

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Three Strikes

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On August 27th, 2019, Blake Bivens was in a Tennessee hotel room. He was a pitcher for the Montgomery Biscuits, finishing up a five-game series against the Chattanooga lookouts. The Biscuits were a double-A feeder team affiliated with the Major League team the Tampa Bay Rays.

This always made Blake's summers busy with baseball. The game on the previous day had been postponed due to rain, so Tuesday they had a double header scheduled. Blake rolled over in bed and glanced out of the slight crack in the hotel room curtains to see that it was another gray and overcast day. He grabbed his cell phone. It was 9 o'clock. He looked for the usual morning text messages from his wife, but today there were none. He needed to get up and prepare for the short bus ride to the game, but first he decided to take a moment to wake up and scroll through his social media. Blake had barely started scrolling when the headline of a post caught his eye. Right at the top of the feed was a news headline that he just couldn't wrap his mind around, and little did he know that his life would never be the same because of it.

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Blake Bivens was 24 and living his dream. He was picked in the fourth round of the Major League Baseball Draft right out of Danville High School. In the five years since, he played all over the Southeast United States, quickly working his way up from the rookie level Gulf Coast League to the Class A Advanced Florida State League, and finally, AA in the Southern League. Every summer he would have to leave his wife and home and go on the road, but that was okay. Baseball had always been a constant in their life together. When Blake met Emily at Church Youth Camp when he was 13, he immediately noticed her large warm smile and her long blonde hair.

It was obvious to those around them that they were soulmates. They bonded over their love of baseball and God. They had been pretty much inseparable ever since, both deeply religious. They dated for five and a half years before Blake proposed at the tender age of 18.

The young couple would spend a year engaged before finally getting married. At their wedding, their love for each other, God, and baseball was evident. Blake wore a little baseball themed boutonniere, and the cake topper was a bride with a bat and a groom holding a glove and ball. That day, as Blake looked at his fiance, he was reminded of the day they first met.

Her blonde hair cascaded in those loose curls down to her beautiful wedding dress.

While Blake went away every summer after high school to play minor league baseball, Emily went to Everett University and earned a degree in music performance. After that, she began teaching music locally and helping her parents run the family campground. Her father had purchased it back in 2012. A couple of years later, they welcomed their first child into the world, a beautiful blonde baby boy named Cullen. After that, traveling during the summer became especially hard for Blake. A couple of hours before, Blake sees a headline that would change his life forever. Rachel Jefferson, Emily's aunt, hears a knock at her front door.

It's early, it's only 7.30, and the sun is still low in the sky, casting a yellow glow filtering through leaves and branches. She hesitates for a moment wondering who it could be at this hour, but she stops what she's doing and goes to answer it. When she opens the door, she's greeted by a familiar face, although with an unfamiliar expression. When she asks what's wrong, the young man at the door quickly punches her in the shoulder and runs away, fleeing into the woods near her home. She's not injured, she's just confused.

Moments pass as Rachel tries to think of a reason the young man was acting so strange when she hears another noise. In the distance, she hears several loud bangs that sound like gunshots.

Keeling, Virginia is in rural Pennsylvania County and is heavily wooded. That stretch of lonely road she lived on was dotted sparingly with homes, only evident from the long winding driveways that disappeared into the trees. The home next to hers in the direction of the gunshots was her sister, Joanne Bernards. She is instantly filled with suspicion. She grabs her keys and gets in her car. She backs into a little turnaround area of her long driveway and pulls forward toward

Keeling Drive. Her sister's house is next door, but not right next door. Between her house and her sister's are over 500 feet of thick wild forest, so she drives the 300 feet or so to the

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Three Strikes

end of her driveway to the beginning of her sister's even longer driveway and slowly turns in. At that moment, she only hears the sound of gravel grinding beneath her tires when she feels a sense of dread come over her. She doesn't know what to expect and suddenly she realizes that she may be putting herself in danger, but she doesn't have enough time to finish processing that thought. She slams on her brakes and a cloud of gravel dust envelops her car. There, in the long driveway ahead of her, she sees something. It's a person lying down and they're not moving. Her thoughts are interrupted again by motion in her peripheral vision. From the side of the house, the young man from earlier emerges. He's wearing a t-shirt, blue sweatpants, and a pair of Nikes, but it isn't what he's wearing that sends a chill down Rachel's spine. It's what he's carrying and his hand is a large rifle. As she sees the young man, they lock eyes for a moment. She knows this man, but doesn't recognize the eyes staring back at her. She's frozen in that moment until the young man breaks the gaze and turns and runs into the woods again.

