One

THE MURDERING MIND

“There is no single crime that fascinates us more than murder. . . . We have been fascinated with murder since Cain killed Abel.”


“For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with almost miraculous organ.” —William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

My interest in studying murder was sparked when I witnessed a close friend fly into a murderous rage one night at a cocktail party. I had known him for years and spent many pleasant nights socializing with him and his wife. They had always seemed a happy couple with a strong bond, though, as we all know, much goes on between couples about which others aren’t aware. As I was to learn, their marriage was rife with tensions.

The party was already in full swing when I arrived, but my friend was nowhere to be found. When I asked his wife where he was, she told me with disgust that he was in another room. Though he greeted me warmly when I found him, I could tell he was out of sorts.

We passed his wife a short time later, and she was chatting with one of the other men at the party, radiating beauty and charm as she talked flirtatiously with him. She was a striking woman, and men were generally enchanted by her. As we went by, she looked at her husband derisively and
made a derogatory remark about the way he looked, then turned right back to her flirtatious conversation. He immediately became enraged, in a way I’d never seen him before. Grabbing my arm, he said, “Let’s get out of here,” and stormed out of the house, with me following close behind. The second we hit the street, he started fuming. Her public flirtation incensed him, he said. Her flagrant “dissing” of him in front of others enraged him. Then he said he wanted to kill her. Tonight, right now, at this moment. I was stunned. And I had no doubt that he would do it.

Then a strange feeling came over me—I became frightened for my own life. As I look back on that night, that instinctive fear reaction still amazes me. He wasn’t angry at me, but he was so wild with rage, such a transformed man, that he seemed capable of killing any living thing within arm’s reach. I’d never seen anyone in such an unbridled murderous state, and it was terrifying.

I spent the next half-hour talking him out of his rage, trying every tactic I could think of. I appealed to his self-interest, telling him that he’d be throwing away his career if he so much as touched her. I told him he’d spend the rest of his life in prison. I stammered out everything that rushed into my mind. Finally he calmed down, and then we returned to the party. After a while, I left for my hotel, still shaken and more than a little worried. And I should have been. The drama wasn’t over. At two in the morning, he called and asked if he could come over and sleep on my couch. After the party, he said, he immediately started a horrible fight with his wife, and had threatened to kill her, slamming his fist into the bathroom mirror and shattering it. Then, fortunately, he had left the house. He told me he had realized that if he didn’t leave right then he would kill her.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of the story is that his wife moved out of their house that night and went into hiding. Eventually she divorced him, and they have never seen each other again since the night of that party. I was shocked that a marriage that I knew to be founded on genuine love, between two exceptionally intelligent, thoughtful, and successful people, had ended that way, and that a close friend of mine might well have become a murderer.

One thing my subsequent study of murder has taught me is that his wife
recognized something that all too many of us don’t quite fully appreciate—that we must be alert to the deeply ingrained capacity for murder that lurks inside us all, even those whom we love and who love us. When her husband went into a murderous rage, she understood with exquisite awareness that she was in mortal danger.

If her reaction seems overdone, and her flight out of town and filing for divorce without ever seeing her husband again seem extreme, then consider the story of Sheila Bellush, the ex-wife of Texas multimillionaire Allen Blackthorne. Blackthorne was, as news accounts said, a man who had everything. He’d made a fortune in the medical-equipment business; he was handsome, and he had married again after he and Sheila Bellush divorced—his fourth marriage—to a beautiful woman with whom he had two children. Sheila had also remarried, to Jamie Bellush, but she was haunted by an intense fear that Blackthorne might try to kill her. Their divorce had been nasty, and she had won custody of their two daughters in a horrible battle. For years he had continued to harass her, even after his remarriage. She even told her sister: “If anything ever happens to me, promise me that you will see that there’s an investigation. . . . And find Ann Rule and ask her to write my story.” So afraid did she become that one night she gathered up her family—her two daughters by Blackthorne, and quadruplets she had by her new husband—and fled from her home in San Antonio. They moved to Sarasota, Florida, and Sheila was so afraid that she didn’t even give her own sister her new address.

