

FATAL VOWS

The Tragic Wives of Sergeant Drew Peterson



Joseph Hosey





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Drew Peterson—May 21, 2008 / Will County Sheriff's Department.

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For Gracie

“He knows how to manipulate the system, and his next step is to take my children away. Or kill me instead.”

—From a letter dated November 14, 2002, from Kathleen Savio to Will County Assistant State’s Attorney Elizabeth Fragale regarding her estranged husband, Sergeant Drew Peterson.

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PROLOGUE

Walter Martineck hardly knows Drew Peterson, a retired police sergeant in the Chicago suburb of Bolingbrook, but he's a good friend of Peterson's stepbrother, Tom Morphey. So it was that Martineck found himself unwittingly drawn into the events of October 28, 2007, the day Peterson's young wife, Stacy, was last seen. The prologue that follows is a dramatization based on an account Morphey reportedly gave to police, as well as statements Martineck made in the media regarding his strange run-in with Morphey late that day, before Martineck had heard a word about Stacy's disappearance. In the months that she's remained missing, numerous stories have flooded out from both those who knew her well and those who barely knew her; stories that the police, and everyone following the case in the national news, are sorting through to answer the vexing question: What happened to Stacy?

Drew Peterson set a cup of coffee in front of his stepbrother, who was slumped in a stuffed chair in the back of Starbucks, away from the wide windows looking out onto busy Weber Road. Tom Morphey sipped the coffee and waited to hear why Peterson had summoned him there.

But Peterson only said, "Drink this. You look like you need it."

Morphey could believe he did. He'd woken up that morning with a familiar dull ache behind his eyes and burning in his stomach after spending the day on the couch, watching the Bears give away the game to the Lions. Then he dozed off and might still have been asleep if his stepbrother hadn't called at 5 o'clock that evening, asking to meet him at the Starbucks midway between their homes in the Chicago suburb of Bolingbrook.

Peterson told Morphey to be there at seven; it was important.

Morphey heaved himself off the couch and, since he had nowhere else to be, headed over to Starbucks, happy for the chance to help his stepbrother for a change. Usually it was Peterson coming through for him with things like money, furniture, or work. Just the other day Peterson had told him he could probably line up something at the local Meijer department store; Morphey needed the job, and it would not have been the first that Peterson had helped him get.

When Morphey walked into Starbucks, he was early for their meeting. Peterson was already there, sitting in back, reading the paper.

After getting Morphey coffee, Peterson asked, "How's things at home?"

Morphey just shrugged and asked about Peterson's three boys, daughter, and wife, Stacy. Peterson gushed about the kids: Tom at the top of his class and playing trumpet in the school band, Kris a champion junior high wrestler, Anthony and Lacy adorable and growing up fast. About Stacy—his fourth wife, mother to Anthony and Lacy, stepmother to Tom and Kris—he said nothing. He fell silent and stared across the table.

"Why aren't you working tonight?" Morphey asked.

"Taking the day off." More silence. Then: "I need something."

So he didn't just want to talk, to get something off his chest. He—Drew Peterson, Bolingbrook

police sergeant, enforcer of law and order—needed something from his troubled, unemployed stepbrother. It was the best Morphey had felt in a long while.

“What?” he said quickly.

“Stacy,” Peterson said. “She said she’s leaving me again. You know how she is.”

Morphey said he knew.

“It’s like this every month,” Peterson said. “Right around her period. It’s getting to be too much. Especially since Tina.”

Stacy’s half sister, Tina, had died about a year before. Peterson had told Morphey how hard Stacy had taken it, about her depression, her pills. Morphey, too, knew a little something about depression and pills.

“You know what else?” Peterson said. “I think she’s running around on me.”

“Get out of here.”

Peterson pulled out his wallet and opened it to a picture of Stacy, in a tight party dress, leaning over Drew as he sat on a chair. “You’d say no to this?”

“She’s a fox,” Morphey agreed, “but that doesn’t mean she’s running around.”

Peterson put the wallet away. “It’s getting to be a problem,” he said. “She’s a problem. We got to dispose of the problem.”

Morphey didn’t know what to make of that. He didn’t really want to know. Had he even heard his stepbrother correctly? He didn’t try too hard to figure it out.

Peterson rubbed his temples and pushed back his hair. “I need you to wait here for a little while. Then he reached into his jacket, pulled out a cell phone and handed it to Morphey.

“Take this. Whatever happens, don’t answer it. Just stay here. Don’t fall asleep. Get another coffee, whatever. Just don’t leave and don’t answer the phone. And don’t call anybody either. Think you can handle that?”

“Yeah, Drew.”

Peterson left. Morphey studied the phone. It was a nice one, but Morphey did not mess with it. He did not want to screw up. He sat there and tried to stay awake.

After about half an hour, a jolting ring made Morphey drop the phone in his lap. When he picked it up, he saw the caller ID.

Stacy.

Morphey stared at the phone until it stopped ringing. He didn’t know what was going on, but suddenly he wasn’t so sleepy.

Another half hour passed before Peterson reappeared. When Morphey asked where he had gone, Peterson told him that he just went to run an errand.

Morphey handed back the phone. “Your wife called.”

Peterson put the phone in his pocket without looking at it. “I know,” he said. “You did a good job.”

Out in the parking lot, Peterson said, “Give me a call tomorrow. I might have something on the Meijer’s thing.” He got in his GMC Denali and drove off.

A few hours later, he called Morphey again. “You think you can come over here? I need a hand moving something. The Denali and the Grand Prix are in the driveway, so just park in front. You’re a right to drive, right?”

Morphey put on his jacket and headed for the door. He told his girlfriend Sheryl he’d be back in a minute; he had to go to Drew’s.

