

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MISSING: Ashley Loring HeavyRunner

Hi Crime Junkies, I'm your host Ashley Flowers.

And I'm Britt.

And the story I have for you today is about a young woman who vanishes without a trace in the middle of the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana.

May 5th is Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Awareness Day.

And this month, we want to highlight a young woman whose family, especially her older sister, have been figures in the fight for justice.

With all signs pointing to someone knowing what happened to her, everyone stays silent as her family is forced to pick up the pieces.

This is the story of Ashley Loring Heavy Runner.

When Kimberly Loring Heavy Runner lands back in Montana after a three-month trip to Morocco, she expects her younger sister Ashley to call or text her.

The two are super close.

They're pretty much constantly talking in person over the phone through Facebook Messenger, whatever.

In fact, they were literally messaging like hours ago.

But as the night goes on, her sister's radio silent.

Kimberly thinks it's a little weird, but she's not immediately panicked, you know?

I mean, Ashley's 20, she's got her own life.

Plus, she has a habit of losing her phone.

Must be an Ashley thing.

I was gonna say, quite literally, I left my phone at home this morning.

I do not have it at work today.

I was like, sounds familiar, weird.

Yeah.

But by the next day, which is June 9th, she still hasn't heard from her sister.

So Kimberly gets on Facebook Messenger and looks at the last exchange that she had with her.

And next to Ashley's name, it says last active 18 hours ago.

And that's when Kimberly starts to get a little worried.

You see, it's 2017.

Ashley had never gone that long without checking her social media.

So Kimberly tries messaging her, but she doesn't get a reply.

And then she tries calling, but the call goes straight to voicemail.

She keeps trying over the next few days.

But when almost a week goes by with no word, that is when she is full on panicking.

And she isn't the only one.

Their parents are also getting really worried, especially because her dad had this concerning encounter with Ashley just before she seemingly disappeared.

You see, Ashley lives with her family in Browning, which is the headquarters of the Blackfeet Reservation.

And according to a season three episode of the Up and Vanished podcast, right before she vanished, Ashley ran into her parents' house and frantically like shut all the blinds.

I mean, she was clearly upset and her dad asked what was wrong.

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But all she said was, I did something.

So of course she's like, well, what did you do?

But she wouldn't say she just kept going around shutting all of the blinds.

And then he heard this vehicle pull up outside of their house, so he goes to like look and see who it was.

But before he could even pull back the blinds, Ashley panicked even more and told him not to look outside.

So they're there in the house just like waiting in silence.

But the whole time no one came to the door.

And before he could ask Ashley any more questions, she bolted it out of there again.

And that is the last time anyone from her family actually saw her.

So she never told them who was following her?

Well, or if anyone was following her, I mean, her dad never actually saw anything because she wouldn't let him look outside.

They heard a vehicle, but never saw anyone, never saw a vehicle, maybe the vehicle was just passing by.

I don't know.

And remember, she didn't say that someone was following her.

I think that's just what he thought because of her closing the blinds.

All that she said was that she did something.

By June 12th, no one in the family has heard from Ashley.

And so her mom goes to Blackfeet Law Enforcement Services to report her missing.

But it turns out reservation law enforcement sounds a lot like state and federal agencies.

Oh, she's an adult.

She can go wherever she wants, when she wants, without telling her family, blah, blah, blah.

End of story.

We're not going to look for her.

Well, not yet anyway.

And to an extent, they're a little bit right.

There were times when Ashley would spend time away from home.

She was an adult.

She went to school.

She had friends, had relationships.

She also struggled with the death of her grandfather.

She had fallen into substance use, which also impacted how much time she would spend away from her family.

But she had never gone this long without at least messaging Kimberly.

So by now, her family is sure something terrible happened.

And I think that's the difference here, right?

In most cases, and clearly in this one, the family isn't coming to you when she's just been gone for five minutes.

They have been waiting.

They have waited.

And I get it.

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Resources are limited.

And law enforcement gets into tough situations deciding how to best utilize those resources.

But you got to listen to the people who know the missing person best.

I mean, if their family says something is wrong and they are begging for help, something is probably wrong.

Yeah.

So they waited a week already and combine that with the fact that the last time someone sees her, she's in like full-on meltdown mode.

This should be cause for concern.

Totally.

And did Ashley ever say anything in her last messages to Kimberly about whatever was going on that night?

No, nothing.

The last message that she had sent was at like 12.31 p.m.

That was on the 6th.

They had been chatting, I guess, and Ashley had asked Kimberly if she could send her some money, but since that she was in like Morocco, she couldn't.

And Kimberly had asked if she was home, but Ashley said no.

