

# Chapter Two

## The Murders

It was a cold Monday evening at the KMTV newsroom in Omaha, Nebraska and the reports that typically fed their telecasts were as flat and frigid as the snow-covered plains outside. There had been no extreme weather, no upcoming events, and nothing affecting the farming community, which were the usual news items in this typically bucolic part of the country. With the holidays over, it was going to be more of the same until spring thawed the stillness of the news.

The reporters often filled the time learning how to use the motion picture cameras they had only recently received. The cameras were a necessity for television news, which was typically not regarded with the same prestige as the well-established print media. If the local station hoped to compete with the newspapers, it would have to give the public what still photographs and typed words could not. But with no news stories in motion, nothing could be filmed.

The slow Monday ended and the executives went home. The few remaining technicians and reporters scabbled together whatever they could to fill news stories that night. In the meantime, the station gave way to the Huntley-Brinkley report out of New York and Washington. It was a slow news day for them as well. The local Unitarian congregation was kicking off a fund drive to build a new church, the national debt was nearing \$280 billion, and their lead in for the evening was “World’s Greatest Cartoons.”

Mark Gautier, alone in a dark control room upstairs from the bright lights of the studio, turned the volume of the television up to tune out the buzzing of the machines behind him. They were supposed to bring in information, but now they were only causing a useless racket.

Then he noticed a lot of chatter coming from the police radio on the shelves above the TV. It was unusual to hear much more than an occasional smattering of reports referring to domestic disputes and traffic problems coming from the box. What he heard now caused Mark to get to his feet and grab a pencil. He wrote what he heard:

*“Be on the lookout for a 1949 black Ford. Nebraska license number 2-15628. Radiator grille missing. No hubcaps. Believed to be driven by Charles Starkweather, a white male, nineteen years old, 5 feet 5 inches tall, 140 pounds, dark red hair, green eyes. Believed to be wearing blue jeans and black leather jacket. Wanted by Lincoln police for questioning in*

*homicide. Officers were warned to approach with caution. Starkweather was believed to be armed and presumed dangerous.*

*“Starkweather is believed to be accompanied by Caril Fugate, fourteen years old, female, white, 5 feet 1 inch tall, 105 pounds, dark brown hair, blue eyes, sometimes wears glasses. Usually wears hair in ponytail, appears to be about eighteen years old. Believed wearing blue jeans and blouse or sweater. May be wearing medium-blue parka.”*

It was 5:43 pm, January 27, 1958.

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John McArthur heard the news report on the radio in his office the next day. He was a news junky, often listening to what was happening while at work, only to come home to watch a more in depth recap of the day's events on television. This time it was the opposite way around. There had been sketchy information about a triple homicide the night before, and now they had further information about it on the radio. A 14-year-old girl and her 19-year-old boyfriend had disappeared, her family was discovered murdered, the parents' bodies left in a chicken shack behind their home, and a baby's body was in the outhouse; its head had been crushed by a rifle.

The sheer audacity of the murders was shocking enough to catch anyone's attention and everyone turned on their radios and televisions to learn what was happening.

John didn't have to turn far to reach his radio. Only a short swivel brought his legs into contact with a wall, or filing cabinet, or some other piece of furniture. Though John was a thin man, even his gaunt frame barely fit through the narrow passage into his office. If a drawer was open, he had to duck under or climb over it. If his partner Merrill Reller wanted inside the office, it became a back and forth dance for one to enter and the other to leave. A chair rested outside the doorway because when clients came to visit they had to sit outside the office looking in.

The report on the radio was interrupted by a break in the case. The police had surrounded a farmhouse near Bennet, approximately 20 miles east of Lincoln, where Charlie was believed to be holed up. His car was parked in front, and no one answered a call to come out, not even the farmer who owned the property. A small army of police officials slowly moved in on the home, guns drawn.

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Blackie Roberts and Dick Trembath, two of the reporters for KMTV, stood in the still, gelid air beside their car at the Meyer farm outside of Bennet. They had rushed from Omaha, more than sixty miles away, to film the capture of the two fugitives for KMTV. Before them, the police formed a wide perimeter around the house, and waited for the dispersal of tear gas before moving in.