With all that distance between her and Allen Blackthorne, Sheila finally began to feel safe. It was a fatal mistake. Within months, she was murdered at her home in the middle of the day, and her quadruplet babies were found crying and covered with their mother’s blood. Sheila’s thirteen-year-old daughter discovered her mother dead in the kitchen, her face shot and her throat slit. When the daughter was asked by the police, “Do you know who might have done this?” she replied, “Yes, I know who did it, but he didn’t do it himself. He probably hired someone to do it.” “Who?” “My father—Allen Blackthorne.”

Allen Blackthorne now makes his home in the state prison in Huntsville, Texas. He was convicted of hiring a young thug to drive the fourteen
hundred miles from Austin to Sarasota to murder his ex-wife. According to the Star-Telegram, on May 3, 2002, a federal appeals court upheld Blackthorne’s conviction for his role in arranging the killing. Ann Rule actually did write a book about the murder, titled Every Breath You Take.

When people sense that they are in mortal danger, their intuitions are probably quite good. But those we might least expect to become murderers may well be capable of killing under certain circumstances. Allen Blackthorne had a history of abuse and had been harassing his ex-wife, factors that weighed heavily on the jury’s decision to convict him. Some husbands who kill their wives, however, do not exhibit any prior indications that they will murder. My friend’s rage that night at the party made a profound impression on me, and my puzzlement about why he would have become so intent on murdering his wife set me on the road to investigating the deep psychology of murder. Until I sensed so palpably that someone I knew well and respected—someone whose judgment, good sense, and thoughtfulness I had come to rely on—was perfectly capable of committing a violent murder, I had thought of murderers as a special type: people given to violence in general, people conditioned to violence because of their upbringing, or hardened criminals, and at the extreme, psychopaths.

Only crazy or desperate people think about committing murder, I had thought, or people brought up in subcultures of violence that have desensitized them to violent acts. Certainly, normal, educated, successful people, like my friend, don’t seriously consider becoming killers. So I was left wondering what could have produced the homicidal rage I had seen in my friend. The anger I could understand perfectly well, but the murderous intent seemed to indicate deeper psychological processes at work. I also wondered why, even though I had never witnessed murderous fury before in my life, I had felt so keenly that I myself might have been in danger that night.

The cases of cold-blooded contract killers, or those who murder in the midst of committing a crime, aren’t so puzzling. These people kill for money or to eliminate a witness to a crime. So many other kinds of murder, however, seem baffling. We struggle to comprehend how a young pregnant woman can go to her high-school prom, give birth in the bathroom, stuff
the newborn into the trash, and return to her date at the dance. We are horrified when a spurned man refuses to accept that his lover is leaving him, slashes the tires on her car, and leaves her body in a bloody pool. We are stunned when, en masse, Serbs rape and slaughter Albanians, and as soon as the tables are turned, Albanians rape and kill Serbs in revenge. And we are mystified by what must surely be the seething evil that motivates terrorists to sacrifice their lives so readily in order to kill for the glory of God.

People are mesmerized by murder. It commands our attention like no other human phenomenon. After studying murder extensively, I believe the reason for the fascination we feel is that we are imbued with a deep intuition born of a long history. No matter how alien, unbelievable, and extreme the cases of murder we hear about may seem, the impulse to murder is a part of us. The inclination to murder emanates from our deep, unconscious psychological mechanisms. Our fascination with it makes perfect sense—it's a good survival strategy. We must pay close attention to the parts of human nature that may one day threaten our own lives.

