

[Transcript] Dateline NBC / Return to the Farm

A twist in a family's desperate search for justice.
Nothing has turned out right.
A wife and mother murdered.
She was in a casket-like position.
Her arms were crossed.
Who would have a motive to kill a lady in rural Iowa?
You see this purse.
It's untouched.
Her jewelry box is untouched.
Did someone have a bigger prize in mind?
A family farm worth a fortune?
I did not shoot my mom, and I would never shoot my mom.
Two trials.
Every emotion hit.
Two verdicts.
There are only two people who know what happened that day.
One of them is dead, and the other one is sitting in that chair.
Too much to bear.
It's just been a hell on earth.
Father Regents' son in a small town mystery.
I'm Lester Holt, and this is Dateline.
Here's Dennis Murphy with Return to the Farm.
Council bluffs Iowa.
In a small courtroom, the new and final scene of a four-year-long drama was playing out.
Count one.
Murder in the first degree.
The defendant did, having malice and poor thought, willfully, deliberately, and with premeditation, kill Shirley Dean Carter.
It's a case that ripped the stitches out of a close-knit family never to be repaired.
The bullet strikes her in the side and carves a path through her chest, shattering ribs and punching holes in her lung and heart.
Shirley Carter shot twice with a deer rifle in the little home set in Cornfields that she'd shared with her husband of 50 years, Bill Carter.
In Pleasantville, Iowa, so much of the rhythm of life is set by the seasons, turning the acreage, planting the seed, then bringing in the harvest, corn and soy, mostly.
So that June morning in 2015, dawned with no particular omens.
Shirley Carter and her husband Bill started their day as they always did, with coffee at the general store.
We went to coffee every morning at Milo to Casey's.
That was a ritual.
After coffee saying hello to neighbors, they bounced back down the gravel road to home.
Bill dropped off Shirley at the top of the driveway.
I let her out of the pickup, and she said, I think I'll finish my coffee before I chore.
And I said, honey, I'll see you between 11 and 11.30.

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You never know, do you, Bill?

You don't know.

Bill headed off to sell a load of corn at the grainery about an hour away.

By 11 a.m., he remembers being just a few miles from home when he got a call from his daughter.

And she said, dad, mom's dad, Jason found her.

Jason, Bill's son, had called 911.

This is what he said.

My mom, my mother was laying here on the floor.

What?

Why weren't you dead?

I don't know what happened.

Bill got to the house, ran from his truck, passing son Jason on the back deck.

I went in, and there she lay.

She looked like she was asleep.

Not long after, Marion County Sheriff Jason Sandholt arrived at the farmhouse.

He grew up in Marion County and knew the Carter family.

Did you get into the house itself?

I did.

And there you are in the kitchen, saying what in the world happened here?

Correct.

And who would have a motive?

Who would have, I mean, the desire to kill a lady in rural Iowa?

The sheriff called for help.

I got multiple phone calls from my boss.

Special Agent Mark Ludwig works for a division of the state police, the Department of Criminal Investigation, the DCI.

This was his first case in Pleasantville about an hour from Des Moines.

So I get here to the driveway, got multiple vehicles in the driveway, law enforcement's on the scene, and the family's kind of gathering around the big tree.

Does any of the arriving officers tell you that's the husband or that's the son?

I meet with the sheriff and it's apparent to me that these are family members.

And I don't know names yet.

As soon as he got a search warrant, Agent Ludwig entered the house with crime scene texts.

It looked as though someone had ransacked the place, but they're sitting on a chair.

You first see this purse, that's going to be a key item for a burglar.

It's untouched.

Money in it?

Cash in it, credit cards in it, gift cards in it.

Was not touched.

Some papers were strewn about it.

That's it.

When we made our way into the bedroom, her jewelry boxes were untouched.

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And in the kitchen lay the unlikely victim, Shirley Carter, a 68-year-old farmwife and mother.

Shirley's body was laying right here on the kitchen floor.

What's your best guess as to what happened that day?

We know the gun was in this area and Shirley was standing in the middle of the kitchen.

The first bullet went through Shirley's body and pierced the refrigerator.

They thought the weapon was a high-powered gun, perhaps a rifle.

Held like this?

Held from the hip?

Held from the hip.

We know Shirley will have fallen down to the kitchen floor and the shooter would have moved up towards and then fired a shot like this.

A coup de gras shot to Shirley's chest.