Scattered among the men in uniform were farmers with shotguns, eager to see the young murderer captured or killed. They knew that August Meyer, the man who owned the farm, would never willingly aid a killer, even though Charlie had been a friend of August for years.

August, who was seventy, had allowed Charlie to hunt on his farm from time to time. He had seen Caril whenever Charlie brought her with him, but he barely knew her. Now no one could discern what was going on inside; if the two were preparing an ambush, or if they would surrender as soon as it got hot.

“How come all the local people?” Blackie asked one of the sheriff’s men. “Did you form a posse?”

“No, that’s something else,” came the reply. “They were just in the area and came over to help.”

“What else is going on?”

“A couple of teen-agers from Bennet were reported missing last night and the neighbors have been out looking for them.”

A patrol car engine roared to life. It was the signal. “Let’s move out!” someone shouted. “Spread out and stay low!”

The police car moved forward, and the men in uniform surged ahead. When the car rumbled into place in front of the house, it stopped. The men got out of the car and took cover behind the doors.

A loudspeaker squealed to life. “This is the police! We know you’re in there! We’ll give you five minutes to come out of there with your hands in the air!” They were met by silence, and police answered with the loud cocking of their guns.

A half dozen troopers ran as they spread out across the front lawn keeping low, carrying their stubby, wide barreled guns. Half way to the house they dove to the ground. A white flash trailed from one of the men, and a moment later a window crashed. A thin trail of smoke slowly began to snake its way out of the hole as the farmhouse filled with tear gas.

The troopers charged the home from every direction. The front door was kicked open, and as the smoke poured out, they rushed in, guns at the ready.

One man called out from the back of the house. It was not what they expected, not a shout at Charlie to drop his weapon, or a signal to tell the others where he was, but a genuine scream of disgust.

The man who had called out was at the doorway of a small, white shed attached to the back of the house. Inside was the body of August Meyer. There was no sign of struggle, no visible bullet wound. The only evidence of his death was a thin layer of blood peeking out from under him.

Blackie Roberts, who had followed the police inside, now shot a whole roll of film for the news. This was certainly a change from their usual photographs of placid pastures and town meetings. He just had to get past the crowd of police huddling around the house.

August’s brother was among the officers outside. One of the policemen who had seen the body confirmed what they had found. “Oh my god,” was all he could say.

Dick Trembath, also outside, walked down the lane to take photographs of Starkweather’s car, which was stuck in the mud just down the street. There was nothing unusual about it, except that Charlie had collected tires in the backseat.

As Dick was returning to the Meyer place, he was approached by a farmer who asked where he could find a policeman. There were plenty available, which Dick pointed out, and he asked the perplexed man what was happening. The man waved him off and continued toward an officer. Dick stood close enough to hear, but not so close to scare them away.

The man’s name was Everette Broening. The night before he had heard a car accelerate at high speed around 10 pm. The next morning, after hearing about the missing teenagers, he had found a pile of school books along the side of the road a few miles up. All Dick heard him tell the officer after that was, “They’re in the storm cellar.”

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The police stood on the pale, frozen ground surrounding the cement entrance of the storm cellar a couple miles from the Meyer residence. One civilian stepped up to the entrance, looked down inside, then covered his mouth and turned quickly away, his shoulders heaving.

Dick tried to make his way to the doorway to get a photograph. He was stopped by a trooper a foot taller than him. "Come on, I've got a job to do," Dick said.

"You don't want any pictures of what's down there," the man told him gravely.

The two teenagers who had been reported missing the night before, Robert Jensen and Carol King, lay at the bottom of the cellar. The girl was naked, her body lying zig zagged across the floor, her breasts and groin fully exposed, her face as contorted as her body. Her blue jeans were bunched at her feet around her white bobby socks. One arm, still attached to the sleeve of her jacket, was wrapped around her back, while the other arm reached down to her knee as if making one last attempt at modesty. Her small hand rested in the fold of her leg. A blood stain led out of her buttocks and trailed down her thigh where she had been raped, and then stabbed. Her body was on top of her boyfriend, Robert. A pool of their mixed blood ran down the floor away from them.

