

The Barrow Case

Dan Petrosini

Chapter One

I have to tell you about the case that framed every investigation I've worked.

The saying, that something good comes out of something bad, was one I didn't quite buy into. To me, it was a way to put a good face on a terrible situation. I was all for moving forward, no matter what, but tell me, if someone dies, does it get better because a child is born? The baby was coming, either way, and it wasn't going to resurrect the dead guy.

See what I mean? Touting the infant's birth was only a way to distract people suffering from loss.

We all remember our firsts. The first time we kissed a girl or touched her in places we weren't allowed. Our first job, our first you-know-what, and especially, for a homicide detective, our first murder case.

My first case was cut-and-dried. A wife had caught her husband cheating and plunged a steak knife into his chest. No need to conduct a meaningful investigation. The woman he was in bed with witnessed it, and the wife admitted to the murder. It never felt like a solve, and though seeing a man who'd been killed in his own bed was something I'd never forget, it didn't change me.

For me, it was the second case that altered everything. For years, I was haunted by it. Even moving from New Jersey to Naples, over a decade ago, hadn't eased the pain. Thirteen hundred miles away, and it was still talking to me. Sometimes it was just a whisper, and other times, it shouted.

I tried everything, even going to see shrink about it. But nothing worked. It was like a film of the investigation had been burned into my mind. The images, especially a harrowing one of the Barrow kid, I'll be dealing with for the rest of my life.

It was a sunny Tuesday, the tenth of October, 1995, when it all started. Bob Stone hung up the phone after a short conversation. He stood, saying, "Okay, kid. Let's get moving. They found a body in Poricy Park. It's a damn teenager."

I followed my partner out the door. Officially, he wasn't my partner. Stone was a few months from retirement, and Sgt. Gesso figured teaming me up with him would speed my education.

Driving along Middletown-Lincroft Road, I made a right onto Oak Hill Road and pulled into the entrance to the park. The heavily wooded area was a two-hundred-and-fifty-acre nature preserve. Two cruisers, lights on, were blocking the footpaths. To the right, a man with a black Labrador was talking to an officer.

I didn't know the uniforms guarding the scene and chin-nodded. As Stone spoke with them, I signed us in. Before ducking under the police tape, we put on protective gear. Stone pointed. "It's that way, by the trails."

"Who found her?"

"The guy walking his dog. We got to talk to him."

We went off the trail toward a cordoned-off area. A grim-faced officer nodded. Stone went under first. I swallowed and snuck below the tape.

Stone stood five feet away from the body. "What do you see?"

What the hell kind of question was that? "A female corpse, fourteen to sixteen years of—"

"Not that. I'm talking about the scene."

The girl was on her back, one of her thick-soled shoes was missing. “She was dragged here.”

“Anything else?”

“She doesn’t have a pocketbook. Most girls her age never leave the house without one.”

“Good catch.”

“Whoever did this either robbed her or was trying to hide her identity.”

“Unless she was from a wealthy family, kids her age don’t carry a lot of money around.”

“You’re right.”

“Let’s see what we can learn before the medical examiner arrives.”

We bent down over the body. Leaves were floating down around us. The girl wore a light, unbuttoned bomber jacket over a tie-dyed shirt, and jeans.

Stone picked a leaf off the neck of the blond-haired girl. He said, “The kid was strangled.”

“Looks like a ligature of some kind was used.”

He moved his finger above the neckline. “It’s a wide bruise. I’m thinking a rope rather than a wire.”

I found myself swallowing. “Poor kid. I can’t imagine what the parents are going—”

“Now’s not the time for emotions. This is a crime scene. It’s not about her right now. We have to focus on the how. It’ll help us with the why-and-who parts.”

I didn’t fully buy the strategy. It was important to know how someone took a life, but knowing as much about the victim generally led you to the killer. “I understand, so what are you thinking?”

“Killers who use weapons, say a gun or knife, are in a class by themselves. And there’s a world of difference between a shooter and a murderer who stabs someone to death.”

“Killing from a distance versus up close, right?”

“Yeah, a strangulation is about as close as you can get. But it’s different. There’s no blood. Unless the killer carried a rope with him, it could have been rage or passion induced.”

“The medical examiner will be able to tell us what was used as a ligature.”

“Uh-huh. Let’s hope he gives us a lot more than that.”

“I don’t see any bruises, and with her clothes intact, it doesn’t look like she was sexually abused.”

“But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t the intent. Some sleazebag could have swept her off the trail looking to rape her. Someone might have come into the park and scared him. He strangles the girl to keep her quiet and then slips out.”

Throwing theories against the wall was the currency of a homicide detective. It was a way to flesh out possibilities, and even though it could be gruesome, I found it fascinating.

“Could be.”

Stone put a hand on the victim's cheek. “I’m no doctor, but I’d say she’s been dead less than a couple of hours.”

“In broad daylight. And in Middletown. I just can’t believe it.”

“Get used to it. The suburbs haven’t been immune for decades. Come on, we gotta talk with the guy who found her.”

