

# UNMASKED

My Life  
Solving  
America's  
Cold Cases

**PAUL HOLES**

WITH ROBIN GABY FISHER

Note amputations



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CELADON  
BOOKS

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NEW YORK

The names and identifying characteristics of some persons described in this book have been changed, as have dates, places, and other details of events depicted in the book.

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*For the victims and their families. And for the law enforcement professionals who have sacrificed so much in the name of justice.*

# Prologue

DECEMBER 2019

**I** order another bourbon, neat. This is the drink that will flip the switch. I don't even know how I got here, to this place, to this *point*. One minute I was having dinner and drinks with friends, discussing my latest cold case—the rape and strangulation of a young girl after her high school Valentine's Day dance—and the next thing I knew we were all piling into an Uber going, where? I had no idea. Something is happening to me lately. I'm drinking too much. My sheets are soaking wet when I wake up from nightmares of decaying corpses. I've looked at a woman, and rather than seeing the beauty of the female body, I've dissected it, layer by layer, as if she were on the autopsy table. I have visualized dead women during intimate moments, and I shut down.

People always ask how I am able to detach from the horrors of my work. Part of it is an innate capacity to compartmentalize, to put my thoughts in mental boxes and only access what I need, when I need it. The rest is experience and exposure, and I've had plenty of both. The ma-

cabre becomes familiar enough that I can dissociate from even the grisliest details of the job. I file the gore in my brain under “science.” I suppose anyone can become desensitized to anything if they see enough of it, even dead bodies, and I’ve been looking at them since college when I spent hours studying death scenes in pathology books.

But real life, of course, isn’t black and white like those textbook photographs. On one hand, I am fortunate to have been born with a good, analytical brain. On the other, my heart bleeds when it comes to innocent victims. Crime solving for me is more complex than the challenge of the hunt, or the process of piecing together a scientific puzzle. The thought of good people suffering drives me, for better or worse, to the point of obsession. But I have always taken pride in the fact that I can keep my feelings locked up to get the job done.

It’s only been recently that it feels like all that suppressed darkness is beginning to seep out. The dam is breaking. I’m cratering fast. So I end up in a place like this, a bar on Hollywood Boulevard called Jumbo’s Clown Room. Yes, it’s a real place. Entirely red inside. Red walls. Red floors. Red bar. Red lights. I order another drink and swig it, trying to forget about the latest case I can’t shake.

**CARLA WALKER WAS A TEENAGER WHO** was full of life and spunk, four feet, eleven inches tall and twinkly eyed, with everything to look forward to. Looking at her picture, I would have guessed she was nine years old, not seventeen. In the crime scene photos, she’s lying in a desolate cow culvert. Her head is tilted toward me, and her eyes are closed. She has a tiny little nose. Her face contradicts the savagery she endured during the final moments of her life. She looks serene, like a sleeping doll. She’s dressed in the same blue dotted swiss party dress with lace trim that she was wearing when she kissed her parents good night and headed out to a Valentine’s

Day dance at her high school, only the dress has been torn off and placed carefully over her bare chest, leaving her naked lower body exposed. Two blue barrettes are still intact, but her pretty strawberry blond hair is muddy and disheveled. Thin swipes of blue on her eyelids, which, I was told, she worked so hard to match to her dress, are smudged. Semen stains, dark purple bruises around her neck, and contusions on her arms and legs tell the story of a horrific death. I study her injuries and envision what happened. Young Carla was violently beaten, raped, and strangled, and her body dragged through a barbed wire fence and ditched like garbage in the middle of nowhere, where it lay for nearly four days.

Carla's murder is no closer to being solved today than it was when it happened in 1974. But forty-five years later, the collateral damage continues to fester. Her younger brother, Jim Walker, was twelve when Carla was killed. Now he's a little older than me. When I decided to look into the cold case recently, I met with Jim in a suburb of Fort Worth. He told me that after he got his driver's license, he used to steal away to the crime scene and spend nights in the culvert, waiting for Carla's killer to show. There was something about Jim that broke my heart, and I found myself choking back tears talking to him. All this time later, the pain on his face is as fresh as if he'd lost his sister yesterday. It was even worse for his parents, he said. They suffered in silence until their deaths. His mother kept a portrait of Carla and touched it every morning when she woke up. It was her way of saying "Good morning" to her daughter. That's the thing about these tragedies. There are so many victims. So many shattered lives. So many families torn apart. Healing is subjective, but the scars never fade, and the pain is always a breath away. It's a terrible way to spend your life.