When he got to Peterson’s house, his stepbrother opened the front door before Morphey had

chance to ring the bell. As Morphey stepped inside, Peterson glanced around the sleepy cul-de-sac. ~~was a few days before Halloween. The air was crisp, the house almost as dark as the street.~~

The kids were sleeping, and Peterson said Stacy was out with her sister. Morphey thought that was strange, since both cars were parked in the driveway. Maybe Stacy's sister had picked her up from the house.

Morphey followed Peterson upstairs and into the bedroom. He noticed a blue plastic barrel next to the bed. The barrel was tightly sealed and had two plugged holes in its lid, maybe openings for a pump. It looked a little smaller than a fifty-five-gallon drum.

Peterson squatted and put his fingers under the edge of the barrel's bottom. "I'll tip it," he said. "You take it from the top."

He pushed the barrel over, and Morphey accepted its weight. It was warm against his hand. Peterson backed out of the bedroom and toward the stairs. Morphey walked after, holding up his end. The barrel was not very heavy, and now Peterson bore all of its weight as he stepped backward down the stairs.

Morphey asked what was in the barrel.

"Chlorine," Peterson said.

Morphey thought it was strange that Peterson would have a barrel of chlorine for his swimming pool all the way upstairs, next to his bed. He wondered for what reason it needed to be moved late on Sunday night, not to mention why it felt warmer than the air in the room. But he didn't ask any of these questions. He told himself to just believe his stepbrother, to go along with it and show himself capable of helping with this simple task.

Once downstairs, they carried the barrel through the attached garage and out to the driveway where Peterson set it down to open the back of his Denali. The two men hoisted the barrel into the car. Peterson wedged a piece of wood against it to keep it from rolling around.

"Well, I better get this out of here," he said.

"Where you going?" Morphey asked.

"I know a guy wants to buy some chlorine," Peterson said.

"Now?"

"He wants it pretty bad." Peterson pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and palmed it into Morphey's hand.

"Ah, Drew, come on," Morphey protested. "You don't have to."

"Got to run," Peterson said as he climbed into his Denali and closed the garage door from inside his car. Morphey watched the door go down, then drove home.

In his kitchen, he sat down and had a few drinks. His head throbbed. *Dispose. Problem.* He had a few more and then walked up the street to the home of his pal Walter Martineck. Lights shone through the front window, so he knocked on the door.

Wally opened the door, and Morphey blurted out, "I think I just helped move Stacy with Drew."

Wally tried to follow what he was saying, but Morphey was drunk and rambling, nearly incoherent. He kept trying to push a handful of money onto his pal. Wally refused and asked where the cash had come from. Morphey wouldn't say. He left his friend standing mystified in the doorway and walked back to his own house.

When he woke up the next morning, his girlfriend told him something that he already knew, no matter how much he tried to convince himself otherwise. So he went back to bed and tried to forget. He tried to pretend that it had never happened.

When he awoke the second time and couldn't fall back to sleep, Morphey swallowed a handful

pills and chased them with what was left in a big plastic bottle of liquor. The rest of that day, October 29, 2007—the day that Stacy Peterson was reported missing, as his girlfriend had informed him in the morning—was largely lost to Morpheus. And as he gratefully drifted off again, he hoped the whole thing had been a bad dream.

Waking up in a hospital room in Naperville, the next town over, was no dream. Through his haze he heard people saying he had tried to end it all with liquor and pills. He believed what these people were saying, never mind that he could not quite make out what they looked like. Whether he had intentionally tried to kill himself, which was entirely possible, or had simply overdone it trying to block out the terrible thoughts racing through his mind, Morpheus didn't know or care. They gave him drugs to sleep, which was nice, but when the drugs wore off, an unwelcome consciousness returned. He slept and woke, and upon one woozy resurfacing, Drew Peterson had materialized next to his bed.

Peterson, catching Morpheus's eye, leaned over and asked, "How you feeling?"

CHAPTER ONE

Inked into the flesh of Yelton Cales is the sad history of his troubled family. It's an incomplete history, still without an ending, but tattooed tributes to dead relatives already cover much of Yelton's upper body. On his left arm are the names of two of his four sisters, Jessica and Lacy. They died as young children. Scrawled indelibly on the left side of his neck is his mother's name, Christie. She is probably dead too, although no one knows for sure; she hasn't been seen or heard from since she walked away from her family, clutching her Bible, in March of 1998.

One name absent from Yelton's skin is that of his little sister Stacy Peterson, who was last seen at her home in the Chicago suburb of Bolingbrook on October 28, 2007. Maybe Yelton didn't add Stacy's name because he hoped she would be found quickly. More likely he didn't have the work done because at the time that she vanished, he was in prison for violating parole on a sex-crime conviction. When he was freed in June 2008, however, and Stacy was still missing, it looked like he might need to add another tattoo to his living book of the dead.

Yelton's body is a testament to the adversity that he and his sister, Stacy Peterson, faced from a young age, but the tattoos tell only part of the story. They don't tell about the mother who, before leaving for good when Stacy was fifteen, regularly took off for long stretches of time. They don't tell about the reportedly heavy drinking of both parents, or of how Stacy and her siblings were left to fend for themselves for weeks on end as teenagers. The tattoos don't tell the full story, even, of the man who bears them, a registered sex offender whose run-ins with the law pained his sister, although she still loved and tried to help him. And they don't tell of the loss of Stacy's adored half sister, Christine—called Tina to distinguish her from her mother, for whom she was named—who succumbed to colon cancer in September 2006, when Stacy was a young mother of two, stepmother of another two, and the fourth wife of a much older police officer.

When Stacy Cales, at the age of nineteen, married forty-nine-year-old Drew Peterson, overnight sergeant of the Bolingbrook Police Department, he must have seemed to offer the stability, respectability and authority she'd rarely known in her tumultuous early years.