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As soon as the young man disappeared into the underbrush, Rachel called 911. She relayed what she saw, a person laying in the driveway and a man with a gun retreating into the woods. Now, Pennsylvania County is the largest county in Virginia in terms of land area, covering nearly 1,000 square miles. The county mostly falls into the jurisdiction of the county sheriff's department. Other than the small towns of Chatham, Gretna, and Hurt, all miles away, there were no other police departments county-wide. So, the sheriff's department had to cover the entire county, which consisted of over 60,000 residents spread out in small towns between dense forests and expansive farmland. The call to 911 came in a little after 8 a.m. and it took deputies 12 minutes to arrive on scene. By the time the first deputy arrived, Rachel had already called relatives and they'd come right over. As investigator Anthony Rouse pulled up his patrol car, there was already another vehicle parked near the house. Investigator Rouse gets out of his car and starts walking up the gravel driveway. He sees Rachel waiting nearby a safe distance from the house. He does not make immediate contact with Rachel. Instead, he just continues toward the house. He wants to secure the scene, make sure it's safe and no one else needs any help before taking statements. The ranch-style three-bedroom home is modest, with pale gray vinyl siding and

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Three Strikes

brick underpinning. The big porch, complete with a white railing, lines the front of the home. The driveway is long, almost 200 yards, and curves around to the right side of the home. Two other deputies arrive, pulling their cars into the driveway behind him and join him in the approach to the house. As they get closer to the house, they notice that a man is sitting in the vehicle in the driveway. The man exits the van and walks in the direction of Rachel. For a moment, the deputies are on high alert until they recognize he's a relative of Rachel's. That brief moment of confusion was enough to interrupt their focus when the sound of a woman screaming draws them back to the task at hand. The three deputies rush towards the house with guns drawn. Investigator Rouse is worried that there could be other victims inside that need assistance or worse, that whoever responsible was still there. A woman, another relative, comes running out of the house sobbing. The three deputies approach the home in single file, walking up the steps onto the porch and stage for a moment at the front door before guarding around the corner and disappearing into the house. The quiet country morning goes still for a moment, while Rachel and her relatives listen to the muffled shouts from deputies inside as they clear room after room. Inside the home, deputies are on edge. Immediately upon entering the home, they are welcomed by a dreadful scene. Just inside the living room door was a wall spattered with blood. The source was the family dog, now dead on the floor next to the shell casing from the bullet that killed him. From where they stood, they could already see another victim. A woman was lying on the floor inside the bathroom, blood pooling around a bullet wound in her abdomen. She was obviously deceased. They carefully clear the rest of the home. It is only when they inspect the woman a little closer that they see she was also shot in the head, like the family dog the shell casing's lay next to her. As they stand there, looking down on this young woman whose life was cut short, they make a horrendous realization. On the bed in the same room was another victim, a little one-year-old boy shot in the head, another shell casing marking his murder. Reeling from the tearful scene inside, the deputies finally emerge from the home to see the third victim, the victim Rachel called about. In the driveway fallen, where she was once shot in the chest, was an older woman. In the grass near her body was another discarded shell casing. This was a serious crime. The scene painted an eerie picture. Two defenseless and unsuspecting women were gunned down one after another, and a completely innocent little boy was executed in his bed. Not to mention the family dog put down in the living room. Who could have done such an atrocity? From Rachel's report and from the aftermath of the scene itself, they surmised that the killer calmly walked through the home shooting anything that moved until they were all dead. All in all, he fired six shots, some going through the wall of the home, into the garage and lodging into the car parked inside. The deputies radioed for help. They were going to need everybody on this case. They had three bodies and an armed killer on the loose in the woods. An enormous manhunt was immediately orchestrated. The Pennsylvania Sheriff's Department pulled in resources from multiple law enforcement agencies, including help from the Virginia State Police. There was over a hundred law enforcement personnel that utilized canine units, drones, helicopters, and even an armored vehicle, the kind you would see in the military. They had completely surrounded the general area the young man could have traveled while on foot through the woods. But just to be safe, they alerted nearby schools and colleges of the manhunt, and nine campuses went into lockdown. Back in Chattanooga, Blake was already at the airport waiting for his flight home. He had dropped everything and told the team manager

