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CATCH THE DEVIL

A TRUE STORY OF MURDER,
DECEPTION, AND INJUSTICE
ON THE GULF COAST

PAMELA
COLLOFF



CATCH THE DEVIL

A True Story of Murder,
Deception, and Injustice
on the Gulf Coast

PAMELA COLLOFF



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For Chad, Jake, and Lucy

How easy it is to make people believe a lie, and how hard it is
to undo.

—MARK TWAIN

PROLOGUE

I first met Paul Skalnik in the fall of 2018, when he was serving time in federal prison. All I knew then were the broad strokes of his story, pieced together from court filings in Florida: He was a small-time con artist, married nine times, whose testimony prosecutors had relied on, decades earlier, to win a staggering number of felony convictions. Skalnik had a gift: Whenever his luck ran out and he ended up in jail, men confessed their crimes to him. More than thirty years after he had testified against them, some remained in prison. One sat on death row, awaiting an execution date.

Yet from the beginning, these men told a different story: They said Skalnik had made it all up. I wanted to know: Were they lying—or was he? How did he get these confessions? And how did a con man become the state's most valuable witness?

I had tracked Skalnik down to a federal penitentiary in Texas, southeast of Dallas: a squat, redbrick building, ringed by a double perimeter fence and razor wire, where I was granted entry one October morning. To my surprise, he had agreed to meet with me—though the prison limited us to just an hour. A correctional officer led me through a series of locked metal gates to the sparsely furnished visitation room where Skalnik was waiting.

Time had eroded his once-roguish appeal; at sixty-nine, he was Falstaffian in scale, his bulk straining against the wheelchair he sat in. His thinning gray hair was greasy, and his complexion had the waxy pallor that comes from years spent in confinement. But his eyes remained sharp and alert, bright with anticipation, and he thanked me effusively for coming to

see him. Then, without warning, he began to cry. His voice swelled with emotion as he confided that he had been diagnosed with late-stage colon cancer. From his waistband, he pulled out a soiled rag, stained with dried, rust-colored blood. He thrust it toward me, as if offering it as evidence, and his voice dropped to a whisper. “I’m dying,” he said.

Like much of what he told me during our brief time together, it was impossible to know if this was true. He blamed his imprisonment on a vendetta, which he said had been orchestrated by an ex-lover’s daughter and a U.S. marshal. He boasted of money he’d stashed in offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands and Abu Dhabi, and of his time as a star witness in Pinellas County, Florida. His reputation there, he said, had been so fearsome that the mere possibility of his testimony could sway the outcome of a case. “If I was on the witness list, people would take deals,” Skalnik said. “I never lost a case—never ever.” He thumped the table in front of him for emphasis.

When I pressed Skalnik to explain how he had extracted so many confessions from so many men in a single jail, he sidestepped my questions. Soon the correctional officer rapped on the visitation room’s window: five minutes left. Our time was nearly up.

Skalnik acknowledged my obvious frustration with a smile, assuring me that this would be the first of many conversations. He told me to send him my questions so we could correspond, and he encouraged me to visit him as often as the warden allowed. The more sensitive details about his work with prosecutors in Pinellas County, he said, could only be shared in person. “This is a story that needs to be told,” he said when I stood to leave, “and I want to help you tell it.”

Elated that he had agreed to cooperate, I drove home to Austin, where I pored over jail logs, case files, and trial transcripts, and wrote him letters that brimmed with questions. I contacted the prison to set up another interview and messaged him through an email system that connects federal inmates to the outside world. He wrote often, describing the daily indignities of prison life and his fear of dying alone—but never a word about Pinellas County. There was always a holdup: He had not received my most recent

letter because the mailroom was short-staffed, or he felt too unwell to write. Still, he assured me that as soon as he regained his strength, he would be ready to talk.

I refused to admit to myself, until it was much too late, that Skalnik had been stringing me along. Months after our visit, when I was still holding out hope that he might talk, he wrote to say that my questions were making him uneasy. Then he went dark on me.

PART I

SKALNIK

In Friendswood, Texas, the only disturbance to the order of things came during hurricane season, when storm surges in Galveston Bay left the creeks with nowhere to drain and floodwaters could rise in an instant. Some seven thousand people lived there in the mid-1970s, when it still retained the austere calm of its early days as a Quaker settlement. Halfway between Galveston and Houston, it remained, as the county's sole dry town, a world unto itself—a stubborn holdout against modern excess. Lisa Rogers had never lived anywhere else, and apart from school she spent most of her waking hours at her grandparents' horse farm. At fourteen, she preferred the company of horses. She liked the quiet sameness of her days, the predictable hum of life. Her mother, Penny, longed for something different.