It didn't turn out that way. Soon after Tina died, by many accounts, the Petersons' marriage went on the rocks, and several people say Stacy talked about taking her four kids and leaving Drew. The year, slightly more than a year after Tina's death, Stacy went missing, without the kids. All along, Drew Peterson has maintained that Stacy, repeating her mother's pattern, abandoned the family for another man.

The Illinois State Police, however, saw it differently from the beginning. Within two weeks, they had ruled Stacy's disappearance a "potential homicide," and their sole suspect was, and still is, Drew Peterson.

The same day the state police declared Stacy's disappearance a potential homicide, the Winnebago County state's attorney also reopened an investigation into an event in Peterson's recent past that many had always felt unsettled and mishandled: the death of his third wife, Kathleen Savio, to whom he was married when he began romancing the then-seventeen-year-old Stacy. Three and a half years

before Stacy vanished, Savio, with whom Peterson was still embroiled in contentious divorce proceedings even though by then he had married his much younger girlfriend, was discovered dead at her home, in a dry bathtub. State police investigated and pretty swiftly concluded that Savio had slipped in the tub and died accidentally. A coroner's jury upheld that ruling. Peterson was never a suspect, and the whole episode was behind him in about two and a half months. But when Peterson's next wife disappeared, the death of his third spouse suddenly took on a more suspicious appearance. Her body was exhumed for another look, and this time a different conclusion was reached: Savio's death had been no accident, but a homicide.

Unless Stacy Peterson turns up somewhere, with a plausible explanation of where she's been all this time, her exit from the world will be much like her entry into it and a great deal of the time between: marked by tragedy and family troubles.

Stacy Cales was the third child born to her mother, Christie, and father, Anthony, of Downers Grove, a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. Yelton came first, followed by Jessica, the sister Stacy never met because she died in a house fire before Stacy was born.

Stacy's aunt, Candace Aikin of El Monte, California, said the little girl was about a year and a half old when she suffered burns and smoke inhalation during a December 1983 fire in the family ranch home. Christie Cales, who was about a month away from giving birth to Stacy, managed to escape from the burning house through a window, barefoot and in her pajamas. Her husband, Anthony, wasn't home at the time of the fire.

"My sister called me when the paramedics were taking her daughter out of the house," Aikin recalled. "She said, 'They're taking my daughter away.'"

Cruelly, the family suffered another terrible loss not long after. In October 1987, when Stacy was three and the family had added two more daughters—Cassandra, age two, and baby Lacy—Lacy fell victim to sudden infant death syndrome. After the loss of her second daughter in less than four years, Christie Marie Cales' life seemed to spiral out of control, and she became an intermittent figure in Stacy's upbringing.

After her tragedies, Christie "had a history of vanishing for weeks on end," according to the missing persons Web site the Doe Network, dedicated to investigating and solving such cold cases. She moved to the south suburbs to live with family members and saw her children only periodically.

According to a November 26, 2007, article in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Christie Cales also suffered from depression and spent time in a psychiatric institution. While she was on the outside, Christie ran afoul of the law. One of her criminal convictions was for contributing to the neglect of a child: She had let Yelton, then seven, outside in the snow without adequate clothing.

"Cales...admitted to drinking a case of beer a day and drew convictions for many criminal charges," the Doe Network site says. "DuPage County warrants [were] issued for her on charges including criminal damage to property, battery and drunken driving."

In 1983, the *Sun-Times* article reports, Christie sought a protective order against her husband, saying he had threatened her with a .357-caliber pistol. Anthony Cales was charged with aggravated assault, but his wife refused to testify against him, so the charges were dropped. The couple seemed to have reconciled, because five months later they bought a ranch home in Downers Grove, the same one that burned down only a few months later.

In November 1989, the *Sun-Times* article also states, Christie pleaded guilty to shoplifting a bottle of vodka and three packs of cigarettes from a drugstore. The day after Christmas that same year she was arrested for stealing two cases of Old Style, a bottle of Baileys and more cigarettes from a food store.

Eventually, her husband, Anthony, filed for divorce and custody of the children, according to the Doe Network site. In 1990, Christie at first challenged the filing but then failed to show up to court for divorce hearings, so Anthony's request for divorce was granted. "Not showing up for court was typical behavior for her," the Doe Network says.

When Stacy was fourteen, her mother picked up her Bible, said she was going to church, and left. But this time her absence wasn't just for weeks. It was apparently permanent, because she hasn't been seen or heard from since. No one knows exactly what happened to her.

"I think she went with another guy and just got in a bad situation," Candace Aikin said. "She has a habit of disappearing." Still, Aikin adamantly believed that Christie, who was forty when she vanished, is dead, not living a new life with a new identity or anything like that. True, she had taken off before, but she always surfaced eventually.

Aikin also believed that her sister, for all of her troubles, could have held it together if not for the horror of losing a second child. She recalled a visit years later to the Bolingbrook home of her niece Stacy, during which Stacy's husband Drew took the family, including Stacy's father, out to dinner. Aikin remembered the lament of her former brother-in-law.

"He felt like if we wouldn't have lost Lacy, the second child, they would still have been together," Aikin recalled Anthony Cales telling the table. "He said, after the first death it was hard. After the second death, she lost it."

Aikin said that after Lacy died, Anthony Cales took his surviving children, Yelton, Stacy and Cassandra, down south to Florida and possibly Louisiana. For a few years she lost track of the family. They moved frequently, and she didn't always know where they were or, when she did know, why they were in a certain place.

"He didn't let us see [the children]," Aikin said. "I think he was hiding from my sister more than anyone."

But Aikin said her access to her nieces and nephew resumed when Stacy's half sister, Tina, tracked them down somewhere in the South.

"It wasn't too long, a couple years," Aikin said, relieved to find her big sister's children once again.