I promised Carla's family that I'd do everything in my power to solve her murder. The only peace they'll get will come with knowing who killed her, and why. And when I went to the culvert, I promised Carla, too, that I'd work tirelessly to catch her killer. I'm committed to Carla. People

think I'm strictly analytical, and that's how I present myself, but there is something very spiritual for me when I'm at a crime scene. I don't just put myself in the minds of the offender and the victim, which is critical to my crime-solving process. I make my peace with the victim.

As it was in Carla's case.

The culvert where Carla was dumped is a lonely place, a tunnel under a road in rural Texas about ten miles from her high school and the Walker family home.

Standing in the exact spot where her body had lain, it was as if I was witnessing the whole terrible attack. I see the offender looming over Carla, his eyes wild with excitement as he pulls off her underwear and yanks her bra up over her breasts, ripping her party dress in his frenzy. I see her, eyes dilated, heart pounding, breath fast and shallow. Adrenaline courses through her body, and she is in full-on fear mode—fight, flight, or freeze—but she's too small and not nearly powerful enough to compete with her attacker. He grimaces as he places his hands around her neck. He starts to squeeze, and she grabs at his hands and arms, trying to loosen his hold. She gouges her own skin with her fingernails as she claws futilely at his death grip. Carla has to know this is the end of her life. There's nothing she can do to save herself. Her body is shutting down. The outer jugular veins begin to collapse, but her heart continues to push blood to her brain through the carotids, causing an intense buildup of pressure in her head. Research suggests that at this point, victims lose consciousness within six to ten seconds, but offenders have reported it can take much longer—several minutes—for a victim to die.

I can almost feel Carla as she takes her last breath. I kneel down and touch the spot where her head would have been. "I'm here for you," I say. "I don't know if I can solve your case, but I promise I will do my best."

It is a promise I know I can keep.



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**JUMBO'S CLOWN ROOM IS GETTING LOUDER.** The music blasts, and women in skimpy bikinis climb onstage. Some swing on poles placed around the bar. Others slither seductively on the floor, scooping up dollar bills that people, both men and women, are tossing onstage. I'm sure the patrons mean well, but it feels wrong, disrespectful. I can't even watch the dancers. I wonder what kind of lives they have. I worry that they're putting themselves in danger. I know I shouldn't be here—*what am I doing?*—and I signal to the others that I'm headed out. As I pull on my jacket, a dancer catches my eye. She's maybe twenty, younger than my oldest daughter, and she's making her way toward me, slinking across the stage. I look at her and envision her broken body sprawled in a muddy ditch. I shudder, then pull out a hundred-dollar bill, wrap it in a single, and hold it out to her. "Please," I say, as she bends down to take the cash. "Be careful." The sultry expression drops from her face, and I see the little girl.

Getting up from the bar, I walk unsteadily out onto Hollywood Boulevard and hail a cab.

"Where are you going, buddy?" the driver asks as I slide into the back seat.

*Crazy, I think, wiping away tears. I'm going fucking crazy.*

# The End of the Road

MARCH 2018

**M**y ex-wife used to say my job was my mistress, and I chose my mistress over everyone. Those charged conversations from long ago rang in my ears as I stood in my office, boxing up the last of my belongings. *Paul, you've lost your way. . . . We need you. . . . Even when you're here you're not really here.* Lori was right about a lot of things. I wasn't there for my family—not then and not now—not in the way they wanted me to be. Not in the way I wanted to be. My work was never a job. It was a calling, my purpose, as vital to me as air and water. For nearly thirty years, I'd chosen my cases over everything. There was always a crime scene to attend, always a predator to chase down. I was happiest when I was digging into a cold case. The challenge of trying to figure out what no one else could was irresistible to me. Now I was facing down the end of a career that had consumed my entire adult life. The time had passed in a blink.

Looking around my office, at the empty shelves, at the bare desktop,

I took a deep breath. What was I feeling? Was it uncertainty? Had I been kidding myself when I decided that retirement wouldn't be so bad? That I'd finally have the time to take guitar lessons and pedal my mountain bike on rocky trails? That I'd find some other way to matter?