And then when Kimberly asked if she was okay, Ashley replied always.

And that was it.

So like it was a very normal conversation.

Yeah.

Now, even though she hasn't heard from her sister since then, Kimberly still has hope that she's going to show up.

Maybe she really did just lose her phone and she's with friends and she's fine.

But when their dad unexpectedly gets admitted to the hospital and then there's still no word from Ashley, Kimberly is certain at that point.

Her sister is gone.

So since the police clearly aren't going to be any help, she basically goes full detective mode and starts reaching out to Ashley's friends on social media.

She wants to know when they last saw her, where they last saw her, all of it.

She also calls as many people as she can.

Browning's not a big city.

And according to the 2020 census, there's only like 1,018 people living there.

And it's literally a place where everyone knows everyone.

And if you don't know someone personally, you know someone who knows them.

Right.

So Kimberly is tracking down everyone she can, asking them about Ashley.

Can I just say I love this big sister energy in action.

It is.

Truly.

Truly.

I feel her.

Now, based on what she learns, the last time anyone saw Ashley was at a party on June

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5th in Browning, hosted by this guy named Vernon.

There's even a video on Facebook that shows her there sitting on the couch as people drink.

But after that, no one really knows where she went.

But assuming nothing happened that night, because she talked to her sister on the 6th, right?

Right.

And a few of the people that Kimberly reaches out to tell her that they'd actually heard from Ashley on June 7th, so even after she talked to her sister, at least they got a message from her account on Facebook, I'll say.

Just in France reported for Flathead Beacon that they say she'd messaged them kind of out of the blue asking for a ride, but they say it was really weird and unexpected because some of the people she messaged, she wasn't even really close to.

Like some of them she hadn't even talked to in years.

Did any of them respond?

Yeah, Kimberly says that at least one person did and that person said that they couldn't leave work yet.

They asked for more information, but then Ashley just never responded.

And those messages are just the tip of the iceberg because the more Kimberly talks to people, the more interesting responses she gets.

A lot of the people she talks to are trying to be helpful, but some get really defensive.

That's not a great look, but how exactly were they defensive?

I couldn't find like exact examples, literally all of my source material says that they just get defensive.

Cool.

So I'm not quite sure, but others tell Kimberly that they heard Ashley had gotten hurt somehow or that someone took her to like the nearby mountains or maybe she went to Washington.

Where's all this coming from?

I don't know that either, but in typical small town fashion, the rumor mill goes like in full swing.

Of course.

And over the first few weeks after Ashley goes missing, Kimberly hears a lot of rumors about what happened to her sister and who she was last with.

For instance, about two weeks after Ashley disappeared, either Kimberly or Blackfoot law enforcement gets this tip that someone had seen a woman who looked a lot like Ashley running along the road away from a car in this remote part of the reservation.

I'm not sure who gave them this tip, but it spurs a three day search led by tribal police and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

But still, they don't find anything that they connect to Ashley.

I thought you said the police weren't taking her disappearance seriously.

They aren't.

Not to the extent that they should be, but I guess a young woman running for her life is enough to get them moving in the right direction, even if nothing comes of the search.

So the rumors are still making their way around Browning.

And through all of the stories and speculation, there's one man's name that keeps coming

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up over and over again, Sam McDonald.

Sam is in his fifties at this point, and he and Ashley were known to hang out together. From what I can tell, they had kind of casually been seeing each other and based on the rumors, she might have gone over to his place after that party that we last have that video of her at.

Now, I'm not sure if police go talk to him just yet.

By this point, they haven't even opened an official missing persons investigation.

But Podcaster Payne Lindsay actually tracked him down for the Tenderfoot series on Ashley for up and vanished.

And by God, Sam actually talks to him.

He confirms that Ashley did come over after she left Vernon's and they spent several days together.

Sam's story goes that Ashley came over to his place after the party.

The two hung out, they did drugs, they were up for days, he says, and every now and then she would just disappear on him, although he didn't know where she went or what she was doing.

But by the morning of the 11th, he says that he wanted her to go home, not because they had a fight or anything, but because he was worried about her.

He says he wanted her to head home, go to bed and come down from whatever they were on.

But he said that she didn't want to go home.

Eventually, they hopped in his car and he started driving her toward Browning because he lived in a town called Bab, which is just like a little over a half an hour to the northwest. But before they could get there, he claims that Ashley makes him pull over to the side of the road.

She gets out saying that she was getting a ride with someone else, this guy known as V-Dog.

Then she asks if he knew where this cabin was, like this random cabin in the woods nearby, which apparently he did know the location of, so he points her in that direction and told her that there's this trail that leads up to it.