Although Aikin didn't live close to her nieces and nephew, she said she always tried to keep close tabs and have a positive influence on their lives, "because I was like a mother to them." Aunt Candace was the closest thing they would have to a mother, at least for a part of their lives—particularly for Stacy.

"Stacy was like a daughter," Aikin said. "I was very close to her."

Even before their mother up and left, however, Stacy and her siblings had less than ideal childhoods, growing up without much parental oversight. After her parents divorced in 1990, her father married Linda Cales, in Florida, about five years later. Stacy's former stepmother has said Anthony Cales was an abusive alcoholic, and their home was no place to grow up. The couple and the kids moved around to different places—not always, it seems, living together—shuffling around the South with periods back up in Illinois, before eventually returning to the Chicago area for good. Anthony and Linda are now divorced.

Sharon Bychowski, Stacy's next-door neighbor in Bolingbrook, who became a close friend and confidante of Stacy's in the last few years before she disappeared, recalled some of the tales Stacy told about growing up in the Cales family.

"He drinks a lot," Bychowski said of Stacy's father, while Stacy's mother "was kind of into drugs a lot." She and Drew Peterson said Anthony Cales worked in construction, but Aikin said he was

plumber. According to the Web site A Candy Rose, which has been tracking the case of Stacy's disappearance, at one time Anthony Cates had plans to buy a marina in Florida, but ended up back in Illinois.

Bychowski said Stacy had told her that their father left her, Yelton and Cassandra alone for three weeks (her parents were divorced by this time). "And they went to school every day," Bychowski said. "They got up and dressed, took showers. [Stacy] was twelve or thirteen, I think she said. She was still in grammar school.

"I said, 'You got up and went to school every day for three weeks?' I said, 'How did you have enough food?' [Stacy said], 'We ate mac and cheese, and we ate whatever we had.' I said, 'Nobody knew that you guys were alone?' She said, 'No. We didn't want to be separated.' So she's got a lot of background."

Bychowski said Stacy related that episode as the two women were returning from an outing in rural north central Illinois.

"We were going out to see my niece Jennifer—she lives in Paw Paw," Bychowski said. "They went out with me to a picnic. On the way back, me and Stacy were in the front seat, and we went by that area and she said, 'You know, I used to live here. As a matter of fact, we were here for three weeks by ourself.' [sic] And she told me that story."

Bychowski remembered pressing Stacy as to why the three children, when left to fend for themselves, did not seek help. "She said, 'But we knew that if we told somebody, we'd be separated.' I said, 'My God, Stacy, how much did you grow up?'"

After her mother disappeared and her father proved to be a less than responsible parent—having separated from Linda by this time—foster care apparently became a greater likelihood for Stacy and Cassandra. (Yelton, more than four years older than Stacy, was probably old enough by then to be on his own.) To avoid that, Stacy, by then in high school, went to live with her half sister Tina, about eight years her senior. Tina was the daughter of Christie and, according to Aikin and Bychowski, a man named Ron Kokas, whom Christie never married. At least for some of her growing up, Tina was in her mother's care; at other points, she was in foster care, according to Tina's friend Steve Cesare.

Nonetheless, by the time Stacy lived with her, Tina was married and in her twenties. Perhaps because they shared a mother who had left them behind, Tina in turn became a surrogate mother for Stacy, who lived with her sister during Tina's divorce from her first husband and after she married her second husband, Jamie Ryan. Aikin said Stacy was living with Tina and Jamie when she took up with Drew.

Stacy's sister Cassandra was also lucky enough to escape foster care. She was taken in by her employer, local businesswoman Pamela Bosco, who became Cassandra's legal guardian and, after Stacy disappeared, served as the family's spokeswoman. Years later, Bosco admitted that she regretted not taking in Stacy as well. But by that time, Cassandra's older sister was already out in the world. She had graduated from Romeoville High School in 2001—a semester early, according to her Aunt Candy—had found a job as a hotel desk clerk, and was about to meet Sergeant Drew Peterson.

Stacy, Aikin said, grew up fast. But despite the tumult and hardship she suffered from her very first days, she didn't give in to defeat or gloom.

"She was more of a softy," Aikin said of Stacy. "She still had her frustrations and everything. But she tried hard, she tried very hard, to make her life positive."

Indeed, a theme that repeatedly comes through from those who knew Stacy is that while she endured a tough childhood, she was not hardened by it. Messed up as her family was, she never turned her back on them and probably felt especially devoted to Cassandra and Yelton, after the siblings had

looked out for one another for so many years. Stacy took school seriously and aspired to become a nurse, starting classes at Joliet Junior College the fall that she vanished. In photos, she often appeared peaceful, serene. There was something about Stacy, even when she was just a small child, that was inherently good, her aunt said.

“She was always happy,” Aikin said. “She noticed people. She was a people person. Even when she was very little.”

Her friend Cesare, a Chicago-area magician, knew Stacy when she was just a girl. Cesare met eight-year-old Stacy through the then-teenage Tina, who became both his girlfriend and love assistant. Tina was a “box jumper, because they jump in and out of boxes,” he explained. “I cut women in half, stuff like that.”

Cesare remembered Stacy as a vibrant, artistic girl who was very attached to her half sister.

“Stacy and Cassandra both looked up to Tina as their mother figure,” he said. “When Tina got sick, it was devastating for her.”

Stacy was also in need of a father figure, Cesare said, and this is apparently what led her to Peterson.

“Stacy was a good kid,” Cesare said. “In my eyes, she was just a little girl who got mixed up with the wrong guy.”

If anything, Stacy’s troubled childhood made her appreciate the importance of family. “Stacy was the glue in that family, and she was very responsible as a child,” Aikin said.

From a young age, Stacy focused on family, on keeping her own together as best as she could and then reaching out to bring them even closer once she was married and had the means to do so, Bychowski said. For example, she often hosted family get-togethers at the roomy house on a cul-de-sac that she moved into with her husband. When it came time to choose names for her own two children, she looked no further than her immediate family: Anthony for her son, after her father, and Lacy for her daughter, Lacy, after the younger sister who died as a baby.