Some experts who have studied violent behavior, especially those concerned with violence by children, have put forth the argument that the rampant violence portrayed in movies and on TV has made us more violent, and pushes some people over the edge into murder. They caution that children's repeated exposure to Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator*, or Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, warps them. Some are convinced that the consumption of sadistic pornography compels the Night Stalkers and Hillside Stranglers of the world. Others stress the roles of poverty, drugs, and subcultures of violence. I am convinced that none of these arguments is adequate, or gets at the real underlying motivations behind the vast majority of murders.

My investigations demonstrate that every one of these widely held beliefs is wrong—dead wrong. To understand why, we must journey into the depths of the murdering mind, and we'll discover that there is a fundamental logic to murder—ruthless but rational—and that it resides not only in the minds of people who actually become murderers, but in the minds of all of us.

Seven years ago, I taught a seminar on human nature that included a session on murder. As an exercise to get the class engaged, I had the students
complete a questionnaire asking, "Have you ever thought about killing someone?" If the answer turned out to be "yes," they were instructed to describe the specific circumstances that had triggered their homicidal thought, their relationship to the victim, and the method of killing that they had fantasized about. My research into murder began in earnest after this astonishing experience.

As I read through their responses in my office, I was stunned. Nothing had prepared me for the outpouring of murderous thoughts my students reported. These were intelligent, well-scrubbed, mostly middle-class kids, not the gang members or troubled runaways one might expect to express violent rage. Yet most of them had experienced at least one intense episode in which they had fantasized about killing someone. As I sat in my office reading through these homicidal fantasies, I began to suspect that actual homicides were just the tip of the deep psychological iceberg of murder. Could actual murder be only the most flagrant outcome of a fundamental human drive to kill? Do our minds really course with homicidal thoughts? Is there a purpose to our killing fantasies?

Pursuing this line of research, my lab went on to conduct the largest scientific study ever carried out on people's homicidal fantasies, looking into why they have them and the specific circumstances in which they contemplate killing. This groundbreaking international study involved more than five thousand individuals from San Antonio to Singapore, who were interviewed intensively. Here are a few excerpts from those remarkable interviews.

**CASE #5537, female, age 20.** [Who did you think about killing?] My ex-boyfriend. We lived together for a couple of months. He was very aggressive. He started calling me a whore, and told me that he didn't love me anymore. So I broke up with him. Then a few months later he started calling me trying to get back together, but I didn't want to. He said that if I ever had a relationship with another man, he was going to send videos, where we appear having sex, to all the people in my university. The thing is that I do have a new boyfriend, but my ex-boyfriend doesn't know it yet, and I'm terrified that he'll
do what he says. Then suddenly the thought occurred to me that my life would be so much happier without him in existence. [Please describe step by step how you thought about killing this person.] I actually did this. I invited him over for dinner. And as he was in the kitchen, looking stupid peeling the carrots to make a salad, I came up to him laughing, gently, so that he wouldn’t suspect anything. I thought about grabbing a knife quickly and stabbing him in the chest repeatedly until he was dead. I actually did the first thing, but he saw my intentions and ran away. [When asked how close she came to killing him, she estimated 60%.]

CASE #967, male, age 28. [Who did you think about killing?] He was a very good friend whom I defended on a number of occasions. On my 20th birthday, he told my paranoid fiancée that I had been unfaithful. This was a pack of lies. Then he made a move on her. It has been a huge problem in my relationship, one that will probably never be resolved. He was like my little brother and he stabbed me in the back, in the worst possible place, on my birthday nonetheless. . . . [What method did you envision using to kill him?] First, I would break every bone in his body, starting with his fingers and toes, slowly making my way to larger ones. Then I would puncture his lung and maybe a few other organs. Basically give him as much pain as possible before killing him. [When asked how close he actually came to killing, he estimated 80%.]

