

CHAPTER ONE

Out of the Shadows

A new type of killer is wreaking havoc across America and around the world. He has made countless headlines in recent years, but until now his core identity has been hidden. He is not driven by rage or lust. His conscience is not set loose by drugs or alcohol—the deadly fuels that can turn some men into momentary killers. Unlike most other murderers, he very often has no criminal record and sometimes no history of violence whatsoever. He is an intelligent, careful, methodical killer.

He is also someone who has always been a fabricator of reality. He is not your harmless garden-variety fibber but a compulsive, pathological liar whose lies are meant to get a reaction out of others: to inspire their admiration, to evoke their sympathy, to get him exactly what he wants. He makes up stories big and small, often lying about things for no readily apparent reason. But he is especially practiced at deceiving others about who he really is.

He fabricates evidence to exaggerate his accomplishments, wealth, success, social standing. Sometimes he proudly displays phony business cards or diplomas, awards from military service he never earned, and other “proof” he needs to create the impression that he craves. He knows how to use words, lies, and actions to manipulate others. Manipulation—either subtle or overt—is a core feature of how he interacts with others.

He leads what appears to be a normal and productive life and is often considered to be an exemplary citizen. But quietly, beneath the surface, unbeknownst to almost anyone, he has used all his well-honed abilities to lie, manipulate, and fabricate reality in order to commit the crown jewel of crimes, the perfect murder.

His goal is to erase his victim—be it his wife, ex-wife, girlfriend, or lover—to expunge her from the record of his life. If she is pregnant with a child he does not want—and an unwanted pregnancy is an alarmingly common motive for eraser killings—he is killing two birds with one stone, eliminating what he views as dead weight dragging him down. In his mind, he is not really murdering a human being; he is simply rearranging the world to better suit his needs, to remove a major annoyance or let him make a fresh start of things.

He harbors a cluster of psychological traits very unusual in the general public. He does not experience the almost universal psychological reaction called fear. It is not that he is uncommonly brave or that he has “conquered” fear. He does experience an abstract, emotionally colorless sensation when put under great stress—especially if he feels caught in a situation he is not confident he can talk his way out of, when he is no longer in control of everyone around him. Most of the time, any sense of truly being afraid is more like a thought than a feeling. His heart does not beat faster, and he shows few if any signs of the *emotion* of fear. He knows about fear a bit like a colorblind person is aware of color: it is visible, but only as another shade of gray.

Eraser killers employ cunning, stealth, and often meticulous planning to overcome their trusting prey, frequently employing the agonizingly slow and terror-inducing method of suffocation or strangulation in order to minimize the type of messy crime scene evidence that could get them caught.

These killers represent a previously unrecognized subset of intimate partner murderers, different in distinct ways from other domestic killers:

- Their killings are not committed in the violent rage or sudden loss of control that characterizes more classic domestic homicides. On the contrary, they kill with total calm, total control. If they leave behind any crime scene at all, it will be what criminal profilers refer to as “organized”—just the kind of crime scene investigators do not expect to see when a domestic homicide is involved, for that is supposed to be the most “hot-blooded,” disorganized, and messy of crimes.
- The eraser killer is a master of deceit and an expert manipulator. His killing is carried out in total secrecy (unlike many domestic homicides, which often are committed even though there are witnesses present) and then very highly “staged,” to use the investigators’ term for a crime scene that is arranged like a stage set to create an illusion intended to confuse the police and send them down a wrong trail.
- Most domestic homicides involve jealousy, money, another woman, or explosive and vengeful rage felt by the killer because the woman is planning to leave him. Although there are sometimes subsidiary motives involving monetary gain or other women, the eraser killer is not “driven” by these things. His real motivations stem from the unique psychology of men with a particular set of dangerous traits that psychologists have recently named “the Dark Triad” of personality.
- He is killing because the woman in question has become inconvenient. In his eyes, she no longer meets his needs, or she stands in the way of something he wants. She is not allowed to leave him or take away anything he holds dear, be it a home or children or the lifestyle he has come to enjoy. He will only let her go on his deadly, unilateral terms.
- He plans his killing well in advance, once again distinguishing him from the standard wife-killer. Far fewer than half of all wife-killings are actually planned in advance of the final encounter, according to available research.

