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Anthony Alls never saw it coming.

He walked out of work at the barbershop around 7 p.m., as usual. He turned the corner off Woodward onto Melbourne Street and opened the hood of his '88 Bronco. This, too, was usual for Alls. The power-steering pump leaked like a sandbag and before he would start the motor, he'd fill the reservoir with fluid. He was meaning to take it in to the mechanic to get it fixed.

While Alls was stooped over the quarter-panel, someone approached from behind and unloaded six shots into his back. Alls was spun around by the force of the barrage and took another in the chest. He stumbled backward and collapsed on the sidewalk.

Instead of the mechanic, Alls went to the morgue. The killer calmly walked around the corner and disappeared.

On the surface, Alls was just another random killing in a city with too many -- File Number 098331 in the Wayne County Medical Examiner's ledger of doom. Just another murder until you look beneath the sheet of the Alls case. Confronted with the details, one sees the pillars of the criminal justice system buckling; the cracks and crevices increasingly filled by organized criminals who walk the streets with impunity.

Alls, authorities believe, was killed to keep him quiet. He was the witness to the murder of his friend at a Southfield nightclub in the early morning hours of Aug. 9. Alls was a rarity -- he was willing to testify. In fact, he had been subpoenaed to appear in court just a few hours before his murder.

He had identified three men who he said beat his friend to death with bottles and a rope stanchion. Those men are reputed members of the Black Mafia Family, a sprawling narcotics syndicate with its taproot in the city, investigators say.

But dead men don't talk. And without a living witness, the suspects may be released. Eiland Johnson, 38, Darnell Cooley, 33, and Deandre Woolfolk, 20, each face charges of second-degree murder and manslaughter.

Investigators also believe they know who killed Alls a few weeks later on the evening of Aug. 27, thanks to a confidential informant working inside the Black Mafia Family. The informant says Alls' slaying was a contract hit that paid at least \$50,000.

But now the informant is scared he'll be killed because an Oakland County assistant prosecutor turned his taped confession over to a judge and defense lawyers hoping to demonstrate that Alls was killed to silence him.

The street has ears, the saying goes, and the street may now know the informant's name.

Outraged, the informant called this reporter to express his dissatisfaction with the prosecutor.

"If anything happens to my family," he hissed, "that f----- prosecutor, he can kiss the babies."

Suspect linked to '08 slaying

The murders of Alls and his friend Robert Alexander may never have happened had not a circuit court judge ruled that a confession Woolfolk had given police about his role last year in the killing of a teenage girl was unconstitutional.

According to investigators, court transcripts and witness testimony, it happened this way:

In January 2008, Woolfolk and confederate Rowmoto Rogers made plans to avenge a failed hit on their boss, Darnell Cooley.

Woolfolk tried to enlist the help of a neighborhood man named Davon Perry to be the getaway driver, asking him if he could "buy his car for a mission."

Perry, 34, declined, insisting he had to work that night. But Perry never went to work. Instead, Perry went to the intersection of Fenkell and Wyoming to watch the hit. Before Perry arrived, however, he picked up a 16-year-old boy and three teenage girls, including 15-year-old Martha Barnett. It was 2 a.m. on Jan. 21, a school night.

Why Perry picked up the teenagers is a matter of conjecture. "It was cheaper than a movie," surmised one hardboiled cop, familiar with the case.

The evening's entertainment would prove to be terribly expensive. Perry either forgot or did not know that the intended target drove a black Jeep Commander, just like Perry.

Woolfolk and Rogers -- having found a new driver in Anthony Hurd -- did not stop at the Jeep to inquire. Rogers opened up from the back seat with an AK-47. Woolfolk, sitting in the front passenger seat, pulled a 9 mm pistol, pointed, fired, but the gun jammed, according to court transcripts. Woolfolk was furious.

When the smoke cleared, little Martha Barnett was dead from multiple gunshot wounds, one in the head. "What's going on?" were her last words.

The gunmen got away until March 27, when Woolfolk was swept up in a four-house drug raid on Lauder Street in the city's west side. He was arrested amongst a cache of weapons and drugs.

Police said the houses belonged to the Black Mafia Family, an infamous crack cocaine cartel, founded in the late 1990s by brothers Demetrius and Terry Flenory on Detroit's southwest side. In less than a decade, the cartel had spread to Atlanta and to Los Angeles with ties to the Mexican Mafia. The syndicate earned as much as \$300 million until 2005, when federal authorities dismantled the upper echelon, bringing down 65 indictments. The Flenory brothers are now serving 30-year sentences in federal prison.

