

# Killing Time

Peter Sexton

They called him The Rose Killer, which I think is totally absurd. But the media always need to have a flashy name to attach to their news items. He was convicted for the murder of six girls, the last of whom was my sister, Heather. And for these murders he is sitting on death row.

I first set eyes on him during his trial. And I can tell you, it wasn't an easy thing to sit through. I've often been asked, if given the opportunity, would I kill him for what he did to my sister. "Of course," I say. "*Hell* yes. In a heartbeat."

His life—life in terms that you or I define life—is over. He's not a threat to society anymore; he's no longer preying on innocent young women. The only thing he's killing anymore is time. And that's about all he has to do for the rest of his miserable life: sit in his cell, killing time, living with the memories of the lives he has taken.

The day deputies escorted him from the courtroom, bound and shackled, I thought I had seen him for the last time. In fact, I was happy to see the door close behind him. But as it turned out, that wasn't the last time I would see him. I saw him again less than two months later, when my mother asked me to take her to see him in prison.

I didn't understand why she wanted to go, and she offered no explanation during our long drive. I simply understood it was something she felt she needed to do.

We were led to a visiting area and instructed to sit and wait. Patrick Billiard appeared after a few minutes, smiling as he sat down. He and my mother stared at each other for a long time, neither choosing to speak. Finally my mother took the initiative and pierced the silence that had been hovering between them. And the conversation that took place has haunted me to this day.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," my mother said.

Billiard nodded.

They both stared at each other a while longer before the man spoke.

"I doubt you came here today simply to sit there and have another look at me."

My mother cleared her throat. "No, I didn't."

Billiard leaned back in his chair. And my mother cut right to the heart.

"Are you sorry for what you've done, Mr. Billiard?"

"Sorry for what I have done?" He took off his glasses, massaged the bridge of his nose, then returned the glasses to his face. "What have I done to be sorry for?"

"You know what you've done, Mr. Billiard. You know perfectly *well* what you've done."

"Yes. I have to agree with you there. I do know what I have done. But the real question is: Do *you* know what I have done?"

"You murdered my daughter. You murdered her and five other young women. You're a killer, Mr. Billiard. You're a cold-blooded killer."

Patrick Billiard slowly shook his head. "You have no idea what I am. And even less idea what I have done. I'm surprised at you."

"You're surprised at *me*?"

"Yes."

"And why might you be surprised at me?"

Billiard shook his head. "No, no, no," he said. "You're wasting your time."

"I'm wasting my time?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"Do you know why you came here today?"

"I came here to ask you some questions about the crime you committed against my daughter."

"To what purpose?"

"I want to understand."

"All right. Yes. I think we might be getting somewhere now. Please, ask away."

"Again I will ask you: Are you sorry for what you have done, Mr. Billiard?"

Billiard shook his head again. "Next question."

"No. I want an answer. You agreed to see me today; you agreed to talk to me. The least you can do is answer my question."

"I told you before, you're wasting your time. It doesn't matter to me, you understand. I have all the time in the world."

"Please, Mr. Billiard. I need answers to my questions."

"You need answers to your questions?"

"Yes."

"You aren't even asking the right questions."

"Excuse me."

"I know you heard me perfectly well, Mrs. Simmons. You're asking questions but you're asking the *wrong* questions. If you want me to answer you, start asking the right questions."

My mother was quiet for a long time, her face in her hands. I thought for a moment she might have been crying, but she wasn't. She cleared her throat and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand.

"Why my daughter?" she asked. "Why Heather?"

"All right. Good. That's better." Billiard leaned forward in his chair, bringing his face close to the wire-mesh screen. "Why do *you* think I chose your daughter?"

"Damn you! Stop doing this. Please, just answer my question."

"How well did you know your daughter?"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me correctly. How well did you know your daughter?"

"She was my daughter, Mr. Billiard."

"That doesn't answer the question."

"I knew her as well as any mother knows her own daughter."

"Let's hope not," he said, leaning back in his chair again.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Would it surprise you to learn that I knew Heather? Not intimately, of course. And we weren't exactly what you would call good friends. But we did know each other. And we spoke on several occasions."