My office was in the county complex in the industrial city of Martinez in California's East Bay. The sun was just peeking up over the horizon when I climbed the stairs to the third floor of the criminal justice building. I had come in especially early to gather my things before my colleagues got there. I've always been quietly sentimental, especially about endings and the past. Just the other day, I drove to the first house I owned and parked on the street. The house had been brand-new when I bought it with my first wife in 1992. It was where I'd learned how to take care of a home. I built the deck on the back and planted the saplings that now tower over the rooftop. Sitting in my car, I could almost imagine myself back there, in the family room, playing with my firstborn, Renee, still too young to sit, all toothless grin and happy babble as I prop up pillows to keep her upright. Now she has a little girl of her own.

I've never been a crier, but lately the tears were coming without warning, as they did that day, driving away from my old house. Yet another reason to gather my things and get out of town before my colleagues began arriving. Was I becoming a sentimental old man at the age of fifty? My dad got softer in his older years, slowly changing from the detached career-military guy who raised me to the playful grandfather who made funny faces with my kids. I was determined to be stoic on my last day, but this place had been my life. I wasn't sure I would have chosen to leave the job if California's pension system hadn't made it financially irresponsible to stay. I'd spent nearly every day since I was twenty-two years old living and working under the dome of Contra Costa County government. The most relevant chapters of my story had played out here. Every career move. All of the ups and downs of my first marriage. The births of my first two kids.

Meeting my second wife, Sherrie. The births of our son and daughter. Dozens of homicides solved. Others still unresolved, but never forgotten, and now headed home with me on a hard drive.

Tomorrow, my office, historically reserved for whoever was chosen to oversee homicides for the district attorney, would be turned over to my successor. They would fill the empty shelves where my collection of books on forensics, sexual homicide, and serial killers had grown. They would sit behind the computer monitor I'd kept at an angle so passersby couldn't see the gruesome crime scene images that were so often on the screen. Maybe they'd make the time to wipe the years' worth of grunge off the window overlooking the Sacramento River delta. The shimmer of the water was hypnotic, but I'd barely noticed. I was always too immersed in my work.

**MY JURISDICTION STRETCHED OVER HUNDREDS OF** square miles of San Francisco's Bay Area. With a population of more than a million people, we had our share of crime. Four of our cities were on the FBI's list of California's one hundred most dangerous places. I'd worked on hundreds of homicides, but I'd spent the last few years almost exclusively mining cold case files. Every casualty comes with collateral damage, those who are left to pick up their lives in the agonizing aftermath of murder, and nothing motivated me more than the idea of a killer having the freedom to live a normal life after he'd destroyed so many others.

There was never a shortage of bad guys in our slice of the world, and for whatever reason, some of the most sensational crimes in contemporary history occurred in Contra Costa County. In 2003, the bodies of Laci Peterson and her unborn son, Conner, washed up a day apart on our shores, four months after Laci's husband, Scott, dumped her body into the freezing cold waters of the San Francisco Bay. I met mother and child in the morgue, and even with all of my experience with evil, it's something

I'll never forget. Conner was less than a month from birth when Laci was murdered. What kind of monster kills his eight-and-a-half-months-pregnant wife and goes about his life knowing she and his unborn son are anchored to the cold ocean floor with concrete blocks?

Six years after that, Jaycee Dugard, who'd been famously grabbed at her school bus stop in South Lake Tahoe in 1991, when she was eleven, was discovered 170 miles from home, living in a run of tents and lean-tos in the fenced backyard of her captors, sex offender Phillip Garrido and his wife, Nancy, in our jurisdiction. By then, she was twenty-nine and had given birth to two of Garrido's children. For eighteen years, she had been right under our noses. My detective buddy John Conaty was at the scene with me shortly after Jaycee and her young children were rescued. "How the hell did we miss this?" he asked, looking around at the cruel, filthy environment that she'd been forced to live in for eighteen years. I just shook my head. I had no words.

I'd caught so many strange cases over the years. Even when a case wasn't mine, if I thought I could contribute, whether with my forensics expertise or investigative doggedness, I always found a way to insert myself. I always thought maybe I could see something that the last guy had missed. It wasn't arrogance; it was just that I wouldn't take no for an answer. Both my wife and my ex-wife have ribbed me about being overly confident in myself and my abilities. I'd say that's about half-right. I can put on a good show when I have to, but I'm an introvert by nature and painfully reluctant when it comes to personal interactions. Put me face-to-face with a neighbor at a cocktail party, and my insides are twisting in knots. Sitting with a group at a restaurant, I shrink from the conversation. I am Paul the wallflower. And speaking in front of large groups? When I first started, it was paralyzing. It's better now that I've had so much experience talking about the high-profile cases I've been involved with, but it still requires a shot of bourbon before I take the stage.