And that's the last thing he remembers because after that, he says he leans back in his seat and then just passes out.

Just passed out there on the road in his car?

Yeah, he told Payton that he was just like so tired because he hadn't slept and his days of partying finally caught up to him.

So he's just like out cold.

And by the time he wakes up, Ashley's just gone.

Okay, okay.

So on a scale of one to ten, how much do we believe this guy?

Because if I'm honest, I'm at like a five at best.

It's a little too convenient, right?

Yeah.

There is at least one semi-trueful part to it because the guy known as V-Dog actually is a real person.

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He's Paul Valenzuela, a guy who lives in Browning for part of the year.

And this isn't just anybody.

This is somebody who actually has a connection to Ashley in more ways than one.

V-Dog and Ashley were reported to have been romantically involved either before or during the time she went missing.

But here's the twist.

He's also married to Ashley and Kimberly's cousin, a woman named Tashina Running Crane, who goes by T.

So did T know they were involved?

Hmm, TBD on that.

Their marriage was definitely shaky to say the least.

And based on everything I read, I'm pretty sure that T knew Paul was up to something with someone.

But she later claims that she only found out about the affair after Ashley went missing.

But again, TBD, a lot of this stuff in his cases, he said.

She said they said, ugh, it's messy.

Anyway, Paul also has a criminal history.

According to a post on Justice for Native People from June of 2017, he had been convicted in the past for burglary and weapons charges.

Okay, so where was he when all of this was happening?

Well, so according to some of T's Facebook posts, he and T were in Seattle around the time that Ashley went missing.

Although by the 11th, he had left T there and theoretically would have had time to make it back to Browning by the time Sam says that Ashley was going to meet up with him.

So Kimberly reaches out to her cousin T to see, like, you know, is this real?

Is this not real?

And T tells her that, yeah, Paul did pick up Ashley and gave her a ride to this other nearby town.

So T says to Kimberly, like, you should call Paul if you want more details.

So she does.

And according to the Up in Vanish podcast, Paul, quote unquote, blew up on her.

Like he was super angry and accused T of lying about him.

So he didn't give her a ride?

I think that's what he's saying.

Yeah.

Okay, then why would T lie about it?

Hold that thought.

I will get back to it, but I need to tell you something else first.

Okay.

So by June 27th, Blackfeet law enforcement finally registers Ashley as a missing person and they start participating in the searches that Kimberly's been organizing.

And the next day they have a breakthrough.

During a search of the land around Sam's house, they find a tattered gray sweater and a pair of boots, both look to be in Ashley's size and both have what looks like blood on

them.

Some of my source material says that only the boots have blood stains on them.

But either way, this is the first solid physical lead that they've had.

Yeah.

Are those the clothes she was last seen in?

Great question.

I actually tried to find that Facebook video of her at the party the last time, you know, we know she's seen to see what she was wearing.

But it turns out that shortly after it was posted, it was actually taken down.

But again, I couldn't confirm it.

That being said, Kimberly later states that someone from the party confirms that it was the sweater she was wearing.

So they turn the sweater and boots over to the tribal police for testing.

But shortly after police get them, the items get quote unquote misplaced.

Misplaced?

Mm hmm.

Okay.

I will never truly understand how something like, you know, actual pieces of physical evidence get quote unquote misplaced.

And certainly not at this point in the investigation, right?

I've heard about people going back to like four year old cases to like see what evidence they have.

And they're like, oh, it got and it's been destroyed because of time.

Blah, blah, blah.

There's a flood.

There's a fire.

We got rid of it.

Yeah.

It's like we're literally out there looking for this girl.

Here's the sweater and somebody loses it in like, I don't know.

To me, this is like very unusual.

So even though she's finally considered missing by law enforcement, this whole sweater and shoes thing doesn't do any favors for the relationship between the family and police.

Because I mean, there will be speculation if they're never going to be able to a hundred percent know if it was blood on those items.

Okay.

But they could have found out if the police didn't lose them.

I mean, exactly.

So it's frustrating.

That being said, it is a good thing that police are involved now.

Because according to reporting by Evan Simon, Jessica Hopper, Aiman McNiff and Ali Yang for ABC News, it's around this time that Kimberly gets a bunch of texts from Tee out of nowhere saying that Paul has Ashley in a hotel room in the town of Shelby, like an hour away.

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Has her like as a hostage.

So it's unclear what she means by has her.

But Tee even has the room number that they're staying in.

And she says that Ashley's hair has been dyed blonde.

She goes on to tell Kimberly to call the police, get police out there ASAP, which of course she does.

