

Killer In The Code: Chapter 7 transcript

Michael Connelly:

This is Michael Connelly and you're listening to Killer In The Code: Solving The Black Dahlia & Zodiac Cases.

Today we're going to follow our first six episodes with a round table discussion with the principal investigators on these cases and answer questions that have come in to our podcast website, which is killerinthecode.com.

With me today is Alex Baber who started this whole thing, when he cracked the Z13 code left behind by the Zodiac Killer fifty some years ago. And veteran homicide investigators, Mitzi Roberts, who at one time before her retirement ran the cold case unit for the Los Angeles Police Department, of which the Black Dahlia case was assigned. It was her case for about 15, 16 years. And another cold case detective, Rick Jackson, who is veteran of the LAPD Homicide squads, including the Cold Case squad, and now works as a cold case investigator for the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office up in Northern California.

So welcome everybody. And we know we have limited time here, so we're going to start going through the questions and see how many we can get answered. So let's start with this first one. This one is very germane to what we've been trying to do. But probably the question we're getting the most to our website is this, have any law enforcement organizations contacted you about the podcast? We've gathered a lot of circumstantial evidence and even some physical evidence. And I think it's a good question. What's going to happen with all this? Or is it just going to end up in a podcast? Rick, you want to start with that one?

Rick Jackson:

Sure. In reality, we have no control over where this goes once we make our notifications and communicate with law enforcement. I have talked to a detective from LAPD who has been assigned to look into it. To what degree, I don't know. They've made it known that they're not going to provide us with information. They are taking information for us to team what is necessary to fall upon and make determination whether this is a viable suspect or not. I've also talked with the San Francisco Police Department, to the detective that is technically assigned to the Zodiac case that occurred in San Francisco.

And basically, it was the same thing. They are moving their investigation as they feel is appropriate. Again, not sharing with us what they are doing, which is understandable from ... We're no longer sworn law enforcement officers working under jurisdiction of any place that has the jurisdiction over these cases. So we shouldn't be given information. So again, it's outside of our control. But I do think they will look at it and make a determination. I think there's sufficient evidence for them to look at these cases and move forward to the extent where they can either definitely include him as the suspect, can eliminate him if that's what it shows, which I don't think will happen. Or just combine it with all the other theories and not make a determination on any of them.

Michael Connelly:

Anybody want to add anything?

Alex Baber:

I'd like to add the fact that I was the first individual in decades to be requested to show in Napa or any jurisdiction in North Bay, to do a presentation with San Francisco PD, Solano County Sheriff's Department, as well as representatives of Napa Sheriff's Department or office and FBI. For me to be

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requested to fly from the East Coast to California to do a presentation between four of the five involved jurisdictions from the original case makes a statement in itself.

Mitzi Roberts:

Yeah. And I'd just like to add that the fact that you're not hearing a lot about law enforcement being involved, hearing from the law enforcement side is just the nature of this case. Like I've said many times, when I've had it, it's an ancillary case. Their main duties are more current homicides and cold cases. And so just because we're not hearing anything from law enforcement, doesn't mean that they're not looking into it and investigating the evidence that we've given to them and the evidence that's in the podcast.

Rick Jackson:

I should also add that they have asked for contact information from certain people that are pertinent people in the case as we explain to them the particulars of our investigation.

Michael Connelly:

And I will add a reminder here. The suspect Alex has identified died in 1993. So while all of these law enforcement agencies would like to solve these crimes and say "case closed," they are duty bound to pursue cases where there are viable suspects out there, you know, live killers who need to be brought to justice. With this case and this suspect, that is not going to happen, as sad and disappointing as that is. So that puts this investigation on a level of being worked when it can be worked. And when you consider a big city like Los Angeles, when is there not a new case to be worked and a killer out there somewhere on the loose?

Okay, let's move on.

We hope that you've already listened to the first six episodes of this podcast, but just very briefly, Alex broke Z13. It's also known as the My Name Is. It's where the Zodiac claimed he had put his name into a cipher. And the name Alex came up with and which has been verified by some of the top cryptographers in the world was Marvin Merrill. Further investigation revealed that was an alias for a man named Marvin Margolis, who was one of the prime suspects in the Black Dahlia case. And that's how we linked these cases.