- The eraser killer will exhibit neither mourning nor real signs of emotional loss, and will almost always exhibit strangely inappropriate behavior and speech after the mysterious death of his wife or girlfriend. (Sometimes he even starts speaking about her in the past tense *before* he has killed her.) Although he may actively participate in the search for a missing loved one, he will be using his full array of skills to direct any inquiries or police investigation toward fictitious threats and other suspects and away from himself.
- He may have hidden his contempt for the object of his enmity, especially if doing so gives him tactical advantage when the moment of attack arrives. But once he makes up his mind to erase his victim, his determination is all-consuming. When the act begins—once he puts his hands around her throat or strikes her with a heavy object as she sleeps—there is no twinge of conscience or compassion.
- He is generally intelligent, though he also greatly overestimates his talents. He believes he is smarter and better than the rest of us, certainly smarter than the police and more deserving in all ways than his victim. He often has considerable familiarity with the law and with how the police work. He may have read up on these matters diligently to help him with his plan. Or he may have used his unusual ability for absorbing things around him, observing with the cold eye of a lizard in the desert how other predators kill and get away with it, because getting away with murder is his goal.
- To achieve that goal, he may follow one of two distinct strategies. Either he can erase the victim's body by destroying it entirely or secreting it where it won't be found, or he can rearrange the crime or stage a wholly false scenario to erase all connection between himself and any criminal act. Either way, he appears to remain free and clear of any involvement in a dastardly act.

Although men have been carrying out this kind of crime for centuries, it is only now that the extraordinary glare of television lights and an almost “shock-and-awe” level of news coverage are beginning to drive him out of the safety of the darkness. But without an actual name for this crime and for this killer, it is still hard for us to make sense of these crimes, to find the hidden clues, and solve

what too often and quite tragically remain unsolved mysteries. As criminal profilers have discovered, truth and resolution can be found only by ferreting out the unseen links and connections between these seemingly disparate cases.

I believe these killers are best described as *eraser killers*, because that term describes simply and succinctly both their motive and their methods. Their victims are not “missing women” or “vanished wives.” They are women who have been erased, just as repressive political regimes have used the method of “forced disappearances” to dispose of their enemies and strike terror into all those who oppose them. The impact of so many women being “erased” or “disappeared” from our very midst, from communities or homes we have assumed to be “safe,” is overwhelming in its magnitude and undermines so many of the fundamentals on which our sense of trust and security is based. These eraser killers exploit the safeguards built into our legal system—principles enshrined in our constitution to protect honest citizens from unreasonable searches of their property and from being forced or coerced into making a false confession—as if those honored protections were simply escape hatches built to provide safe haven for someone capable of pulling off an expert murder.

By following a series of threads, beginning with Laci Peterson and then going back and forth in time to hundreds of other instances of mysteriously disappeared women, I discovered that most of the cases fit a distinct pattern or profile of a startlingly prevalent type of murder, yet one that had never been identified because we have tended to look at each case in a vacuum.

Most were not missing persons cases in any strict sense of the word, but elaborately planned and premeditated domestic homicides disguised to appear to be mysterious vanishings. Invariably, the person responsible for the woman’s disappearance was her current or former husband or boyfriend. Although some recent killers even cited Scott Peterson as their inspiration, he was hardly the first to come up with such an idea. Looking back in time, I traced the same pattern back a century to the murder that inspired Theodore Dreiser’s literary classic, *An American Tragedy*.

Although the essential facts of these cases bear a striking similarity, the outcomes vary widely. Many “disappeared” women are never found, and no one is ever held to account for what happened to them. A few victims—the “lucky” ones, in a manner of speaking—are

eventually discovered, often by pure chance or an act of nature. Their families get a chance to bury their loved ones, or what is left of them, and sometimes their killers are brought to justice. A small number of presumed killers are tried and convicted in the absence of a body; others are acquitted with or without a body because there is not enough evidence to convince a judge or jury beyond a reasonable doubt that a murder occurred, much less that the woman's intimate partner was the one responsible.

The victims of these killers are women of all races and social classes, from all parts of the country (and around the world as well). Whereas some have been the subject of intensive media coverage, others are all but unknown beyond their closest loved ones.

All the women listed here are dead or presumed to be dead. All were murdered or are believed by authorities to have been murdered by a husband or boyfriend, falling victim precisely because of their physical and emotional vulnerability to their killer. All "went missing" under mysterious circumstances, but none of these women was ever truly lost. They didn't wander off, run away from home, suffer amnesia and forget where they belonged. They were deliberately "disappeared" by someone who had good reason to try to make sure they would never be found, someone who wanted to erase them from the face of the earth.