Penny often told her stories about an earlier, more exhilarating time, when she had been a regular on *The Larry Kane Show*, Houston's own version of *American Bandstand*. Of all the bright-eyed teenagers who were chosen to appear on the show each Sunday in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was Penny who stood out. Her heart-shaped face, framed by dark, dramatic eyebrows and high cheekbones, often drew comparisons to Elizabeth Taylor. But no modeling contracts followed; no acting career bloomed. After high school, she married and divorced three men, in quick succession, and suffered a shattering loss when her twin sister died of leukemia. By early 1977, at thirty-three, she was raising two children on her

own, working as a receptionist at the funeral home her parents owned, and still living in Friendswood.

It was that spring, at the funeral home, that Penny first encountered a man named Paul Skalnik. He cut a striking figure in a three-piece suit, his blue-gray eyes tracking her from across a roomful of mourners. At twenty-seven, he was six years Penny's junior, but he spoke with the polished assurance of a trial lawyer or politician, leaning in just close enough to make the conversation feel private without being intrusive. He told Penny that he had grown up in nearby League City and that, after college, he had quickly ascended the corporate ladder to become a top executive at Southwest Airlines. Then a scrappy Texas upstart, Southwest was known for outfitting its flight attendants in hot pants and go-go boots. Skalnik, with his outsized ambition, seemed to reflect the company's brash confidence.

When Penny brought him home to meet Lisa and her younger brother, Lynn, Lisa was put off by his heavy-handed efforts to win over her mother. Penny, however, was enthralled by his attention. Skalnik held out the promise of a life that was bigger, brighter, grander, and he made it feel thrillingly within reach, carrying a business-sized checkbook with him whenever he took her out. Restraint, Lisa noticed, was not his strong suit. He cultivated a maximalist style, accenting his wide-lapelled suits with gold chains, a Rolex watch, and plush sideburns, and he encouraged Penny to live large, too. After a brief courtship, he spirited her away to Las Vegas for a weekend, and they returned to Friendswood as Mr. and Mrs. Paul Skalnik.



PENNY ROGERS IN FRIENDSWOOD, TEXAS, IN THE EARLY
1970S

Skalnik moved into Penny's condo, where he soon settled into a routine. On weekday mornings, he bounded out the door with his briefcase in hand, telling her that he was headed to the airport, to fly to Southwest's headquarters in Dallas, and that he would be back home in time for dinner. On weekends, he took Penny, Lisa, and Lynn to the best hotels in Dallas and Austin, where he ran up the tab on room service, summoning platters of chocolate-covered strawberries and bottles of champagne. He bought Penny a fur coat and jewelry, and outfitted their home with the latest technology, including a microwave and another modern marvel, a VCR. He gave Penny both a baby-blue Lincoln Continental and a customized Dodge van, complete with red velvet curtains, a TV, and CB radios.

Only Lisa seemed to see Skalnik's idiosyncrasies: how he filched the robes and towels from their luxury hotel suites and squirreled away the purple velvet bags that held his Crown Royal. It didn't escape her attention,

either, that he always kept his handgun within reach, even stashing it under the driver's seat when he was behind the wheel. What these details added up to, she could not be sure, but she took note of each peculiarity. Once, on a drive through League City, he pointed out the house where he said his parents lived, and Lisa stared at the sun-blistered paint and shabby yard. The tiny frame house, she thought, seemed oddly untouched by his largesse.

When Skalnik was in an expansive mood, he would regale the family with stories of his extraordinary achievements. He was skilled at weaving a narrative, and he knew how to hold a listener's attention with a perfectly timed pause or an anticipatory smile. He frequently boasted of having helped the University of Texas clinch a national football title when he was a college student, before a knee injury sidelined his athletic career—always making a point, as he told this story, to flash his jumbo-sized championship ring. He was the hero of every story. No one else was ever as bold, or as quick thinking, or as clever. Lisa thought he seemed happiest when he was holding court, his hands shaping the air as he spoke.

Once, Skalnik promised Penny and the kids a trip to New York City—a trip he announced they would take on a Learjet that he had commandeered for the occasion. Lisa was elated until their departure day came, and she, her mother, and her brother found themselves in an empty airport hangar, watching Skalnik pace back and forth. As the day wore on, and the Learjet did not materialize, Skalnik became more distressed, shouting into the receiver as he made a series of frenzied calls from a nearby phone. Lisa watched as he waved his arms in what appeared to her, in a moment of sudden clarity, to be a pantomime of fury. Despite his show of outrage, he seemed to enjoy being the center of attention, she thought. As he barked orders, Lisa wondered if anyone was on the other end of the line. At the end

of the day, Skalnik shook his head and told Penny the trip would have to be postponed. Engine trouble, he said.

Lisa kept her questions to herself, but she studied Skalnik as he moved about the house, which he did, increasingly, in nothing but his white Jockey briefs. She had failed to notice his crudeness at first, but as he grew more familiar, it was all she could see: the gold chain beneath his collar, grazing his dark pelt of chest hair; his gaudy self-regard; his obsessive need to accumulate newer and ever more expensive things; his taste for ersatz splendor. She grew exhausted with his grandiose stories and his thirst for praise and adulation. His wolfish appetite for all things—alcohol, spending money, her mother’s attention—seemed to have no limits. One evening when she was in the shower, she thought she felt his gaze, but when she turned to look, she saw nothing. She heard only the click of the bathroom door.