I've always been most at home when I'm working on a case, my head buried in a file. I know I'm good at what I do and that I have a fighting chance at solving even the toughest cases that may have stumped others. Before I ever earned the right, I never trusted anyone else's hunches about a homicide. "I'll think about it," I'd say skeptically. My instincts were made for this kind of work, and I almost always follow them. It takes a lot of time before I feel comfortable accepting someone else's impulses and ideas. I can see how that could be construed as egotistical, and there were times, especially when I was starting out, that I wasn't always popular. The veteran criminalists never hesitated to let the rookie know when they thought I was overstepping my boundaries. I regularly heard, "That's not your job," then shrugged as I dove headfirst into an investigation.

So many cases, now reduced to files on a hard drive the size of a pack of cigarettes. It was kind of funny when I thought about it: the last vestiges of my long and distinguished law enforcement career fit into a single fifteen-by-twelve-by-ten-inch storage box. I tossed in the drive, along with the book on serial predators my parents gave me as a birthday gift twenty-five years ago when I first started, the bowl, fork, and spoon I'd kept for all the meals I ate at my desk, and the tan leather coaster with the logo of a lab equipment company that came in handy for those long days that ended with a nightcap at my desk.

Ripping a piece of packing tape from the roll, I prepared to seal the box when something caught my eye. The morning sun reflected off the glass of a picture frame, drawing my attention to the small cluster of family photographs on the credenza beside me. I almost forgot them. They were happy memories, long ago faded into the background of administrative paperwork and homicide case files. My favorite had been taken a decade earlier, when my youngest son, Ben, was a toddler. It was shot from behind as the two of us walked away from a formal ceremony called Inspection of the Troops, me in my Sheriff's Office dress uniform—Smokey

Bear hat, green jacket, and khaki trousers—my boy in a striped polo shirt and shorts, his little arms swinging as he tried to keep up with me.

I paused to study the image, now faded with time. My oldest son, Nathan, from my first marriage, had recently turned twenty-three, and I'd only just begun trying to get to know him. I was learning how hard it was to foster a relationship, even when it was with my own kid, during weekly phone calls that began and ended with stories about video games. How could I expect my son to talk to me about things that mattered when I wasn't around for the things that mattered? Nathan once told me that he didn't even remember me living in the house, he was so young when I left. Ben was from my second marriage, but I feared I had been just as emotionally absent with him and his sister, Juliette, as I had with my first set of kids. Did I have regrets about not being there when they were learning to ride a bike or awakening from a bad dream? On my last day on the job, I was just beginning to realize the consequences of putting my career before everything else. I knew more now with the children I had with Sherrie than I did when Nathan and Renee were growing up, the kind of knowledge that comes with age and maturity, but in many ways, I had not changed at all. My second wife, Sherrie, had some of the same grievances that my first wife, Lori, did twenty-five years ago. Like Lori, Sherrie interprets my reticence as not caring, which couldn't be further from the truth. She's told me she never knows what I'm thinking. Even when I'm home, I'm not "present," she says. I'm always "in my head." Why can't I take some time in the evenings to join her and our kids playing board games? I've tried, but within minutes of sitting down, I'm squirming in my seat. I move the little pawn around or toss the dice a few times, and my mind drifts to one of my cases. I can't even hide it. My lips move with my thoughts. "You're gone again," Sherrie said the other night when she and the kids were talking at dinner, and I was pretending to hear. "You're not listening," she said. "You look like a crazy old man with your lips moving."

The only way I knew how to bond with my younger kids was the same as it was with my older two. Take them outside and throw the ball. It's like "Cat's in the Cradle," that Harry Chapin song, the one where the father is too busy making something of himself to pay much attention to his son. The kid grows up, and the father retires. He calls his son to say he'd like to see him. The son responds, *I'd love to, Dad, if I can find the time.* . . . And the father realizes, *He'd grown up just like me. My boy was just like me.* I choke up whenever I hear it. It hits too close to home. My older daughter Renee and I were hiking recently, and she asked me questions about my marriage to her mom, Lori. "Why did you leave us?" she asked. "Where did it go wrong?" I tried to reassure her, telling her that I would always love her mother, but we'd simply been too young to get married and eventually grew apart. It had nothing to do with her or Nathan, I said. I hoped they knew how much I loved them. "But Dad," she said, "you were just never there." Tucking the framed photo of Ben and me into the side of the box, I took a last look around my office. Fighting back all of the feelings that come with endings, I flipped off the light and closed the door behind me. *This has been my whole life,* I thought. With my box under my arm and a lump in my throat, I walked down the hallway to the stairs and onto Ward Street in the government district of the city. It was now part of my past. The Sheriff's Office, where I'd gotten my start. The forensics library, where I'd slept on the floor after working a long night at a crime scene or reading case files into the wee hours of the morning. The courthouse, where I'd testified dozens of times. The jail, where I'd lifted weights during lunch hours. The district attorney's office, where I'd spent the last few years. Every law enforcement position I'd ever held was in Martinez, the birthplace of hometown hero Joe DiMaggio. The city was a little rough around the edges, and night and day from where I lived in rural Vacaville, but it was home.

