

UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | WHO KILLED KIA?

S1E31 Transcript

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: There's a living room area where several papers and her passport was ripped up and left on the floor. The scene suggested to us someone who was very, very angry. I walked into that apartment. I 100% believed that it would be solved, and that it would be solved within a relatively short amount of time. Tearing up her belongings and old letters that were very, very old, had nothing to do with anything. Her passport that almost suggested that the person had some type of animosity towards her for her travels. We never thought it was staged. The scene does suggest that there was some passion involved, that the person was very, very upset with her. To our knowledge, Markia did not give a key to her apartment to anyone.

NARRATION: ON THE MORNING OF MARCH 30TH, 2016, 36-YEAR-OLD MARKIA BENSON TEXTS HER MOTHER AS SHE'S GETTING READY TO LEAVE FOR WORK AND EVERYTHING SEEMS PERFECTLY NORMAL. BUT LATER THAT AFTERNOON, MARKIA'S EMPLOYER CALLS CONCERNED, BECAUSE MARKIA NEVER SHOWED UP FOR WORK, AND SHE'S NOT RESPONDING TO TEXTS OR CALLS. A CO-WORKER AND MARKIA'S BOYFRIEND HEAD TO HER APARTMENT TO CHECK UP ON HER, WITH NO IDEA THAT THEY'RE ABOUT TO WALK INTO AN INCREDIBLY DISTURBING CRIME SCENE.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "WHO KILLED KIA?"

MONIQUE BENSON: I was at work. My mother called me around three, I guess, and says, "I don't want to upset you, but I got a call from Markia's job, and they said that she didn't come to work today. And she didn't call out." And so, I said, "Well, has anybody tried to call her?" And she says, "I've been trying to call her and I'm not getting an answer." And as soon as she said that, my stomach sank.

NARRATION: 45-YEAR- OLD MONIQUE BENSON HAS A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH HER YOUNGER SISTER MARKIA, EVEN THOUGH THEY LIVE NEARLY 800 MILES APART – MONIQUE IN ATLANTA AND MARKIA IN THE WEST PHILADELPHIA SUBURB OF UPPER DARBY. WHEN HER MOTHER CALLS, MONIQUE FEELS HELPLESS BEING SO FAR AWAY.

MONIQUE BENSON: So, I'm kind of freaking out because I know that this isn't her M.O. It's not her normal for her. My mother seems to remember their last text was around 8AM. And her boyfriend stated the same. And he said he texted her a little later than that, and she didn't respond. But he just assumed she was busy at work and she would get back to him whenever she was free. But now, that is not a normal thing for her, like, because if she's working or whatever she's doing, and she can't get right back to you, she will text, or whatever.

NARRATION: AT AROUND 4:30PM, A CO-WORKER AND MARKIA'S BOYFRIEND ARRIVE SEPARATELY TO HER APARTMENT. THEY SEE HER CAR IN THE PARKING LOT AND ASSUME SHE MUST BE HOME, BUT WHEN THEY KNOCK ON HER DOOR, NO ONE ANSWERS, AND IT'S LOCKED TIGHT.

MONIQUE BENSON: So, they go to the main office and ask a manager that they're doing a welfare check, and that they'd like to go in. And as they open the door, they can tell that there was some form

of struggle in the house. There's papers ripped up and dispersed. There's dining room table chairs turned over, some personal paperwork, it was pulled out and looked like it was rifled through. And it was very humid in the apartment. The boyfriend, as he walked past the bathroom, he heard the water running. And he walked into the bathroom and found her in the tub. Maybe somewhere around 5, 5:30, the phone rings and my mother is crying. And she says to me, "They found her, and they found her dead," and it was devastating. I have been through a lot of my 49 years and I will tell you, I have never felt anything like that in my life, and I hope I will never have to do it again. It was one of the worst days of my life.

NARRATION: TO HER TIGHT-KNIT FAMILY, MARKIA'S DEATH IS A TRAGIC LOSS BEYOND COMPREHENSION. SHE WAS KNOWN AS THE STRONG ONE OF THE THREE SISTERS, AN INTELLIGENT, BEAUTIFUL, AND WITTY WOMAN.

MONIQUE BENSON: It's funny. Monica and I laugh about it all the time in that, she was the baby, and she had accomplished more than Monica and I had in her short 36 years. She had self-educated, you know, put herself through college. We dubbed her the Career College student, because every time you turned around, she was in, taking a class for one thing or another. She had travelled. She had been to Germany, Mexico, and Milan, and she had really good jobs. And she had had two cars and she was the youngest of us to purchase her first home, and things that really kind of made Monica and I aspire to. Life would tell you, you know, the oldest would be the one to make the accomplishments and the younger will follow. And for us, it was the complete opposite. She was the one who inspired us.

