


ACT ONE

My Lifelong Hunt for BTK

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— S omewhere inside my head, the murder played itself out the way it always did in my dreams. His hands were wrapped around her throat—patiently, relentlessly squeezing the life away from her. Blood vessels in the whites of her eyes ruptured from the pressure building up inside her head, creating hemorrhages that resembled faint red and yellow flowers.

She never thought it would end like this. But then who really does? And still he continued to squeeze. His hands and fingers were powerful enough to prevent the blood from flowing through the carotid arteries that snaked up either side of her neck. But to compress the vertebral arteries that allowed the blood to drain from her brain, he needed to twist her head at just the correct angle. So he lifted her torso a few inches off the mattress and went about his business. It was almost over—even amid the chaos, she could sense this. So she used what remained of her strength to try to claw his face. But he'd already considered that option and had tied her arms and legs to the wooden bedposts. She never laid a finger on him.

After a few more moments, her hyoid bone cracked. The sound was similar to that of a twig snapping. It was only a matter of time

now. A spasm-like shudder rippled through her nude body, followed by a trickle of blood dripping from her nostrils . . .

“Jesus,” I muttered, sitting up in bed, wiping the sweat from my eyes. “I gotta get a grip.”

My heart was pounding, thumping madly. For a moment, I wondered if I was having a heart attack, but the vision of the strangled woman’s face quickly returned. Just another god-awful nightmare.

That face—I’d been seeing that face and hundreds like it for the past couple years now. Almost every night they came to visit me when I fell asleep. Each was in the midst of being brutally murdered—strangled, stabbed, shot, beaten, poisoned. All of them were people I’d come to know only after they’d been killed.

Welcome to my life, circa October 1984. For the past five years I’d worked myself to the point of physical and mental exhaustion while helping create the FBI’s elite criminal profiling unit. Back when I started with the bureau in 1970, criminal profiling was seen as a bunch of snake oil, something spoken about only in whispers. But over the course of the next decade and a half, I and a few other visionary, bullheaded souls like Bob Ressler and Roy Hazelwood had worked tirelessly to prove that criminal personality profiling could provide a legitimate, effective crime-fighting tool. Investigators from police departments around the globe turned to me and my unit after they’d hit a brick wall. We examined crime scenes and created profiles of the perpetrators, describing their habits and predicting their next moves.

I was addicted to my job as the leader of the FBI’s Investigative Support Unit (ISU) and over the years had immersed myself in thousands of the nation’s most grisly homicides and other violent interpersonal crime cases. I’d poured over mountains of crime scene reports and scrutinized stacks of photos that sometimes made me physically ill. I hunted some of the most sadistic and notorious criminals in the nation—the Trailside Killer in San Francisco, the Atlanta child murderer, the Tylenol poisoner, and the man who hunted prostitutes for sport in the Alaskan wilderness.

In an effort to understand the motives and motivation of the killers we were trying to catch, I—along with my colleagues—met face-to-face with dozens of serial murderers and assassins, including Charles Manson, Sirhan Sirhan, Arthur Bremmer, Richard Speck, John Wayne Gacy, David Berkowitz (Son of Sam), and James Earl Ray. The findings of these interviews became part of a landmark study into

what makes serial killers tick and, in 1988, it was published as a book: *Sexual Homicide: Patterns and Motives*.

Up until then, no one had ever thought to undertake this type of research from an investigative perspective. It had always been done by psychologists, psychiatrists, or parole officers. But I was convinced that those of us with a police background had the ability to understand the mind of an incarcerated felon far better than any psychologist or psychiatrist. We possess a type of street smarts that can't be learned out of a book or a classroom. We can listen to a suspect's words, but we also know how the mind of the criminal works.

I worked much like a physician—only all my patients had usually either been murdered or raped by the time I got to them. And instead of studying their medical history in an effort to cure their disease, I reviewed crime scenes, forensic evidence, and the victim's background (this work is known as victimology), trying to better understand what kind of person could have committed a particular crime. It was only after we answered those questions that we could prescribe a course of action that investigators should take.

Over the years, our work helped police crack plenty of cases and put countless sick, dangerous people behind bars. But it wasn't without a heavy price. I could never turn down any request for help on an investigation. My caseload quickly became so overwhelming that I worked myself past the point of exhaustion.

In early December 1983, while in the Seattle area trying to come up with a profile of the so-called Green River serial murderer, I collapsed in my hotel room from viral encephalitis. For three days, unbeknownst to anyone, I lay on the floor in a coma, my body racked by a 105-degree fever with a Do Not Disturb sign hanging on my door.