And the Bureau of Indian Affairs is called as well.

And they are the ones who send officers to Shelby.

So you can imagine Kimberly's whole family is waiting with bated breath, praying that this is real, praying she's alive that they found her.

And when the BIA gets there, they find Paul.

The woman with the dyed blonde hair is not Ashley.

It's Tee.

What?

Yeah.

Tee's the one who messaged Kimberly in the first place.

So yeah, she was what, just pretending to be Ashley?

I don't even think that's it.

I don't know that she was pretending to be Ashley.

Like I don't think when they got there that she was trying to convince them she was Ashley.

But I don't know to your point.

I don't know why she would try and convince Kimberly that Ashley was with Paul because it's her, right?

Like they're going to know right away.

Right.

What's the point of this?

What's she trying to get at?

I don't know.

Kimberly and her family think maybe the purpose was to either like just play around.

Like this is just some kind of twisted joke or they think maybe it was to try and throw everyone off because she knows something about what really happened to Ashley.

I don't know.

But for what it's worth, I mean this whole time the rumor mill in Browning continues.

And as people are talking, it really seems to be like the latter is the general consensus that basically Tee, Paul, Sam or a combination of all three killed Ashley or knows what happened to her.

And some people say that maybe Tee killed her because she found out about the affair between Ashley and Paul.

Some people say that Paul took Ashley to a trailer that he was renovating and then she got in a fight with Tee there.

Others say that Sam killed her and then just claimed that she got a ride with Paul to cover his tracks.

And then there's also all of these other weird rumors.

Not so much about Ashley directly, but like weird.



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And weird isn't even the right word.  
Like this is shady.  
It's stuff around Sam.  
They say that a few of Sam's neighbors tell Kimberly that they'd sometimes see girls running away from his home completely naked before Ashley went missing.  
It feels like an important thing to bring up to someone.  
But apparently no one ever did anything.  
Kimberly says the neighbors told tribal officials, but I guess no one ever did anything.  
And to be clear, these allegations have not been proven.  
They're all just rumors and speculation.  
But throughout all of it, Kimberly and her family keep doing everything they can to bring Ashley home.  
They start a Facebook page.  
They put up posters, organize search after search after search.  
And it is actually on one of those searches, which takes place sometime before July 7th, that they go to that trailer where Ashley was rumored to have been staying with Paul.  
Somehow they get permission to search it and they actually go with this group.  
Kimberly says in Up and Vanish that by the time they get there, it looks like the walls had just been painted and parts of the floor had been ripped up because I guess Paul had been like renovating.  
But inside the trailer, they find something else that Kimberly believes to be Ashley's.  
There are a pair of bloody shorts.  
Now again, we don't 100% know what she was wearing when she disappeared.  
But Kimberly is sure that these shorts belong to her sister.  
This isn't near Sam's place, right?  
So not where they found the sweater and the boots?  
No, no, this is a completely different place.  
So those shorts are collected for testing.  
And then it's on another search, which happens around July 7th, that things take a turn.  
You see, Kimberly is searching another area with an officer from Ponderade County when a call comes in.  
This officer is told to drop what he's doing and head to Paul's trailer, the same trailer that they found the shorts, because apparently Tee just set that trailer on fire.  
In Up and Vanished, Tee explains that she and Paul were getting divorced and he was trying to kick her out of the trailer.  
So in retaliation, she just set it on fire.  
But as you can imagine, the fire just makes the two of them look more suspicious to the public.  
Uh, yeah, like they were trying to get rid of evidence.  
Yeah, bingo.  
That being said, though, like it seems like firefighters got there pretty quickly.  
I don't know who called them, who alerted them the fire, whatever.  
But basically it was just the kitchen that had the majority of the damage.  
And if it's searched for any evidence, they must not find anything suspicious.

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Or if they do, that's never been reported.

Now the rest of July goes by without any new leads.

And by August, a task force is formed by Blackfeet Law Enforcement that's dedicated to finding Ashleigh.

So what's the reason for putting a task force together?

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for it.

But I feel like we usually only hear about this happening when different agencies are like pooling resources and working together or there's a serial killer or something.

You know, you actually make a good point.

And I mean, there is more than one agency involved here, because in addition to Blackfeet Law Enforcement, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is involved too, which now might be a good time to explain just how like the jurisdictions work on reservations because it is all kinds of messed up.

So we actually talked a little bit about this, Brett, I don't know if you remember in our March 2022 headlines episode, I think, but here's the lowdown.

So reservations are considered sovereign nations.

But jurisdiction gets muddy in situations like these because you don't just have Blackfeet Law Enforcement.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs is involved too.