CASE #108, male. [Who did you think about killing?] I was in a parking lot, and he was going about 30 miles per hour. He almost hit me (even though I had the right of way). He jumped out of his car, threw his cigarette at me, then started kicking my car and trying to break my window. I grabbed my bat and got out of the car, and hadn’t even had a chance to swing it at him when he ran away like a little pansy. I calmed down a little bit after he bolted, but when he started to try to get at me and my girlfriend, to cause harm to us, that’s when I felt the desire to take his life. . . . I would have beaten
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him to death with my baseball bat. [What did you actually do?] I thought about what I would have done if he wouldn’t have taken off, which is probably beat him to a bloody pulp with my bat. I don’t know if I would have killed him, but it definitely crossed my mind. [What could have pushed you over the edge to actually kill him?] If he would have touched my girlfriend, I would have beat him to death. No questions asked.

According to our findings, 91 percent of men and 84 percent of women have had at least one such vivid fantasy about killing someone. As I contemplated these surprising findings, and considered that the human mind has been exquisitely fine-tuned by evolution, I began to suspect that these fantasies were the expressions of deep psychological underpinnings that motivate us to kill for quite specific, calculated reasons. Seven years of near-obsessive subsequent research into murder has led me to the conclusion that, yes, the human mind has developed adaptations for killing—deeply ingrained patterns of thought, often accompanied by internal dialogue, anchored in powerful emotions—that motivate us to murder.

The simple explanations that are so frequently proffered to explain murder—poverty, pathology, parents, media violence—fail crashingly at getting to the heart of the darkness, the underlying architecture of the murdering mind. They fall short for many reasons, but the most obvious is that murder does not flow from any singular motivation. Consider the panoply of emotions that roil our blood and drive us to kill. Sometimes hate motivates murder; sometimes envy; sometimes greed; sometimes fear; sometimes jealousy; sometimes spite. And sometimes, a complex combination of emotions motivates murder.

Moreover, a single emotion can cause quite different kinds of murder. Jealousy compels one man to gun down a rival. But that same rage causes a second to strangle his wife, and a third to put the gun in his own mouth. Some people kill in order to secure a mate they think might stray into the arms of another; others kill to get rid of a mate. Some kill for love, others for hate. Some murders are strangely devoid of emotion, such as when a Mafia hit man kills. Others seem to cut against the grain of fundamental
human nature, as when a single mother abandons a newborn. From malice to mercy, the range of psychological states that propel people to kill is staggering and begs for deeper understanding. Ted Bundy, Susan Smith, Jack Kevorkian, and Osama bin Laden are miles apart in motive.

Behind the apparent diversity of motives, and across the variability of circumstances that lead up to murder, lies a hidden web containing a collage of motives, a variety of means, and an assortment of opportunities. The powerful threads of this web stretch back millions of years, into the ancient mists of human evolutionary history.

According to the theory I’ve developed, nearly all the many kinds of murder—from crimes of passion to the methodically planned contract kill—can be explained by the twists and turns of a harsh evolutionary logic. Killing is surely ruthless, but it is also most often not the result of either psychosis or cultural conditioning. Murder is a product of the evolutionary pressures our species confronted and adapted to.

Recent findings about the murderous impulses of our ancestors strongly suggest that we became murderers very early in the course of our evolution. The “Iceman,” a frozen corpse discovered in the Italian Alps, lived fifty-three hundred years ago. In 1991, two German hikers found him, the best-preserved human specimen yet discovered. With bread and meat in his intestines, and a bow and quiver of fourteen arrows by his side, he lay face-down in the snow. Scientists advanced several theories about his demise. One claimed that he froze to death in his sleep when he lay down to rest after an exhausting climb. Another suggested that he died because he had fallen and broken his ribs. A third suggested that an avalanche buried him under the snow.

All were proved wrong when scientists discovered the real reason. He died from an arrow that ripped into his back, tore through his insides, shattered his scapula, and lodged itself into his left shoulder. He suffered internal bleeding, and lived no longer than a few hours after being shot. Those who had examined his remains had initially missed the signs of this wound. The inch-long arrowhead was finally discovered through a multidimensional imaging procedure known as computerized tomography. We do not know whether he died trying to flee his attacker, whether he was caught by
surprise and felled unawares, or whether a single enemy or a gang attacked him. What we now know with the certainty of forensic science, however, is that he was murdered. The "Iceman" was found clutching a dagger in his right hand. His forearms and hands revealed defensive wounds. And his body was covered with the blood of at least two other individuals.