And a question that has come in largely because of internet chatter, I don't know what else to call it, where people said, "No, Margolis was cleared by the LAPD way back in 1947, the year of the Black Dahlia murder." By the way, Black Dahlia is the moniker, I guess you call it, for Elizabeth Short, the victim. And so let's have that question answered here. Hopefully once and for all, was Margolis cleared or not by the LAPD?

Mitzi, you had this case for a while, so you're probably more familiar with it than anybody possibly in the world. What's your answer to that question?

Mitzi Roberts:

Not to my satisfaction. And there's just a lot of conflicting information, a lot of, well, because of this, he was cleared, because of his alibi that his wife supported he was cleared. But the timeline just doesn't ... It doesn't make sense to me with the evidence, with the grand jury, with the LAPD still looking for him after the grand jury, because the lead investigator had said that he couldn't clear him, nor could he include him. And that's just more evidence to me of what an elusive type of suspect Marvin Margolis

was. And that there's not enough information that they have or the access to him to make that determination.

The benefit that I have with maybe a handful of individuals is I had access to the files for 15 years. And I've scoured through those files. Not just the DA files, but the entire Black Dahlia files. As well as all the stuff that's out on the internet that I have access to. And all I can say is I'm not satisfied that he is cleared. And even if you take all of that into consideration and you say, "Yes, the investigators in the late 40s cleared him, he had an alibi and they cleared him." I've worked many cases where people lie, people lie for people, you're not really 100% able to verify the alibi. And so they take him for his word and they move on to the next because that happened a lot in this case. Take somebody's ... Check them off the list and move to the next.

And it's kind of what is so fascinating about this case all these years later is that suspects like Leslie Dillon and Hodel, all these suspects that keep coming out at one point were somewhat cleared or had alibis. But they're still there. They're still in the files and they're still, at least for the internet sleuths and stuff, that everybody has a theory of who it could be and why they weren't cleared sufficiently. And that's the nature of the beast of this case.

All I can say is I've had access to the files for 15 years, all of the files. And I'm not convinced that Marvin Merrill was cleared.

Rick Jackson:

And I will add onto that. And Mitzi briefly referred to one of the lead detectives, but Finis Brown was a homicide division detective, a veteran detective, and he was one of the two leads on the Black Dahlia case. And in the grand jury, in the 1950 time period, he definitely says, as Mitzi referenced, that he can't include him because there was insufficient evidence to move forward at that time. But he definitely was not eliminated as a suspect. And there are other people that were associated with the investigation from either LAPD or the DA's office that said he always remained that person's key focus from early on because of their personal relationship. He should have been a major target of the investigation, not just 1 of 21. I mean, he was the one that had a relationship with her, lived with her. And we all know the percentage of times that relationships or people known to the other person are the killer and the victim. It's just the way it goes, those have to be eliminated. And he definitely wasn't eliminated by the detectives then.

Mitzi Roberts:

Yes. And when he was initially interviewed, he lied. He lied to the detectives. Which they kind of gave him a pass on that. And I think it was a soft pass. I think that you have to take that more into consideration and to say, "Well, if he's lying about this, what else is he lying about? And who else may be a part of that?" And so for all those reasons, I don't think that he was eliminated back then and can be eliminated now.

Rick Jackson:

And we all know an alibi is given by people close to somebody, specifically a wife, a new wife, has to be looked at with very close eyes to see if that's a legitimate other than just her word. There's nothing else other than her word, that's got to be looked at. And I've handled many cases, one recently where I work now, where the eventual suspect was eliminated based on things that happened within days of the murder. And 30 something years later, we began looking at it. And I just could not get past the fact that this is too good of a suspect. Not only in her visual appearance and the likeness to the composite, but in a very unique car that she had access to. And eventually, 35 years later, she was definitely identified as

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a suspect, not only through a confession, but some of her journal writings that she had done about shooting the victim. It happens all the time.

Michael Connelly:

Alex, you want to say something?

Alex Baber:

Yeah, I want to put a cherry on top here, guys. There's this myth of a missing week. If that's true, then we can eliminate Marvin Margolis as a suspect based on his school attendance and his employment at that time. He's given two alibis by his roommate, Bill Robinson, who he lives with, that knew Elizabeth Short as well as his wife who he married approximately a month after Elizabeth Short left him.

