Ash and June After Dark

Shelby's Sweetheart: The Asha Degree Story

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June: Okay, before we start, I just want it noted for the record that it is eight o'clock, I am already in my housecoat, and you have me out on this porch talking about murder.

Ash: It's a podcast, June. The porch is the brand.

June: The porch is cold, is what the porch is.

Ash: And yet here you are, with your sweet tea, ready to go. Welcome to Ash & June After Dark, y'all. I am Ash.

June: And I am June, and I complain, but I always show up. What have you got for me tonight?

Ash: A question I can't shake. What makes a nine-year-old girl get up in the middle of a storm, pack a bookbag, and walk out of her house into the dark?

June: ...Nothing good. Nothing good makes a baby do that.

Ash: No. And for twenty-six years, nobody has been able to answer it. Her name was Asha Degree. Shelby, North Carolina called her Shelby's Sweetheart.

June: Tell them who she was first. Before the mystery. I always want the person before the mystery.

Ash: Gladly. Asha Jaquilla Degree was nine years old, a fourth grader at Fallston Elementary, and the star point guard on her youth basketball team.

June: Point guard! At nine!

Ash: Star point guard. Shy, careful, a rule follower, afraid of dogs and storms, truth be told. The kind of child who stayed inside the lines her parents drew. She lived with her mother Iquilla, her father Harold, and her big brother O'Bryant, in a small home on Oakcrest Drive, just off Highway 18.

June: And the weekend before she vanished, normal?

Ash: About as normal as a weekend gets. Schools were closed that Friday, so the kids spent the day at their aunt's house and went to basketball practice. Saturday, February twelfth, Asha's team lost its first game of the season, by one point. She fouled out and cried with her teammates—

June: —the way nine-year-olds do—

Ash: —exactly, and by her brother's game that afternoon she'd shaken it off. Sunday was church and Sunday school, then home. She fell asleep on the couch watching television and went to bed

around eight.

June: And that Sunday night was Valentine's night.

Ash: It was. February thirteenth into the fourteenth was Harold and Iquilla's twelfth wedding anniversary. A storm rolled through, wind and heavy rain, and it knocked the power out. Which matters, because the alarm clock never went off the next morning.

June: Oh, I don't like where this is going.

Ash: Around two thirty, Harold checked on his children before bed. Both asleep. And in the room the children shared, O'Bryant, who was ten, later remembered hearing his sister's bed squeak in the night. He thought she was turning over in her sleep.

June: She wasn't turning over.

Ash: She was getting up. And that bookbag was already packed, June. Clothes and personal things, packed ahead of time. Like a child who had a plan—

June: —or a child who had been given one. Lord.

Ash: Hold that thought, because it becomes the whole case. Somewhere between two thirty and four in the morning, Asha Degree walked out of her house, into the rain, and turned south on Highway 18.

June: Four in the morning. Nine years old. In a storm.

Ash: And seen. Two men on that highway saw her. A truck driver and a motorist, near where Highway 18 meets Highway 180, about a mile and a third from her home. A small girl in a white long-sleeved shirt and white pants, walking alone. One of them thought it was wrong enough that he turned around and circled back, three times, to approach her. And when his headlights came back around—

June: Don't tell me.

Ash: She ran. Off the road, into the woods. Gone.

June: A nine-year-old who was scared of the dark, running from the one man trying to help her. Ash, that gives me chills I do not want.

Ash: That's the last confirmed sighting of Asha Degree. Around six thirty that morning, Iquilla went to wake the children and found an empty bed. No sign of forced entry. Search dogs couldn't pick up a trail in all that rain. And Shelby, North Carolina poured itself into those woods. The search ran a week, some nine thousand hours of it, three hundred leads. And near a shed by the spot where she went into the woods, they found candy wrappers, a pencil, a green marker, and a yellow hair bow her parents confirmed was hers.

June: Like she'd stopped there.

Ash: Like she'd stopped there, in the dark, and then simply evaporated. There was even a little wallet-sized photograph of a girl nobody recognized at first, later reported to be a school friend.

June: A child does not evaporate, Ash.

Ash: No, baby, a child gets taken. But it took this case twenty-four years to say that out loud.

June: Twenty-four.

Ash: The story went national. Montel Williams, America's Most Wanted, Oprah. Age-progressed pictures as the years stacked up. And then, August of two thousand one, a year and a half later, a construction worker thirty miles north in Morganton, right off that same Highway 18, dug up a bookbag buried in the ground.

June: I know about this bag and it makes me sick every time.

Ash: Sealed inside two black garbage bags. Asha's bookbag, her name and phone number inside it. And here is where the case tilts sideways. Along with her clothes were two things that did not belong to her. A copy of Doctor Seuss's McElligot's Pool, a library book from her own school that Asha never checked out. And a New Kids on the Block concert T-shirt nobody in her family had ever seen.