"There's a second generation, but not related to the 65 guys we indicted," said Special Agent Rich Isaacson of the Drug Enforcement Administration. "They're not what we consider BMF, the formal circle. Certainly, it makes sense others are out there using the name. You've still got lots of folks in the business."

On March 29, two days after his arrest, Woolfolk was interrogated by detectives. On that taped interrogation, Woolfolk is read his Miranda rights. He then tells detectives that he was in the car and that he tried to shoot but that his gun jammed, so he was not guilty of murder.

"How can I be responsible for a gun I didn't fire?" he asked.

Rowmoto Rogers and Anthony Hurd were convicted of first-degree murder for killing Barnett. Woolfolk's lawyer, Paul Daniel Curtis, argued that his client had repeatedly asked to speak with a lawyer before he confessed but was denied one by detectives.

Judge Jeanne Stempien of the Detroit Circuit Court believed Woolfolk: "He was too familiar with the criminal justice system not to have asked for a lawyer," Stempien said then. She threw out his confession.

"I suppressed a confession on constitutional grounds and told the prosecutor that I was not dismissing the case and that they should go forward with other evidence," Stempien told The News. "I did not dismiss the case and I did not release him from jail."

With little other evidence, the prosecutor dropped the charges. Woolfolk was released in late February.

It would be easy to dismiss the Woolfolk case as dysfunction in Detroit. In Detroit, a person was charged with murder in only one-third of all homicide cases last year. After preliminary examinations, trials and plea bargains and judges' rulings only about 1 in 5 killers was sent to prison for homicide.

It would be easy to dismiss the Woolfolk case as Detroit dysfunction, except for that fact that the nightclub killing that Alls witnessed occurred in Oakland County, one of the nation's most prosperous counties, but which is also suffering a steady creep of violence.

Jessica Cooper, the Oakland County prosecutor, expects this year's murder total to double from the 28 recorded last year.

"Oakland County isn't as beautiful as it used to be," she said.

As for little Martha Barnett, her remains rest in a small brass urn in a linen closet on the city's west side, her grandmother too poor to bury her.

"All the pain that man caused," said the grandmother, a decent, churchgoing woman also named Martha Barnett. "Why? Why was he still allowed to walk 'round?"

Celebration turns deadly

On Aug. 9, Robert Alexander went to Arturo's Jazz Theatre & Restaurant at 12 Mile and Telegraph to celebrate his 33rd birthday. He went with a group of guys from the barbershop and their girlfriends. Among them was his best friend, Anthony Alls.

The evening began as a good one. Champagne was flowing, the music was sweet. Then someone from Woolfolk's table is said to have spoiled the evening by fondling one of the women at Alexander's table. Alexander, a large man, well over 6 feet tall and weighing 250 pounds, went over to straighten it out.

"The next thing you know, fists were flying and I guess Alexander was holding his own," said Art Blackwell, the owner of the club and the former emergency financial manager of Highland Park who now faces federal corruption charges. "Security had a hard time getting inside the melee and by the time they did, the man on the floor was dying."

When police arrived, they found Alexander amongst upset tables, a broken bottle and his own blood. He was lying face up, unconscious and gasping for air.

Alexander died of blunt trauma to the back of his head, according to the medical examiner, suffering multiple fractures to the skull.

Alls was "nervous and upset," according to court testimony given by Southfield Police Officer Christopher Clark who responded to the scene that night. Alls put the finger squarely on Woolfolk and the two others.

The witness, Anthony Alls, 35, was raised in Detroit but he was not a creature of the streets. Educated in Catholic schools, he was a college graduate who majored in information technology. He was a white-collar professional who worked in accounts for Chrysler before getting laid off. A father of two, Alls applied to the Police Department and was hoping to be admitted into the next academy class. In the meantime, he took odd jobs: a parking attendant at Metro Airport and a barber at Motor City Cutz on Woodward.

"He knew about the streets because he grew up out there," said his brother, Alex. "But they didn't kill a bad person, not one of their own. He was going into the police to feed his children and clean up these streets. He didn't do drugs. He didn't sell them. He was asked to step in and be a peacemaker at the club and it ends in both of their murders. They killed a good guy; a man."

Nobody got a look at Alls' killer. And if somebody did, he isn't talking. It was dusk and the evening was overcast and the case of who killed Anthony Alls may have died there along with

him. Except two days later, police arrested a man during the commission of a serious crime. The man, not wanting to do another stretch in prison, said he had information on Alls' murder.