After they found me, I hovered in that strange purgatory between life and death. The right side of my brain had ruptured and hemorrhaged. I wouldn't survive the high fever raging within my body, the specialists explained to my wife.

A grave was reserved for me at Quantico National Cemetery. A priest administered my last rites. But I somehow managed to hold on to life. My family, along with friends and fellow agents, kept a week-long vigil in my hospital room, occasionally encircling my bed and holding hands while praying for me.

After I emerged from my coma, the left side of my face drooped, my speech was horribly slurred, and blood clots formed in my lungs and legs. In an effort to control my seizures, I was given phobarital,

then Dilantin. After I left the hospital and returned home to Virginia, my body slowly went to work mending itself.

Yet before long I began to sense that something was different about me; something seemed amiss. I'd awoken from my coma a different man. I found myself looking at the world in a new way. It wasn't obvious to anyone but me. It was so subtle at first that I barely realized what was happening.

I'd begun to identify with the victim. I still wanted to catch the monsters and slap them behind bars. But it was my newfound propensity to identify with the victim of violent crimes that began changing the way I looked at the world. I started seeing things through the eyes of those who, for whatever reason, had their lives stolen away from them by another. It wasn't long before I began to understand—viscerally, from the inside—the horror that comes with being murdered, beaten, or raped.

This newfound shift in perspective hardly came as a surprise. In my own way, I'd become a victim of my own obsessive-compulsive way of doing my job. Weeks after arriving home from the hospital, I still felt vulnerable, weak, and overwrought with emotion that something like this could happen to *John Douglas*. A few months before, I was at the top of my game—thirty-eight years old, strong as an ox, focused, motivated, and driven. I had a beautiful wife and two adorable little girls, and I felt blessed to be forging a name for myself in a career I loved. Nothing could stop me. Or so I thought. On that cool autumn night in October 1984 when I woke from my nightmare, I was on the mend. After a few unstable months, I could now walk, run, and lift weights.

My mind, however, was another story. As much as I hated to admit it, I was a psychological wreck. A few weeks before, I'd begun driving out to Quantico National Cemetery to sit by the grave where I was supposed to have been buried, wondering who had taken my spot in the ground. Try as I might, I couldn't shake my anger at the FBI for not giving me the support I'd needed to perform my job, for fostering a work environment where you had to literally drop from exhaustion before anyone would ever step forward to help you.

I pushed myself up from the bed, shoved my feet into a pair of slippers, plodded downstairs into my study, and closed the doors behind me. It had been a long day, and it was turning out to be another long, sleepless night. I collapsed into my leather chair and polished off

what remained in the wine glass on my desk. I'd returned to my job at Quantico the previous April, but I was still a raw nerve, still trying to come to grips with the inescapable fact that my brain couldn't work the way it used to.

Earlier that afternoon, two detectives from the Wichita Police Department arrived at FBI headquarters, hoping I might have some answers for them. They'd read my 1979 analysis of the BTK case and wanted to discuss the latest developments in my research that would allow them to finally nab this heinous killer. We sat down in a conference room, and they walked me through a case that had stumped their department for the past decade. Almost seven years had passed since his last known murder.

As I listened, I felt my focus and confidence return. For the next eight hours, my brain ran on autopilot, soaking up every fact and bit of data the two detectives tossed at me. The sensation wouldn't last, I knew. But it was nice, all the same—it reminded me of who I used to be.

Despite my having recently returned to work after months of being on sick leave, I already had an enormous caseload. So did the six wannabe profilers assigned to me, whom I'd handpicked because of their impeccable reputations as investigators. But I could sense how much pressure the Wichita police were under from their community to take this killer off the street, so I decided we owed it to them to carve out some time in our overcrowded schedules to see how we could help.

The facts behind BTK's killings went like this:

In January 1974, he strangled Joseph Otero, thirty-eight; his wife, Julie, thirty-four; and son Joey, nine. The partially nude body of Josephine, eleven, was discovered hanging from a water pipe in the basement. A large amount of semen was found on her leg.

In October, the local paper received a detailed letter from someone claiming to have killed the Otero family. In March 1977, Shirley Vian, twenty-four, was found strangled, with her hands and feet bound. The killer had locked her children in the bathroom. In all likelihood he would have killed them, but was scared away by a ringing telephone. In December 1977, BTK telephoned a police dispatcher to inform police about his latest murder—twenty-five-year-old Nancy Fox, whose body was found strangled on her bed. The next month, the killer sent a letter about the killing to the local paper—although it wasn't discovered for almost two weeks. In February 1978, he sent

another letter to a local TV station, gloating over his killing of Vian and Fox, along with another unnamed victim.