Additional archeological evidence of our murderous nature is leading a reassessment of just how long ago murder entered our lives. Fifty-nine human skeletons were recently found in a cemetery at Gebel Sahaba in Egyptian Nubia, dating from the Late Paleolithic, some twelve to fourteen thousand years ago. More than 40 percent contained embedded stone projectiles. Many had multiple wounds. The majority of injuries appear on male skeletons. Most wounds pierced the left sides of the crania and rib cages, suggesting right-handed killers who attacked while their victims faced them. Other fresh evidence among the Anasazi Indians of the American Southwest suggests the sinister practice of cannibalism. It turns out that the scalping of skulls leaves characteristic cut-marks on the cranial bones. Did ancestral humans feast on other humans? Analyses of ancient fossilized human feces from the Anasazi recently revealed the presence of human myoglobin, which could only get there through the consumption of human muscle or heart.

Another study of human skeletons from California from more than a thousand years ago revealed that 5 percent contained arrowheads embedded within them, a finding that constitutes only the most direct evidence of warfare death. A study of prehistoric sites dating to around 1325 A.D. in South and North Dakota also reveals dramatic evidence of war between tribal groups. Analysis of roughly five hundred skeletons buried in one pit provides evidence that they were all massacred during a single raid. Almost all had unhealed cut-marks and cranial trauma indicative of scalping with sharp stones or knives, suggesting that they did not survive their attackers. Roughly 40 percent had depressed cranial fractures in addition to scalping. Interestingly, among the five hundred skeletons there was a striking absence of young women, providing a telltale clue about the purpose of the slaughter.

A study of skeletons from the Oneota culture residing along the Illinois
River floodplain, from roughly 1300 A.D., revealed that 16 percent experienced violent death. These murder victims tell their stories with unhealed trauma to the body, upper limbs, and cranium from projectiles, depressed fractures on the top and back of their skulls indicating clubbing, and holes in skulls that match the dimensions of stone weapons found at the same location. Some of the skeletons also revealed healed wounds, including punctures and cranial depressions, suggesting that they had survived at least one previous attack. Another study of the American Great Plains revealed that 19 percent had died from large projectile wounds that had penetrated pelvic bones, spinal columns, and limbs. Similar victims of mass slaughter among Native Americans have been found along the Pacific coast of southern California, dating back more than a millennium. Two-thirds of the injuries to the skeletons were inflicted on the left side of the front of the skull, indicating face-to-face combat with mostly right-handed attackers.

These and other new findings, such as discoveries of ancient weapons like maces, lances, tomahawks, daggers, and swords, leave no doubt that homicide has been prevalent over a vast expanse of human evolutionary history. Although obviously fragmentary and incomplete, this new paleontological and bioarcheological evidence has provided fascinating insights into the long history of murder, and has informed the theory of murder I've developed.

As I delved into the mystery of why we had become so violent so early on as a species, I realized that, according to the cold calculus of evolution, killing—especially the kinds of killing that are most prevalent—offered an abundance of advantages to our early ancestors in the competition for survival and reproduction, and I will explain those advantages through the course of the book. It may seem bizarre to talk about killing as adaptive, or murder as advantageous, but in fact the benefits of killing, in an evolutionary sense, are so substantial that the real mystery is not why killing has been so prevalent over our evolutionary history, but why killing has not been more prevalent.