Tomorrow I'd fill out a bunch of paperwork and be debriefed by the



FBI about what I could and couldn't do as a private citizen. *You cannot divulge "top secret" information. You must protect your sources.* I'd turn in my gun and my county car and officially retire from law enforcement. After that, there'd be time to think about the next chapter in my life. But there was still one thing I had to do before I closed this one.

## Last Act

**I**t was nearly noon when I finally snaked my way out of Martinez, my cardboard box of a career on the seat beside me. A veil of smog obscured the brilliant afternoon sun, just as it had in the spring of 1990 when I arrived after college for my first job interview with the county. I remembered thinking then that I was descending into hell after I drove across the mile-long truss bridge, over the sparkling swells of the Sacramento River Delta, and dropped down into the industrial landscape of oil refineries and spewing smokestacks that led to downtown. The landscape hadn't changed much since then.

Winding my way through the Shell oil refinery and up over the Benicia bridge, I headed north toward Interstate 80. On a good day, traffic should have been light in the early afternoon, but there is never a good day on California's clogged freeways. It was a long stretch of highway to get to where I was going. The news stations were prattling about Stormy Daniels and some study about Americans getting fatter. I'm not much of a talk radio kind of guy, and it's safe to say I'm probably what you'd call apolitical, so the playlist on the iPod was my go-to. Music was my

therapy. Which kind depended on my mood. When I was pissed, after an argument at home, or a run-in at work, I punched in heavy metal. Last week, it was Metallica, after a witness in a cold homicide blew up at me for bothering her at home. I don't do conflict well. Being raised in a military family, and strict Catholics to boot, you learn to keep your emotions locked up (which is not so good for maintaining relationships, I've learned), so I usually released mine in the gym or, in the case of that angry witness, by blasting headbanger music and drumming my fingers on the steering wheel. On most days, though, I turned to '70s ballads to relax—you know, Billy Joel, Jim Croce, Neil Diamond kind of stuff. I didn't like feeling out of control, and my whole life was about to veer into a direction of unknowns. My house in Vacaville was on the market, and as soon as it sold, I was moving the family out of state to Colorado to enjoy the mountains. At the time, I wasn't sure what I would do for work. I'd thought about starting my own business, Paul Holes Investigates, and because I'd had a fair amount of media exposure from my high-profile cases, I'd been approached by TV producers about possibly consulting on one of those crime channels or news magazine shows. But nothing was certain, and the uncertainty made me nervous. I'd suffered from panic attacks since I was a kid, and the music helped to keep my anxiety in check.

As my car inched along the highway, my left leg jackhammered into the car floor, and I tried to unwind to Elton John's "Tiny Dancer," my all-time favorite song. *Pretty eyed, pirate smile . . . you must have seen her dancing in the sand. And now she's in me . . . tiny dancer in my hand.* Cranking up the volume, I sang along, which I often did when I was alone and restless. After four or five replays, and a break in the traffic, my anxiety began to subside.

As often happened in quieter moments, my mind took a turn to the inevitable, the Golden State Killer, the masked madman who had raped and murdered his way up and down our state and had never been caught.

Cold cases were my passion; this one was an obsession. It had stumped every investigator who had looked into it—and believe me, there had been hundreds. Over forty years, more resources had been pumped into trying to solve it than any other case in California history, and it had still remained in the cold case files. I had revisited it repeatedly since the day in 1994 when, as a curious neophyte criminalist, I stumbled across it in an abandoned file cabinet in our forensics library. There were other cases I hadn't been able to crack, and I took each one personally, but that one weighed on me more than the others—mostly because the offender had outwitted some of the best criminal investigative minds in the business. And I believed he was still out there. For ten years in the '70s and '80s, he'd cut a wide swath of psychological terror across the state with his meticulously planned attacks, breaking into homes in the middle of the night, tying up his terrified victims, viciously attacking both men and women, sometimes in front of their young kids, before eventually graduating to murder—his preferred method bludgeoning. The guy was a psychological sadist. “If you cause any problems, I'll chop up the kids. I'll bring you one of their ears,” he told one of his victims before taking the man's wife into another room and repeatedly raping her. Before the attacks suddenly stopped in 1986, he'd killed at least a dozen people and savagely raped more than fifty women.