She also made an effort to rekindle relationships among her in-laws, Aikin said.

“She brought Drew’s family back together,” Aikin said. “She said Drew didn’t get together with his family.”

As much as Stacy managed to resist the downward pull of her family’s troubles, the same wasn’t true of her heavily tattooed brother, Yelton. At the time Stacy disappeared, Yelton was twenty-eight and locked away in the Western Illinois Correctional Center. He had been convicted for the aggravated criminal sexual abuse of a victim between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, and he had gone back to prison for violating his parole. It was hardly his first run-in with the law, however. He’d also spent time in prison for offenses as varied as possession of a stolen vehicle and domestic battery.

As his Aunt Candace Aikin said wistfully of her nephew, “He’s a stinker.”

The girl he was accused of sexually abusing was actually fifteen at the time of the offense, according to the Illinois State Police. Yelton was twenty-five. A report on the incident released by the Downers Grove Police Department said that about half past eleven on the night of January 7, 2000, Yelton “forcefully assaulted” the teen in the passenger side of a vehicle.

His victim told police that Yelton “held her hands above her head and penetrated her vaginally with his fingers and also with his penis [and] also forced her to have oral sex with him as well.”

Yelton took a four-and-a-half-year hit on the sex case, and now must register as a predatory sex offender for the remainder of his natural life. Prior to that, Yelton—whose non-familial tattoos include a picture of the cartoon character Yosemite Sam and a Chinese symbol on his back, footprints across his chest, a demon and a dragon on his left arm, a tribal sign on his right forearm, the letter

“H.D.” on his right ankle, and the prediction “Hellbound” on his stomach—got three years for possession of a stolen motor vehicle (a black 1989 Ski-Doo snowmobile the cops caught him with in January 2004) and fifteen months for domestic battery.

According to the cops, Yelton showed up at Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove in January 2002 with his girlfriend, whose identity the police have withheld. She had severe head injuries. Yelton, whose arms were scratched and shirt was soaked with blood, supposedly explained that his girlfriend fell out of the back of his van. Soon after arriving, he excused himself to go back to his van, saying he would return in “a few seconds.” He drove off, leaving his girlfriend behind. When Yelton later returned to the hospital, at one point a bottle of beer fell out of his freshly changed shirt.

Cursory examination by hospital staff showed the woman’s injuries were not consistent with falling out of a van, police said, but an injury to her eye was entirely consistent with being struck with a fist.

As the woman regained her composure and was able to recall what happened to her, she told police officers that she and Yelton had driven to Bensenville, near Chicago’s O’Hare Airport, to look for a friend. When they could not find the friend, however, Yelton’s girlfriend grew frightened that he was going to leave her alone in a parking lot.

When she would not leave of her own accord, “Cales drove recklessly to a parking lot...and stopped the van,” according to a police report. “Mr. Cales pulled the victim out of the back of the van by her ears. Mr. Cales proceeded to punch the victim in the face. The victim felt the right side of her face go numb. The victim is unsure of the events which followed after that.”

Yet Stacy, once again, didn’t abandon a family member, even one who had done a pretty thorough job of screwing up his life. When he was paroled on the sex charge, she helped fix up a rental home for him to live in, although he wasn’t able to enjoy it long before getting sent back to prison. Yelton was released again in June 2008.

Stacy’s friend Sharon Bychowski said Stacy loved her brother. But for her own part, Sharon did not hold out much hope for Yelton’s future.

“Yelton—I think he’s messed up,” she said. “I think he had a good time partying a lot. Drew says there’s nothing that would stop him from doing what he does. He would rather just get high and party than worry about the consequences. He doesn’t think consequences are important. When he gets out, he’s not going to be out very long. He’s going to be a career jail person. [Stacy’s] focus was to get him straight.”

It was precisely her devotion to family that makes Aikin utterly reject the story Drew Peterson has stuck to since Stacy disappeared: His wife was simply following in her mother’s footsteps by abandoning her family without a word of explanation. He in fact seemed perturbed by her irresponsible behavior, considering everything he had done to make her happy, including buying her new breasts and a tummy tuck, and springing for hair removal, corrective Lasik eye surgery and braces. He had really extended himself, and she had the nerve to leave him and four children in the lurch. At least that’s what he wanted everybody to believe, that his wife gave up on her husband and the children for the sake of an extramarital dalliance, one that possibly took her to a tropical vacation spot.

Stacy’s Aunt Candy didn’t buy his story for a minute.

“It’s the last thing she would have wanted,” she said. “When you have something happen in your childhood, you try to do the opposite. Her mother disappeared. She knew how that felt. She would never do that to her children.”

In the days immediately following Stacy’s disappearance, Peterson mentioned the lurid story of

her mother's disappearance to me and claimed there were "indications" Christie was still alive. On this topic, Aikin once again did not share Peterson's worldview. Peterson, she claimed, badly wanted people to believe that because he also wanted people to think Stacy is still alive, that her story lines up neatly with her mother's. But Aikin firmly insisted that her sister is not alive, and Stacy's disappearance is not a reenactment of her mother's.

Stacy, for one thing, did not inherit her mother's habit of disappearing, Aikin has pointed out. Making herself scarce was something Stacy's mother did quite often, but it was a stunt Stacy had never pulled even once before she vanished at the end of October 2007.

Moreover, Aikin and others believe, Stacy would not have traded in her children to further her own romantic happiness. Bychowski agreed: "She did not walk away from her little kids. She loved her babies."

Stacy knew the particular pain of being an abandoned child; she would never willingly inflict the same injury on her own children. In fact, she had spoken with Aikin about her children's future without their mom.