How totally odd the way she'd come to rest.

She was in a casket-like position.

Her arms were crossed.

As though the funeral director had posed her for viewing, huh?

Yes.

And that's not normal.

There were still tests to be done, interviews to conduct, but it was coming.

Coming with the relentless fury of an Iowa summer twister, no stopping it.

A family was about to be destroyed.

The investigation starts with a closer look at the family, which didn't make the family very happy.

When we come back.

They are upset that we're wasting time.

But police have their reasons.

The murder weapon may have belonged to someone within the family.

So the question is where is this 270 Remington?

That's correct.

In Iowa cornfields, a warm sun was beating down on the farmhouse where a murder investigation was underway.

Shirley Carter was lying dead shot in her kitchen.

Sheriff Jason Sandholt and his team of investigators were trying to figure out what had happened.

When your crime scene text cleared the house, they really didn't have much for you, do they?

They did not.

No forensics, no blood, no DNA, nothing really useful, nobody walked in front of a security camera.

Right.

So to understand Shirley Carter's death, they'd have to learn more about her life.

The backstory to a murder.

Turns out she was a local girl, her dad a grocer, her mother an assistant at a law office.

In high school, she met Bill.

Where'd you go on your first date?

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I took her to the homecoming dance.
She was quiet, prettiest thing you ever seen.
As Bill tells it, they were kids in love, deeply, maybe carelessly.
During her sophomore year, Shirley got pregnant.
We were married at a very young age.
I was 18, had just turned 18, and she was 16.
Soon, daughter Jana was born.
Then came Billy.
Eight years later, Jason completed the family.
With three kids to raise, Bill and Shirley went into farming.
On a small plot of starter land, they grew some corn and soybeans.
Then plowed the profits into more prime Iowa acreage.
Shirley loved farming.
She did everything.
She just took to it.
She was a natural.
She loved, loved being in the tractors.
Long time friend and neighbor, Irene Schultz, said Shirley brought a little pizzazz to the fields when she climbed into her custom-made tractor.
She always put a little bit of makeup on every morning before she went out.
You mean up on the John Deere, she's decked out?
She had rosy cheeks.
She was beautiful inside and out.
In time, daughter Jana married and moved away to a job in Des Moines.
Son Billy went into the heating and air conditioning business.
But Jason, the youngest child, took to the land.
I really enjoyed working with him.
I was teaching him.
He is a good farmer.
Jason would carry on the farming tradition for another generation.
And best of all, he and his wife Shelly lived close by.
Bill and Shirley soon had grandchildren to doad on.
A happy family picture suddenly disfigured by the ugly murder of Shirley Carter.
DCI agent Mark Ludwick took the lead in the investigation.
First, we want to identify all witnesses.
We want to separate them, and we want to conduct a face-to-face sit-down interview as soon as we can.
Early on, the most important witnesses were Bill, the husband, and Jason, the son.
Ludwick assigned deputies to take the two down to the Pleasantville PD.
And she said, do you want to cook your cup?
In an interview room, Bill told investigators the same story he told us.
How he dropped Shirley off at home and then ran a load of corn to the granary.
And then he raised home to find his wife, still on the floor.
And when I went in, I liked all their shoes cold.

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Jason, in turn, said his day started pretty much the same.
He'd also taken a load of corn to that same granary.
I went back down the drive and headed down to Eddyville.
Later in the morning, he said he went to his parents' house to help with some chores, and then discovered his mother.
You live my life.
It was terrible.
With their accounts on the record, deputies sent Bill and Jason home that night.
The farmhouse was still taped off as a crime scene, so Bill stayed at Jason's place.
And I didn't sleep that night.
I smoked cigarettes and I walked that deck.
In the meantime, crime techs had finished with the scene, and deputies had seized half a dozen guns they found in the house.
Jason took a look at the inventory of weapons they'd confiscated, and he noticed one gun was missing, a high-powered Remington 270 rifle like this one.
How did the weapon come to you?
My oldest son bought it for me in 2005 for Christmas.
Bill kept the rifle in a gun safe in his basement.
So the question is, where is this 270 Remington, and is that our murder weapon?
That's correct.
The crime scene investigators had examined the two slugs they'd collected.
And it could be ammo used in a 270 Remington.
It was a 270.
Round.
Couldn't say absolutely positively, but certainly consistent with being.
They were consistent.
Rounds fired from that type of weapon.
That's correct.
Bill stored that rifle unloaded deep in his basement.
The killer would have to have gotten lucky, finding the gun and the ammo.
Or investigators thought maybe the shooter was someone who knew where that gun was.
Maybe someone in the family.
That didn't go over well with the carters.
We go back out of the crime scene and then the family is mad.
Jason, his wife Shelly, Bill and daughter Jana all gathered in the living room.
And Jana and Bill let us have it.
They are upset that we're wasting time on this investigation, that we're screwing up the investigation because we're looking at family members.
Bill and his daughter were right about at least one thing.
They were now focusing on the family.
Coming up.
We had found out that Jason Carter was having an affair.
If Jason was hiding in an affair, was he hiding anything else?
I never hurt my mom.

