

Justice Delayed podcast

December 5, 2019

Transcript: Season 5, Episode 1

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

Minnesota is known for the cold. Frigid winters and stoic Nordic sensibilities. On this bright November morning, as I drive southwest in the land of ten thousand lakes, drifts of snow gust over the highway, aloft and swirling like phantoms. One minute I'm winding my way through flat expanses of prairie and farmland, the next I've arrived in the city—all concrete and lights and neat, modest lawns. Like many Midwest American states, there's a separation that runs along the invisible but impenetrable borders between rural and urban. Just a few miles is all it takes for demographics, ideologies, cultures, and customs to change.

But every now and then, something happens that shakes a whole state. Its impact is felt by everyone, uniting people in grief and a common purpose.

Just under twenty-four years ago, in the lively college student community of Dinkytown, a young woman named Beverly Anderson disappeared.

[THEME MUSIC]

ELLE INTRO:

The cases have gone cold. The perpetrators think they're safe. But with your help, I'll make sure that even though justice has been delayed, it will no longer be denied. I'm Elle Castillo, and this is *Justice Delayed*.

[SOUND BREAK: Snow crunching underfoot; the echoes of "I'll Make Love to You" by Boyz II Men playing in the distance; the laughter of young adults.]

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

In February 1996, twenty-year-old Beverly left a party she was at with her boyfriend and several other fellow juniors from the University of Minnesota. When the group walked out of the party, Beverly's boyfriend tried to convince her to come with them up to Annie's Parlour for late-night burgers and milkshakes. But Beverly had to get up early the next morning, so she insisted on going home. She was three months away from finishing her psychology degree and had already started an internship with a local clinic. They had an argument about it — nothing serious, just a spat like college lovers do. Eventually, he gave up and followed his friends alone. It was only five blocks to her apartment—a short walk

she had made alone a hundred times before. Beverly zipped up her black wool coat, dipped her chin into her scarf, and waved goodbye to her friends.

It was the last time any of them saw her alive.

When she didn't show up for her internship the next day, Beverly's supervisor phoned her apartment. Her roommate, Samantha Williams, answered.

SAMANTHA:

I don't know how to explain it. As soon as I got the call, I had a feeling that something was wrong. I went up to her room to check, just to make sure, and yeah. Her bed wasn't slept in. None of her stuff was there, like her bag and keys and everything. I could tell she had never come home.

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

I'm sitting with Samantha Williams, now Carlsson, in her kitchen. She lives about an hour outside Minneapolis with her husband and two beagles, who sounded the warning before I even made it up to her front door.

SAMANTHA:

[Over the sound of two dogs barking.] Hush! Go to your crate. I said *crate*. Good girls. You see, they're well trained when they want to be.

ELLE:

So, what happened when you realized Beverly hadn't come home?

SAMANTHA:

Well, I told her supervisor, and he said we should call the police, so that's what I did. At first, they didn't want to investigate — you know, it hadn't been long enough or whatever. But once her boyfriend and me told them she was seen walking home alone, and that she was a dedicated student who had just started an internship, they started getting more worried. I know they interviewed [redaction tone], but his friends gave him a solid alibi. Other than that two or three minutes when they argued about her coming up to the restaurant with him, he was with them the whole rest of the night. The police came and talked to me that day, I think in the afternoon. You could find out in their report, if you have it.

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

I do. According to Detective Harold Sykes, Samantha was interviewed on February 5, 1996, at 3:42 p.m. — approximately seventeen hours after Beverly was last seen.

ELLE:

And from what you remember, what happened next?

SAMANTHA:

Nothing, really. All her close friends had been with her that night, and they were at Annie's Parlour for at least two hours after she left. Her family lived hours away, in Pelican Rapids. They figured there was no way the boyfriend did it, because he was only out of their friends' sight for a couple minutes. She just . . . vanished. Everyone thought she might have gotten lost or disoriented, maybe she was drunker than her friends thought and fell into the Mississippi River and drowned. It's happened before. But they searched the banks and snowdrifts for days, and there was no sign of her. Not until a week later.

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

Seven days after Beverly went missing, the manager of Annie's Parlour was locking up for the night when he noticed someone huddled up against the outside wall. He thought it was a homeless person and bent over to offer to take them to a shelter. When they didn't respond, the manager pulled the scarf away from their head and discovered the lifeless face of Beverly Anderson.

SAMANTHA:

[Through tears.] All anyone could focus on then was Beverly. Everyone was horrified, you know. This sweet, innocent, smart girl— dead. I couldn't believe it. I barely left our apartment for weeks after that, I was so afraid. Turns out, I had good reason to be.

ELLE:

Do you remember when you found out about the other victims?

SAMANTHA:

They didn't say anything on the news until they realized that second girl, Jillian Thompson, died the same way Beverly had. And she was missing for the same length of time — seven days. I think they found something on Jillian's body that linked her to Beverly, some DNA or something.

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

It was skin cells on her jacket. The police figured Jillian must have offered it to Beverly when she got cold, wherever they were kept together. Jillian Thompson disappeared from a parking lot at Bethel University three days after Beverly did. Her family thought she had run off with a boyfriend they disapproved of. He was the primary suspect until the cases were finally connected.

[SOUND BREAK: A chair squeaking; a man clearing his throat.]

ELLE:

Can I ask you to introduce yourself for new listeners?

MARTÍN:

Uh, yes, I'm Dr. Martín Castillo, and I'm a medical examiner, an ME, for Hennepin County.

ELLE:

And?

MARTÍN:

And, full disclosure, I'm Elle's husband.