June: Somebody else's book. Somebody else's shirt. Somebody else's hands in that bag.

Ash: And the FBI sat on those two items for seventeen years before showing them to the public in twenty eighteen, asking: whose are these?

June: Seventeen years!

Ash: Seventeen. Now, back up a little. In twenty fifteen the FBI formally joined the case with a dedicated team. In twenty sixteen they released another lead: investigators believed Asha may have gotten into a dark green car that night, an early seventies Lincoln Continental Mark Four, or possibly a Ford Thunderbird, rust around the wheel wells. In twenty seventeen, agents went back and physically recreated that morning on the highway. And still nothing. Until September of twenty twenty-four, when this case stood up out of its grave.

June: I remember those headlines. Raids, in little Cleveland County. I about fell out.

Ash: September tenth and eleventh, the FBI, the state bureau, and the sheriff's office searched properties belonging to a local family named Dedmon, whose home on Cherryville Road sat less than four miles, about six minutes, from where Asha was last seen. They seized vehicles, including an old green nineteen sixty-four AMC Rambler. And when the warrants were unsealed—

June: —bomb. It was a bomb, Ash.

Ash: It was. Because modern DNA testing had finally been run on the evidence preserved from that buried bookbag, and it came back with names. A hair stem recovered from Asha's undershirt was genetically consistent with AnnaLee Dedmon Ramirez, the youngest Dedmon daughter, who

was thirteen in February of two thousand. DNA associated with the garbage bag itself was linked to a man named Russell Underhill, who had lived in care homes run by the Dedmon family, and who died in two thousand four. Roy Dedmon was listed in medical records as Underhill's emergency contact.

June: And the theory. Say the theory plain.

Ash: Plain: the warrants say investigators believe Asha Degree was the victim of a homicide, and that her body was concealed.

June: Twenty-four years of maybe she ran away. Gone, in one document.

Ash: And there is a detail I cannot put down. According to those warrants, back in two thousand, Roy Dedmon used to have one of his teenage daughters drive patients from the family's care home to Broughton Hospital in Morganton. The route is Highway 18. Same highway where Asha was last seen, same direction, passing the very stretch where her bookbag was buried.

June: Oh, come on.

Ash: The warrants also describe a witness who told investigators in twenty twenty-four that years earlier, at a party, he heard one of the Dedmon daughters, in tears, say that she had killed Asha Degree, while her sister told her to be quiet. And in February of twenty twenty-five, more warrants, phones seized, and court documents referenced a polygraph investigators said one of the sisters failed, when asked if she was concealing information.

June: Okay. Okay. This is where you do your thing.

Ash: My thing?

June: Your lawyer voice. Do it, because it matters.

Ash: Fine. It does matter. A search warrant is an allegation, not a charge, and it is a long way from a conviction. As of tonight, nobody has been arrested or charged in Asha's case. The Dedmon family denies any involvement. Their attorney has called the connection tenuous, pointed at Russell Underhill's DNA, and said records show that green Rambler wasn't acquired until after Asha disappeared. Those denials are on the record, and they count.

June: They do. And what's also on the record?

Ash: In February of twenty twenty-five, investigators officially reclassified Asha's case as a homicide investigation. More properties searched that April. A combined reward of one hundred thousand dollars. And fresh billboards with her face went up along that highway last year.

June: And her mama and daddy, Ash. Twenty-six years of this.

Ash: Every single year, Harold and Iquilla Degree walk from their house to the billboard that stands where their daughter ran into those woods. Neighbors walk with them. Asha would be thirty-six years old now. Her brother has children of his own. And the question in the middle of it has never moved: why did a careful, frightened little girl pack a bag and walk into a storm at three

in the morning? Investigators have long wondered whether somebody she trusted had been talking to her. Coaching her. Telling her there was a reason to come out that night.

June: If that's true, somebody planned it. And somebody has kept it quiet for twenty-six years, through raids and DNA and all of it.

Ash: Cases like this don't break from luck, June. They break because one person finally talks.

June: Then let's talk to that one person. If you're listening and you know something, you have carried it long enough.

Ash: Plainly, the way her family would want it said: if you know anything about Asha Degree, call the Cleveland County Sheriff's Office at seven oh four, four eight four, four eight two two, or the FBI at one eight hundred, C-A-L-L, F-B-I. A hundred thousand dollars is standing, and so is a mother who has walked that highway every year of this century.

June: Whew. Okay. I need a minute and a refill.

Ash: You've been listening to Ash & June After Dark. I'm Ash.

June: And I'm June. Keep your porch light on, y'all. Somebody's baby is still trying to come home.

If you know anything about Asha Degree: Cleveland County Sheriff's Office, 704-484-4822 · FBI, 1-800-CALL-FBI (1-800-225-5324). Combined reward up to $100,000.

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