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Three Strikes

that it was an emergency and he needed to get home now. By the time he was at his gate waiting to board, everyone on his team knew what was so important when another headline hit social media. Blake sat there in the airport in a state of half shock from the headline he saw back in his hotel room. He had so many questions and so many thoughts that his brain was in chaos. He tried to call his wife Emily several times. He tried to call his mother-in-law. He tried to call anyone that might know what the heck was going on back home. But no one answered. He was alone in the airport when he opened his social media app again. At the top of his feed was another headline. This one said two women and a small child were dead. Blake breaks down. He begins screaming and despair in the middle of the airport. He just knows that the article must be about his family, his wife Emily, and his baby boy Cullen. He spends the entire flight home alternating between

a catatonic state and uncontrollable shaking and crying. Nearly four hours had passed since shots rang out in the early morning quiet of rural Virginia. The police presence on Keeling Road was immense. The few families in the area were asked to either leave or lock themselves in their homes for their own safety. Of course, the news media was quickly descending on the small town interested to know more about the triple homicide and peaceful little Keeling. The authorities wanted them safe and out of the way, so they set up a media staging area in the parking lot of a nearby Keeling Baptist Church. Reporters and a cameraman from ABC 13 News were already setting up their

equipment when they heard a lone trooper yelling commands across the street from the church. That side of the road was lined with nearly a dozen homes with the woods to the north behind them. A fully nude man came jogging out from between two of the homes, like he was rounding the bases after a home run. The news crew immediately started recording the scene. The trooper saw the man for a moment and didn't know what to do. I mean, what do you do in a situation like this? He obviously wasn't armed any longer, but he wondered if he could still be a threat. When the naked man's attention turns towards the trooper, he starts jogging straight toward him. The trooper takes a couple of steps backwards before turning to make his retreat. The man doesn't respond to his commands and has a furrowed brow with mixed emotions of both confusion and anger. He can't seem to make up his mind whether he's going to run away from or toward the trooper, who by now is retreated to the front lawn of the church. The man first starts jogging down the road before something the trooper says draws his attention once more. He leaps over the small drainage ditch lining the road and casually charges the officer. They begin circling each other in an almost comical fashion. The trooper deploys his pepper spray and the nude man runs right into the noxious cloud, but that only seems to deter him for just a moment. He never stops moving even though he's momentarily blinded. When he regains his senses, he can't see the trooper right behind him. The trooper radios for backup while the nude man charges the news crew, who hastily runs away.

That's when the church groundsman, Lloyd Galden, exited the church unaware of the events unfolding outside. At the time, he was unlocking the door to the church so the authorities could use it as a base of operations during what they thought would be a long manhunt. When he saw the nude man already making a slow beeline toward him, he understood what was happening. Lloyd turns and runs to his truck. He's older and not quite as fast as he used to be. He fumbles trying to get his keys out of his pocket and unlock the door.