In April 1979, he waited inside the home of a sixty-three-year-old woman, but eventually left before she returned home. Not long afterwards, he sent his intended target a letter, informing her that he'd chosen her as his next victim, but had opted not to kill her after growing tired of waiting for her to arrive home.

The local cops had exhausted all their leads. But in the five years since I'd last reviewed the case, investigators had managed to link another homicide to him. In April 1974, three months after the Otero killings, Kathryn Bright, a twenty-one-year-old assembly line worker, was stabbed to death in her home. Despite being shot twice in the head, her nineteen-year-old brother survived the attack. The detectives briefing me believed that having another case to link to BTK, especially one with a survivor, might help shed some new light on the UNSUB responsible for the murders.

From my knowledge of the case and of the Wichita Police Department, widely regarded in law enforcement circles as one of the most progressive in the nation, I was confident that the police hadn't botched this investigation. Yet the killer was still on the loose, and this worried everybody.

Why, everyone wondered, had he stopped killing? What had happened to him? I sensed he was still out there. But he'd become a ghost, which was why the task force created by Wichita police a few months before, in July 1984, had been named the Ghostbusters. I had a hunch that the only way we could catch this ghost would be to find some way to flush him out, to develop some sort of a strategy to force him out into the light where we could finally see him.

I rummaged through a few drawers in my hopelessly messy desk, looking for the criminal profile I'd written for police back in 1979, but I couldn't locate it.

"Probably back at the office," I mumbled to myself.

And then it suddenly came rushing back to me—the memory of that night three years ago in 1981, when I used BTK to help pry information out of the head of one of the nation's most notorious serial killers. It happened in a pale green interrogation room deep inside the Attica Correctional Facility, with fellow FBI profiler Bob Ressler.

It was evening, the loneliest time inside a prison. We'd arrived unannounced, on a fishing expedition of sorts, hoping to convince David Berkowitz, aka the Son of Sam, to help us with our criminal profiling study, which involved a fifty-seven-page interview questionnaire. We wanted answers to such questions as *What was his motive? Was there a trigger that set him off on his murderous spree? What was his early childhood like? How did he select his victims? Did he ever visit the grave sites of his victims? How closely did he follow the press coverage of his crimes?* His answers would help us better understand the killers we were hunting.

Berkowitz was three years into his 365-year prison term after trying unsuccessfully to convince a jury that his neighbor's Labrador retriever had commanded him to gun down his six victims. He looked surprised to see us when the guards led him into the tiny interrogation room.

"Who are you guys?" he asked the moment he spotted us seated at the far end of the only piece of furniture in the room—a linoleum-covered table. As planned, the guards had quickly exited before Berkowitz had a chance to tell us to take a hike.

"We're FBI agents, David," I told him. "We'd like to talk to you. We're hoping you might be able to help us." Berkowitz wheeled around toward where he expected the guards to be, but because they were no longer there, he begrudgingly took a seat.

"It's like I always say," I explained, "if you want to learn how to paint, you don't read about it in a book. You go straight to the artist. And that's what you are, David. You're the artist."

I was laying it on, but, I hoped, not too thick. Berkowitz stared at me with his aquamarine eyes. He didn't smile. He didn't even blink. Inside his head, he was trying to figure out some way to get something in return for talking to us.

"I'll speak to the warden," I said, trying to head off his question. "I can't make any promises. But if you agree to talk to us, I'll tell him how helpful you've been."

He nodded slightly, looking past us at the cinder-block wall behind our backs. I didn't have much time. He seemed about thirty seconds away from shouting out to the guards to get back in here and take him back to his cell.

"Why me?" he asked. "I ain't no artist."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" I laughed. "You're famous. You're huge. You had all of New York City scared shitless. In

a hundred years, no one will remember my name. But everybody will still know who the Son of Sam was.” Berkowitz listened, but he didn’t seem all that impressed with the bullshit I was spoon-feeding him.

Like all the killers I’d interviewed, he longed to have his ego stroked—the problem was, I wasn’t particularly stroking him the way he liked. I was losing him. He turned to see if the guards had returned yet, but of course they hadn’t. So he spun back around and fixed his gaze on me.

We stared at each other in silence for a few moments. The fluorescent lights overhead cast a green tint on Berkowitz’s pale, pudgy skin. A year earlier, another inmate had slit his throat with a razor. The scar, which snaked a jagged path across his neck, had required sixty stitches to close. It glowed an unhealthy shade of pink.

“You know, David, there’s a serial killer out in Kansas, a guy responsible for the deaths of at least six people, who idolizes you,” I told him. “He’s mentioned you in the letters he writes to the police. He fancies himself just like you. He even wants a name like you.”