Some people thought he was dead, but not me. I imagined him living an obscure life in some middle-class neighborhood in suburbia, a place where no one would ever suspect that a serial killer was among them. He was either one lucky SOB or as cunning as a fox, and probably both. Most people believe the myth that serial killers can't stop, but they can, and they do. Some have long, dormant stretches, and some stop altogether, usually either because they come close to being caught or they substitute something else for their killing habit—a hobby, a new marriage, starting a family. Sometimes they just get too old. Crazy, right? It had always nagged

at me that he was probably somewhere out there living his life—driving his car, taking trips to the hardware store, enjoying family dinners—after wrecking so many other lives. And probably laughing at all of us who weren't able to catch him.

Before he was called the Golden State Killer in a 2013 magazine story by Michelle McNamara, who would become my friend and confidant, he was known as the Original Nightstalker, and before that, the East Area Rapist, or EAR. The titles evolved as his crimes progressed, from fetish burglaries, to vicious sexual assaults in the middle of the night, to murder. He adopted the nicknames, using them to taunt us. I remember getting hold of an old recording of a call made during the EAR phase to Sacramento Dispatch from a man claiming to be him.

“This is the East Area Rapist, you dumb fuckers,” he says. “I’m gonna fuck again tonight. Careful.”

The voice was menacing. Cocky. Taunting. Brash.

I played it over and over.

“You know about this recording?” I asked Ken Clark, a detective with Sacramento Sheriff’s Homicide who’d put plenty of time in on the investigation.

“Oh yeah,” he said.

“You think it’s him?”

“Likely.”

“It really pisses me off,” I said.

“Absolutely,” Clark said. “That’s what he wanted.”

Two years after that call in 1977, his cat and mouse game escalated to murder.

**OVER THE TWO-PLUS DECADES THAT I'D** been looking into the cold case, I'd witnessed the suffering of the mothers and fathers and sons and daughters

and brothers and sisters of some of his victims. I'd studied the crime scene photos of his sadistic handiwork. I'd spent hours listening to the stories of men and women who, either by the grace of God or their own raw courage, had somehow survived his merciless attacks, only to be haunted still decades later by what he had done to them.

Not long ago, my cell phone rang. The woman on the other end sounded like she was about to fall apart. "I know he's coming back to get me, so I'm moving to Mexico," she said. It had been thirty years since he broke into her home in the middle of the night and terrorized her family. Those were the people that drove me relentlessly to pursue the case, and they had been counting on me to get him. "We know you'll be the one to do it." I'd heard that so many times.

I hated disappointing her. I hated disappointing all of them. After working the case in between other open cases, usually on my own time, I'd spent the last few years of my career making the Golden State Killer, or GSK, my top priority. I'd scrutinized thousands of police documents and witness statements and interviewed everyone I could who was associated with the case and still alive. The obsession ran over into weekends, while I was mowing the lawn or playing with the kids. Even on Christmas Day, when the rest of the family opened presents, it was GSK who was on my mind. And through the long nights, when I searched computer databases for clues and drew geographic profiles of his crimes to try to determine his home base, the case played like an endless movie in my head. His victims haunted my dreams.

People like Mary, one of the youngest. She was headed into eighth grade when he forced his way into her life in 1979. Barely thirteen, she still had a playhouse in the back of her home, and her hobby was hopscotch. That summer, he broke into her Walnut Creek home at four in the morning through the sliding glass doors. As her father and sister slept in adjoining rooms, he slipped into hers. She awoke to him straddling her, a

knife to her throat. “I hope you’re good,” he said in a menacing whisper. She didn’t know what he meant. He pulled off her covers and savagely raped her in her pretty pink bedroom with unicorns painted on the walls. Mary waited nearly an hour after he was finally gone to free herself from her leg ties. He’d threatened to kill her family if she told, so she’d waited to be certain he was gone. Still shackled at the wrists, she ran to wake up her father. All these years later, she lived with the echo of her father’s voice screaming to her sister, “Get those things off her!” Soon after, Mary had asked a friend’s older sister, “Am I still a virgin?”