"How? How did you know Heather?"

"It is truly a shame that she didn't live to finish medical school. I assume you knew she wanted to pursue a career in pediatric medicine."

"She mentioned her interest in the field, yes."

"She was good with children. I'm sure she would have made a wonderful doctor."

"Mr. Billiard."

"We first met during the summer of ninety-eight. She had just started medical school and was living in her apartment near the campus."

"Where did you meet her?"

"You realize that it hurts me more now to be learning how little you knew about your daughter, than it did the night I saved her?"

"*Saved* her, Mr. Billiard? You strangled her. You robbed her of her life."

Billiard seemed unaffected by my mother's words.

"I sit here before you now," he said, "listening to you throw your questions at me, and it turns my stomach. Spending this time with you today is only confirming for me what I knew the night I saved her. And that is the sad truth that she *needed* to be saved. Saved from you; saved from herself; saved from the life she thought she had to lead."

My mother started to get up. "I've heard enough," she said. "Thank you, Mr. Billiard."

The man calmly said, "She was pregnant when I first met her. Did you know that?"

I nearly jumped when he said that. But I managed to remain composed. Billiard stared at my mother. My mother turned and slowly returned to her seat.

"What on Earth are you talking about?"

"Barely nineteen and two months pregnant."

"You apparently didn't know Heather as well as you thought, Mr. Billiard. My daughter was never pregnant. I think I would have known had she ever been. Her education was far too important to her to ever let something like that happen."

That's when he turned toward me. And though we had never been introduced, he addressed me by name.

"Matthew. Why don't you tell your mother about your sister's pregnancy? It seems she doesn't want to take my word for it."

My mother looked at me. I swear I could feel her stare burning through my skin. I wanted to be anywhere else but in that room. *Anywhere* else.

"Matthew?"

I was looking at my hands, holding one in the other.

"Matthew?" Her voice was meek, battered.

"He's telling the truth." I couldn't look up; I couldn't face her. I continued to talk to my hands. "Heather asked me to take her to get an abortion. She made me swear I would never tell."

"Oh my God."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"Why didn't she tell me? Why didn't she come to me?"

"Why do *you* think she didn't go to you?" Billiard asked. My mother couldn't speak for several long moments, she simply glared at the man sitting before her.

"Was it—?"

"Mine? No, certainly not," Billiard said. "She was already with child when we met."

"So how did you come to know about it?"

Billiard shook his head. "No," he said. And my mother seemed to know exactly what he meant. She wasn't asking the right questions.

"How long did you know Heather?"

"Does the length of our acquaintance matter?"

"Can't you just give me a straight answer?" She appeared to be fighting back tears.

Billiard slowly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "We knew each other for just more than a month."

The deputy appeared then and informed us we had five minutes left. My mother thanked him, then stared at Billiard, silent. I had begun to think she wasn't going to say anything more.

"Where did you meet Heather?" she asked.

"Is that a question you're prepared to hear the answer to? If the truth turns out to be painful, is it necessary for you to know?"

"Yes, I think so. I must know."

"Tell me. What kind of work did Heather do?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, what kind of work did Heather do?"

"What has that got to do with where the two of you met?"

"It has *everything* to do with where we met."

"She tutored high school students in history and government."

The look I saw on Billiard's face when she said that was almost too complex to describe. It wasn't a scowl, it wasn't a grin, it wasn't a sneer: but perhaps it was an amalgam of all three. Unfortunately, I knew what he was going to say next, and I wanted so desperately to fade into my own seat, to disappear. Anything, if only to be gone from there at that very instant.

"Perhaps. Perhaps she did do some tutoring. But I'm afraid the majority of her income came from her dancing."

"Dancing?"

"I use the euphemism purely out of respect for Heather."

"I don't understand what you're trying to tell me," my mother said.

She looked at me, but I dropped my eyes back to my hands.

Billiard said, "She danced for me; and she danced for other men. And she made a lot of money doing it."

My mother was shaking her head, perhaps not wanting to believe what Billiard was saying.