Her uneasiness was not lost on Skalnik. That Christmas, to win her over, he presented her with a lavish gift: a glittering Seiko watch that he told her was made of 24-karat gold and inlaid with diamonds. It glittered in the light.

Lisa looked up at him, unsmiling, and asked if it was real.

Skalnik broke into a grin. “Looks real to me,” he said.

—

That January, a series of typewritten letters addressed to Skalnik began arriving at the condo in Friendswood. The first, from Amco Jewelry Company, informed him that three different checks of his had failed to clear. The tenor of the letter was professional but urgent. If the total of \$1,879 was not received by February 1, it warned, the matter “will be out of our hands.” Days later, an attorney representing Oshman’s Sporting Goods wrote to insist on the immediate remittance of \$1,307. Taken together, these were sizable amounts: today, adjusted for inflation, nearly \$16,000.

More letters came in the months that followed—from banks, a local grocery store, a pharmacy, a men’s clothier. Skalnik carried on as he always

had, striding down the front walkway with his briefcase each morning, only to reappear at dinnertime, loosening his tie and heading for the liquor cabinet. He did not share the letters with Penny, but the strain he was under showed. He drank heavily, and any perceived slight could set him off, his face suddenly going taut with anger. Lisa saw her mother emerge from the bedroom more than once, after a night of Skalnik's rages, with a poorly camouflaged black eye.

As Skalnik's behavior became more and more unpredictable, he began heading out of town on business, always returning a few days later. But one such absence in the spring of 1978 stretched on and on—first for weeks, then for more than a month. Lisa did not know where her stepfather was or what had become of him, and Penny, if she knew more, offered no explanation. Freed from Skalnik's grip, their household resumed its quiet rhythm. Just as suddenly as Skalnik had barreled into their lives, he was gone.

—

Kenny Rodgers, an investigator in the Harris County District Attorney's Office in Houston, was sitting at his desk one day that May when the phone rang. Rodgers worked in the Special Crimes Bureau, a division of the DA's office that specialized in investigating and prosecuting organized crime, money laundering, and major fraud and narcotics cases. Located above a thriving import-export business, it was not listed on the building directory, and its detectives, many of whom wore street clothes, accessed the office through an unmarked sliding glass door on an adjacent side street. If anyone called the unpublished number that was dedicated to undercover operations, whoever picked up the phone was supposed to answer, "Austin Street and Bridge Company. How may I help you?"

Rodgers hunted down the witnesses whom prosecutors needed to bring their cases to trial. The Houston native was a natural people person, skilled not only at locating uncooperative citizens but at winning them over. The

phones at the Special Crimes Bureau were always buzzing with tips from contacts he had all over the city. When Rodgers picked up, he expected it to be one of his sources.

“Hey, Kenny,” he heard a familiar voice say. “It’s Paul Skalnik.”

Rodgers had not heard from Skalnik in years. They had met a decade earlier, in 1968, when they were first-year cadets waiting in line for buzz cuts at the New Mexico Military Institute, a predominantly male junior college in Roswell, southeast of Albuquerque. Both were Texans far from home, and they immediately hit it off, despite their different approaches to the regimented nature of a military college. Rodgers established himself as the school’s resident bootlegger, sneaking six-packs of beer onto campus in guitar cases, selling them at a steep markup, and running a counterfeit driver’s license operation on the side. Skalnik was a model cadet, a stickler for the rules who won the favor of the school’s top brass and an appointment to the honor board. “I’ll be running this school in no time,” he told Rodgers the day they met.

Skalnik signed a contract with the Marine Corps, all but guaranteeing that he would begin active duty upon graduation. He already looked the part, with his stiff-backed stride and the set of his jaw, and he acted it too, going out of his way to cultivate the steely persona of a drill sergeant. Rodgers suspected it was all for show; he doubted his friend had the self-discipline for the Marines’ punishing regimen of physical and mental conditioning. Skalnik remained resolutely out of shape when they played together on the junior college’s baseball team, and he was a lazy, disinterested student. When Skalnik returned from summer training in Quantico, Virginia, sporting a conspicuous white neck brace, Rodgers was certain Skalnik had feigned an injury to get out of his Marine contract. “You’re nothing but a big old pussy,” he ribbed his friend.

They saw little of each other after graduation, but when Rodgers ran into him a few years later, Skalnik proudly announced that he was a cop, too. He had never become a Marine; he had spent a few semesters at the University of Texas, then dropped out and enrolled in the Austin Police Academy.

Now Rodgers was holding the receiver to his ear, pleased to hear from his old friend. “Where in the hell are you?” he said.

“The Harris County Jail,” Skalnik said, without further explanation. “I need you to come and get me. I’ve got something to tell you—something that will interest you.” He had information in one of the highest-profile criminal cases in Houston, a case he knew the DA’s office had to win.