"She wanted her children to be with me if anything ever happened to her," Aikin said. "Now I don't know what's going to happen to them. All her wishes got thrown out the window."

According to Aikin, Stacy sounded like anything *but* a woman planning to run off: She told her sister, Cassandra, to worry if she had trouble even getting through on the phone.

"Stacy told Cassandra, 'If I don't answer my cell, something's wrong.'"

Stacy even predicted she would go out like this. Not dead in a tub like the wife before her, but just gone, faded away.

"She thought she would just disappear," Bychowski said. "Ironic. Sometimes they say that you know what your destiny is before it even happens."

Not that Stacy was looking in a crystal ball; Bychowski thought Peterson may have threatened her, saying that he could make her disappear. "Oh, I think so," she asserted.

Clearly, Aikin believes Peterson was involved in Stacy's disappearance. She now shudders to think that, on her visits to Illinois, she so often slept in the man's bed. She slept there with Stacy, she explained, on his side of the bed, while Drew was working the overnight shift or just out on the town being Drew.

"I slept on that man's side of the bed," Aikin said, in a voice betraying the horror she later felt. "It's insane."

As curious and repugnant as it might seem for a seventeen-year-old girl to take up with a forty-seven-year-old man who was vying for her affections while his appropriately aged wife and young sons were sleeping not far away, it undeniably set Stacy up in a pretty good situation. She gained a beautiful home and in short order a pair of healthy, adorable children, one boy and one girl. With the package came two sons Stacy inherited from the previous Mrs. Peterson and soon adopted as her own. Bychowski described Stacy as trying to go above and beyond in proving she loved the older boys enough to be their birth mother.

Stacy had made, it seemed, a nice little life for herself. And no matter how things may have devolved between herself and her much older husband, she could take satisfaction in knowing that her children's lives were infinitely more stable than her own had been.

Stacy was smart enough to grab hold of what must have seemed a golden opportunity for a teenage girl who had fended for herself and her siblings for practically her entire life. But at some point in her four years of living that dream, it turned out to be less than she expected. Either she'd had enough and fled, or else she was taken out against her will. If that was the case, and her brother was

going to keep his family's story up-to-date, he'd have to find room on his skin for the name of one more departed relative.

CHAPTER TWO

Stacy Cales was a seventeen-year-old hotel desk clerk in 2001 when she made the acquaintance of a charming police sergeant old enough to be her father. Drew Peterson in fact was a father, with two boys living at home and two grown sons. He happened to be a husband as well, for the third time. But none of this stopped him from wooing the teenage girl behind the front desk at the SpringHill Suites in Bolingbrook, a moderately priced Marriott hotel right off Interstate 55 which was largely geared toward business travelers passing through the small town.

Stacy worked the overnight shift. So did Peterson, patrolling Bolingbrook's quiet streets during their darkest hours, police work that he called "cookies and milk" after a stint as an undercover narcotics officer took him to the larger, grittier city of Joliet, a dozen or so miles south.

One might think Sergeant Peterson was stopping in on the petite teenager to ensure her safety. But the real reason, he later said, was that the cop he patrolled with had his eye on another woman working at the hotel.

"My partner liked her partner, and we got together," Peterson said.

One of Stacy's former coworkers at the SpringHill Suites said Peterson made a bad impression on her. The woman, who out of fear did not want to give her name, said she was disgusted by the notion of a middle-aged man romancing a teenage girl thirty years his junior. Yet, for an older man past his prime, Peterson must have cut a dashing figure in his uniform, and he overwhelmed his young lover with pricey tokens of his affection.

An old boyfriend of Stacy's also remembered Peterson showing up at the hotel to woo the teenager. Keith Rossetto, a male nurse, dated Stacy for about two months, according to his twin brother, Scott Rossetto, also a nurse. Keith and Stacy's relationship ended when he left to join the Army two days before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Soon after, Stacy took up with Peterson, although he had been hanging around her even before Rossetto departed to serve his country.

For his part, Keith Rossetto said he did not exactly date Stacy.

"We were kind of in a getting-to-know-you phase," he told me. Still, Keith Rossetto, himself about a dozen years older than Stacy, spent time with her. He went to the hotel while she worked through the night, and when things were slow, they would go outside to smoke cigarettes and talk.

During this time, Drew Peterson also dropped in, and Keith Rossetto remembers not caring much for the cop, who kept showing up at the job of the girl he was getting to know.

"I didn't like him, I can tell you that," Rossetto told me. "It was like he was trying to impress me that he was a Bolingbrook cop, and he was on a special team or whatever."

In his younger years, Peterson had been a member of the Metropolitan Area Narcotics Squad, a multi-jurisdictional, undercover drug unit. He considers his work with this team to be the finest in his law enforcement career. An episode during his time with the unit led to him not only being fired from the Bolingbrook Police Department, which had loaned him out to the unit, but also being brought up on criminal charges. Peterson weathered that storm, as he always seemed able to do. The charges were dropped and he got his job back, but it was the end of his days as an undercover narcotics agent.

All that was far behind Peterson by the time he was sniffing around after Stacy at the SpringHill Suites, supposedly so his partner could chase some other woman working there. Peterson and Stacy's romance may have been a fortuitous by-product of their colleagues' flirting, but their liaison unleashed a storm of events beyond anything even they might have anticipated at the time.

For one thing, Peterson was still married to Kathleen Savio, although nothing as flimsy as marital vows had ever stopped him from cheating on the two wives before her. And Savio, Stacy would learn before long, was not going to set her husband, and their financial assets, free without a tenacious fight. Within a few months, police cruisers responding to Savio and Peterson's domestic battles would become a common sight on the street where all three—Savio, Peterson and Stacy—ended up living.

For another, Peterson's supervisors on the police force most certainly were not as delighted as he was with his new girlfriend.