The evolution of the psychology of murder has been like an arms race: in response to the threat of murder, we've developed a well-honed set of defenses against it, and they have acted as powerful deterrents.
Through the course of our evolution from primate proto-humans into *Homo sapiens*, we've had to struggle for survival against three primary dangers. The first is against the physical environment—falls from heights, starvation from food deprivation, death from drowning. The second is against other species—parasites from within and predators from without. Our natural revulsion toward people who appear diseased, our fear of spiders and snakes, and our acute sensitivity to when we are followed are all evolved defenses against these dangers. The third struggle is against members of our own species. Indeed, we are now at a stage of development where humans have become our most savage "hostile force of nature."

This long history of mortal danger from our own species is the reason that we have also developed a set of exquisitely tuned defenses to prevent being murdered. According to the workings of natural selection, the more costly it is to get killed—and of course nothing in our lives is more costly—the more rapidly will selection design weapons of defense against being killed. And, sure enough, just as humans have evolved fears of spiders and heights, we've evolved an impressive set of capabilities to ward off murder.

In an amazing scientific discovery, we have now come to know that these defenses start early in life—even before we are born, when we still inhabit the presumably cozy environment of our mother's womb. As Harvard biologist David Haig has discovered, even the womb presents its own dangers; a chief one of those is what is known as spontaneous abortions, many of which happen before a woman even knows she is pregnant. Indeed, we now know that many women who experience late periods and worry that they are pregnant, only to be relieved later when their periods begin again, have actually experienced spontaneous abortion of the growing fetus. According to Haig's findings, these often undetected miscarriages occur when the mother's body has sensed that the fetus is in poor health or possesses genetic abnormalities.

Remarkably, Haig also discovered that a defense mechanism has evolved to outwit the mother's body and protect the fetus. This is the fetal production of human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG), which is a hormone the fetus secretes into the mother's bloodstream. The female body appears to "interpret" high levels of hCG as a sign that a fetus is healthy and viable,
and so does not spontaneously abort. Even the womb is a hostile environment where one's own interests must be protected at the cost of another's. Even in that most sacred place we are potential murder victims.

After birth, the next antihomicide mechanism that occurs is crying—a distress signal that alerts parents to a baby's hunger or any experience of pain. By six months of age, just when infants become more mobile, a specialized fear emerges—the fear of strangers. And this fear is not indiscriminate: infants' stranger-anxiety centers primarily on strange men, corresponding precisely to the sex of strangers who have posed the greatest threat to infants throughout human evolutionary history.

The antihomicidal defenses we've developed include our wariness when walking alone at night down a dark street, as well as the hypervigilance and acute anxiety that so many Americans experienced in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. We have also evolved an amazing ability to read the minds of those with homicidal intent.

That is why Sheila Bellush sensed the danger that Allen Blackthorne might kill her. Think also of the O. J. Simpson case. Nicole Brown Simpson suspected that her life was in danger. She said on several occasions, "He's going to kill me and get away with it, because he's O. J. Simpson." Though we don't know for sure that O. J. Simpson was in fact her murderer, and he was of course acquitted of that crime, we do know that Nicole Brown Simpson's antihomicide defenses had been triggered. Unfortunately, they ultimately failed her; her killer was extraordinarily determined. The irony is that, even as natural selection fashioned our defenses against being murdered, it simultaneously created more finely developed killing strategies to evade and circumvent these defenses. As we evolved means of detecting danger from others, we also evolved the ability to deceive and surprise our victims. In effect, we evolved to disguise our own homicidal designs, concealing them from our victims. Even so, thousands of us owe our lives today to an uncanny and powerful urge to protect ourselves from the stealth tactics of the killers among us.

Our fascination with blood, our astonishing ability to pick out the angry face in a crowd of hundreds, and our thirst for the details of murders are all features of these defensive armaments. These mechanisms are
designed not only to help us avoid situations in which our lives may be in peril, but also to strike back when we are in danger. As many potential murderers have discovered, it can be very dangerous to try to kill someone. Through the course of our evolution, our arsenal of self-defense strategies created monumental deterrents to those who might otherwise be tempted to kill. Potential killers are keenly aware of these defenses and deterrents, and that awareness prevents many potential murders. It's a tribute to our evolved antihomicide defenses, and to the mental calculations made by potential murderers of the risks of killing—both consciously and subconsciously—that murder is not more common.

