

Excerpt

A source in the Marion Park Police Department confirms that the body count is six. Six bodies have been discovered in the basement of Bramhall Auditorium on the Mansbury College campus. We have no word yet on whether the bodies include the missing Mansbury students, Cassandra Bentley and Elisha Danzinger.

— Carolyn Pendry, *Newscenter Four*, 1:18 p.m., June 26, 1989

Marion Park Police have arrested Terrance Demetrius Burgos, 36, a part-time handyman at Mansbury College, in the murders of six young women who were found murdered and sexually molested in a campus auditorium.

— *Daily Watch*, June 27, 1989

— MONDAY, JUNE 26, 1989 8:32 AM —

Paul Riley followed his police escort, navigated his car through the barricades and stopped next to a patrol car. He shifted the gear into park, killed the engine, and said a quiet prayer.

Now, the storm.

When he opened the door, letting in the thick, humid air, it felt like someone had jacked the volume on the stereo: An officer's voice through the bullhorn, warning the spectators and reporters to respect the police barricades. Reporters shouting questions at any officer they could find, some of them now turning to Riley, a man they didn't know. Cops and medical and forensic technicians shouting instructions to each other. Other reporters positioned with microphones, speaking loudly into cameras about the breaking news; hundreds of citizens gathered from every angle, speculating on what, precisely, had been found inside Bramhall Auditorium.

Riley knew little more than they. The word was, six bodies, young women, mutilated in various ways. Then there was the one additional fact had been delivered by his boss in a shaky voice: "They think one of them is Cassie."

Cassandra Bentley, he'd meant, a student at Mansbury College but, more importantly, the daughter of Harland and Natalia Bentley, a family worth billions. Family money. Political contributors. People who mattered. Even the name sounded wealthy.

Riley looked up at the bruised sky, where three news helicopters circled over this corner of the Mansbury College campus. He clipped his badge—all of three weeks old—to his jacket and looked for a uniform. There were plenty of them, in various colors—blue for Marion Park police, brown for deputies from the county sheriff's office, white for Mansbury security, black from some other jurisdiction, probably brought in for crowd control.

He gave his name and his title, something he wasn't used to saying: the First Assistant County Attorney, the top deputy to the county prosecutor.

"Who's in charge?" he asked.

"Lightner," the cop said, gesturing toward the auditorium.

Bramhall Auditorium took up half the block, a dome-topped structure arising from a large concrete staircase, a threshold supported by granite pillars, with a manicured lawn to each side. Riley counted the steps—twelve—and entered the lobby to the auditorium.

It was only slightly less sticky inside. No air conditioning. School was out. No one was supposed to be using this auditorium this time of year. Access, Riley thought to himself. Who would have access?

Riley moved cautiously. He was new to this job but not to crime scenes. He'd been an assistant U.S. attorney—a federal prosecutor—for many years, and had spent most of the time working on a street gang that was no stranger to violence. Riley groaned at the number of law enforcement officials inside the place. Fewer was always better, but as he looked around the place, he realized that little would be gained from all of the fingerprint dusting around him. This was an auditorium, with a decent-sized lobby and then a massive theater that, including the balcony, could probably house several thousand people. It would be easier to figure out who hadn't left their prints.

To the side of the lobby, a door opened—the door, presumably, leading to the basement and the maintenance locker where the bodies were found. An officer stepped out and lifted his gas mask—a charcoal-impregnated odor mask—just before he vomited on the floor.

Paul found himself instantly wishing for city cops. As a former federal prosecutor, there was a built-in bias against the city cops, too, but anything was preferable, in his mind, to a suburban cop. But jurisdiction was jurisdiction. He wasn't working with the FBI anymore.

Riley took the gas mask from the spent officer, who was wiping at his mouth. He told the officer to clean up the mess and get some fresh air. He then took a deep breath and opened the access door.

It was a wide staircase, the steps filthy with shoeprints. He kept his hands off the wooden railing. He hit the landing and turned for the final set of stairs.

There were only two uniforms down there when Riley reached the basement. One of them was in the elevator, which had been shut down. The initial flurry of fingerprinting and photographing had probably already happened.

It was a wide hallway, understandably, with several heavy doors propped open, several storage rooms already combed over with no results. Riley moved down the hall to the last room in the hallway, the room that mattered, feeling his pace slow.

He steeled himself before he took one shuffle step into the last doorway.

The room was large, with rows of oversized chain-link lockers and shelving units, all containing chemicals and cleaning supplies. Mops and brooms and an oversized garbage can with sprayers containing purple and blue fluids attached. And on the floor, lined up, posed, arms at their sides, legs together, were six corpses.

How to explain? People always said words couldn't describe. That wasn't true. He just wouldn't have known where to begin or end. He'd seen pictures of Dachau and Auschwitz, but those were photographs, capturing the horror and desperation only in two dimensions. He tried it as a defense mechanism, tried to think of these six butchered girls as photos on a page, ignoring the upheaval in his stomach and the pounding adrenaline through his body. He fought to keep his breathing even, his mind clinical.

The first one was blond, seemingly a beautiful young girl, though the yellowish hue to her skin made her look more like a wax statue. The blow to her head could only vaguely be seen from her angled head, near the scalp. Far more prominent was the wound to her chest, where her heart had once been. Calling it a wound was insufficient. It was like the life had been ripped from her.