Lancaster County Attorney Elmer Scheele soon filed first-degree murder charges against Charlie Starkweather. After what they had seen of the King girl, there was reason to believe Fugate was probably dead as well, and they expected to find her body dumped along the side of the road.

Neighbors were warned, posses were formed, and farmers from across the area converged on the narrow, unpaved main street of Bennet, a town of 490 people 18 miles southeast of the capital city of Lincoln, where the primary police headquarters was set up. The search centered around a line of police headlights and moved out from there into the dark, vast reaches of the nearby farmland. The heavily armed men stretched out into the night, some almost shooting one another as they spotted shapes in the dark. One officer was fired at when he tried to approach a farmhouse to warn the residents about Starkweather. It appeared they already knew, so he continued on to the next house.

Back at the KMTV newsroom, Ninette Beaver, a junior reporter, speculated that Charlie could have gone to the closest major town, Lincoln. "I doubt that," Mark Gautier told her as he got his jacket to leave. "If he's not holed up somewhere around Bennet, he's probably made it out of the state by now."

"Good lord, I hope so," Ninette said. Her sister Joanne lived in Lincoln, and if Starkweather was going there, who knew what would happen. She waited for Mark to leave, then quickly called Joanne.

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County Attorney Elmer Scheele had to duck his head slightly as he entered the magniloquent home of C. Lauer and Clara Ward. He was often the tallest man in any room. Though thin and introverted, his presence was imposing, and his gaze through his black, horn rimmed glasses was focused and intimidating.

The murder spree had gone from bad to worse. Only one day earlier Scheele and the Nebraska police had thought they had Charlie pinned down in a farmhouse, only to find its owner dead inside the house. And then they had found two teenagers brutally murdered, their bodies left locked in a storm cellar near a school. Never in the history of Nebraska had there

been such a chain of killings, and now it had moved from the scattered small communities of the rural farmland into the more densely populated city of Lincoln. And even more disturbing, it had come to the upscale neighborhood near the country club.

Lincoln was a conglomeration of many small communities that had grown together over the decades. The resulting contrast in wealth and class was visible as one passed from the less developed north side of “O” Street to the more affluent south side of town, where the houses were larger, and the vast yards stretched out greener. For this type of bloodshed to enter any part of Lincoln was shocking enough. For it to enter the home of such a prominent figurehead was downright unthinkable.

Yet there was Mr. Ward, a well respected businessman, president of Capitol Steel Works, and a friend of the most influential people in the state, just inside of his front door, dead from a shot at point blank range with a shotgun. The last person to see him alive, in fact, was his close friend, Nebraska Governor Victor Anderson. Lauer Ward's wife Clara was found dead upstairs, a knife sticking out of her back, and their maid, Lillian Fencl, was found with her hands and feet bound, a gag in her mouth, and a knife embedded in her torso.

Scheele was a professional at hiding his feelings, but outrage was beginning to boil over as the pressure was building. Charlie had eluded every road block and patrol that was out to stop him, and now he had to be stopped before panic spread. Something else disturbed him; a smell overwhelming the second floor of the house. It was more than the stench of death, which Elmer was used to. When he followed it to its source, where the odor was strongest, he found the body of Mrs. Ward, bound and gagged and lying dead between the two beds. Then he identified the aroma. It was perfume. Someone had tried to cover the smell of death by pouring it all over the room.

Mrs. Ward’s drawers and closets had been ransacked. Women’s clothes were scattered all over the place, as if someone had been shopping and had left the discarded apparel behind. Among them was Carol King’s jacket. Elmer was incensed. Up to this point he had been expecting to find Caril Fugate’s body in a ditch somewhere. But now it was clear. She was alive. And she was traveling as Charlie’s companion.

Outside, Merle Karnopp, the county sheriff, was talking to reporters. “Well, since discovering the last three bodies, which makes a total of nine that we know of so far, Mayor Martin and I have made an appeal for all adjoining counties, including Omaha, to send all available help they can to Lincoln. It is our opinion that the car is still in this vicinity. We know he has been for the last three days, and we want to cover Lincoln block to block.”