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If you want to hold those affairs against me, that's fine, but I just never had an affair.
I never hurt my mom.

When Dateline Continues

Watch Party's aren't what they used to be ever since we got Xfinity.

When I was little, we'd worry about buffering.

Now kids just worry about the charcuterie board.

Ooh, hot dogs and spray cheese.

The best way to stream your favorite shows and movies is on the Xfinity 10G network.

Restrictions apply.

Hey guys, it's HodaCopy from The Today Show.

My podcast Making Space is full of conversations with spiritual leaders and teachers.

People like Viola Davis, Wynona Judd, Oprah Winfrey, Mel Robbins and so many more.

Hear how they found the strength to make changes in their lives and how you can do it too.

All of them inspire me today.

Welcome to all three seasons of Making Space with HodaCopy, available now.

Just search Making Space wherever you're listening now.

Surely the farmwife and mother had been gunned down in her own kitchen and there was no obvious explanation for the crime.

As investigators began digging into the Carter family background though, they came across a detail that focused their attention.

It concerned the son, Jason, the one who had found his mother's body.

We had found out that Jason Carter was having an affair.

How'd you find that out?

A friend of his during one of the interviews.

Jason never mentioned any problems with his marriage when investigators first asked him about that.

So who's this girlfriend?

We locate her, we bring her in and we determine that there's another phone in play.

Another phone?

A phone that they just had.

The lovers had.

They called burner phones kind of off the books.

Burner phones, we called it the sexting phone.

The girlfriend told the investigators Jason kept the phone stashed away, hidden under the hood of his pickup truck.

Jason not only didn't mention the affair in his first interview, he also never told investigators about that secret phone.

Does it change him where he stands in your suspects?

Absolutely.

He gets elevated at that point.

If Jason had tried to hide the affair, Agent Ludwick wondered if Jason was hiding anything else about his mother's murder.

The investigator called Jason and told him he knew about the affair and the phone.

So he says, I will meet you at the sheriff's office.

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He's there and he hands the cell phone over.
So here you go.
Here's my suspect.
Knock yourself out, huh?
Yep.
Then surprise, Jason wanted to talk some more.
Comes in on his own free will, no attorney.
In this video, investigators went over his story again in detail.
The timeline of that morning.
How long from 9-1-1 phone call till your dad got there?
Five minutes.
Jason was bent on letting them know he had nothing to hide.
No matter how long it took, bring on your questions.
And he sits in the chair and he proceeds to sit in this chair for over 10 hours.
Let's do this.
Let's step out.
We're going to give you a minute.
I'm fine.
Doesn't shift, doesn't move, doesn't stand up.
No bathroom breaks, nothing.
We begged him to take bathroom breaks.
We begged him to bring him food.
Probably that.
I don't know if you wanted it or not.
You need anything else, Jason?
What's that about?
He's going to stay here until we believe him.
He admitted to being unfaithful, but said it was ludicrous to think he'd killed his mother.
I never hurt my mom.
If you want to hold those affairs against me, that's fine, but I never hurt her.
I never hurt my mom.
I walked in and found my mom the way she was.
This is about Shirley being killed.
I know that.
Okay.
And you're not doing anything about it, because whoever did kill her is still out there.
He headed home, but a cloud of suspicion hung over the Carter family.
Not only over Jason, but Bill too.
Bill knew Agent Ludwick was looking at him since he was the last person known to have seen Shirley alive.
And he said, you know, you could have done this when you brought her back from coffee.
Then for weeks, nothing happened.
We have no leads.

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Nothing's going on in the investigation.

So the Shirley Carter murder case was heading to the cold case file?

It was that way, yes.