Chapter Two

We stepped back into the parking lot as two patrol cars pulled up. Walking toward them, Stone said, "Let's get a search going."

I followed him. Stone said, "Listen up. We need a complete search of the area conducted. We're looking for any physical evidence you can find. The victim is missing a shoe: black, thick soled, and didn't have a pocketbook. We think they're out there somewhere. But anything you find, no matter how small, I want the location marked and the item bagged."

"Where do you want us to start?"

"I want the entire park searched. But let's start by the crime scene. Use the standard grid-search pattern. Get booties and gloves on, and be on your damn toes. The victim is a teenage girl."

The guy with the dog had on a Yankee windbreaker and was one of those guys who wore shorts no matter the time of year. His back to us, he was crouched down, petting his dog. He rose as the officer staying with him said something to him.

Stone extended his hand; I bent down and rubbed the dog's head. "I'm Detective Stone, and this Detective Luca."

"John Turner. I can't believe this."

"Tell us how you discovered the body."

"Well, me and Hershey were going for our walk. We come here every afternoon. She was acting strange; I didn't know what it was, but Hershey's a smart dog."

"What was your dog doing?" Stone said.

"She's always excited to come the park, but as soon as we got out of the car, she stopped dead in her tracks. Then she started to go in that direction." He pointed toward the area the body was. "I tried to pull the leash back, but she was tugging me along. I figured I might as well go where she wanted. I thought it was a cat or something that would take off when we got closer. Hershey loves chasing cats."

"As you were going along, did you see anything or anyone?"

"No, but I wasn't watching all over, just kind of following her."

"Any noises or sounds?"

"No, I mean, it wasn't dead quiet though. There was some wind, and we were stepping on leaves when we left the trail." He shook his head. "And then I saw . . . her . . . and tugged on the leash. I wasn't sure and didn't know what to think. At first, I thought she'd fallen. But then I knew. I mean, she was lying there with leaves on her, and her shoes were off."

"Did you touch the body?"

"Yeah, I mean, I had to see if she was alive. I didn't know if she was, so I cinched up the leash and got close. Hershey is very obedient, and I told her to sit and she listened. I went and tried to see if she had a pulse."

"Where did you check?"

"Her neck."

"How close did the dog get to the body?"

"She sat about five feet away."

It felt like Stone had asked his questions, so I jumped in, "Mr. Turner, you mentioned coming to the park each day."

"Yeah, we have our routine every afternoon."

"Have you noticed anyone unusual in the park recently?"

"You know, this place is pretty quiet. I guess that's why whoever did it came here."

"So nobody you didn't recognize?"

"Not really. Sometimes the teenagers come here to smoke or to neck, you know, but that's about it."

"Nobody you'd consider a threat?"

"It's been a while, but there was this one guy. I don't know if he was homeless or not, but I'd see him maybe once every couple of weeks. He'd carry around a bag with him. I thought it might have been everything the poor soul owned."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Gotta be a good two months."

"Let us have your contact information. We may have you come down and sit with a sketch artist."

"Sure, anything I can do to help."

As he was giving me his contact details, an officer trotted out of the park. He was holding an oval-shaped pocketbook.

"Detective Stone. We found this. Thought you'd like to see it right away."

He handed the bag off. "Good work. Where'd you find it?"

"About fifty yards east. Pretty close to the railroad tracks. I flagged the location."

Immediately, I pictured the killer fleeing with the kid's pocketbook. Maybe rummaging through it. He dumps the bag and escapes via a route where no one would likely see him.

I said, "Thanks. I'd appreciate it if you can walk away from the body toward where you found it and keep an eye out for anything he might have taken out of the bag."

Stone said, "I don't want anyone to know the location or even the fact the victim didn't have her pocketbook with her. Nobody, not even the press must know. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Stone looked at me, and I said, "Of course." It was a classic move. We needed to hold a detail or two from the case for ourselves. We might need to use the nonpublic information to verify a confession.

As the officer left, Stone and I walked to our car. Next to the entrance sign, I spotted a post with a plastic box attached to it, marked maps. I grabbed one. Stone was opening up the pocketbook. I hustled back as he drew something out.

"We got a name."

It was a laminated card. The kid's high school identification. Stone said, "Mary Mercury. Kid went to Middletown South."

He held out the ID. The picture matched the dead girl.

"Anything else?"

He shook his head. I didn't know it at the time, but even Stone couldn't deny things changed when a corpse had a name. I felt it too and defaulted to unfolding the map. The place had buildings on it. They were part of the Murray farmhouse.

It was on the other side of the trail, probably two hundred yards away from the body. The map also highlighted a network of trails that stretched all the way to Poricy Pond. We needed to check the entire area out.

I said, "There's a pair of buildings out that way. You want to go check it out?"

"I'd love nothing more, but we need to speak with the parents."

Ugh. By far, it was the worst part of the job.

I said, "The medical examiner just arrived. You want me to stick around? See what he says?"

"No." How could a word with only two letters dash my hopes?

The Barrow Case is one of 18 deadly stories in the Dead Silent Box Set.

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