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James McArthur was a junior in high school at Union College Academy, a small Seventh-day Adventist school of about eighty to a hundred students that was squeezed into the fourth floor of the Union College Administration Building. The lower grades had not been allowed to recess because of fear that Starkweather was in the vicinity. Now that Charlie was known to be in Lincoln, the school immediately sent all of the students home.

Lines of cars driven by armed parents appeared at Lincoln’s schools. At Lincoln High School, one student was almost lynched when his bright red hair caused him to be mistaken for the murdering teenager. Inside homes, children were told a key word that, if the parents spoke it, would mean that they were to run and hide.

At Whittier Jr. High School, students raided Caril Fugate's locker and kept her possessions as souvenirs. Few had ever paid any attention to this tiny, reticent girl, but now dozens of students grappled over who would walk away with her belongings now that she was an infamous fugitive. Many who had ignored her before now made claims to have known her well, and claimed that she had always been a trouble maker.

James and his little sister Linda piled into John's truck and they headed home through the madness. Along the way they witnessed stores closing, people getting into their homes and bolting the doors, some boarding their windows. Lincoln had been a town where few ever bothered to lock their doors, but now the entire city was digging in as if under siege. Police from Omaha and the surrounding communities converged on the capital city. Even the National Guard was called in by Governor Anderson after he learned that his good friend had been murdered. Soldiers piled out of their armored vehicles and marched in formation through the empty streets of downtown.

A posse was called for at the courthouse, and so many people showed up that some had to be turned away. Those who left mostly went to gun stores, which sold out within an hour. Small groups of private citizens spread into Lincoln neighborhoods to search for Starkweather and almost shot each other. Armed civilians subjected individuals who drove cars similar to the one Charlie was now driving to repeated searches.

Reports of Starkweather sightings rolled in from places as near as the county courthouse in Lincoln to as far as the western end of Kansas.

In one small Kansas town, police were rushed to the airport for reasons they could not be told. Some thought they were being sent to capture Starkweather, and they pulled their guns to be ready. When the airplane landed, they found that it was President Eisenhower, who was flying in to Kansas City for the funeral of his brother Arthur, but had been diverted to the smaller airport due to bad weather.

The sightings the police took most seriously were those of the Ward car with a single teenage occupant. This led many to believe Starkweather was now alone, and a new search began for the body of Caril Fugate.

One reporter for the local newspaper, the Lincoln Journal, appeared at the office while he was supposed to be shadowing police officers. When asked why he was there, he said, "Just look at me!" He was red headed and had a freckled face. Worse yet, he drove a Packard, just like the one Starkweather was reportedly driving. "I'm double parked and I'm not going out there," he said.

John Jr. drove his brother James and sister Linda home from school as fast as he could. Once there, James turned on the news to watch the chaos. The rest of his other brothers and sisters trickled home rapidly after that, all of them sent home from school, and their mother, Ruby, didn't allow anyone to go outside the rest of the day while she waited anxiously for her husband to come home. John returned late in the afternoon and joined James at the television, watching the historic chaos.

KFOR, a Lincoln radio station, reported that Starkweather had been seen at Capitol Steel Works, the company where Lauer Ward had been the president, but it was an incorrect report by the Associated Press who had misinterpreted the events of the day. It was easy to do. New information was coming in so quickly it was hard to know what was fact and what was gossip. The news team had to not only keep track of new stories, but also corrections to previous ones. It was especially difficult for a continuity writer such as Joanne Young to keep track of the most

recent information. She was juggling correcting copy with answering the flood of calls from reporters all over the world who wanted to know more about what was happening.

KFOR was pre-empting every show they had, and using the radio not only for information to the public, but also to give police as much information as was coming to them. This wasn't the usual job for the press, but this incident was different, more terrifying. Their evening radio announcer, Bob Asky, had come in the night before after having visited the Fugate house where he saw the three bodies of Caril's family. All he could say was "it was really bad." The next morning, when the Wards were found dead in their own home and chaos gripped the city, the president of the radio station arrived at work with a gun, and ordered the doors locked.