• Hattie "Fern" Bergeler, fifty-seven, was found floating in the bay near her Florida home in August 2002 with a bedsheet wrapped around her head and cinderblocks tied to her neck and ankles. Her multimillionaire husband, Donald Moringiello, a retired aerospace engineer, claimed the two had lost sight of each other while driving in separate cars to visit his children. But he had still not reported her missing by the time her remains were identified—a month after he claimed to have lost her in traffic. Despite a wealth of physical evidence—the sheet, rope, and cinderblocks and the gun used to kill Fern, also fished from the water behind their Fort Myers Beach home, were all tied to her husband, and cleaned-up blood was found in the house—it took two trials to convict him of second-degree murder. A man of Moringiello's intelligence and character would never have made so many stupid mistakes, his attorney had argued.

• Isabel Rodriguez, thirty-nine, vanished in November 2001 two weeks after seeking a protective order against her estranged husband, Jesus, who she said threatened to kill her if she was awarded any money from him in their divorce. In the days before her disappearance, her husband ordered ten truckloads of dirt and gravel delivered to his five-acre farm on the outskirts of the Florida Everglades. On the day she went missing, a witness saw a fire burning for hours on the property. Jesus had told all his farmhands not to come to work that day, explaining to one that he was planning a Santeria “cleansing” ritual on the property. Police believe he killed his wife that day, burned her corpse on the farm, and scattered the ashes under the dirt and gravel. He claims she returned to her native Honduras, abandoning their two children, but there is no record of her leaving the United States or entering Honduras. Not long after his wife disappeared, he began seeing another woman, who looks uncannily like his missing wife and whose name even happens to be Isabel. At the time this book was written, prosecutors were preparing for a third trial after two previous efforts ended in mistrial.

• Kristine Kupka, twenty-eight, was just two months away from graduating with a degree in philosophy from Baruch College in New York City when she vanished without a trace in 1998. She was also five months pregnant by one of her professors, Darshanand “Rudy” Persaud, who did not confess to her that he was married until after she became pregnant. He was so adamant that she get rid of the baby that she began to fear he might hurt her. Kupka left her apartment with Persaud on the day she disappeared. Although he admits seeing her that day, he denies harming her or having any knowledge of her whereabouts, and no charges have ever been brought against him or anyone else.

• Lisa Tu of Potomac, Maryland, a forty-two-year-old Chinese immigrant caring for two teenagers and her elderly mother, disappeared in 1988. Tu’s common-law husband, Gregory, a Washington, D.C., restaurant manager heavily in debt from business failures and gambling losses, said she never returned from a trip to San Francisco to visit a sick friend. But police believe he killed her as she slept on their couch, then attempted to assume a new identity, traveling to Las Vegas, forging checks under her name, stealing from her son’s college fund, and enjoying the services of prostitutes. A first-degree murder conviction was overturned when

an appeals court ruled that evidence seized from his Las Vegas hotel room was improperly admitted. In the retrial, he was found guilty of second-degree murder.

- Pegye Bechler, a physical therapist and mother of three, disappeared in 1997 while boating off the Southern California coast with her husband to celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary and her thirty-eighth birthday. Eric Bechler claimed she was piloting a rented speedboat and towing him on a boogie board when she was washed overboard by a rogue wave. Although Pegye was an expert swimmer who completed in triathlons, Bechler claimed she never surfaced, and no sign of her has ever been found. After sobbing for the cameras about his devastating loss, Bechler took up with another woman just three months after his wife's disappearance, an actress and lingerie model; she agreed to wear a wire for police. Having been recorded describing how he bashed his wife over the head with a barbell, then attached the weights to her body and dumped her at sea, he was convicted of first-degree murder.

- Lisa Thomas's rocky marriage turned strangely amicable in the summer of 1996 when she and her husband of eight years finally agreed to divorce. Then the thirty-six-year-old mother of two vanished on the same weekend she planned to begin looking for her own place to live. Her husband, Bryce, seemed remarkably nonchalant about the fact that his wife was missing, and refused to allow police into their Bakersfield, California, apartment. Lisa's frantic twin sister, Theresa Seabolt, broke in and found the underside of the couple's mattress, which had been flipped, soaked in blood. Only then did Lisa's husband move into action, setting up a tip line and pleading for the public's help in finding his wife. Although Lisa's body was never found, a jury convicted her husband of second-degree murder. But the verdict was almost immediately thrown into question when one of the jurors accused fellow panelists of not following the judge's instructions. Facing the possibility of a new trial, Bryce Thomas attempted to hire a hit man (who was actually an undercover sheriff's investigator) from his jail cell to eliminate his wife's twin, the woman he believed responsible for putting him behind bars. Dictating a scenario identical to the one he carried out against his wife—presumably in the hope that it would appear that the same person killed both sisters—he asked the

purported hit man to kill his sister-in-law in her sleep, then make her body disappear, leaving just a little trail of blood “because that’s similar to what happened to the one I’m accused of murdering.” Ultimately, the trial judge allowed the conviction for killing his wife to stand, and handed down a sentence of fifteen years to life. He was subsequently convicted and sentenced to another twelve years for trying to arrange the murder of Theresa Seabolt.

