



A YOUNG MOTHER'S FATAL FALL

DID HER BOYFRIEND GET AWAY

WITH MURDER?

Rhonda Casto plunged to her death while hiking with partner Steve Nichols in Oregon's Columbia River Gorge. He said it was an accident—but her family isn't so sure *By* CHRISTINE PELISEK

Rhonda Casto was in good spirits. On the morning of March 16, 2009, the 23-year-old aspiring model handed off her 9-month old daughter, Ava, to her mother and set out with Ava's dad, Steve Nichols, to Eagle Creek Trail, a popular hike with steep drop-offs along Oregon's Columbia River Gorge. By early evening, a rescue crew responding to a 911 call from Nichols found Casto's lifeless body at the bottom of a steep ravine. Says Casto's mother Julia Simmons: "I had a bad feeling."

As it turned out, so did the police. In February 2015, almost six years after Casto's fatal fall, Nichols was arrested and charged with murder. Police alleged that Nichols, 42, pushed his girlfriend off the 100 ft. cliff so he could collect the \$1 million in life insurance he had secured on her. Prosecutors also claimed he'd had sexual contact with Casto's younger sister, and that he had previously tried to push his then-wife off a balcony in China during an argument. (Nichols denies both allegations.) Despite all this, authorities dropped the murder charge against Nichols in May and he pleaded guilty to criminally negligent homicide. He received time served and three years probation. Nichols insists Casto's death was accidental and that she was high on drugs when she slipped from the cliff. "When we started hiking up the trail I knew something was wrong with her," he says. "I should have grabbed her and brought her back to the car."

While prosecutors won't comment, those close to Casto say the charismatic, outgoing and spontaneous young mom was considering leaving Nichols because of their tumultuous, volatile relationship. "She was a very good mom and wanted to do everything right," says Casto's pal Jessica Colburn. "She always made the best of things, and that is why I loved her." ●

LIFE CUT SHORT

"You were drawn to her because she was so happy," says friend Jen Sconce of Rhonda Casto (above, left). Steve Nichols (in his 2015 mugshot) says her death was a tragic accident.