Joanne had a personal connection to the danger. The husband of a good friend of hers, Robert Colvert, had been murdered the month before, and Charlie had been a lead suspect; and now her cousin, Chuck Green, a stocky, red headed teenager, was somewhere out there in the city, a target for citizens mad with fear. A police car pulled him over, and to make sure they knew he wasn't Starkweather, he jumped out of the car and announced, "It's not me!"

Newspapers, long the reliable source of information for the people of Nebraska, could not keep up with what was happening. Bodies were appearing three at a time in a seemingly random pattern. No one knew where or when Starkweather would strike next. Lincoln had two papers, one in the morning, the Star, and one in the evening, the Journal, and each had to keep adjusting and updating their headlines as new stories developed.

Police, meanwhile, were trying to decide what leads to follow. A series of reports arrived throughout the day that a couple matching the descriptions of Caril and Charlie were spotted driving northwest along Highway 60 through the Sandhills of Nebraska towards Wyoming. Though these reports were numerous, the police disregarded them, and set up roadblocks south of Lincoln to prevent the couple from escaping into Kansas.

Ninette Beaver was one of the people bringing some semblance of order to the chaos in the KMTV newsroom. Although she was in the relative safety of Omaha, 50 miles removed from the action, her sister Joanne was in the middle of it.

Joanne had described over the phone what was happening in Lincoln to Ninette. She had been stopped by a man with a shotgun on her way to teaching dance class. She thought it was Starkweather as he leaned down and checked out her car. When it was over she rushed home and locked the doors. Ninette got goose bumps as her sister told her the story.

Ninette and the others in the KMTV office tried to keep up with the quickly changing information. There were reports that Charlie was alone, reports that Caril was with him, and reports that Caril was dead. As the news came across the wire, Ninette delivered it to her boss, Floyd Kalber, and others who then reported it on the air. Ninette was only supposed to be at KMTV on a temporary basis, and now she was in the middle of a major event. A full blown panic had caught the attention of an entire nation. Soon, even news stations in Europe began covering the story.

At 2:30 p.m. on January 29<sup>th</sup>, Ninette took a call from Blackie Roberts, one of their reporters chasing the story, still in the field after no sleep for two days. He told her that Elmer Scheele's office was filing first-degree murder charges against both Charlie *and* Caril.

"He's charging the girl, too?" Ninette asked.

"That's it," Blackie told her.

"Hang on, the bell's ringing," Ninette told him, and she turned to the Teletype machine. Floyd jumped out of his chair and joined her.

DOUGLAS, WYO., JAN. 29 (AP) – CHARLES STARKWEATHER, 19, RUNTY NEBRASKA GUNMAN SOUGHT IN NINE SLAYINGS, WAS CAPTURED TODAY IN THE BADLANDS NEAR THIS WYOMING COWTOWN.

Everyone began moving. The story had moved to Wyoming, and they couldn't be the only station without footage.

Then the Teletype machine interrupted them again:

A TENTH MURDER VICTIM WAS FOUND NOT FAR FROM WHERE STARKWEATHER WAS CAPTURED. THE DEAD MAN WAS MERLE COLLISON, 37-YEAR-OLD GREAT FALLS, MONT., SHOE SALESMAN.

WITH STARKWEATHER WAS CARIL FUGATE, THE 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL WHO FLED WITH HIM FROM LINCOLN, NEB., WHERE POLICE SAID HE KILLED NINE PEOPLE. INCLUDED AMONG THE VICTIMS WERE CARIL'S PARENTS.

THE TWO TEENAGERS WERE RUN TO EARTH IN RUGGED COUNTRY WHERE OLD WEST GUNMEN OFTEN HOLED UP.

THE GIRL WAS ALMOST HYSTERICAL AND RAN FLEEING TO DEPUTY SHERIFF BILL ROMER CRYING OUT HER FEAR STARKWEATHER WOULD KILL HER. SHE WAS IN A STATE OF SHOCK SHORTLY AFTERWARD.

ROMER SAID SHE SCREAMED TO HIM:

“HE'S COMING TO KILL ME. HE'S CRAZY. HE JUST KILLED A MAN.”