But Bill Carter wasn't going to let that happen.

He hired his own detective.

Nick Webb is a crime scene analyst and a former homicide detective from Texas.

Bill instructed him to dig into the case with an open mind.

If it's the good, the bad, the ugly, is it all going to be in your final report?

We are only advocates for the truth.

To aid his investigation, Webb purchased a rifle similar to the one missing from Bill's basement.

The Remington rifle ejects a shell casing between shots.

At least one of those would have flown out, as the killer wrapped another round in the chamber to shoot Shirley twice.

It was never found, so somebody had the presence of mind to gather it up.

That's great.

And since Webb promised to look at every possibility, he examined Bill's movements the day of the killing.

Phone records show Shirley making a call from the house phone at 8.45 a.m., after Bill had dropped her off.

And by 9 a.m., Bill was spotted at the granary, 50 miles from the house.

Webb said Bill's only opportunity to kill her was after that.

Bill has to leave the granary, has to get home, kill his wife, Shirley, and then leave before Jason can get there.

Is it impossible for Bill to do all this towing and froing in the time allowed?

It would certainly be a very tight timeline.

Squeaky to get it done, huh?

Certainly.

Even the private analyst looked at Jason's timeline.

He already puts himself there, so Jason simply has to commit the murder instead of doing the other tasks that he said he did.

Is it your belief that Jason shot his mother?

Yes.

Painful as it was, Bill had been suspicious of his son early on and remembers a moment when it all became clear.

Not long after the murder, Bill says, Jason found out he was going to visit his lawyer.

He came barging through the door and he said, what are you going to go see your lawyer about?

And I said, I just need to get some things straightened out.

There's some things that don't add up, and that's when he slammed his fist on the countertop and he said, my life is over.

His life, Jason's life is over.

His life is over.

I knew then he had done it.

It was a shocking realization.

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You're telling me your boy became a monster.

He did.

He did.

I'm ashamed.

You shouldn't be ashamed.

You did everything you could for the boy.

I didn't do something right.

Shirley and I did something wrong.

Bill Carter tired of waiting for the prosecutor.

He the father would take the almost unprecedented step of bringing his son before a civil jury.

My attorney said, you know, we can file a wrongful death suit and that will force the county attorney to make a move.

Bill was about to sue his son for Shirley's death.

If the jury ruled for the father, Jason wouldn't face prison, but something like financial ruin.

Coming up, father against son.

He became a practiced, skilled and chronic liar.

Son against father.

Killer, Shirley Carter is in this room and it's not Jason Carter.

On a December day in 2017, two and a half years after Shirley Carter's murder, in this courthouse in Knoxville, Iowa, father faced off against son.

Bill Carter had spent almost a million dollars to get to this courtroom and to this moment.

There is not a more important courtroom anywhere in this state than this courtroom today right now.

Bill Carter's lawyer, Mark Weinhardt, opened by telling the jury only one person wanted Shirley dead.

The killer is sitting a few feet from you.

That's the killer right there, Jason Carter.

It started like a murder case, but remember this was a civil trial, a wrongful death lawsuit.

The father, the plaintiff, his son, the defendant.

The burden of proof is much lower than it would be in a criminal trial.

The plaintiff only has to prove the defendant liable by a preponderance of the evidence, in other words, 51% likely that you're right.

Bill Carter's lawyer played Jason's 911 call.

He argued Jason stated something about the time of death he couldn't possibly have known.

And you hear him say that his mother has been dead for two hours, which medically is absolutely not the fact based upon what we know about the condition of the body.

But also, why would he be saying that other than to already start to create the narrative, hey, it wasn't me?

Then Bill's lawyer attacked Jason's character.

To show the jury he wasn't a devoted family man.

Jason's other woman took the stand.

Her name, Tara Hoke.

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She was questioned by another of Bill's attorneys.

You could hear a pin drop in that courtroom.

Tara recounted her 15 month affair with the married Jason Carter.

And Bill's lawyer said that on the morning of the murder, Jason and Tara exchanged more than 100 texts on that secret phone, some of them steamy.

Do you recall what your last text message from Mr. Carter was?

It was something sexual.

Weinhart said the conversation ended only when Jason stopped texting as he pulled up to his parents' house.

Text, text, text, text, text until 10.50 a.m., at which point the text traffic goes dark.

Quiet for 13 minutes until Jason made a phone call to his sister, telling her their mother was dead.