That being said, we do also know that Officer McBride had an account of Elizabeth Short coming to her for protection within hours of her murder. And it's verified that she confirmed Elizabeth Short's body, not photographs, her body as being that of the woman that she spoke to. So this surpasses the belief that she saw photographs a few hours later, came back and said, "Look, now I'm dubious about my original account. It might have been somebody different." Because once you go down and you view the body and you confirm that, that's etched in stone.

So then you move forward to the grand jury inquest and you have one suspect and one suspect only that they tried to track down outside of California. And that's Marvin Margolis in Chicago. We have accounts of letters where they reach out to Chicago PD repeatedly. They send him out to his in-law's house, to his residence. They're trying to hunt this guy down. Nobody else of the suspects was ever hunted down in that manner, ever. And in the closing statement, guys, the very last document under oath, DA or Deputy DA Veitch says, "If we allow Marvin Margolis to know outside of these four walls that we're attempting to locate him, he may elude justice forever." So that right there is a statement in itself as well.

Michael Connelly:

Yeah, I find that at the very end of the grand jury, that kind of instruction basically that nothing leaves these four walls about this guy is very telling. And there's another thing I just want to throw in. I just finished reading a book called Black Dahlia just came out by an author named William Mann, and he also calls Margolis the last man standing in terms ... He methodically knocks down all the other suspects and says, Margolis is the last man standing. And one of the things he says, which I don't think we've come across or Alex, maybe you can confirm, is that the LAPD never pulled his military records. It was the grand jury that did.

And so when they cleared him, they didn't know anything about him getting a 50% reduced capacity situation with him. They didn't know anything about the psychologists who interviewed him and talked about his aggression and his mindset. And I think if Finis Brown and his partner knew this stuff, they would've never cleared him in any way. Because this guy just ... He fit that profile right off the bat.

Alex Baber:

Let me add to that real quick, Michael. Also, another thing is when they didn't pull his military record, they didn't realize that he was attached to Marine Division as a Naval Corpsman. And we know that they were looking for a Marine in particular following her murder. And he lies and in the files he claims to be in the Army. Not the Navy, not the Marine Corps, in the Army, that's in the report. But that is often overlooked when people do their investigation.

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Michael Connelly:

Okay. By the way, I'm going to talk to William Mann about his book and his investigation later down the line in our podcast.

Rick Jackson:

And I also want to mention that when we first heard about Mann's book coming out toward the latter part of 2025, it showed that he had pegged Margolis as the likely suspect or as the suspect. And as had Alex in his investigative work. So the fact that these two people, Mann and Baber, had no connection to each other, didn't know what the other was doing, and they both came to the same conclusion with well-researched information. Kind of supports the fact that even beyond those two people's investigations, that he is likely the suspect. And that's, let alone all the information that we've recovered, that is great circumstantial evidence linking Merrill/Margolis.

Mitzi Roberts:

I just kind of want to add too that it's funny that people are so sort of fast to push that narrative that he was cleared during the initial investigation. Which means that all of this information that Alex has come up with today and that we verified with world-renowned experts, we're just supposed to ignore because he was eliminated back in 1947. And that just doesn't make sense as an investigator that you would ignore compelling evidence on an elimination that we really can't even prove.

Michael Connelly:

This is kind of related. So sticking with the Black Dahlia here, especially you two homicide detectives, your view of this ... And Mitzi, I know you've looked through with the four drawers of the cabinet and we've all seen the FBI files and the grand jury files. What is your view of this investigation? And obviously things are different now. Technology is way ahead of time and so forth. But there's this lore out there that this was a state-of-the-art investigation. And I think if it was, the police chief would not have called for a grand jury to refocus the case. I think if it was, they might've at least charged somebody, but no one was ever charged. No one was ever convicted of this crime. Is there a way to reach back almost 80 years and say this was a solid investigation? I know it deals with some detectives who are pretty famous. But as someone who's not a detective and who is complete amateur and probably doesn't know what I'm talking about, I see this string of things that were missed and ultimately led to the grand jury kind of taking over this case.

Mitzi Roberts:

What I can say about that is that yes, the detectives at the time have very good reputations as smart, dedicated, hardworking detectives. There is an abundance of investigative material. There's no doubt that there was heart. And that there was just heart and soul and they put everything into this investigation.