"When the department found out I was a forty-seven-year-old sergeant, and I was engaged to a seventeen-year-old, there was a big scandal," Peterson said.

Once the department brass caught wind of their involvement, the higher-ups approached prosecutors to determine if Peterson was violating sexual-abuse statutes by romancing a girl practically a third his age. Apparently, he was not. In Illinois, seventeen is the age of sexual consent unless the older person is in a position of authority—such as a teacher, counselor, or coach—in which case the age of consent is eighteen. The state's attorney's office decided that Peterson's status as a police officer did not constitute a position of authority over Stacy.

"The state's attorney said, 'He's not doing nothing wrong,'" Peterson recalled, visibly pleased by the memory of getting the green light to carry on with his young love, whom he clearly intended to marry as soon as he was legally free of Savio.

That Drew Peterson was able to take three ladies to the altar before Stacy is evidence enough of his charisma. And with each trip up the aisle, the age difference between himself and his wife grew wider.

With his first wife, high school sweetheart Carol Hamilton, the gap in age was a mere three years. With his second wife, Victoria Rutkiewicz, it had stretched to five: her twenty-three to his twenty-eight. Then, a thirty-eight-year-old Peterson tied the knot with twenty-eight-year-old Kathleen Savio.

To put the icing on the wedding cake, Police Sergeant Drew Peterson, forty-nine, made an honest woman out of nineteen-year-old Stacy Cales in October 2003. She had given birth to their son, Anthony, not three months before they wed.

Peterson married his first wife, Hamilton, in 1974, two years after he graduated from Willowbrook High School, which she also attended. She accompanied Peterson to his senior prom.

Peterson and Hamilton had two sons together, Eric and Stephen, but divorced in 1980. Hamilton, later Carol Brown after remarrying, did not accuse Peterson of anything sinister or violent. Asked by Diane Sawyer on *Good Morning America* if there were "any signs of controlling behavior, the things that you're hearing about now?" Carol told her, "No, there really wasn't. You know, in the beginning we just had a normal relationship."

But that normal relationship did not last.

"Apparently we somewhat grew apart, and then one day I did discover that he was having an affair," Carol told Sawyer.

Peterson also cheated on his next wife, Rutkiewicz, whom he married in 1982. By the time Stacy disappeared, Rutkiewicz was going by the name Vicki Connolly and living in the tiny downstate Illinois town of Paxton. I met with Vicki Connolly one night while she was at the home of her daughter, Lisa Ward, also in Paxton. Vicki said she did not wish to talk about her marriage to Peterson.

and also told me she was afraid. I spoke to Ward as well, both in person and on the telephone, and exchanged e-mail messages with her. Ward, who lived with Peterson as his stepdaughter from the age of eight until she was seventeen, said she and her mother were not interested in discussing their time with the ex-sergeant.

But Ward did go on Fox News' *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*. To protect her identity, Ward's last name was not given, and she was shown only in silhouette. In the interview, Lisa Ward described her stepfather as "strict, extremely strict, sometimes not a very nice person" and prone to be "extreme with the punishment sometimes."

"I was hit with a belt for many years," Ward said.

She continued, saying that despite outward appearances, she knew her mother was not happy in her marriage to Peterson and that he was "abusive to my mother. He was very controlling to her. He watched every move that she had made."

And just as with his first wife, Carol, Drew lost his second wife when she got fed up with him for having sex with other women.

"My mom [wanted out] because he was not being faithful to her, and he had not been faithful for many years," Ward said to Van Susteren. "And I think that she knew and finally had just had it, just wanted out."

At least one of the other women Peterson was having sex with was Kathleen Savio, who became his third wife number three; reportedly, she didn't know Peterson was married at the time she started seeing him.

Besides being wives of Drew Peterson, Rutkiewicz and Savio had something else in common, at least according to relatives. They both thought he could kill them and make it look accidental. As Ward told Van Susteren, "I mean, I told her she doesn't have to be afraid of him anymore, but obviously, he had hurt her, you know, so badly all those years ago that she still thinks about that. He used to tell my mother that he could kill her and make it look like an accident."

When told about the threats he supposedly made against his second wife and ex-stepdaughter, Peterson, who has had no reservations about admitting his extramarital affairs, had an explanation.

"Vicki's just mad 'cause I cheated on her," he said. He also said Ward resented him for being "a strong disciplinarian."

Besides Peterson's four brides, there was the one that got away: fiancée Kyle Piry. Peterson failed to marry her in between his first and second marriages.

Piry claims she called it quits with Peterson; Peterson says he was the one to give her the heavy分手. Either way, Piry was twenty when the four-month engagement was called off. Keeping with his pattern of everwidening age discrepancies, Peterson was twenty-seven.

Years later, with Peterson the subject of intense scrutiny by the police and public for both the disappearance of Stacy and the mysterious death of Savio, Piry accused Peterson of stalking her and abusing his power as a police officer to make her life miserable for ending their relationship back when they were dating and engaged to marry.

Peterson denied this, saying Piry was just bitter over their breakup and even angrier for her spurning her attempts to rekindle the romance. He went on to explain that he dumped Piry after finding out she was seeing other men and "dancing" at bachelor parties. Piry, after denying Peterson's allegations, upped her own and claimed her ex was so cheap that he recycled their engagement ring when he proposed to Rutkiewicz.

No matter what the first three wives and the fiancée he failed to close the deal with said after things ultimately broke down, they must have seen something in Peterson at the beginning. It seems

young Stacy was no different.

~~She may have found Peterson irresistible, blown away by the dashing figure he cut in his Bolingbrook police uniform, not to mention his authoritative mustache. Or maybe it was just the attention and the gifts he showered on her: he bought her a Pontiac Grand Prix, set her up in an apartment, and furnished her new digs. Something definitely attracted Stacy to Peterson, and it was very likely a combination of both the promise of financial security and the possibility of the stable home life she'd never had.~~

Whatever it was, the pull must have been powerful, because judging from the heady recklessness with which they carried out their affair, Peterson and Stacy didn't appear to have worried too much about the repercussions of getting caught. Stacy even introduced her Aunt Candy to the older, married father-figure she was dating.