Does this mean, then, that most murders happen because someone has lost his mind, lost his ability to understand or care about either the danger presented by self-defense mechanisms or the danger of punishment? Not at all.

Many people may believe that, whatever remaining residue of base instincts humans possess that might drive a man—or woman—to murder, they are held in check by the powerful brake we call rationality. According to this line of thinking, it simply isn't rational to kill. In their influential book *Crime of Passion*, psychologists David and Gene Lester express this traditional view of the occasional moments when the brakes fail: "Most murders occur on sudden impulse and in the heat of passion, in situations where the killer's emotions overcome his ability to reason." Most experts argue that homicides typically occur when rage supplants reason; when judgment is set aside; when deeply rooted ancient emotions take over; when logic is overwhelmed by passion.

These assumptions, rooted in an artificial contrast between emotion and rationality, are wrong for two fundamental reasons.

First, many murders are premeditated. In one of the largest studies of female homicides, for example, 56 percent were judged to fulfill the criteria of premeditated (first-degree) murder, and the planning, reflection, and deliberation often extended over days, weeks, months, and occasionally years. Killers often prepare elaborate scenarios—acquiring a weapon, selecting a time when the victim is vulnerable, and staging an alibi. Such deliberate planning is hardly the mark of irrationality, and though some of
those who so intricately calculate their murders are discovered to be psychopaths, the vast majority are not.

Second, although it is clearly true that some killings are motivated by intense emotions, such as rage, jealousy, and envy, it does not follow that emotions defy reason. Indeed, a core argument that I will make in this book is that passions are rational. They function as well-designed components of human psychological machinery, facilitating effective solutions to specific adaptive problems. They succeed at precisely those critical junctures in life when dispassionate cold calculation would fail. Emotions, far from opposing reason, are extraordinarily effective means for implementing goals. Passions possess a functional, subconscious logic. In the case of homicide, passions provide the motivational fuel to enact a murder—but the murder is most often a solution arrived at through careful and complex, although sometimes speedy, calculation. The saying “Don’t get mad, get even,” misses this basic point: getting mad exists, in part, precisely for the purpose of “getting even.”

Case records do show that often people who kill do so while seized by a blinding rage, and they often seem oblivious to the consequences of their actions. We tend to think, then, that killers must be crazy. But they aren’t. Or at least the majority are not. In the state of Michigan, as in most of the United States, nearly all people accused of the crime of killing end up being evaluated by trained psychologists and psychiatrists. They must be assessed as sane or insane, competent or incompetent to stand trial, psychotic or not psychotic. Surprisingly, in our study of 375 Michigan murders, we found that 96 percent were judged to be legally sane, competent, and nonpsychotic. They fully understood that their actions were wrong and illegal.

Most killers, in a nutshell, are not crazy. They kill for specific reasons, such as lust, greed, envy, fear, revenge, status, and reputation, or to get rid of someone who they perceive is inflicting costs on them. They are like you. They are like me. As forensic psychologist Dr. Carol Holden observed, after more than eighteen years of interviewing murderers, “The line between us and them is virtually non-existent.” But, perhaps unlike you and me, their cost-benefit calculators have arrived at a deadly solution to their problems.
This observation raises questions about why and when people kill. Precisely how do killers arrive at their lethal solutions? How many alternative solutions do they tend to entertain before deciding on murder? How do they determine that the benefits they would obtain from killing, the plums they would pluck, are worth the risks? How do they arrive at the means and the motive? And how do they choose the opportunity? In my investigations, I've discovered fascinating answers to these questions.

