



The Baber Case Is a Hoax

A Forensic Teardown of the Baber-Margolis Theory

FEBRUARY 9, 2026

THEDECIPHERIST.COM

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A FORENSIC TEARDOWN OF THE BABER-MARGOLIS THEORY

TL;DR: Alex Baber – a security guard from West Virginia with a fabricated backstory and zero cryptography credentials – claims to have solved both the Zodiac Killer and Black Dahlia cases by linking them to Marvin Margolis, a dead man who was never a Zodiac suspect in 75 years of investigation. His methodology has never been published. His "NSA verification" has never been published. The two crimes share zero overlapping characteristics. The entire theory got headlines because bestselling novelist Michael Connelly made a podcast about it. This article breaks down every claim.

On December 23, 2025, the LA Times, NY Post, Daily Mail, Newsweek, SF Chronicle, and NewsNation all ran variations of the same headline: an amateur codebreaker had solved both the Zodiac Killer and Black Dahlia cases by linking them to a single suspect named Marvin Margolis.

The source was Alex Baber, a 50-year-old security guard from West Virginia who runs an outfit called Cold Case Consultants of America. The engine behind the coverage was Michael Connelly – bestselling crime novelist, creator of Harry Bosch, 90 million books sold – who launched a podcast called *Killer in the Code* telling Baber's story.

Headlines everywhere. FBI reportedly reviewing the claims. Wikipedia updated. Disney+ documentary in the works.

There's just one problem: none of it holds up.

This article dismantles every pillar of the Baber-Margolis theory – the man behind it, the methodology he claims to have used, the suspect he named, the two cases he claims to have connected, and the celebrity credibility laundering that turned a WordPress website into front-page news.

1. WHO IS ALEX BABER?

The media portraits describe Baber as a "citizen sleuth," an "autodidact polymath," a self-taught cryptographer who logged 13,000 hours of privatized study. His official bio on the Cold Case Consultants of America website paints a picture of relentless dedication born from personal tragedy.

Here's what they don't mention:

Professional background: Baber's listed credential is "PSL Protective Service Officer." That's a security guard. He has zero law enforcement training, zero cryptography credentials, zero academic credentials, and zero cases solved resulting in convictions.

The uncle murder story: Baber's bio claims that "on Christmas Eve 1969, prior to Alex's birth, his uncle committed multiple murders and was subsequently apprehended, tried, and convicted in a Florida court." This is presented as his origin story – the tragedy that drove him to cold case work.

No uncle's name has ever been provided. No case details. No court records have been found. No news articles. Searching "1969 Florida Baber killings" returns nothing. The story bears a suspicious resemblance to Ted Bundy's Florida narrative, but with the wrong dates – Bundy's Florida crimes were in 1978, not 1969.

This backstory appears to be fabricated.

The website: Cold Case Consultants of America is a WordPress template with stock imagery, dramatic lighting, a world map background, and a file literally named "Redford-small-768x511.png" (the Robert Redford aesthetic). It features a testimonial calling Baber a "modern day Sherlock Holmes," a prominent "IN THE NEWS" section, and a victim-family relief fund that solicits donations. What it does not feature is any published methodology or any verifiable cipher solution.

2. THE "METHODOLOGY" THAT DOESN'T EXIST

Baber claims to have solved the Z13 cipher – the Zodiac's 13-character code that begins "My name is –" – by using AI to generate 71 million possible 13-letter names. He then cross-referenced these against military records, census data, marriage files,

and witness descriptions until he arrived at a single name: "Marvin Merrill."

This sounds impressive. It is also completely unverifiable.

The methodology has never been published. It has never been peer reviewed. The specific AI tools, parameters, filtering criteria, and elimination process have never been disclosed. The 71 million names have never been made available for independent analysis.

The entire solution rests on two words: "Trust me."