NARRATION: AT MARKIA'S APARTMENT, THE INVESTIGATION INTO THE SAVAGE MURDER BEGINS. WILLIAM SMINKEY IS THE DETECTIVE SERGEANT ASSIGNED TO THE CASE FOR THE UPPER DARBY TOWNSHIP POLICE DEPARTMENT.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: I was just starting my 4PM to midnight shift when we received a call that there was a, uh, deceased person out at a, an apartment complex on the, on the west end of town.

NARRATION: THE DIVERSE AREA OF UPPER DARBY TYPICALLY AVERAGES FEWER THAN TEN HOMICIDES A YEAR. MOST ARE GUN RELATED. SO, WHEN DETECTIVE SMINKEY FIRST ENTERS MARKIA'S APARTMENT, HE IMMEDIATELY REALIZES THIS IS NOT A TYPICAL CRIME SCENE.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: Upon entering the apartment, there was steam in the room, beads of water running down the wall, suggesting that the water was running most of the day. I mean, she was found at 4:46PM and it was probably the better part of, uh, 12 or so hours that the, uh, water was running. So there was, it was very hot, very steamy. When she was located in the tub, she was nude, laying on her back, face up with her head under the spigot. Markia's cause of death was determined to be blunt and sharp force head and neck injuries, complicated by immersion, and extensive scold burns. That suggests to me that she was possibly still alive when she was put in the tub and then ultimately died of the blunt and sharp force trauma to her head. We had a similar case where there was a claw hammer used, and I would say her injuries to her head are consistent with that. Now we can't say for certain that that's what was used, but something similar to a hammer-type object. In all likelihood, the murder weapon was brought by the killer and taken with him when he left.

NARRATION: SPLATTERS OF BLOOD IN MARKIA'S BEDROOM HELP TELL THE STORY OF THE VICIOUS AND DEADLY ASSAULT UNLEASHED EARLIER THAT DAY.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: There's blood on her pillow, and on the mattress, and on the wall. First, we did some blood spatter analysis which determined the attack took place in and around the bed. There was not a major sign of struggle. There was no lamps knocked over, nothing that suggested a knockdown, drag out fight. Her fingernails, at the time, were not that long, so there wasn't a guarantee that the person would have been scratched during a struggle. And then, she was more than likely unconscious and dragged out of her bedroom and into the bathroom, which is just the next door out of the bedroom so it's not a far distance, and she was placed in the tub, and then the killer turned on the shower which was determined to be only hot water, so there was scalding hot water turned on her while she was in the tub and left running until she was discovered later that day.

NARRATION: THE ONE CLUE THAT INVESTIGATORS FIND THE MOST EERIE AND REVEALING IS A CRUDE MESSAGE SCRAWLED THROUGHOUT THE APARTMENT IN RED LIPSTICK.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: It was one word. It was written three times on two walls in the living room and on a painting in the bathroom. The same word, obviously derogatory towards women. Where the words were written on the wall, we attempted to lift latent fingerprints using a few different methods. We attempted latent prints on the lipstick container, as well as DNA evidence from the lipstick container and several other items that we believed may have been touched in the apartment. As far as the results, the quality of the results of those examinations is not where we need them to be.

NARRATION: IT IS CLEAR THAT THIS WAS MORE THAN JUST A MURDER. IT WAS AN ATTEMPT BY THE KILLER TO BRUTALLY HUMILIATE AND DESECRATE HIS VICTIM.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: The scene suggested to us someone that was very angry. There's a living room area where several papers, and her passport was ripped up and left on the floor. To the left of that is the kitchen where her trash can was dumped over. So, trash was all over the floor, tearing up her belongings and old letters that were very, very old, had nothing to do with anything. Her passport that almost suggested that the person had some type of animosity towards her for her travels. We never thought it was staged. The scene does suggest that there was some passion involved, that the person was very, very upset with her. No forced entry was seen. The door was intact. The sliding glass door was closed and locked. To our knowledge, Markia did not give a key to her apartment to anyone. As far as we know, no one had access to her apartment other than her. The fact that there was no forced entry and she doesn't give out keys to her apartment suggests that she knew the person that killed her and she, more than likely, invited them in.

NARRATION: DETECTIVE SMINKEY IS ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN SPEAKING WITH MARKIA'S BOYFRIEND, ONE OF TWO PEOPLE WHO DISCOVERED HER BODY.