Three years after the attack, she found her father dead in his bed. She was certain he died of a broken heart. I didn’t doubt it. I have two daughters. I’m not sure I could survive the grief and regret of not being able to protect my children. Mary was robbed of her innocence and her peace of mind. She’d spent her life looking over her shoulder, wondering if he was still out there somewhere, watching.

The monster had stolen so much from so many. Surely there had to be a reckoning for him. I worried that, after I retired, no one else would take up where I had left off. The investigation would, once again, get tossed into a file cabinet and be all but forgotten—the way I’d found it—and the people who had counted on me to solve it would never forgive me. What would happen to them, those whose lives had been ruined? How would they ever get the little bit of peace that comes with knowing?

So many times over the years I thought I was close to solving the case, only to be bitterly disappointed when I was proven wrong by DNA. The last time had been just a couple of weeks earlier, and it was gut crushing. I’d recently discovered something within genetic genealogy called DNA segment triangulation, a process that could determine biological relationships by combining DNA profiling—which we had for GSK—with genealogical research from paid private ancestry websites. It had gotten my attention when I’d heard it was successful in identifying a woman who

was abandoned as a small child. We didn't know who the little girl was or where she came from, and she had been too young to remember much that could help us. For years, we'd tried to identify her using traditional methods, and we'd always failed. Then, during a conference call about another case, I'd heard that she had finally been identified using DNA segment triangulation. I started to wonder, could that same tool lead us to the Golden State Killer?

For several months I had been working with a small task force of investigators, crime analysts, and the same skilled genealogist who'd assisted in the other case, we were comparing DNA profiles and dissecting family trees to come up with a handful of leads for GSK. Through a process of elimination, we'd whittled down the list to a small group of men who were roughly the right age and had been living in California during the time of the attacks. From there, we'd narrowed the search even further using physical descriptions from some of the victims.

I'd zeroed in on one suspect that looked the most promising to me and spent the last few weeks before my retirement investigating him. He was a Colorado construction worker whose personal and geographical profiles closely corresponded with those of the Golden State Killer. "I think we've got our guy," I told my FBI buddy Steve Kramer. "His piece of shit uncle was a rapist. There's a family thing going on here." I was so sure we had a fit, and I was ready to tie up the case and my career with a big bow. Until I got the call from Kramer telling me that the DNA results from the construction worker's sister showed she was not the sister of GSK, which eliminated him as a suspect. I hung up the phone and dropped my head on the desk. I was devastated. It was at that moment that I resigned myself to the fact that my last real shot at getting the Golden State Killer was gone.

There was this other guy, though. This match was someone who in forty years had never appeared on the radar screen in any of the previous investigations. His name popped up, like the guy's in Colorado, because



the DNA profiles of a second and third cousin triangulated back to him through their family trees. The distant cousins who'd signed up with the private ancestry website had no idea their profiles were used to try to track a notorious serial killer. I'd done some preliminary research in the days after the latest disappointment, and he matched some of the criteria. He was around the right height at five feet eleven. He was seventy-two years old, a little older than I'd thought the killer would be now, but that didn't eliminate him. He lived in a suburb of Sacramento in the general area where I'd predicted the killer lived. His name was Joseph DeAngelo, and, an interesting little detail: he was a former cop. Still, I wasn't expecting much. I'd had suspects with more circumstantial evidence suggesting they should be looked at, and they were all eliminated with DNA. What was the likelihood that this guy would be any different? Based on my theories about GSK, the Colorado suspect had been a much better fit.

**IT WAS RIGHT AROUND 2:30 P.M.** when I turned off of I-80 onto Antelope Road, the main artery connecting strip malls, chain restaurants, and neighborhoods across Citrus Heights. Home was an hour in the rearview mirror. It was almost like I was on automatic pilot when I passed my exit. I hadn't even slowed down. I knew I had more digging to do into Joseph DeAngelo, but with this being my last day, I told myself I would use the time for a stop. I did that in all of my cases—checked out where a suspect lived and worked in order to get some sense of who they were.