Weinhart argued that was more than enough time to kill his mother and stage a robbery.

Then came the moment so many had been waiting for.

Jason, the favorite son in his own words, telling the jury about seeing his mother dead.

Weinhart confronted Jason about the affair.

You did it in a friend's residence in cars, even in your own house.

Correct.

You became a practiced, skilled and chronic liar.

Correct.

Now Bill's lawyer tried to prove motive.

It was, he argued, about money.

The jury was told Jason was a spendthrift.

He puts money into motorcycles and nice cars and trips and vacations.

At the same time, Jason was expanding his farm operation.

Where did all that leave him?

More than half a million dollars in debt.

Jason was as broke as he had ever been.

He had \$40 in his personal bank account, \$80 in his business bank account.

Weinhart said Jason saw only one way out, getting control of his parents' farmland worth millions.

Jason knew that he stood to inherit all of it.

My dad said that Shelley and I and our kids will inherit the ground and that your sister and brother will inherit everything above ground.

The lawyer mapped out his theory.

Shirley had found out about Jason's affair.

And if Shirley knew, then Bill soon would know too.

Jason worried he'd be disinherited.

He had to stop his mother before she disclosed his illicit romance.

I want you to look at the jury and tell them the truth.

You shot your mother to death.

Absolutely not.

The jury listened for seven days to the plaintiff's case and then came the defense.

Jason had a loving, close relationship with his mother.

Jason Carter's lawyer, Steve Wandro, challenged the accusation that Jason, in his 911 call,

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was trying to push back the time of Shirley's death to morning hours when he'd been accounted for on video at the granary.

When you're like, wait two hours.

This is all happening within a matter of minutes.

Jason was simply so distraught and to say, you know, you should have done this and you should have done that at this and that, I think is just ridiculous.

As for Jason's affair, Wandro told the jury it was irrelevant, a salacious distraction.

And of course, Jason lied about it to preserve his family.

If you want to characterize him as a bad guy for carrying on an affair, fine.

But that doesn't make the man a killer.

Jason's wife, Shelley, told the jury, despite everything, she still supported her husband.

Every day I work on forgiving, but never forgetting I love my husband and we have reconciled.

As for the motive, Wandro argued Jason didn't have one.

Shelley conceded that at one point they owed the bank more than half a million dollars on their loan.

But she said that was business as usual for farmers.

We paid that off just like we paid it off every year so we could renew our line and start again.

And then Wandro boldly offered the alternative theory of the case.

Mr. Weinhard is right.

The killer of Shirley Carter is in this room and it's not Jason Carter.

It's him, the accuser.

Bill Carter, he said, was the likely killer.

Shirley, he argued, complained about him all the time.

She had to get permission for everything.

Jason's wife testified that Shirley told her Bill was too controlling.

Whether it be to go get her hair, make a hair appointment, or to help with the kids, whatever it was, she had to get his permission before she could do that.

Wandro said it all must have come to a head on that June morning.

After two weeks of trial and mutual accusations, the battle between father and son went to the jury.

The court will now read the verdict.

It took a little over two hours to answer the question.

Jason Carter caused the death of his mother.

Did defendant Jason Carter batter Shirley Carter, causing damages to plaintiffs?

Answer, yes.

Jason had been found liable for the death of his mother.

The jury cleared Bill.

It had to come.

Sooner or later, it had to come.

Since this was a civil case, Jason wasn't getting any prison time.

What amount of punitive damages, if any, do you award the estate of Shirley Carter?

Answer, ten million dollars.

Ten million?

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Bill and his lawyer never expected to see a dime.

The more important thing for Bill was simply to have eight people from that county hearing all the evidence and saying, Jason did it.

Meanwhile, the county district attorney, Ed Bull, sitting in the back of the courtroom, had been watching closely.

What would he do now?

The fates were not quite through with the Carter family.

There would soon be an act two.

What is the biggest thing you have going in your favor in this thing?

There really was no significant evidence against Jason Carter.

When Dateline continues.

I'm Lester Holt with NBC Nightly News.

The past couple of years have been challenging and exhausting for so many, and the headlines can often feel overwhelming.

We all want answers.

We want to know what it all means for us and our families.

These are the questions we try to answer every night, making sense of the major stories and learning about the people and moments that inspire us.

I hope you'll join me every evening.

Watch NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt or listen wherever you get your podcasts.