"I met Drew in 2001, right after she met him," Aikin said. She found the dynamics of the relationship odd but said it was not her place to discourage her niece's budding love affair.

"It was pretty crazy," Aikin said. "But she was old enough to make her own choices. There was nothing I could do."

"She didn't have a mom. She didn't have a lot of guidance. I don't mean that in a bad way. It's just how her life was."

Perhaps even more revealing of their recklessness, in their early days Drew and Stacy would try out in the basement of the Peterson house while his wife and boys slept upstairs. Sharon Bychowski, who became Stacy's next-door neighbor on Pheasant Chase Court and instant dear friend in April of 2001, said the young woman took her to the house where Peterson and Savio had lived—just down the street on the nearly identically named Pheasant Chase Drive.

Stacy told her, "'This is where he lived, down in the basement,'" Bychowski said. "And I said, 'So wait,'—I don't know her very well [at this point]; I just moved here—I said, 'So wait, he was bringing you here to the house?' She said, 'Yes, we would go into the basement, and I would leave in the morning before Kathleen got up.'"

Just as when he was questioned about his alleged extramarital affairs while married to wives one and two, Peterson freely admitted that he and Stacy would have sex in the basement while his unwitting third wife and boys slept upstairs.

Bychowski said she was shocked by her new friend's revelation, telling her, "'Stacy, that's terrible. I don't even know you that well and I can tell you that's terrible.' She said, 'Oh no, no Sharon. You don't understand. Their marriage was over.'"

Stacy said that Peterson and Savio, by that time, were just staying in the same house because they hadn't yet divided up their assets and neither could afford to move.

"I said, 'Wait, let me tell you what else he told you,'" Bychowski continued, and proceeded to rattle off such lines as, "We haven't slept together in a really long time" and "I'm only here for the kids."

"She said, 'How did you know that?'"

"Stacy," Bychowski told the young woman, "because every man says that kind of shit. That's why. It's standard, comes with the package."

But by the time Bychowski shared her wisdom of the male species with her young friend, it was too late. Peterson had already snared Stacy, gotten her pregnant, and married her. Their son, Anthony, was born in July 2003, and not three months later, the new parents married in an outdoor wedding ceremony.

Savio's sister, Anna Marie Doman, said she found the notion of Peterson taking up with a girl

fresh out of high school creepy.

“It’s like a child molester,” she said. “Stacy looked like she weighed ninety pounds—no tits, no boobs. She’s not a woman.”

And from the get-go, she predicted their marriage would come to no good.

“Back then I said it’s not going to last, because when she hits twenty-one and sees there’s a whole world out there, the shit’s going to hit the fan, which is pretty much what happened.” Doman might have been off by a couple years, but there are many who believe her prediction was dead-on accurate.

Savio learned of her husband’s philandering through an anonymous note. The revelation turned her world upside down, but Doman said her sister was not particularly surprised. In fact, she had caught him cheating before, prior to Stacy’s entry into their lives.

“He had this humungous cell phone bill, and she was like, ‘What the hell?’” Doman described.

The same number was listed on the bill again and again, so Savio sought her sister’s advice.

“I said, ‘Ask Drew. I don’t know what to tell you.’ She asked, and he gave her some bullshit. She called. It was some young girl named Heather.”

Savio invited Heather to her home. Face-to-face, Savio informed Heather that her boyfriend had happened to be married—to her—and that he had two sons.

“That girl disappeared after that,” Doman said.

Clearly, whatever disapproval he faced in his choice of new love had no effect on Drew Peterson. Between playing the expansive provider and thrilling at their clandestine moments in his basement, the middle-aged Drew Peterson was, without question, quite a happy man in 2002 and 2003.

He fondly recalled the joy he felt with Stacy and her antics to attract attention to them and leave onlookers scratching their heads. For example, Stacy would grab him in public and kiss him passionately, then earnestly ask, “Do I kiss the best of all my sisters?”

It was not the only way they turned their father-daughter age difference into a game. In the supermarket, Stacy sometimes acted like she was trying to get him to buy alcohol for her and the “friends” she had left outside, loudly badgering him to buy her wine to shock other shoppers.

“She’d say, ‘Come on, all the kids are waiting in the parking lot,’” Peterson recalled, smiling at the memory. He even owned a ceramic figurine of a cop and a little girl, which he displayed on a shelf behind his desk. He pointed it out and quipped, “That was me and Stacy in 1988,” when Stacy would have been four years old to his thirty-four.

While Aikin said it was not her place to criticize her legally adult niece or to tell her what to do, she did say she spoke to Stacy about her affair with the married middle-aged man.

“I did talk to her a little bit,” Aikin recalled. “I can’t remember what I said.”

Even if Aikin had spoken to Stacy more than just a little bit, she would have been working against the clock. After all, if she had plans of talking her niece out of the ill-fated romance, there was little time to do so. Stacy and Drew were on the fast track, with the young girl pregnant by eighteen and married by nineteen.

“They got married eight days after the divorce with Kathleen,” Aikin said. “It was a very private wedding.”

Stacy and Drew married and settled into their home on Pheasant Chase Court, a cul-de-sac at the end of the street, a mere five hundred yards away from his old home, where Savio was still living. Peterson had actually closed on his new home in April 2002, nearly a year and a half before he and Stacy tied the knot, so they did have the opportunity to set up house before exchanging vows.

The married life must have afforded Stacy the security she had lacked throughout childhood, but it also kept her tied down with the duties of a wife and mother. Before she turned twenty-one, and led

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