And one external endorsement: Ed Giorgio, a former NSA cryptographer, who told the LA Times that "all of Alex's work checked out to me." Giorgio's verification has also never been published. His methodology for checking Baber's work has never been disclosed. Two other former NSA crypto-mathematicians, Patrick Henry and Rich Wisniewski, reportedly endorsed the Z13 solution – also without publishing anything.

So the verification chain is: Baber says he solved it → Giorgio says Baber solved it → nobody publishes anything.

Even John Gruber of Daring Fireball, who covered the story favorably, noted the gap: "What I can't find is an explanation of Baber's solution to the Z13 cypher. The 'irrefutable' description hinges on that."

For a claim described as "mathematically impossible" to be wrong, there is a striking absence of actual mathematics available for anyone to check.

3. WHO IS MARVIN MARGOLIS?

Marvin Margolis was born in Chicago on March 25, 1925. He joined the Navy as a corpsman – a medic, not a cryptographer – and served during the brutal Okinawa campaign, where he was reportedly buried alive in a cave and developed severe PTSD. After the war, he enrolled as a premed student at USC. In 1946, he briefly lived with Elizabeth Short (the future Black Dahlia victim) in a Hollywood Boulevard apartment. When Short was murdered in January 1947, Margolis was one of 22 suspects questioned by the LAPD. He initially lied about how well he knew her, then admitted they had lived together. He was investigated and cleared.

After the investigation, Margolis changed his name to Marvin Merrill and moved frequently. He ran a restaurant in Atascadero, worked as an engineer at Intel in Santa Clara, and operated an auto repair shop in Oceanside where he was convicted of fraud and sentenced to 30 days in jail. In 1992, dying of cancer, he drew a sketch of a woman titled "Elizabeth." He died on July 22, 1993, in Santa Barbara.

Here is the critical fact that no headline mentions: **For 75 years – from 1947 to December 23, 2025 – nobody ever connected Marvin Margolis to the Zodiac Killer.**

Not the SFPD. Not the Vallejo PD. Not the FBI. Not a single researcher in the most obsessively studied unsolved case in American history.

The first and only person to make this connection is Alex Baber.

And Margolis's own son, Roark Merrill, has called the theory a "speculative cesspool," telling reporters: "I don't believe that dad did it. There's just no way it was my dad."

4. TWO CRIMES WITH ZERO IN COMMON

The core claim of Baber's theory is extraordinary: the same man committed the 1947 Black Dahlia murder AND the 1968-1969 Zodiac killings. This requires believing that a single person exhibited two completely incompatible criminal psychologies separated by 21 years.

The Black Dahlia murder was a singular act of surgical precision against a specific person. Elizabeth Short's body was bisected at the waist with anatomical exactness, completely drained of blood, washed clean of evidence, posed like a mannequin in a public lot, and carved with a "Glasgow smile" – a punishment historically reserved for snitches in 1920s-1930s Glasgow razor gangs. The killer left zero communication. No letters. No taunting. No ciphers. Complete silence. This was a professional message killing: "She talked. Look what happens."

The Zodiac killings were opportunistic attacks on random victims – young couples at lovers' lanes, a cab driver. The killer used guns and knives with no surgical precision. Bodies were left where they fell, unposed, uncleaned. And unlike the Black Dahlia killer's total silence, the Zodiac could not stop communicating. He sent letter after

letter to newspapers and police. He created elaborate ciphers. He gave himself a name. He drew a crosshair symbol. He threatened to blow up school buses. His entire psychology was "look at me, catch me if you can."

The comparison:

CATEGORY	BLACK DAHLIA (1947)	ZODIAC (1968-1969)
Victims	ONE	Multiple (5+ confirmed)
Method	Surgical precision	Gunshots, stabbing
Body treatment	Bisected, drained, cleaned, posed	Left where they fell
Facial mutilation	Glasgow smile	None
Communication	ZERO	Constant letters and ciphers
Psychology	Message/punishment	Ego/attention
Location	Los Angeles	Northern California (400 miles away)
Setting	Indoor (torture room)	Outdoor (quick attacks)
Killer behavior	Stayed SILENT	Couldn't SHUT UP

Baber's theory requires believing that in 1947, Margolis committed the most elaborate, surgical, theatrical murder in American history – then did nothing for 21 years – then suddenly started shooting random couples in cars and writing coded letters to newspapers.