MONIQUE BENSON: So, they took him right from the scene to the police district and questioned him right away, 'cuz he was the last guy that she was in a relationship with.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: They dated since 2013. So, they were on and off for about three years. He was last with Markia on Sunday, March 27th, when they went to the movies. He was last at her apartment approximately two weeks prior. So, he, he really didn't have any motive. As far as everyone knew, they were, they were getting along and there were no issues. He did provide DNA and fingerprints. He also consented to a forensic extraction of his cellphone. On the 30th, he dropped his son off at school that morning and went to his place of employment, where he owned an auto body repair shop. He fully cooperated with the, uh, investigation, and there's nothing to suggest that he was involved.

MONIQUE BENSON: He was never suspect for us because we saw how he was with her, how loving he was with her, how gentle he was with her. If you're paying attention, you could kind of pick up, really, where that person is coming from, the type of person it is, that person's characteristics, and those kinds of things. And so, we had that opportunity with the most recent boyfriend.

NARRATION: INVESTIGATORS KNOW THAT FAMILY AND CLOSE FRIENDS MAY NOT BE AWARE OF ALL THE PEOPLE IN MARKIA'S LIFE, SO DETECTIVE SMINKEY TURNS TO THE ONE PIECE OF EVIDENCE THAT MIGHT HELP UNLOCK THE IDENTITY OF THE KILLER: MARKIA'S CELL PHONE.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: We believed that that would be a very crucial piece in the investigation because we believe that she knew her attacker. Unfortunately, under forensic examination, her cell phone was encrypted. We couldn't crack the encryption at that time, in 2016. That was not a possibility. We have since sent the phone out in attempts, with new technology, and have still been unsuccessful at this time. We could pull records. We could see some activity, nothing that would suggest that there was a fight or an argument over the phone, and then, you know, an hour later she was dead. We could match up phone numbers with who she was texting and speaking with. But again, it wasn't enough to make an arrest. It was another piece of the puzzle, but didn't get us where we needed to be.

NARRATION: USING PHONE RECORDS, ALONG WITH INTERVIEWS OF FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS, POLICE ARE ABLE TO PUT TOGETHER A TIMELINE OF THE HOURS LEADING UP TO MARKIA'S MURDER ON MARCH 30TH.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: We were able to determine a general timeframe of when she got home after work. She texted the gentlemen that she was seeing at about 6:21PM on the 29th. She said she had some homework and had some studying to do, and she stopped at a local restaurant to pick up takeout dinner. She went home. According to the cell phone records, she last texted an ex-boyfriend at 7:27PM. Now, the early morning, at about 8:12, she received a text message from her mother which she responded to which they believed to be an appropriate response from her. So, it was most likely Markia responding, and that's the last activity. So, we kind of have a timeframe from around 8:12 in the morning, and then we've, she's found that 4:46PM. We believe she was murdered in the early morning hours, based on the steam and the temperature in the apartment. There's a chance this person came there while she was getting ready for work. She allowed them in, and then the attack happened. She could have been awake and up, but forced onto the bed where she was assaulted. But either way, we believe it to be a surprise attack because she, we believe, she would have fought and someone would've heard it. It was very brazen for someone to do what they did, and they most likely

were leaving in the broad daylight with several people in the complex leaving for work. The issue for us was, it's such a, a big complex and people are always in and out. I guess it's quite possible that they blended in with the foot traffic of the morning. We did several canvasses the days following, trying to see people going to work, if they notice anyone that didn't look like they belonged and, uh, we came up unsuccessful.

NARRATION: POLICE ALSO CHECK THE VIDEO SURVEILLANCE FOOTAGE FROM BUILDINGS IN THE AREA AROUND MARKIA'S APARTMENT, BUT SEE NO SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY. THEY NOW DO A DEEPER DIVE INTO MARKIA'S PERSONAL LIFE. FRIENDS AND FAMILY RECALL MARKIA MENTIONING THAT SHE HAD SOME UNCOMFORTABLE INTERACTIONS WITH A MAN WHO LIVED IN THE SAME APARTMENT COMPLEX. IN FACT, HE LIVED DIRECTLY ACROSS THE HALL.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: The neighbor was described as a strange gentleman, strange personality. We did speak with him at his place of employment. When we told them why we were there, and what it was regarding, he was shocked to hear that Markia was killed. He said that he moved into the apartment around November of 2015. He was separated from his wife, so he got an apartment there. He said he came across Markia in the hallway, but never knew her name and never really, uh, hung out. That differs from what she told family members. She apparently told several people that the guy that lived across the hall from her, in her words, was creepy. He, according to Markia, knocked on her apartment door with a bottle of wine and a couple glasses, uh, and from what she told family members, she didn't want to be rude, so she did have a glass of wine with him. But he does not indicate that that took place, which is inconsistent with what she told family and friends, but not overly surprising that he would not mention that. He had reconciled with his wife and had moved back home. He was cooperative. He was not asked to give a polygraph. We spoke with his wife and his employer and determined that he was at home on the 29th, 30th and at work, we were able to confirm that, and the neighbor is no longer a suspect.