You have two different agencies trying to work this case.

And then if the FBI gets involved, which they're not at the moment, but spoiler alert, they will be later on, now you've got three different agencies.

So the question of who does what and what information goes where, all of that gets really murky.

Which is also not what we need here.

I mean, they go from not having enough people to even do an investigation to suddenly having too many and things start slipping through their cracks.

Right.

But I mean, I think there's a caveat too, because it's not even that it's like so many people, they actually need more bodies.

But it's just like, who's in charge?

Who's running the show?

Who has what information?

And are we sharing properly?

And things would be so much easier, actually, if Blackfeet Law Enforcement could hire more officers.

I mean, this reservation is pretty vast.

It's like 1.5 million acres, basically roughly the size of Delaware.

But according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, there are 15 officers and four sergeants who patrol the entire thing.

What?

Yeah.

15 officers?

For the entire state of Delaware, basically.

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Yeah.

Yeah.

It's going to be impossible to find people.

I mean, they barely have enough officers to do anything.

Exactly.

For that area, they have a Blackfeet Tribal Business Council member interviewed for an ABC News report that says, to at least do their jobs effectively, they need at least like 30 people.

But they get their funding from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and if the BIA doesn't give them the funding that they need to hire more officers, then this cycle just continues.

Well, and I'm sure Ashley's case isn't the only one they're working.

I mean, even if they aren't investigating other missing people, those 15 officers have other responsibilities.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

So that's the background we're dealing with.

They have this task force now, and so they begin conducting interviews.

I'm not sure who all they talk to.

I'm assuming it's probably a bunch of the people from that party, Sam, Paul, T, but I'm not 100 percent sure.

They have been pretty tight lipped about the inner workings of the investigation.

However, despite doing all these interviews, time just keeps passing with no arrests and no new updates until September when T uploads a video to YouTube titled, Set Up.

This recording of a conversation between herself and one of her friends, and in it, she claims that Paul took Ashley and he's trying to set her up.

Like Paul still has Ashley?

Like he's keeping her alive somewhere?

That's unclear.

I mean, what's extremely clear from the video is basically that T feels really manipulated by Paul.

Like, she's like, he is the one who took Ashley in the first place, and I was trying to put all of this on her.

Okay, but I mean, is that what he's trying to set her up for?

Like the disappearance?

I mean, I guess or her murder.

I don't know.

Like she doesn't say, like she doesn't come around and say it.

Okay, but we've heard something like this from T before and it turned out to be fake.

I mean, are we believing her this time or?

I don't know.

To your point, right?

She has lied before and she and Paul had recently got divorced.

So I mean, there's obviously a lot of tension there.

I don't, I don't know.

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She burned their trailer down.

Tension might be a little bit of an understatement.

Fair.

Either way, though, the video they believe is still worth looking into.

Although if she's interviewed about it, it's never been reported on.

And the video is later taken down.

She's not arrested for anything.

But Paul, on the other hand, does get arrested, but on totally unrelated weapons charges.

And while he's in prison, he writes to ABC News saying he knows who killed Ashley.

He's willing to tell them everything as long as they can get him transferred to a different prison.

Which of course, ABC News can't do.

Yeah, zero authority there.

Talking to a journalist isn't going to do anything on that front.

And they tell him as much.

Like they're not even trying to like play games with this guy.

So to absolutely no one's surprise, he declines an interview and just stops contacting them.

Now, it's also around this time that another lead comes in.

Because out of the blue, one of Kimberly's cousins gets a message from a girl in Browning named Rosie.

And all it says is, I had part in her murder.

This is the first time someone's actually saying she's been murdered, not just missing, right?

Yeah, so, I mean, again, we've got like all the bloody clothes and her not coming back has ever,

I think, had everyone fearing that.

But as far as I can tell, this is potentially the first tip where that's being said, like the word murder is actually being used.

Mm-hmm.

So Kimberly's cousin, understandably, freaks out, contacts the task force, who all go talk to Rosie.

But she explains that her Facebook was apparently hacked, and she says she has no idea who wrote that.

Okay, but if someone logged in from another device, that's something that can be tracked.

You'd think?

But like so many other leads in this case, the mystery of who hacked Rosie's account, or if someone hacked it, just becomes a dead end.

And time continues to go by.

There is a reward put up by the Blackfeet tribe for \$6,000,

and by February, the BIA contributes to the fund as well, bringing it up to \$10,000.

But the increased reward money doesn't bring any new tips,

and by March, the FBI officially joins the investigation.

I'm honestly kind of surprised they hadn't gotten involved earlier.