These aren't the same killer. These aren't even the same species of killer. One sends a message by staying silent. The other sends a message by never shutting up.

5. THE CELEBRITY CREDIBILITY LAUNDERING

How does a security guard with no credentials, a fabricated backstory, and an unpublished methodology get headlines in every major outlet?

Michael Connelly.

The chain works like this:

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STEP 1: Alex Baber (nobody) presents theory
↓
STEP 2: Contacts retired detectives Rick Jackson and Mitzi Roberts
↓
STEP 3: They say "interesting" (not "solved")
↓
STEP 4: Contacts MICHAEL CONNELLY (90 million books sold)
↓
STEP 5: Connelly makes podcast "KILLER IN THE CODE"
↓
STEP 6: Every headline says "MICHAEL CONNELLY SAYS..."
↓
👑 INSTANT CREDIBILITY 👑
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And Connelly himself admitted the limitation: "Mitzi had a hesitation that was the same as mine, and that is that I don't know the first thing about breaking codes."

The man lending his credibility to the cipher solution admits he cannot evaluate cipher solutions.

"Michael Connelly's new podcast" is a story editors will run. "Security guard claims to solve cipher" is not. Baber attached himself to Connelly's credibility the way a remora attaches to a shark – riding the bigger fish to places he could never reach alone.

6. THE REVERSE ENGINEERING PROBLEM

There is a simpler explanation for how Baber arrived at Margolis than a 71-million-name AI brute force.

The 1949-1950 Los Angeles County Grand Jury records are publicly available. They contain a list of 22 suspects in the Black Dahlia murder. Marvin Margolis is on that list.

What Baber claims happened: He decoded Z13, got "Marvin Merrill," then discovered this was an alias for a man on the Black Dahlia suspect list.

What likely happened: He found the Black Dahlia suspect list, identified Margolis as the most narratively useful candidate (dead, scary backstory, changed his name, medical background, lived in California), and then claimed the cipher produced his name.

Why Margolis was the perfect pick:

CRITERIA	WHY IT HELPS BABER
Dead since 1993	Can't sue or defend himself
Navy corpsman	Sounds medically scary
"Buried alive" / PTSD	Dramatic backstory
Changed his name	Implies guilt to uncritical audiences
Lived in California	Can be stretched into Zodiac-area proximity
Fraud conviction	Adds criminal flavor

The convenience is too clean. The suspect is dead. The methodology is unpublished. The verification is unpublished. The only people who can confirm anything are either dead or on Baber's team.

7. MARGOLIS VS. THE ACTUAL SUSPECT

While Baber was naming a man who had never been connected to the Zodiac in 75 years, there exists a suspect who has been the center of Zodiac research since 1971:

Arthur Leigh Allen.

CATEGORY	MARGOLIS	ALLEN
Named Zodiac suspect by police?	✗ NEVER (until Dec 2025)	✓ ONLY ONE – since 1971
Investigated for Zodiac?	✗	✓ 20+ years
Search warrants?	✗	✓ Multiple
Lived in Zodiac area?	✗ (LA, various)	✓ Vallejo
Cryptographic training?	✗ (Navy medic)	✓ (Navy submarines)
Pre-crime statements?	✗	✓ Don Cheney (polygraph verified)
Physical evidence?	✗	✓ Weapons, bombs, Zodiac watch
Victim identified suspect?	✗	✓ Mike Mageau (1992)
Cleared by police?	✓ (LAPD, Black Dahlia)	✗ Never cleared
Son/family response?	"Speculative cesspool"	Brother reported suspicions to police

Final tally: Margolis scores 1 positive indicator against 12 negatives. Allen scores 13 positive indicators against 1 negative.

