



**Case File: 003**

Overview of

# **The Disappearance of Tara Calico**

**15 Minutes of Murder**

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# CASE SUMMARY

**Case File:** The Disappearance of Tara Calico

**Location:** Belen, New Mexico

**Date:** September 20, 1988

In the close-knit town of Belen, New Mexico, what began as a normal morning for 19-year-old Tara Calico ended in a mystery that, as of 2026, remains open and unsolved.

On the morning of September 20, 1988, Tara set out on her usual bike route. She told her mother she would be home around noon so she could prepare for a tennis date later that day. Tara never returned home.

When she failed to come back, her mother drove Tara's regular biking route to look for her but found no sign of her. She then immediately contacted the police. Investigators believe Tara was last seen at approximately 11:45 a.m.

Along the route, investigators later recovered Tara's cassette tape player on the side of the road. However, her bicycle and any other personal belongings were never found.

Over the decades, theories surrounding Tara's disappearance have ranged from allegations of law enforcement releasing too much information to the media, to disturbing photographs discovered years later, to anonymous tips pointing to possible suspects. Despite continued interest and investigation, the case remains at a standstill.

# VICTIMS & SUSPECTS

## POSSIBLE SUSPECTS



Joel Doel (Tara's stepfather)



Theories of a suspected van of teens that hit Tara and discarded her bike and her body.

## THE VICTIM



Tara Calico (age 19)

# TIMELINE

September 20th, 1988

**Victim: Tara Calico**  
Goes for a bike ride, and gives her mom a time frame she would return. Mother goes to look for her. By the evening she was reported missing.

**Discovered: Polaroid Photo**  
Polaroid photo found at a convenience store parking lot in Florida of a girl around Tara's age, and a young boy with tape over their mouths, and a scar on the leg of the girl that looked similar to Tara's. Investigators sent the photo to multiple agencies: Scotland Yard believed the girl in the photo was Tara. Los Alamos National disagreed, leaving the FBI to rule the photo as inconclusive.

10 months later 1988

**Anonymous tips**  
Witnesses report to have seen a pickup truck/van following Tara along her route, but no description ever led to an arrest.

Subsequent Developments

**Statement from Valencia county Sheriff Rene Rivera in 2008.**  
Claimed he received information from witnesses that two teenagers in a pickup truck had been following Tara Calico while she was on a bike ride in 1988. They allegedly struck her accidentally with the vehicle, panicked, and then killed her, with the help of their families in covering up the crime. This was allegedly done by Valencia County Sheriff Lawrence Romero Sr.'s son.

**Ongoing investigation:**  
In 2023, authorities announced they found the individuals connected to Tara's disappearance. However no charges were publicly filed. Records remain sealed.

# EVIDENCE BOARD

Parents at first retained hope that daughter is still alive.



Truck similar to the one seen following Tara on her bike ride.



The stretch of Highway where Tara would go on her bike rides.

Tara's bike was never found.



Victim:  
Tara  
Calico

Tara's cassette player was found in pieces along the highway.



Could these be pictures of Tara?

# THEORIES & BREAKS



## Theories raised over the years

- Tara and her mother both knew the kidnapper.
- Tara's mother told her she was being followed closely by a driver on her route. Tara being young said she would be fine and continued the same route. Tara's mother then told her to take mace from now on.
- This was a random attack.
- It was the man who was following Tara's mom.
- Sheriff Lawrence Romero Sr. son and his friends hit Tara in a truck, covered up her murder, and discarded her belongings, and body.
- In 2021 a random man on his deathbed confesses to know what happened to Tara.
- Tara's Stepdad had something to do with her disappearance.

## Breaks in the Case

\*In 2025 police began to set up fly traps and search mines near the route Tara was last seen. These abandoned copper mines were located north of Belen, New Mexico.

\*Police now believe they have enough evidence to file charges against a suspect, though the case remains unsolved.

# THE AFTERMATH



## Impact on the Community

- Fear and unease gripped the small town for years.
- Community and followers of the case are left in confusion by unanswered questions.
- Due to high volume of anonymous tips over the years, with conflicting statements, no one knows what to believe.

## Law Enforcement & Institutional Consequences

- Questions linger about misinformation being made public.
- Internal disagreements due to lack of funding to further conduct searches.
- The case became a staple in how easily information can be misleading and changed over the years.

## Families Left Behind

- Tara's parents died without knowing what truly happened to their daughter.

# UNANSWERED QUESTIONS



## About the day Itself

- Besides Tara's Mother, who else knew about her plans that day?
- Who else knew Tara's routine schedule?
- Isn't it ironic that she was last seen 15 minutes before her mom would know to go look for her?
- Where were the people closest to her at the time of her disappearance? With it being a small town, did these people have alibis?
- If it was a random attack, did anyone see anything unusual that day or notice any unknown vehicle?

## About Evidence

- What evidence was lost, misplaced, or never processed?
- Was every item collected—and if not, why not?
- Are there pieces of forensic material still sitting in storage untested?

## About the Investigation

- Were suspects that were discovered down the line and not released to the public, ever brought in for questioning?
- Did the Sheriff know for a fact that his son and friends hit her? Did he help them cover it up? Why did he wait so long to give a statement?
- Why did the color of the cassette player Tara have keep changing over time? Was it black or was it yellow? Was a formal statement of the color given by her mother?
- Why did Tara's mother allow her to continue on an unsafe route? Why didn't she tell her to take a different way or go with a group of friends?

## About Motive

- Was this personal, professional, or random?
- Did someone seek revenge, silence, or chaos?
- Does anyone actually know what happened and where she is?

## Bigger Questions

- Why do some crimes leave more echoes than answers?
- How do small communities shape or hide the truth?
- And most importantly: **What pieces are still out there waiting for someone—maybe a viewer—to find?**



## Credits

**Tanisha Slater** - creator / producer / host / editor

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