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With the civil case decided against Jason Carter, finding him liable for the death of his mother, the district attorney decided it was time to act.

Less than 48 hours after that civil verdict, agent Ludwig and sheriff's deputies arrested Jason Carter for the murder of his mother.

I got right into his face and I said, why did you kill your mother?

But you didn't get anything.

Didn't get anything.

Stone face cold.

And Jason Carter would be brought back into court, this time accused of first degree murder.

If convicted, he could face life in prison.

Agent Mark Ludwig had been convinced of Jason Carter's guilt ever since that initial interrogation a few days after the murder.

I'm telling you the truth, the God, the whole truth.

I'm telling you the truth, not telling me the truth, Jason.

Yes, I am.

That day, Jason agreed to take a polygraph exam.

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Regarding the death of your mom, do you intend to answer each question truthfully?

Yes.

Did you physically hurt your mom last Friday?

No.

He felled by a big margin, huge margin.

So he totally blew the polygraph.

He totally fell the polygraph.

Not evidence but guidance for you, right?

Strong guidance, yes.

In March of 2019, the curtain came up on the criminal trial.

It was first degree murder and Jason Carter pleaded not guilty.

As much as he wanted his son to face justice, Bill Carter knew there would be no winners.

I knew there wouldn't be a good outcome.

Why do you say that?

If my son's guilty of first degree murder, that's not a good outcome.

So that's a bad choice.

You'll hear prosecutors talk about motive, means, and opportunity.

Well, means, 270 was in the home, there was ammunition.

Ready, 13 minute gap in his time.

So let's talk about motive.

District Attorney Ed Bull was telling a jury in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Jason was stressed over his finances the day he killed his mother.

This case isn't about money, it's about pressure.

It's about, am I going to be able to be a full-time farmer?

This time around, the burden of proof would be higher, beyond a reasonable doubt.

But that's a prosecutor's challenge without that rock-solid CSI-style evidence that juries love.

I want three things in a homicide case.

I want forensics, I want a confession, and I want an eyewitness.

In this case, I had none of those things.

Ed Bull would pretty much follow the map of the civil trial.

But the jury wasn't allowed to know about the civil case or its outcome.

And Bull's hands would also be tied by the judge's ruling that the jury wouldn't be allowed to hear about Jason's affair or the steamy text on his secret phone, and that Jason had lied about all of that at first.

Tara Hoke, the girlfriend, took the stand, but only to testify to the gap in Jason's timeline and to the abrupt end of their conversation.

Was your conversation that morning without telling us any of the details such that you expected it was at a logical stopping point?

No.

That's a motive.

In his opening, the DA had mentioned the financial pressure on Jason.

But in the end, he found it hard to explain why Jason would have shot Shirley in cold blood.

There's absolutely nothing I can tell you that would make sense of why it is a son

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shoots and kills his mother.

Now it was time for the defense.

Jason Carter's attorney, Christine Branstad, had a clear message for the jury.

A shoddy investigation focused on Jason early and never looked anywhere else.

And there were plenty of people to question.

Very significant parts of this investigation simply weren't completed, weren't followed, weren't done.

So war room, Christine, what is the biggest thing you have going in your favor in this thing?

There really was no significant evidence against Jason Carter.

As in the civil case, the defense attorney argued Jason had a loving relationship with his mother and that is allegedly incriminating how did he know that statements were taken out of context.

And by the way, he wasn't in any financial trouble.

There was a \$3,000 cheque deposited that day and another cheque for \$3,000 in the mail and \$175,000 worth of grain in the bands.

And as to the abrupt ending to Jason's texting with his lover on the day of the murder, the defense attorney asked the girlfriend on the stand.

Did you perceive in any way that Jason Carter was troubled on the morning of June 19th?

No.

Then there was the timeline of that morning to deal with.

All along, based on statements of first responders and crime scene texts, it was estimated Shirley had been murdered sometime just before 11 a.m., when Jason admits he was at the farmhouse.

To counter the time of death, one of the nation's most famous pathologists for hire took the stand, Cyril Wecht.

Wecht has been involved in thousands of cases from the JFK assassination to O.J. Simpson.

You were asked to attempt to determine approximate time of death for Shirley Carter.

Is that correct?

Yes.

Were you able to do that to a reasonable degree of medical certainty?

Yes.

Wecht told the jury that Shirley may have been killed two hours earlier than anyone had thought possible.