8. WHAT "IRREFUTABLE" LOOKS LIKE

Baber calls his theory "irrefutable" and "mathematically impossible" to be wrong. Let's compare what "irrefutable" looks like when methodology is actually published.

The Baber approach (unpublished):

- Used AI to generate 71 million names → unpublished
- Cross-referenced with records → unpublished
- Got "Marvin Merrill" → unpublished methodology

- "NSA verified" → unpublished verification
- Result: "Trust me, it's irrefutable"

The classical cryptanalysis approach (published):

- Take the word PARADICE (which the Zodiac wrote on a postcard)
- Slide it across Z340 as a crib – it matches THREE times
- This gives you 10 unique letters: P, A, R, D, I, C, E, S, L, V
- That's 62% of the alphabet from one word
- The cascade reveals the message
- It matches the exact same FBI-verified plaintext from December 2020
- Pen and paper. Anyone can verify it. The math is right there.

One approach says "trust me." The other says "check my work."

In cryptanalysis, "irrefutable" means you show your work and nobody can break it. In the Baber case, "irrefutable" means nobody can see the work to try.

9. THE MEDIA FAILURE

Every major outlet that ran this story committed the same error: they covered the podcast, not the evidence.

Not a single article published Baber's Z13 decryption methodology. Not a single article independently verified the cipher solution. Not a single article consulted an active cryptographer (as opposed to retired NSA officials recruited by Baber's own team). Not a single article noted that Margolis had never appeared on any Zodiac suspect list in 75 years.

What they covered was: a famous novelist made a podcast, retired detectives said "interesting," and a former NSA guy said "checks out."

This is how media credibility laundering works:

1. Attach yourself to a celebrity name
2. Get endorsements from retired officials who won't publish their analysis

3. Make the story about the podcast, not the evidence
4. Let "Michael Connelly says..." do all the heavy lifting
5. Nobody asks to see the actual work because the headline already sounds solved

Larry Harnish, a former LA Times copy editor who has researched the Black Dahlia case since the 1990s, pointed out that LAPD records show police interviewed and cleared Margolis. One critic told the LA Times Baber's work was "a lot of empty calories." These dissenting voices were buried at the bottom of stories, beneath paragraphs of Connelly quotes and dramatic podcast descriptions.

10. THE VERDICT

QUESTION	ANSWER
Did Baber solve the Z13 cipher?	No verifiable evidence exists
Is Margolis the Zodiac?	Never a suspect in 75 years of investigation
Is Margolis the Black Dahlia killer?	Cleared by LAPD in 1947
Are the two cases connected?	ZERO overlapping characteristics
Why did major outlets cover it?	Michael Connelly made a podcast
Is the methodology verifiable?	Nothing has been published
Is the NSA endorsement verifiable?	Nothing has been published
Has the son confirmed the theory?	Called it a "speculative cesspool"
Did Baber use AI?	Yes – to brute force 71 million names

CONCLUSION

The Baber-Margolis theory is built on a fabricated personal backstory, an unpublished methodology, an unverifiable "NSA verification," two crimes with zero overlapping signatures, a 21-year behavioral gap that contradicts everything known about criminal psychology, and a suspect who was never connected to the Zodiac by any person or agency in 75 years of the most scrutinized unsolved case in American history.

What it has is a podcast from a famous novelist who admits he can't evaluate codes.

You cannot disprove what was never proven. You cannot debunk what was never published. That's not strength – that's strategy. And it worked. Headlines ran. Wikipedia was updated. A Disney+ documentary is in production.

But the methodology is still unpublished. The verification is still unpublished. The math – if it exists – is still unseen.

The circus got its headline. The evidence is still waiting.

Document compiled: February 9, 2026 By: TheDecipherist Full research available at: thezodiacsolved.com Previous coverage: "The Z340 cipher was solvable with pen and paper in 1969. Here's the proof."

The math doesn't care about your podcast deal.