Yeah, apparently the BIA had been like asking for their help for a while,

but now they're stepping in to like completely take over the case,

since they have additional resources, and because they've gotten a few tips coming from outside the reservation,

which neither tribal police nor the BIA can easily investigate on their own.

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Nikki Ouellette reports for Montana Public Radio that Kimberly and the rest of her family welcome the FBI's involvement.

And it seems like they get off to a good start.

Remember the sweater and boots that Kimberly found in like the earliest searches?

Yeah, the ones police just so happened to misplace.

Well, when the FBI takes over, the sweater is found.

That seems convenient.

Yeah, to me, like so many other things in this case, a little too convenient in my opinion, because I think it highlights the potential corruption going on behind the scenes.

According to an episode of Never Seen Again,

it's well known that several members of Blackfeet law enforcement services are corrupt.

They play favorites and they don't do their jobs.

Sam even claims that a few of them are on Paul's payroll.

But as far as I can tell, there's no evidence of that.

But Kimberly is certain that the Blackfeet law enforcement services corruption has directly impacted her sister's case.

For instance, she tells Kate Hodel for her article in The Guardian that the lead Blackfeet law enforcement

investigators started dating Tee after she and Paul got divorced.

And he was like leaking information about the investigation to her.

And again, this is all just hearsay, but it is sketchy.

Now, Tee has never been officially named a person of interest,

but she hasn't been ruled out either.

Now, it also comes to light that the sweater isn't the only thing that was screwed up by the previous investigators.

A reporter named Rachel Crowe Spreading Wings comes forward and says that she might have seen Ashley

just a few weeks after she went missing.

Rachel's a reporter there in Montana and her story goes that she had a day off, so she went for a drive.

In that same episode of Never Seen Again, Rachel explains how berries were in season.

So she went out to this good berry picking spot area, whatever, a little over two hours away from Browning.

Now, she's pulled over to the side of the highway picking berries, living her best life when she heard someone ask her what she was picking.

And when she lifts up her head to look, she sees a young woman who is the spitting image of Ashley.

And she knows this because Rachel was familiar with Ashley's disappearance.

She had actually reported on it.

So she knew right away who she was looking at.

She says the young woman looked a little rough around the edges.

And when Rachel stepped forward to talk to her, she kind of like stepped back a little bit, like she didn't want to get too close.

When Rachel looked past her toward the road, she could see a man standing there.

She describes him between 5'9 and 5'11 wearing dirty clothes.

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And even though he was standing a little ways away, she thinks that man was Paul.

She said he was intimidating.

And from what she could tell, the young woman was afraid of him.

Rachel says that she introduced herself and then this young woman said her name was Ashley.

Now, she didn't give a last name and Rachel didn't ask because she says the man on the road scared her.

And there was something about this whole situation that made her really nervous.

I'm not sure how she left that encounter.

Like if Rachel made an excuse, got in her car and just peaced out or if Ashley and the man drove off first.

But either way, Rachel says she immediately called the police to report what she'd seen.

And wouldn't you know it, one of the people she talks to says there had actually been a sighting of Ashley in another town about an hour and a half ago.

And the timing of these matches up perfectly.

So the place where Rachel was pulled over is basically where these two highways meet.

And the drive from where she was to where this other sighting had been is just about an hour and a half.

Now, when she had originally called police, like she's two hours outside of the reservation, so they actually instructed her to call Blackfeet law enforcement.

She does, she tells them everything she'd seen.

Well, she says that after she reported the sighting, she didn't hear anything back.

She didn't know if they tried to investigate it or what.

So once the FBI took over, she decided to call them just to check on her tip and, you know, what's being done about it.

And the person from the FBI just asks her what tip?

What? They didn't even know about it?

Britt, they hadn't added her tip to the case file.

Are you kidding? That could have been their biggest lead yet.

I wish I was, but I'm not kidding.

The FBI has zero record of her calling with this sighting of Ashley.

Oh, my God.

It's ridiculous.

And right like now, when the FBI is involved, it's weeks later.

And she saw Ashley or potentially Ashley in the middle of nowhere.

So it's not like there are any cameras they could check.

Right.

And weeks later with a car, because she's whoever this woman is is seen with a guy in the car, you could be anywhere.

Yeah.

So that's just a frustrating dead end where had it had been acted on, could have resulted in answers.

Now, meanwhile, Kimberly and her family continue their searches.

And around the one year anniversary of Ashley's disappearance,

she and her family are given permission to search the trailer that Tee had burned.

The same trailer where the shorts were found.

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Right. They're searching it again.

So they head inside, gloves on, plastic bags at the ready to hold anything that they might find.