But knowing how cases like this kind of get away from an investigator, you're never prepared in a case like this that it's a gruesome case and you're going to go in with it and give it all your investigators and give it everything that you have. But you're never prepared for the media to pick up on a case like this and just take it and run. And that's when a case like this can get away from you. And you're so busy and the department is so busy chasing down now leads from crank jobs and nuts and legitimate people. And at the same time, trying to just work the case, that it can get away from you quickly. And there can be shortcuts made or things can just get dropped. Because if anything ... And just by reading and having access to those files, I can tell you that it would ... Now if we had a murder like that, it would be worked

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completely different. It would be a ginormous task force. The entire division in Robbery-Homicide would be given some role in that investigation and it would be worked until it was solved.

And I can tell you that that didn't happen back then. There were a handful of detectives on it and they pushed the case for initially for ... And then it kind of just whittled down to the main investigators assigned to the case. And so although I can't fault their investigation because I do think they worked very diligently and hard. It seems to me that just the immense amount of attention from the media outside from the public, that this case got away from them.

Rick Jackson:

And what I'll say about it is the new chief of police came in, William Worton, in 1949. And I can guarantee you, other than just looking at the overall operation of the police department as a new chief, one of the first things he would want to do is get a briefing on this case that had massive public interest, a lot of people working on it. And obviously what he heard, he did not like. Because there is a whole news article about him saying that he felt it was a bungled investigation and it needed a new start. And he was the one that initiated the call to start a grand jury and kind of start from scratch and move forward through the evidence and through the investigative steps that had already been taken and maybe send it in a new direction. So obviously he wasn't happy with it for whatever reason. But he did in fact call it a "bungled investigation." So that's key.

Michael Connelly:

I just wanted to mention that some of these documents that we're talking about, they'll be available on killerinthecode.com.

Alex Baber:

I just want to add too, whenever the grand jury closed out, Detective Frank B. Jimison for the DA's office, his last comment on his report, his personal report was that he advised the incoming grand jury to pick up the case again because he felt that they were close to identifying and getting some justice for Elizabeth Short. And in the local newspaper articles, he actually ... DA Veitch is quoted as stating that the original investigation was subpar by his standards as well as the other investigators.

Michael Connelly:

By the way, I'm not giving the names of the people who sent in these questions because we got many that are the same, so I'd have to give a whole list of names. So sorry about that if you're not getting credit for your question. But here's one word-for-word that came in, "Can you please address the elephant in the room that many on the internet are firmly convinced Arthur Leigh Allen was the Zodiac?" Alex, why don't you take that one?

Alex Baber:

All right. So from the moment the movie was released in 2007, I remember the talk show, one of the leading talk shows, bringing in Jake Gyllenhaal, as well as the individual that played Toschi on screen, which was Mark Ruffalo. And they said, "Are the audience going to be pissed that when they leave the theater that they're going to believe that Arthur Leigh Allen's the Zodiac even though he's not?" And this interview is on YouTube if you get a chance to watch it. And they both chuckle a little bit and they're like, "We assume so."

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With that being said, the movie in 2007 was based on Robert Graysmith's book that was released initially in 1986, revised and released in 2011, 2012, and it points to Arthur Leigh Allen. It's about as much fiction as it is nonfiction, to be honest with you. And that being said, to get down to the legal aspect of this, Arthur Leigh Allen was cleared by three of the top five forensic categories. That being handwriting, which is the least in my opinion, fingerprints, and then DNA.

So three of the top five, you eliminate biometrics as being the other one, as well as audio. This tells you right there that you got a guy that if I'm going to wager on, I'm not wagering on him as being the Zodiac.

Michael Connelly:

What is the source of the DNA?

Alex Baber:

DNA they used was extracted from the stamps, little this letter from 2004. They attempted to extract more DNA in 2018. Supposedly, there's this individual behind the scenes, a whistleblower that said they were unable to extract any DNA at all in 2018, so they revert back to the partial DNA extraction. And it is only partial, mind you, but they were able to eliminate him as well as all other suspects to date.

Michael Connelly:

Rick, were you going to say something?

Rick Jackson:

Yeah. And I have been told by someone that had control of the Zodiac case with the San Francisco Police Department for years. And that person told me that Arthur Leigh Allen, his connection is bullshit, is the quote he used. And that he has been officially eliminated.