- Jami Sherer, twenty-six, mother of a two-year-old son, disappeared in Redmond, Washington, in 1990 the day after telling her husband, Steven, that she wanted a divorce and was moving back in with her parents. At her husband’s insistence, she had gone to meet him one last time, but never returned. Within hours of that meeting, days before her car was discovered abandoned with her packed suitcase still inside, Sherer began telling family members that his wife was “missing.” Ten years later, still maintaining that his missing wife was alive somewhere as a jury found him guilty of murder, he lashed out at his wife’s family: “When Jami does turn up, you can all rot in hell!”

- Peggy Dianovsky, twenty-eight at the time of her disappearance, vanished from her suburban Chicago home in 1982, leaving no trace of her existence. Her husband, Robert, admitted striking her during an argument with enough force to splatter blood on a stairway in the couple’s home. But he insisted that she packed a bag and left that night, never to be seen again—without taking her car or her three children. Twenty-two years later, he was acquitted of her murder in a bench trial, despite testimony from two of her now grown sons, who said they witnessed their father hit their mother and hold a knife to her throat in the hours leading up to her disappearance. A family friend also testified that several months before Peggy went missing, Robert Dianovsky asked him to help dispose of his wife’s body and outlined a plan to make her killing look like suicide. The friend declined to participate in Dianovsky’s schemes, telling him that he would never get away with it—an incorrect assumption, as it would turn out.

The sheer callousness of eraser crimes is breathtaking, not just the murders themselves but the actions taken after the fact to cover them

up. As if taking the life of women they were supposed to love is not cruel enough, these killers afford their victims no solace or dignity even after death.

- Stephen Grant, who reported his wife missing on Valentine's Day 2007, strangled thirty-four-year-old Tara, hacked her body into pieces at the tool-and-die shop where he worked, then buried the pieces in a Michigan park. He was caught three weeks later when he retrieved the largest portion of his wife's remains, her torso, and brought it back to his home for safekeeping after learning police were searching the park. Grant, who ghoulishly used his children's sled to haul the body parts into the snow-covered woods, was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to a minimum of fifty years behind bars.

- Thomas Capano, one of Delaware's most prominent attorneys, a former prosecutor, mayoral chief-of-staff, and an chief legal counsel to the state's governor, shot his girlfriend, Anne Marie Fahey, to death in 1996, then dumped her body sixty miles out to sea inside a giant Igloo cooler. When the ice chest failed to sink because of its natural buoyancy, he pulled her out, wrapped chains and boat anchors around her, and sank her to the bottom of the Atlantic. Although no body was ever found, Capano's younger brother, who drove him out to sea that day in his boat, eventually admitted to police that he had seen the corpse sink below the ocean surface. He was convicted of first-degree murder in 1999 and sentenced to death, but the sentence was later reduced to life in prison.

- Robert Bierenbaum, a brilliant Manhattan surgeon and licensed pilot, is believed to have dropped the corpse of his wife, Gail, from a rented plane into the Atlantic Ocean in 1985. He was convicted of second-degree murder, but not until fifteen years after the crime.

- Ira Einhorn, a counterculture icon and widely revered peace and environmental activist, shattered the skull of his girlfriend, Holly Maddux, in 1977, then locked her—still alive—inside a steamer trunk in their apartment. When police finally gained access to the apartment a year and a half later and discovered her body, Einhorn insisted he had been set up by the CIA or possibly the KGB, that Holly's body was planted in a grand frame-up to silence him because of his radical views and research into "sensitive" areas. Ira was so well regarded in certain circles as the embodiment of peace

that many influential acolytes bought that far-fetched story, lobbying for his release on bail and even posting his bond. Just before trial, he fled to Europe, where he managed to elude justice for a quarter century, living for much of that time happily and openly as a country gentleman in the south of France. After a long extradition battle, he was finally returned to the United States, where he was convicted in 2002 and sentenced to life in prison.