Detectives gave the man a cigarette and a Coca-Cola. Fidgety, the informant spilled like a toddler with a glass of milk. The informant named names. He recounted murders. It came so fast, detectives had a hard time keeping up. He knew who murdered Alls, he said, and was willing to wear a wire to prove it.

"I can help y'all," he said on camera. "I can get it, who pulled the trigger," he said. "But my name ... I can't be put on front street or else I'm gonna get killed."

Detectives promised his identity would remain secret.

Local and federal lawmen began to put the informant to work. But before he could collect a taped admission from Alls' murderer, an Oakland County assistant prosecutor handed the informant's taped interrogation over to the judge and the lawyers of the defendants in the nightclub murder. Without Alls' statement, the assistant prosecutor had little more than blood-stained clothes, said those familiar with the case.

Move sparked outrage

The assistant prosecutor's move angered both investigators and the informant. They had pleaded with him to stall for a few more weeks while they put their case together, gathering taped information about all the murders.

The prosecutor refused.

The informant, who has not yet been publicly identified, called this reporter to voice his displeasure. He spoke as if he had matriculated at the University of Jail House Law School.

"Me and my family's dead, know what I'm saying? I mean, the first witness got killed," he shouted. "The prosecutor's desperate for a case but they can't even use that tape. I could have been lying. It's hearsay. If they subpoena me, I ain't saying s---. I'm taking the Fifth. Who's gonna protect me? BMF runs the streets. I'm f----- dead. I ain't going out without a gun battle. I promise. There's gonna be a war."

Assistant Prosecutor Jeff Hall was asked why he did not wait a few more weeks for the informant to catch the confession of the killer of Anthony Alls.

"I can't talk about that," Hall said. "Now tell me exactly what he said about me? Did he threaten to kill me?"

Hall, who has been known to wear a bullet-proof vest beneath his Oxford shirt while in court, said he would have the informant picked up for questioning.

"I'm not going to get shot by (the informant)!" he said.

The future of his case might be known next week, when Southfield District Court Judge Susan M. Moiseev on Wednesday is expected to rule on whether Alls' statements to police before he was murdered -- taken without a defense lawyer present to cross-examine him -- can be used in the prosecution of Woolfolk and two other men.

'I've got a gun now'

If a suburban prosecutor fears for his life, imagine what it is like to be Sumayah Tauheed, the owner of Motor City Cutz, the barbershop where Alexander and Alls worked. She closed it two days after Alls was killed. She thought she was next.

"I was cleaning out the shop and an old model Thunderbird creeped by," she recalled, agreeing to meet at the shop but insisting that the door be padlocked from the inside. "These guys in the car yelled at me: 'BMF for life b----.' I got up out of here before I'll be their next example. I mean Anthony was going to the police and they killed him. So who's safe? I'm scared for my life."

Tauheed is a 47-year-old grandmother of two. A no-nonsense sort of woman. A small-business person. A worshipper of the Almighty. She is the kind of person who is the bedrock of any functioning community.

"I've got a gun now," she said. "At least I got a 50/50 chance."

It was the first Monday of the month: Social Security check day.

Inside the padlocked door, Tauheed gave an interview.

At the same time, outside the door, just feet from where Alls was murdered, an old man was being bludgeoned across the face, his front teeth broken. Two young men had tailed him from a check-cashing joint and robbed him of \$500.

The ambulance arrived first. Eventually, the police.

"It's despicable," said a white cop with Roy Orbison glasses.

The thieves got away, he said. They normally do.

"Watch your a-- around here," he said and drove away.

Tauheed was left to stand there on the spot where Anthony Alls was gunned down. She doubted that his killer or Robert Alexander's killer or the real killer of the 15-year-old girl will ever be brought to justice. "The police don't run the streets," she said. "The gangs run the streets."

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Credit: Charlie LeDuff

[Illustration]

An uncle drew this picture of Martha Barnett. A man who confessed to a role in the killing went free, and is a co-accused in the Alexander case. Too poor to bury her grandchild, Martha Barnett, who shares the child's name, keeps the remains in an urn. According to authorities, men avenging a failed hit fired on the wrong Jeep at Wyoming and Fenkell in January 2008, killing Martha Barnett, 15. The driver of her vehicle may have parked there to watch the attack. Photos by Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News Fearing for her life, Sumayah Tauheed shut her Detroit barbershop two days after employee Anthony Alls was slain in August. Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News Alexander Alls Barnett Cooley Johnson Woolfolk