And they're looking for anything that might tell them what happened that night.

And as they're scouring the floor, one of them spots this tiny spot of discoloration on the carpet behind an old box TV set.

It looks like it could be blood.

Like it's this dark, rusty, reddish brown color.

So they pull out a box cutter and carefully peel back the carpet, revealing a whole splotch of that same reddish brown underneath.

Now, they don't know what this is,

but it is suspicious enough that they remove part of the carpet, seal it in a plastic bag and turn it into police for testing.

I'm glad they collected it.

But is it admissible as evidence?

Oh, I mean, probably not.

But like they got nothing else to go on at this point.

I feel like if I was in the position, I'd be like, what do I have to lose?

Like it's not like police are going to come down and do this for me.

So at least I can try.

I mean, they're desperate for answers.

And they're even more desperate as months just continue to go by and they don't hear anything.

They organize marches.

Kimberly has even quit her job to search for her sister full time.

But they feel like no matter how much they do, nothing happens, which is so frustrating, especially because Ashley is just one of hundreds of missing or murdered Indigenous women whose cases go unsolved.

According to a New York Times analysis of data from the Department of Justice, as told by ABC News, native women are 10 times as likely to be murdered than non-native Americans.

Four in five Native Americans have experienced violence in their lifetime, a statistic that's 52 percent higher than the rest of the American population.

And stats are even more dire for Indigenous women specifically, with 84 percent experiencing violence at some point in their lives.

And 56 percent have experienced sexual violence.

And yet, majority of the time, these crimes aren't prosecuted.

Partially, like I said before, because tribal law enforcement is significantly underfunded, but also because of a ruling from the 70s that prevents tribal officials from bringing criminal charges against non-native people who commit crimes on a reservation.

I want to go into this just a little bit more because it's so bananas.

Brett, I asked you to like dissect all of this and like break it down for us.

Do you want to like give us the lowdown?

Yeah. And I remember learning about this last year in that March headlines episode

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and thinking, I mean, it makes no sense.

It's their land, their jurisdiction.

Like, what's the problem?

So the case you're referencing from the 70s was Oliphant versus Suquamish.

And it basically states that if a non-native person commits a criminal offense against an enrolled member of a Native American nation on a reservation, then tribal law enforcement doesn't have the jurisdiction to arrest or prosecute the perpetrator.

Instead, it goes to state or federal court.

Now, what they can do is investigate and detail non-native people based on a 2021 ruling, but there's only so much they can do.

And actually, it's so wild.

This even counts for things like traffic tickets.

I mean, if someone's passing through a reservation and they get pulled over for speeding, someone from outside the reservation has to be called over to the scene to actually give that person a ticket even.

This is bananas.

Like, if you go to another country and you commit a crime, they have no problem.

Like, you get prosecuted by that country.

Yeah. I, like, this never ceases to amaze me.

It is, it is wild.

And also, like, if a Native person came into, like, federal or state jurisdictions and did something, our agencies would have no problem arresting them.

It seems like total bullshit, right?

Right. Like, it doesn't go both ways.

It doesn't make sense.

Now, I don't know that this necessarily applies to Ashley's case, unless there is, right, this, like, completely unknown scenario to us, because everyone we've talked about so far in Ashley's case is a registered member of Blackfeet Nation.

But I mean, Kimberly and her family, as they've taken this on, they find themselves in the middle of a fight for justice for all Indigenous people.

In fact, on December 12th of 2018,

Kimberly testifies before Congress about her sister's disappearance and the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women on the Blackfeet Reservation.

She makes this powerful statement about how her sister's investigation was messed up from the beginning,

how lead after lead wasn't properly followed up on,

and she ends by saying, quote,

we will no longer be the invisible people in the United States of America.

We have worth, end quote.

Over the next few months, there are a few leads

that all seem promising, but turn out not to take the investigation anywhere.