Eraser killings raise such disturbing questions—can we ever really know anyone, can we trust those closest to us?—that we have not wanted to ask them. We don't want to believe that someone we let into our heart or our bed could be capable of such monstrous cruelty. We cling to the illusion that danger is something outside ourselves, at a distance, easily identifiable, like the stranger in the alley we can avoid by being safe and prudent.

But the truth is that except in a few notorious cases involving serial killers or sexual predators, grown women are not stolen off the street or ripped from the safety of their own homes by perfect strangers, never to be seen again dead or alive. Despite what Scott Peterson's defense attorneys wanted us to believe, we need not live in fear of mysterious men in vans or homeless people or satanic cults. Young women, and especially young pregnant women, are most in danger from the men they love.

More than a thousand women a year are murdered in America by an intimate partner. Many of those women, about seven in ten, bear the scars of years of male rage directed at them precisely because of their proximity and vulnerability. Others trust their partners implicitly and have no inkling of what lies ahead.

In the last year for which statistics are available, eighteen hundred women in the United States were murdered by men, more than half of those by a current or former husband or boyfriend. Intimate partner homicide is a truly one-sided phenomenon, as less than 5 percent of male murder victims are killed by their wife or girlfriend.

One of the most disturbing and perplexing aspects of the Peterson case was the fact that Laci was nearly eight months pregnant at the time she was murdered. It was unthinkable to most people that a man could kill not only his wife but also his unborn son. Yet young women between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine—women in

their prime childbearing years—are most likely to be killed by their partner. In fact, pregnancy may place them at greater risk of being murdered.

Recent studies from several states and cities across the country have found homicide to be the number one cause of death among pregnant women and that women continue to be at increased risk for being murdered for up to a year after giving birth.

An analysis of five years of death records in Maryland revealed that a pregnant or recently pregnant woman is more likely to die from homicide than any other cause whatsoever. Homicide was discovered to be the single biggest cause of injury-related death among pregnant and postpartum women in New York City and Cook County, Illinois, and among women up to a year after giving birth in the state of Georgia. Researchers reviewing eight years of autopsy records of reproductive-age women in the District of Columbia found murder to be the second most common cause of death among pregnant women, just one death behind medical complications related to pregnancy.

A 2005 study that attempted to look at the problem nationally found homicide to be the second leading cause of injury death in pregnant and postpartum women, behind motor vehicle accidents. But Isabelle Horon and Diana Cheng, authors of the Maryland study, believe that the national study seriously undercounted the number of pregnancy-associated homicides because it looked solely at voluntarily submitted death certificates for women who died during pregnancy or within a year of delivery.

In their own 2001 study, the two researchers from Maryland's state Department of Health found that only a small portion of pregnancy-associated deaths could be determined from death certificates. The rate of homicide reported in the national study was suspiciously low compared to the earlier regional studies, six times lower than what the Maryland researchers found in their state by using medical examiner and other records in addition to death certificates.

In any event, it is clear that the true number of pregnant or recently pregnant women who are murdered is higher than anyone has yet estimated, as pregnancy is not even looked for in all autopsies and may go undetected when women are killed in early stages of pregnancy. Nor are the numbers of "erased" women whose bodies

are never found to be autopsied or to be issued a death certificate included in any of these studies.

Although murder is the most extreme form of a larger epidemic of domestic violence—an estimated two to four million American women are physically assaulted by their partner every year—the rate of homicide just within families in this country is higher than the total homicide rates in most other Western industrialized nations.

Eraser killers represent a small and highly pathological subset of the larger group of men who commit what is known as intimate femicide. Their means, methods, and motives are distinct in almost every way from those of the more “ordinary” spousal killer.

One of the most important differences is that many of the men who commit a more typical domestic homicide never even leave the crime scene or attempt to deny their culpability. Some call police immediately afterwards to turn themselves in, and a significant percentage take their own life as well (whether this is motivated by any genuine sense of remorse or merely by the fear of punishment is debatable). A recent Canadian study found that half of men who had killed their intimate partners contemplated killing themselves afterward, and up to 40 percent of the men claim they tried to kill themselves. Although the exact numbers vary, the surprisingly high percentage of men who commit suicide after killing their intimate partner is validated by numerous studies both in the United States and Canada.

Those who kill both their partner and their children, whom criminologists refer to as “family annihilators,” very often take their own lives as well.

By contrast, true eraser killers hardly ever commit suicide. They feel no guilt for what they have done. In fact, they feel entitled to kill anyone who stands in the way of their happiness. And they do not fear punishment because they are thoroughly convinced they will never be held accountable. Only in the rarest of instances will they ever admit their crimes.