If he was correct, then Shirley was murdered around 9 a.m., when Jason was seen on video clearly still at the granary.

He could not have killed his mother.

So when the state says to you all clues point to one conclusion, it's all the clues that the tunnel vision of law enforcement and one investigator in particular went after.

The defense attorney said the tunnel vision investigator was special agent Mark Ludwig.

Now he reluctantly became her star witness, with Branstad rattling off the names of people who'd come up during the investigation.

Ludwig fumbled.

You were not very aware of Callie Shin's involvement.

That's probably correct, yes.

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Not aware of Jeremy Morris.

I did become aware of Jason Morris, I'm not sure at what point I was.

And that would be Jeremy Morris?

Is that who you think you just said, Jason?

Yeah, that's my mistake.

And that was a big part of the point we were trying to make to the jury.

While Jason's lawyer argued the investigation hadn't been thorough, Agent Ludwig told us none of the names the defense raised were viable suspects, and they had followed every lead, even ones deemed not credible.

No credible information.

Would the jury see reasonable doubt, or would Jason Carter be spending the rest of his life in prison?

The attorneys would have one more chance to make their case.

Coming up, the verdict.

I ask you to return a verdict of not guilty.

There are only two people who know what happened that day.

One of them's dead, and the other one's sitting in that chair.

The case of the state of Iowa versus Jason Carter was about to go to the jury.

There are so many holes in this investigation.

There's so much that isn't even explored.

Jason's defense attorney made one last plea.

And in reality, the forensic evidence says Jason Carter couldn't possibly be guilty.

I ask you to return a verdict of not guilty.

Now the county prosecutor argued all the viable leads were followed, and the defense was just so much smoke and mirrors.

If you believe this is a stage burglary, then all of the names and stuff they put up on the board is irrelevant.

Both told the jury Jason just snapped that morning, and in a fit of rage, had killed his mother.

There are only two people who know what happened that day.

One of them's dead, and the other one's sitting in that chair.

It took the jury less than two hours to reach a verdict, about the same duration as the civil jury's deliberation.

And remember that jury had found Jason liable for his mother's death.

So the lead investigator felt good about things.

We felt this is it, and I had that feeling and emotion of he's going to be found guilty.

Ludwick assembled a team to take Jason into custody after the verdict.

Ladies and gentlemen, have you reached the verdict?

Yes, we have.

Jason knew a conviction could send him to prison for life.

We, the jury, find Jason Carter not guilty.

Is that your verdict, some reason, gentlemen?

Yes, it is.

Not guilty.

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Jason had gotten his life back.
I swear, I've only seen my kids.
It's been a long time coming.
Jason was a free man.
The district attorney says he gave it his best shot.
So you're giving the jury this argument of a moment of rage, but you can't really play that movie for them and explain what it was.
It's not a very satisfying thing to say something happened.
He went downstairs, got the rifle, and killed his mom.
I don't disagree with you.
I wish that there was a better story.
I could tell, but I'm limited based on what the facts are that I can prove to a jury.
And that's the best I had.
But that wasn't good enough for Bill Carter.
The worst thing I was afraid of was that Shirley would never get justice.
And that happened.
Is this case closed?
Yes.
We believe that we held the right person accountable.
But if new information comes forward, we will continue to investigate this.
That's just what Jason Carter says he wants, find the killer.
He declined an interview with Dateline.
But his attorney says he realizes some people will still believe that he shot his mother to death.
Jason knows that until someone is conclusively proven to be the murderer, some people will still suspect him.
The \$10 million civil judgment against Jason remains in place.
Despite setbacks in court, Jason continues to appeal that verdict.
But Jason is what he's always been, a farmer, and the cycles don't stop.
That's planting season.
I imagine seeds are going in the ground, huh?
That's exactly it.
I know that he was planting on Easter day, and Jason saw his father out planting at the same time.
And...
What did he think?
He said his thought was, it just seems wrong.
This should have been the time where we were both planting and we both quit, and we went in for Easter dinner together.
And it's hard for him to understand how his family ended up split up like this.
And on his side of that field, Bill Carter watched the son he loved so much work the land just as he taught him.
I have to farm right across the fence from him.
And you see him?

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I was from here to that wall from him yesterday.

A few feet but an unbridgeable divide when it's a matter of father versus son.

That's all for now.

I'm Lester Holt.

Thanks for joining us.