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Three Strikes

He knows if he can just get inside, he'll be safe. He doesn't even notice the trooper in close pursuit behind the man. He almost has his keys in the door when the man grabs both of his shoulders from behind and begins squeezing and jerking him back and forth. He's face to face with the nude man's rageful eyebrows and bared teeth. He tries to defend himself, grabbing at his wrists, but when the man swiftly positions himself in front of him and clamps his hands around his throat, he prays aloud, good lord, get me out of this. The trooper catches up and whips out his baton and rears back, but before he could bring it down across the man's forearms, he lets go and just keeps on jogging. He runs across the parking lot and onto the other half of the lawn back toward Keeling Drive. He leaps over the drainage ditch again and makes it back onto the road, his bare feet slapping the hard asphalt. When he makes the corner of the woodline that traced the road, he sees the backup that the trooper called. Directly ahead of him is a barricade of troopers, patrol cars, and one alert German Shepherd. The trooper yells commands, but they fall on deaf ears. The man continues to run at them head on. Even the dog seems confused by this man's strange behavior and nudity. When the dog jumps on the man, he just gently pushes him away and goes straight for the officer. This trooper, however, stood his ground and the man decided pretty quickly that going back into the woods would be a better option, but he didn't make it that far. At the edge of the woods, he was taken down handcuffed and arrested. The fear-inducing manhunt that gripped the community for more than four hours was finally over, but the truth of this tragedy was far more heartbreaking than the murders themselves.

Authorities would release the names of the victims shortly after Blake saw the second headline. He was right. His wife, Emily, and his 14-month-old son, Cullen, were both dead.

The woman in the driveway was his mother-in-law,

Joan Bernard, but it was the first headline he saw that was truly heartbreaking.

The focus of the manhunt, the young man that emerged from the woods fully nude, was Joan's son, Emily's brother, and Cullen's uncle, Matthew Bernard.

In the back of the patrol car after his apprehension, Matthew was clearly in mental distress.

He began bashing his head into the cage that separated the front and back seats until he began bleeding. The authorities took him to the hospital for treatment before taking him back to the station to book him, and as mugshot his head is almost completely wrapped in a bandage tied into a little knot on top. His expression is completely confused, like he doesn't know where he is or why he's there. In the investigation that followed, the authorities would discover more about Matthew's mental state. On the morning of August 27, Matthew would say something cryptic to his mother Joan. He told her that something was going on and that it has to stop today.

Then he left. A short time later, he would knock on Rachel's door with an odd expression on his face and punch her in the shoulder before running into the woods. His mother didn't know this, but Matthew's statement worried her. So when he returned to the house, she confronted him in the driveway where he killed her. Near her body, deputies found Matthew's cell phone with two missed

calls, both from mom. Then he shot his sister and nephew before fleeing into the woods again.

At the scene of the crime, at the edge of the woods he fled into, they found the 3030 rifle he used in the murders discarded on the ground. In the garage next to the bullet-riddled car was a sledgehammer covered in blood. It's unclear whether the sledgehammer was used in the killing

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Three Strikes

or whether all the blood it was covered in was incidental, because all of the information about this case has never been made public. In the aftermath of the crime, Matthew's remaining family would issue a very sad statement. Matthew had been struggling with his mental health and his family was seeking treatment for him. In recent weeks, however, his illness seemed to worsen. Matthew had been having bad dreams while asleep and delusions while wide awake. He said he saw demons around his bed and was having visions, hearing things from God. An interview with the youth pastor of the Bernard family's church revealed that Matthew confided in him. Matthew kept an audio diary on his phone documenting his thoughts, dreams, visions, and things he heard from what he thought was God. When interviewed by deputies, Matthew made statements that indicated the murders were religiously motivated. It was clear that he was having a mental health crisis at the time of the crime. Matthew was charged with three counts of murder, but his trial is at a standstill. The first thing the court did was order a mental health evaluation and he was deemed unfit to stand trial and remanded to a state mental health facility, until which time he would be deemed fit. In the several years since, every time a review of his case is held, he's deemed unfit again, perpetually mentally ill forever. Matthew Bernard may never be fit to stand trial for the murder of his family. Since the tragedy, Blake Bivens has taken a step back from baseball and become an advocate for mental health awareness. He's spoken openly about his own struggles with depression and anxiety related to this event. He has also worked to honor the memory of his wife and son by setting up a music scholarship and starting the Emily Marie Bivens Memorial Foundation to create a culture of life, hope, and opportunity and honor the lives that were taken from him on that day. If you enjoyed the show, please consider joining Plus at [swordandscale.com slash plus](http://swordandscale.com/slash/plus). But if you can't, consider leaving us a positive review on your preferred listening platform. Sweet dreams and good night.

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