Second one: The wound across her neck was so gaping that you sensed if you lifted her, the head would detach. Her skin had paled as well. She looked more like a mannequin than a human being, or maybe that was yet another defense mechanism. Maybe it was easier to think of them as objects, at least while you were looking at them. That was usually how the offender viewed them, too.

The one next to her was also naked, had been burned over her entire body with acid, down to her feet and hands. Most of the skin was off her face, leaving the skeleton, her eyes protruding from the bone in a ghoulish stare. She would have to be identified through dental records. Looked like one of her hands might still have the skin, too, for fingerprint identification.

The fourth one looked more recent than the first three, more of a hue to her skin, but still, to Riley's eye, not a recent death. Her arms and legs had been severed but were laid in the appropriate places, like she was a broken, battered doll. Her eye sockets were empty, bloody crevices. Her eyes had been gouged out with a blunt instrument.

The fifth victim's eyes were wide open, like her mouth, and the petechiae on her neck and face suggested suffocation.

The last of the victims was the most recent, he assumed, from the color of her skin, and because it seemed clear that whoever did this was placing them in chronological order. Her face was swollen from pre-mortem bruising, her nose crushed, the bones above her eyes and on her cheeks clearly smashed as well, the top of her skull battered into mush. Her dark hair was sticking in all directions, matted from the blood and brain matter. This, from what he'd been told, was Cassandra Bentley.

Six young women had been lined up like sides of beef, murdered and mutilated in various forms.

Okay, he'd seen it. It was important to view the crime scene, if you were going to prosecute a case. And there was no doubt Riley was going to handle this one.

His limbs electrified, his head woozy, Riley made his way back up the stairs. Neither the hallway nor the staircases showed any signs of blood. The fun hadn't taken place here. They'd been murdered somewhere else and transported to this auditorium.

When he opened the door into the lobby, a tall, skinny man with dark curly hair nodded at him. "Paul Riley? Joel Lightner. Chief of Detectives at MP."

Riley removed his gas mask and shook Lightner's hand. Lightner looked mid-thirties and baby-faced. Riley wondered how many detectives a town like Marion Park would have.

"Chief Harry Clark," Lightner said, motioning behind him. Clark was one of those guys who would look sloppy without the uniform, a sizeable mid-section and bad posture, soft in the chin with small eyes and a military cut to his thin hair.

“And Walter Monk, head of security at Mansbury.”

They all shook hands and exchanged notes. Lightner flipped open his note pad and read off the list of injuries. The first girl, a blow to the skull and her heart had been removed; second girl, throat slit near the point of decapitation; third girl burned with sulfuric acid; fourth, arms and legs severed, eyes gouged out; fifth, strangulation or drowning; final girl, beaten savagely about the face and skull, and with a single gunshot wound through the back of the mouth.

“There was intercourse in each case,” Lightner added. “The M.E. thinks the first victim is about a week old. Each one seems more recent than the—it looks like maybe it was one murder a day, for a week. The last one, they figure was probably yesterday.”

“They were down here a whole week, and no one noticed?”

Monk, the security guy, had to be near sixty. His long, beaky face nodded slowly. “Between spring semester and summer school, there’s a two-week period off. The whole school basically shuts down.”

And whoever did this, Riley thought, knew that.

“The last one is Cassie Bentley?” he asked. “The rich girl?”

Monk sighed. “Hard to tell for sure, she was beaten so badly.”

Riley surely agreed with that. The poor girl’s face had been crushed. They’d need dental records for confirmation.

“But yeah,” Monk said. “I think so. Especially because the first one’s Ellie, so it makes sense.”

Riley perked up. He was playing catch-up here.

“Elisha Danzinger,” Lightner explained. “Ellie. She and Cassie shared a dorm room. Best friends.”

Riley turned to Monk. “How many kids here at Mansbury?”

He made a face. “About four thousand.”

“Four thousand. And how is it you know these two girls so well?”

Monk grunted a laugh. "Oh, well, everyone knows Cassie Bentley. She's a Bentley." His face turned sour. "And she's had her share of trouble. Disciplinary things. Cassie's a little—kind of a troubled young girl."

Lightner hit Monk with the back of his hand. "Tell him what you just told me about Ellie."

"Yes, Ellie." Monk took a breath. "Ellie had had some trouble with a college employee. A part-time handyman. He did odd jobs. Painting, blacktopping, maintenance. He'd been assigned this block of buildings when he worked here."

"And?"

"And he'd been following Ellie around campus. Stalking her. She'd gone to court and gotten a restraining order last year. And we fired him, of course."

Riley thought about that. A handyman. Keys to buildings like this auditorium. Knowledge of the school schedule. "Ellie's the one, her heart was ripped out? The first one?"

They all nodded.

"So you know this guy? This handyman?"

"His name is Terry Burgos," Monk said. "I have his home address right here."

Riley looked at Lightner. Did he really need to say the words?

"I'm taking a couple cars with me," said Lightner.

"Wait," Riley said. "I need a phone. And someone find me one of the ACAs. We're not taking any chances. Surround the house right now. If you can get his consent for a search, then go in. Otherwise, freeze the situation until I say so."

Lightner shot Riley a look. Cops had all kinds of ways of obtaining consent, or saying they did after the fact.

"We're not fucking this search up, Detective," Riley said. "Are we clear?"

Riley left the cops and found an assistant county attorney, sending her off to a judge for a warrant. Then he reached a phone in the school's administrative office and dialed the number for his boss, County Attorney Ed Mullaney.

"You'll need to call Harland Bentley," Riley told him. He looked out the window at an overhead news copter. "If he hasn't already heard."