The logic of the evolutionary theory of murder that I've arrived at may well be disturbing, and I have not reached my conclusions lightly. In the course of developing this theory, I and my research colleagues, most notably Joshua Duntley, have conducted extensive studies and pored through vast numbers of case studies, honing and testing the theory. In addition to our massive study of homicidal fantasies, our work includes:

- **Homicide Defense Adaptations.** My lab has explored the specialized circumstances in which people feel that their lives are in mortal danger. Studying a sample of nearly a thousand participants from five cultures, we started by asking people: "Have you ever thought that another person might want to kill you?" An astonishing 91 percent of the men and 83 percent of the women from our age-diverse community sample answered in the affirmative. Then we probed deeper to find out who they feared might want to kill them, what happened to trigger the fear, physical and behavioral changes in the potential killer, the method of murder they envisioned the potential killer using, and most important, what they did to avoid being killed. In conjunction with the other studies, this study provides us with a roadmap of the precise circumstances in which our lives are most in danger and what murder-prevention strategies are most effective.

- **FBI Homicide Databases.** We have secured access to new and previously unstudied FBI databases, involving a total of 429,729 homicides. The sample contains 13,670 cases in which husbands kill their wives. A startling finding is that key contexts in which
women's lives are at risk are "lovers' triangles" in which the woman is substantially younger than her husband. Women in "May-December" marriages, in which the man is substantially older than the woman, show a sharply elevated risk of murder.

- **Michigan Murders.** More than 50 percent of all people accused of murder in the state of Michigan go through the Center for Forensic Psychiatry, located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In collaboration with Dr. Carol Holden, director of Evaluation Services at the Forensic Center, and Joshua Duntley, I have studied case files of 375 murders committed over the past fifteen years. These previously untapped files include rich and informative interviews with the killers, statements from eyewitnesses to the murder, police reports, psychiatric assessments, and autopsy reports.

- **What Would Push You Over the Edge to Kill?** My lab has conducted the first systematic research on what would tip people over the edge and cause them to kill. We presented participants with more than a hundred different scenarios, in which they recorded the probability that they would kill using percent likelihood. Nearly all people express a willingness to kill in some circumstances—to prevent being killed or to defend their children from killers. Our studies reveal the specific circumstances in which normal people state that they would kill, with some surprising findings. For example, men indicate an increased willingness to kill as their mating prospects become dire; women do not. Jim Morrison of the Doors noted, "Women seem wicked when you're unwanted," and this disturbing sentiment is reflected in our research on the circumstances in which men express a willingness to kill. These new findings simultaneously reveal when our lives are most in danger—a theme explored throughout the book.

- **Expressed Motives for Murder.** In another line of research, we have assembled the most comprehensive master-list of motives
for murder. This research is based on a combined strategy of first extracting (1) all stated motives for murder depicted in criminology and forensic sciences literature, supplemented by (2) motives obtained from a review of our own sample of 375 Michigan murders, and (3) individual nominations of motives for murder by a community sample of everyday people. This is the first comprehensive scientific taxonomy of motives for murder. My research lab has used this taxonomy in our research to obtain a hierarchy of motives for murder, and to test specific facets of our new theory.

- **Interviews with Homicide Detectives and Forensic Psychiatrists.** One unusual source of evidence for the new theory of homicide comes from my personal interviews with homicide detectives and forensic psychiatrists. Those who devote their professional careers to investigating and solving murders have special insight into why people kill. I have also worked closely with forensic psychologists and psychiatrists who interview killers for a living. The insights provided by these professionals complement the other sources of empirical data.

To test our growing realization that murder is deeply ingrained in the human mind, and has been since the human mind evolved, we also investigated a series of new bioarcheological discoveries, such as those I mentioned earlier. No single source of scientific evidence can definitively prove the truth of any new theory. But my research lab over the past seven years has secured an unprecedented variety of different sources of evidence that have never been obtained and never assembled together pertaining to the underlying psychology of homicide. This unique research has enabled the development of the most penetrating, comprehensive, and scientifically sound theory of murder ever proposed, and I will walk you through it step by step in the chapters that follow.