Citrus Heights sits on fourteen square miles of Sacramento County countryside. It's a nice place to live. It's clean and safe, with parks and ballfields, plenty of retail and food chains to accommodate the booming real estate market, and small-town traditions like free movies in the square on Saturday nights. DeAngelo owned a house in a '70s subdivision surrounded by more subdivisions, most with the misleading word "Estates"

in the name. It's an area of cookie-cutter homes, smooshed together with wooden privacy fences offering only the flimsiest sense of separation. I swung off of Antelope and navigated a tangle of intersecting streets, with cul-de-sacs and concrete sidewalks and yellow signs cautioning drivers to watch for CHILDREN AT PLAY, until I saw Canyon Oak Drive. Counting down to number 8316, I pulled alongside the curb opposite the house, a nondescript tan ranch. The garage doors were closed. A Volvo sedan and a fishing boat on a trailer were parked in the driveway. The landscaping grabbed my attention. Even in this tidy neighborhood, with plenty of pride of ownership, his yard stood out. It was meticulous, right down to the edging along the property. Not a blade of grass out of place. For some reason he'd set three large boulders purposefully but seemingly randomly on the front lawn, I guess for decorative purposes. I backed up a bit, trying to get a view of the backyard, then pulled forward again, put the car in park, and cut the engine. The blinds were closed, but I knew he was home. After so many years of sitting in front of suspects' houses, you just know those things. It's a feeling you learn to trust.

The yearning to go to the door was overwhelming. *I should just go and introduce myself.* My mind raced and my anxiety was ratcheting up again. Sitting there, I contemplated possible scenarios.

In the first one, I walk up to the front door and knock. Joe answers.

I introduce myself: "Hi, I'm Paul Holes, Contra Costa County cold case investigator. I've been looking into this series of unsolved cases and . . ."

He looks curious but not suspicious. We immediately establish a rapport, bonded by the uniform. He invites me in.

"How about some coffee?" he asks.

"No thanks. Never drink it."

"How about a beer?"

After a few sips of beer and a little bit of small talk about police work and how different it is now than when he was on the force, I tell him

that his name came up in the investigation. He seems bemused but not concerned.

“I guess it’s your lucky day,” I say. “One of your distant relatives uploaded DNA into a genealogy website, and that person is related to the person I’m looking for. You are likely distantly related to my offender, too.”

He nods. “Ahh. What can I do to help you out?”

“Well, I just need a DNA sample.” I feel a little awkward asking another cop for proof he’s not a malicious serial predator. On the other hand, with the sample, I can officially eliminate him as a suspect, and he’ll never be bothered again.

“Hey, I get it,” he says. “Of course.”

We both chuckle over the absurdity of the situation. I get the sample, tell him I’m sorry for the bother, and leave.

It will be my final act in the case.

But there’s another possibility, the one that considers DeAngelo is the Golden State Killer. In that scenario, I’ve already made a foolish mistake. I’ve sat there for several minutes in front of his house in my official car. Any cop or former cop would recognize it as unmarked law enforcement. If he is the killer, I know what he’s capable of. There’s no telling what he’ll do if he feels trapped. He knows I’m here. He’s a cunning serial predator. He knew what his victims watched on TV, where they went to work and school, whose husband was out of town, whose parents were out for the evening, when people were asleep.

In this scenario, there’s no doubt he’s already seen the car sitting there through the blinds. When I walk toward his house, he recognizes me from the media interviews I’ve done on the case over the years. By the time I get to the front door, he’s already armed himself. He may open up and shoot me before I have a chance to say a word. Or he’ll invite me in to keep me confined, excuse himself, then sneak up behind me and bash my head in.

No one would know. No one knows where I am. I didn't radio in. I didn't call home. I just left the office and ended up here.

I take a deep breath to clear my head. What am I doing, thinking about approaching this guy? If he is GSK, and he becomes aware that we're on to him, it will risk the investigation. If he feels cornered, he'll kill me.

I just need to drive away, I tell myself, putting the car in gear. *It's too early. I don't want to blow this. I don't know enough about this DeAngelo guy.*

I start the car and will myself to put it in gear. I'm not even a block away when I begin doubting my decision. *Maybe I'm blowing it. I should have gotten the DNA. I would have at least had another genealogy data point for my team. And what if DeAngelo was the killer? I was right there. Why hadn't I gone to the front door?*

The drive home to Vacaville seemed to take forever. I was filled with regret. I had just failed to wrap up my final suspect in a case that continued to elude me. If the Golden State Killer case was ever to be solved, I would not be a part of it. I felt defeated. The survivors had counted on me as their last chance for justice, and I'd let them down. My career would end with a blemished footnote.

It felt like an anticlimactic finish to what had been an otherwise pretty good run.

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