ELLE:

Regular listeners might remember Martín from seasons one and three, where he provided expert insight about the autopsies of Grace Cunningham and Jair Brown, respectively. His identification of an oddly shaped lividity mark on Jair's back helped us make a connection to a sofa in his uncle's house, which was key to helping the Minneapolis Crimes Against Children Division solve that case. I've brought him back into the studio to discuss the other way the cases of these murdered girls were connected, before the DNA test from Jillian's body even came back.

MARTÍN:

The simplest answer is that they were killed in the same way. The same, unusual way. Explain that.

MARTÍN:

While Beverly Anderson showed signs of trauma on the right side of her head, her autopsy revealed that she had been struck several days before she died—likely on the day she was kidnapped. She passed away after suffering gastrointestinal distress, dehydration, and multiple organ failures. Those symptoms are consistent with a huge variety of poisons, and the pathologist might never have narrowed it down if it weren't for her stomach contents. It took a few weeks, but eventually tests determined she had eaten castor beans—likely several. Ricin poison takes days to work, and often people survive ingesting it, but it was clear the killer fed the toxin to her multiple times. She had also been whipped on her back shortly before death. Twenty-one lashes.

ELLE:

How could you tell it was shortly before death?

MARTÍN:

The way the scabs formed indicated that her blood stopped flowing soon after the wounds were inflicted. Her heartbeat was probably already slowing when she was beaten—meaning she was already dying, which led the ME to determine that the whipping was part of a ritual, not an attempt to kill her faster. This was confirmed when they found Jillian’s body and she had been killed in exactly the same way. Organ failure due to castor bean poisoning, and exactly twenty-one lashes across the back, made with a switch.

ELLE:

What do you mean by “switch”?

MARTÍN:

A stick or branch of some kind—thin but sturdy. There was evidence both bodies had been in the woods or the country somewhere. Leaf particles in their clothing, dirt under their nails. They figure the killer found a branch wherever he took them and completed the ritual then.

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

Jillian’s body was also found seven days after she was taken, but not in the same place she’d disappeared from like Beverly. That would have been too easy. Instead, she was left on the lawn of Northwestern College—now called the University of Northwestern–St. Paul—a rival to her own Christian university, Bethel. However, despite the fact that both young women were college students, held for the same length of time, killed in the same manner, and left in a public space, their deaths were not immediately connected. Two different homicide squads worked on the cases, and while there were centralized police databases for things like DNA and fingerprint collection, there was no *modus operandi* database—nothing that collected the way victims were killed and analyzed whether cases might be connected based on the method of killing.

Police investigated for months, even arrested Jillian’s boyfriend, but the charges were eventually dropped and both cases went cold. There were no similar murders, no new leads. Not until the following year.

[SOUND BREAK: A waterfall roaring.]

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

This is Minnehaha Falls, fifty-three feet of limestone and cascading water rushing on its way from Lake Minnetonka to the Mississippi River. The famous *Song of Hiawatha* poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow solidified its name, Minnehaha, which Longfellow

interpreted as “laughing water.” The Dakota name would be better translated as “curling water” or simply “waterfall,” both of which are more apt. The intense, almost violent noise of charging water belies the idea of laughter. It was here, beneath the controversial bronze *Hiawatha and Minnehaha* statue, that the body of eighteen-year-old Isabelle Kemp was found.

The recording you heard was taken last spring, when the falls were swollen with melted snow. But when Isabelle was found, the water was frozen—a thick, rough mass of ice stuck in the act of falling, as if enchanted. She almost wasn’t seen; a fresh blanket of snow was halfway finished covering her body before a tourist couple who came to view the falls noticed her red jacket peeking through the powder.

[SOUND BREAK: Background noise from a diner.]

ELLE:

When Isabelle Kemp’s body was found in January 1997, police quickly connected her murder with the cases in 1996. She had been missing for seven days and was whipped shortly before death. That’s also when you came up with the killer’s moniker, isn’t it?

DETECTIVE HAROLD SYKES:

Yes, although indirectly. It certainly wasn’t my intent.

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

That’s the lead detective on the case, Detective Harold Sykes. I met up with him at his favorite diner in Minneapolis.

ELLE:

But you noticed something that no one else had picked up on. Tell me about that.

SYKES:

Yes, well, we had already noticed that the killer seemed obsessed with certain numbers. He kidnapped the first two women three days apart, he kept them for seven days, and he whipped them twenty-one times. So, we figured those numbers meant something to him. The pattern was consistent. Which meant my team immediately scoured the missing persons records, looking for someone who might have been kidnapped three days after Isabelle was. But then when I was going through the cases, I noticed another pattern. Beverly Anderson was twenty years old. Jillian Thompson was nineteen. And Isabelle was eighteen.

ELLE:

They were each a year younger than the last.

SYKES:

Yes. It was just a hunch at that time, but I thought there was a good chance his next victim would be seventeen. It also fit with his number obsession. If the ages weren't a coincidence, I knew that was bad news. It meant he probably had a plan. And that's what I told them, when the reporters interviewed me. I regretted it at the time, but I suppose it doesn't matter now. Someone would have thought of it eventually. I just told them: I think this guy has started some kind of twisted countdown.

ELLE VOICE-OVER:

It was a simple observation, but it stuck in the minds of Minnesotans across the state, filling everyone with a sense of impending doom. The killer was far from finished. Every girl knew she couldn't let her guard down — as much as any girl ever does. A catchy name is all it takes to turn a local case into a national sensation.

Within hours, all the channels were calling him the same thing: the Countdown Killer.