Alex Baber:

[inaudible 00:26:18].

Rick Jackson:

Yeah. Yeah, that's all I can say on that. And that's coming from somebody that's in the know of the Zodiac San Francisco case. There was also a potential ... And I've never been able to confirm this, that there was some potential DNA extracted from a glove that was left at the crime scene inadvertently by the killer of Paul Stine, the cab driver.

Alex Baber:

There's a question surrounding that glove, just for the record. They're not sure if it was left by a prior fare or if it actually belonged to the perpetrator, being the Zodiac. It was found in the front floorboard. It was doused in blood, guys. Because you had Paul Stine's blood that filled the floorboard panel if you look at the photograph. So they're unsure the origin of that as well, but there is a DNA that's been extracted from that, you are correct.

Michael Connelly:

This is a perfect time to bring up handwriting analysis since you mentioned that Arthur Leigh Allen was partially, one of the clearances was on handwriting comparison. That was very important to your investigation, Alex, because it was like pursuing handwriting examples from Marvin Margolis/Marvin

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Merrill/many other names, that you met with his son to get handwriting examples. And of course, you got the sketch, which is at the center of our investigation. But what's the latest or where are we on handwriting analysis on this case?

Alex Baber:

Okay. So we have one confirmation that we had in our back pocket when we started this. And we had one we received last night from Integrated Forensic Services who's also confirmed, A, that he can't eliminate Marvin Margolis as the author of any of the letters, including the Zodiac or Black Dahlia. Reason being is because there's capital box letters that are not personal in description, as well as lowercase and cursive that we supplied him with.

But he also said that there was evidence suggesting that Marvin Margolis was the author of the Zodiac letters. So we have a win-win situation. We have not one, but two experts independently confirming, one beyond a shadow of a doubt in his opinion, the other one is saying that he can't be eliminated and that he is in most likelihood the author of the Zodiac letters.

Michael Connelly:

Okay.

Rick Jackson:

And I just want to also add, and obviously I am not an expert and Mitzi's not an expert in handwriting. But we both handled cases where handwriting, and so we spent time with questioned document examiners with LAPD who handle hundreds and hundreds of these cases a year. And so you pick up some things just from listening to them and learning about their analysis on our cases. And just for me, looking at some of the letters, I'm not saying all of them, but some of the letters are so unique that just my gut feeling is, "Wow, this is pretty strong stuff." Again, I'm not a court qualified expert, but using common sense and the stuff we've learned from questioned documents examiners, I would say it looks pretty good. Especially in some of the cursive, lowercase cursive things.

Alex Baber:

I believe that the general public would have to agree with us, guys. I don't think I've read one comment that's negative about the handwriting similarities.

Michael Connelly:

Well, we'll put some of those up on the website as well where you can see the comparison. And also, correct me if I'm wrong, or actually say this better than me, Alex. But in the world of handwriting analysis, if you see one thing that doesn't match, you have to eliminate. And so when our latest review or analysis comes back, it says that Margolis/Merrill cannot be eliminated. That means they saw nothing that doesn't match. I'm saying this wrong, but I'm saying it's a very high standard, correct?

Alex Baber:

You're correct, Michael. If they see one indication or a red flag at that point, they have to acknowledge that. Meaning that they have to state that this individual, either there's a probability that he's not the author or that he isn't the author.

Michael Connelly:

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Okay. And we had none of that in either of our two analysis made by separate companies, separate people. They probably know each other because it's a small group, I think.

Alex Baber:

They didn't actually know each other because I didn't make it aware to them. When we requested that we get their independent analysis, I didn't want them to be aware of one another. I wanted them to come back and see if they came to the same conclusion, which they both did.

Michael Connelly:

This is running longer than I thought and planned. So we're going to actually break this into two parts. And so we'll be back. You can take a break now. I'm talking to our listeners, not you three. But we're going to end this one, this podcast, and there'll be a part two.

I'm Michael Connelly, and you've been listening to Killer In The Code: Solving The Black Dahlia & Zodiac Cases. That concludes the first half of our round table discussion where we take in questions from the listening audience. If you've enjoyed it, check out chapter eight where we continue the discussion. Thank you for listening.