Berkowitz’s eyes were suddenly ablaze with curiosity. His look of boredom had been replaced with a smirk.

“Is he shitting me?” he asked, glancing over at my partner.

“It’s the truth,” replied Ressler, quietly.

“He calls himself BTK,” I explained.

“BTK?” Berkowitz said. “What’s that for?”

“Bind, torture, and kill. That’s what he does to his victims.”

Berkowitz nodded. “And this BTK, he’s still out there?” he asked. “You guys haven’t caught him yet?”

“No,” I said. “But we will.”

Berkowitz laughed, and I slowly walked him through BTK’s various murders, describing how he’d kill and then disappear for years at a stretch. He listened, spellbound, unable to fathom how someone so bloodthirsty could exhibit such restraint. I could tell by the way his eyes locked onto me that he was soaking up every word I told him. *How can this guy control his appetite like that?* he appeared to be thinking. To a killer like Berkowitz, whose reign of terror lasted a mere thirteen months, this serial killer in Wichita was a criminal with enviable endurance—a virtual marathoner of mayhem.

After a few minutes spent listening to BTK’s exploits, the man we’d come to interrogate turned to putty in our hands. Over the next five hours, he walked us through every dark, twisted corner of his sad life, sharing details he’d never told anyone, confiding that he’d made

up all the crap about demons in order to be able to cop an insanity plea if he ever got caught. By the time Ressler and I emerged from the interrogation room, our heads were spinning. And we owed it all to some deranged killer in Wichita.

The clock on my bookshelf read two-thirty. Upstairs, my wife slept like a baby. My two little girls were tucked away in their beds. The house was so quiet that even down here in my study I could make out the soft rhythm of my wife's breathing. It reminded me of surf breaking on the beach where I used to hang out as kid, growing up on Long Island.

I was jealous of her peace. And as I sat there listening to the make-believe waves, I felt another pang of jealousy rise up inside me. *How*, I wondered just like Berkowitz, *could a guy like BTK just turn it on and off like he did?*

I'd already concluded that one of the reasons he'd managed to elude us was his consummate ability to compartmentalize his life—to appear normal on the outside and keep his perverted, murderous alter ego locked up inside. He'd somehow found a way to prevent his dark inner world from seeping out and infecting his outer world.

I was dying to know how he'd managed to do it. *When they catch this son of a bitch*, I thought to myself, *I'm gonna look him up and get him to tell me.*

Inside my briefcase were the notes I'd penciled from my meeting earlier that day with the two detectives from Wichita. Together with a group of my profilers and a handful of the agency's top criminologists, we listened as the men walked us through the case. This time they'd come to us looking not so much for a profile of the UNSUB, but for some proactive techniques they could use to flush the killer out into the open.

After we listened to the presentation, the one idea that came to mind was that police should organize a community-wide public meeting where the BTK murders would be discussed. The purpose of the gathering, held in a location central to all the crime scenes, would be to get the UNSUB to attend. From my experience with many of the serial killers I'd hunted in the past, I knew that their enormous egos and feeling of invincible superiority make it difficult for them to stay away from such meetings.

My plan was that investigators would covertly photograph those in attendance and identify all the vehicles outside the community hall.

And because I was convinced that the killer was a police buff, I suggested that an announcement should be made that the authorities were looking for potential volunteers “if the need should arise in the future when the police might need help.” The only requirements were that the applicants needed their own transportation and some law enforcement training or education.

The two detectives from Wichita scribbled down my suggestion, but it ate at me that there was something more that could be done, something altogether new.

Sitting there in my study, all I could think about were the eyes of Josephine Otero, BTK’s eleven-year-old victim in his first series of murders, the one he’d hung from a pipe in the basement of her family’s house, after strangling her parents and younger brother. Nothing in my career could ever prepare me for what I imagined this innocent little girl must have endured before finally dying of asphyxiation. I’d worked more child homicide cases than I cared to remember, but something about this one was different.

This killer didn’t feel human to me. All the guys I’d chased and studied were monsters, but even with the worst of them I usually sensed something familiar and human. No matter how horrific their butchery, I found some shred of fragility within them. But I didn’t get that with this killer in Wichita. Just when I thought I’d studied and classified every variation of evil, along comes this freak. He resided in a class all by himself.

I wandered back upstairs and climbed into bed. Before long, I felt myself begin to drift, but I fought the urge, trying to remain in that strange region between wakefulness and sleep. It was a place where I’d sometimes retrieved the information that helped me put together a profile. I waited for my mind to unearth something on the ghost I was chasing, but nothing came.

After a few minutes, my lids grew unbearably heavy. *How does someone like this start?* I whispered to myself as I began to fade. *And how can I put an end to him?*