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For instance, human remains are found on the reservation the day after Kimberly's statement, and everyone, like, their immediate thought is that Ashley's finally been found. But Edward F. O'Brien reported for a Montana Public Radio that by February of 2019, the FBI announces that it is not her, and the remains are likely ancient and from an adult male. Time continues to pass, and on January 18th, 2020, Kimberly and Ashley's dad passes away without ever knowing what happened to his daughter. But at his funeral, Kimberly gets this tip that this man known as Big Al knows what happened to her sister. Now, Big Al is the nickname of a local man named Alvin Dog-Taking Gun. But before she can really even process this information, Big Al is found murdered in, like, a horrific way. Like, his torso is found just outside of Browning. Oh, my God. And just like in Ashley's disappearance, all of a sudden, these rumors start immediately swirling around who did it. And also, like in Ashley's case, people focus in on a few people pretty quickly. This set of brothers, Jerry and Jason Mattson. The Mattson brothers were known around Browning as being pretty violent. In fact, back in 2013, they'd gotten into an argument with Ashley's boyfriend at the time. And actually, the brothers had shot at Ashley and her boyfriend. So once they're rumored to be involved in Big Al's murder, Ashley gets pulled into it as well. However, Big Al's murder gets solved relatively quickly. Like, Jason calls police a few days later on March 10th. He confesses to the crime. So is there a chance he was involved in Ashley's disappearance? I mean, at this point, it seems like they're not related. Again, this is such a small area. I told you, everyone knows everyone and has a connection to somebody who knows everyone. You know what I mean? Right, right. And I think because they had that altercation or interaction, whatever, back in 2013, like speculation was bound to happen. So it's 2021 when Payne Lindsay and the rest of the Tenderfoot team come in and take a look at Ashley's case for their podcast Up and Vanished, which, if you couldn't tell, was one of the main sources for this episode. They took a deep dive into her case and they were able to uncover a ton that just was not reported on. Like, for instance, Ashley was pregnant at the time she went missing. Holy s\*\*\*, do we know who the father was? The father has never been publicly named

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and her family doesn't think that he was at all involved in her murder, which is probably why he's never appeared in any reporting up to this podcast aired in September. I think it was like, yeah, September 2021.

OK, but could her pregnancy have anything to do with her disappearance, though? I don't know.

I mean, it doesn't seem like her family thinks so.

So I would say based on everything I've read and listened to and consumed, probably not.

Now, as part of their renewed investigation,

Payne reaches out to everyone that we have heard about so far, Sam, Paul, T.

And they still basically all blame each other.

T tells him that she was with a friend when Ashley disappeared, so she couldn't be involved.

She also says that she took a polygraph back in 2018.

But then when she's asked if she passed or failed, she says she doesn't know because they never told her.

Now, Sam blames Paul and Paul's son,

whereas Paul just says that he had nothing to do with it.

He didn't see Ashley all around the time she disappeared the end.

So here's where Ashley's case stands today.

It is still under the FBI's jurisdiction.

And although things like the sweater were sent off for testing,

I can't find any reporting on what the results were.

Well, what about that piece of carpet her parents collected from the trailer?

Yeah, I don't even know if that was actually sent for testing, much less what the results are.

Great. What about trying to track down her phone records or anything?

I feel like that would be a great place to start since Kimberly said Ashley was always on social media.

I mean, I agree to me.

What's so frustrating about this case is a lot to do with the timeline, right? Because even when you look at T, who's like, oh, I was with a friend when she disappeared.

In my mind, I'm like, I don't know when she disappeared, right?

Like, I was going to say, but when did she disappear?

We don't even know that.

Yeah, there is there are so many,

even after the whole up and vanished team went out there.

There are still so many holes in this case

because of investigators keeping things close to the vest,

people not opening up or blame each other or lying or whatever.

So do they have their phone records?

I don't know. Couldn't find any mention of it.

I'd like to think that they have that,

especially when the FBI took over,

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because we know that they have the resources to do that.  
But there is just next to nothing when it comes to what they've done  
to try and find her so far.  
Ashley's case is one with a lot of twists and turns.  
Every lead feels like it could be the one that breaks the case,  
but all we're left with are dead ends.  
Her family is still wondering where she is.  
And Kimberly, for one, won't stop searching for answers  
until she brings her sister home.  
And in honor of missing and murdered Indigenous persons Awareness Day,  
Audio Chuck is supporting an amazing nonprofit organization  
that focuses on supporting and advocating for missing and murdered Indigenous women.  
The National Indigenous Women's Resource Center is dedicated  
to ending violence against Native women and children,  
while also providing resources and support to families and communities  
who have lost or are missing a loved one.  
If you or someone you know is in need of their services,  
you can visit [www.niwrc.org](http://www.niwrc.org).  
And if you're wanting to help this incredible organization  
make a difference for these tribal communities,  
we'll have a direct link to their donation page in our show notes.  
If you guys want to take a deep dive into Ashley's case,  
I recommend going and listening to Season 3 of Up and Vanished.  
You can find all of our source material on our website,  
[crimejunkiepodcast.com](http://crimejunkiepodcast.com).  
And you can follow us on Instagram at [crimejunkiepodcast](https://www.instagram.com/crimejunkiepodcast).  
We'll be back next week with a brand new episode.  
Crimejunkie is an audio-chuck production.  
So, what do you think, Chuck? Do you approve?