"Heather was an escort, Mrs. Simmons. That's how she managed the cost of her expenses."

"No. That can't be. She had an allowance."

"Two hundred dollars a month. Yes, I know. And by the end of the first week that was gone. So she danced."

My mother was still shaking her head.

"In the beginning, I asked her why she didn't just call you and ask for more money. But she explained why she couldn't do that; she explained about your lectures on responsibility and self-respect. When she refused to call you for help, I paid her to stay with me at my home. Nothing sexual ever transpired between us, I promise you. My hope was to keep her in her clothes and away from that...*job*. She was better than that. And for a while I thought it was working. But then, one evening after she left my home, I followed her. I was afraid that she was spending most of the evenings with me, but seeing others in the very early morning. And I had been right. My attempts had failed. I believed I had won; I believed I had bought her her freedom. But I had just been fooling myself."

My mother looked puzzled. "Her freedom?"

"From herself. I believed that by paying her to spend the evenings in my home I would keep her from selling herself the way she had been. But I was wrong."

"I had no idea." Again, my mother turned to me. "Matthew?"

I was sobbing.

"My God," she whispered.

Billiard continued. "When I realized that I couldn't save her with money, I saw I had no other choice."

"Please, don't go on."

"But this is what you wanted, isn't it? You asked me why, now I'm telling you. I *saved* her. I saved her from herself, and I saved her from *you*." Billiard actually started to cry. "She wasn't strong enough to do it on her own. And she was too good for that way of life."

I thought the visit had come to an end. I didn't see that there was anything else that could be said or learned at this point. And by now I was starting to hate myself; I was starting to feel somewhat responsible for what had happened to Heather. I wanted to leave, to run, to go someplace where I could hide and never be found.

To my mother, Billiard said, "Next week is Lori's birthday, isn't it. Give her my best."

Lori is my younger sister. My mother looked as though she had been slapped, as though she wanted to scream, but the only sound she managed to make sounded more like a choke or gasp.

"Yes, I know Lori," Billiard said. "Though I haven't had the pleasure of meeting her in person, I do know her. A lover of poetry; herself a budding poet. Will she be stronger than Heather?"

Billiard got up to leave then, saying goodbye before he turned to walk away. My mother reached for the screen between the visitors and inmates until her hand came to rest against the metal. "Mr. Billiard?"

He stopped and turned.

"Thank you," she said.

Billiard was silent for a moment, then moved closer to the partition. "For what?" he asked.

"For telling me the truth today."

Billiard left then. My mother didn't move until the deputy came and helped her to her feet.

My mother was quiet during most of the drive home. I was grateful for the silence. I didn't know what to say, and I was afraid of what my mother might want to ask. However, toward the end of our trip, she summoned the will to speak.

"Did you know Lori writes poetry?" she asked.

I looked at her for as long as I dared take my eyes from the road. I didn't immediately understand why she was asking. I couldn't answer.

"Well?" she pressed.

"Yeah, Mom. *Everybody* knows it."

I didn't mean the words to come out the way they did. The way I said it sounded like an accusation, though that had not been my intention. I was just surprised by the question itself. She looked down at her hands, watching her fingers grabbing at each other.

"I had no idea," she admitted.

She fell quiet again, and I just drove.

Lori was in her room doing homework when we got home, and my mother went upstairs and knocked on her door. Lori's room is next to mine, so I could hear what they were saying. My mother asked her if they could talk.

"Sure, Mom." Lori must have noticed something on our mother's face. "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, honey. I'm sorry. It's been a very long and emotional day."

"Do you need to talk about it?" Lori asked.

"No, honey. I'll be all right. What I want to talk about right now is poetry."

"Poetry?"

"Yes. Matt told me you write poetry. I had no idea."

I caught the lie, but understood her reason. A little white lie every now and then can be justified, I suppose.

"I would love to read some of your poems," my mother told her.

"Really?" The excitement in Lori's voice was evident. I could imagine the look of joy that must have been on her face.

"Yes, if you would like to share them with me."

"I'd love to," Lori said. And I could hear her riffling through her desk before I turned my stereo on and placed the headphones over my ears.