NARRATION: INVESTIGATORS ULTIMATELY FOCUS ON ONE PERSON FROM MARKIA'S PAST WHO WAS MENTIONED IN MANY OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: We spoke with several people that pointed out that, as soon as they heard, one person came into mind, and that was a common theme with some of the people we spoke with, which was an ex-boyfriend that she dated from around 2009 to 2013. Many people said that he was physically and emotionally abusive towards Markia during their timeframe. My understanding is that she tried to make it work as long as she could, and she just couldn't deal with him as a boyfriend anymore. I think, once she got a job and she was kind of doing her own thing and really thriving in life, she finally recognized that, you know, I don't need him anymore. That's kind of the, my understanding of how their relationship went.

MONIQUE BENSON: We did not believe he was a good guy for her. We were not in agreement with how he treated her, how he manipulated her, how he spoke negatively and derogatory things to her. We knew it was just a very toxic situation for her. With everything that Markia had going on in her life, positively, she struggled with some self-esteem issues, and certain areas she struggled with some self-confidence. And so, I believe, him knowing that, he used that against her, sadly enough. I personally

never officially met him. My mother never officially met him. There have been multiple events in our family that she had wanted him to attend, because they've been together two years, or whatever. And like, nobody's never seen him. We didn't have that opportunity because he didn't give it to us. He didn't come around. And so, when you think about somebody who is an abuser on any level, they are isolated, and they try to isolate their victim from those who love them.

NARRATION: MARKIA HAD ENDED THE RELATIONSHIP THREE YEARS EARLIER, IN 2013, AROUND THE TIME SHE STARTED DATING HER MOST RECENT BOYFRIEND. BUT INVESTIGATORS LEARN THAT, JUST A FEW WEEKS BEFORE HER MURDER, MARKIA HAD BEEN TALKING TO HER EX-BOYFRIEND ONCE AGAIN.

MONIQUE BENSON: I don't know what he said, what was said, what conversations were had that she decided that she would entertain conversations with him again. But clearly, she decided that, and I'm not even clear on how long they had been communicating prior to our knowledge. And again, we don't know any of this until literally right before she ends up dead. Maybe she knew that, what our reaction would be and so something she knew not to share with us. Even though she made a conscious, logical decision to walk away from it, her heart was still there, unfortunately, and I don't want to make excuses, but if you've ever truly loved someone, or deeply cared for someone, it's not easy to just turn that off.

NARRATION: BEFORE DETECTIVE SMINKEY HAS A CHANCE TO TRACK DOWN THE EX-BOYFRIEND, HE SHOWS UP AT THE POLICE STATION, CLAIMING HE HEARD ABOUT MARKIA'S DEATH ON THE NEWS.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: At around noon on the 31st, he came into police headquarters, unsolicited, and wanted to know what was going on with the investigation. We did not even know much about him, but for someone to come in unsolicited is almost unheard of. He was cooperative. He gave us his consent for a cell phone extraction. He gave us his fingerprints. He gave us a DNA sample. His head was freshly shaved, and he had, like, a little bit of, like, razor burn on the back of his neck. We did take pictures of his body. He had no injuries. He also provided a statement to detectives. The evening of the 17th, when they got together for some drinks, he says he was there for about two hours when Markia told him that, "You can just go. We're done," almost indicating, like, they were done for good. Like, she was no longer interested in having any type of relationship with him. He said that they had an argument over the phone on Saturday the 26th about not hanging out and him being distant. They then said that they were going to hang out on Tuesday the 29th. He's unable to provide any details about where he is on the 29th, but he does say that he texted her at 6:30 on the 29th saying that he was tied up and they, he couldn't hang out. He can tell us on the 30th, the day of the murder, that at 1:30, he goes to a local restaurant, and he can tell us exactly what he ordered. He says he drove around and ate his lunch, he just drove around aimlessly. That evening, he goes to another local restaurant sits at the bar and has a couple glasses of wine. Both of those were confirmed through, uh, surveillance video that he was in those places.

NARRATION: POLICE GAIN ACCESS TO THE EX-BOYFRIEND'S PHONE AND SEARCH HIS TEXTS AND PHONE ACTIVITY FOR EVIDENCE TO CORROBORATE HIS STORY.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: There were some text messages on Tuesday the 29th at 7:28pm. He did text her indicating that he couldn't hang out with her. And then there's no activity on his phone for several hours after that, until the late morning of the 30th, when Markia was killed. On the 30th, he left her four voicemails. One at 1:18pm, another at 5:29pm, 6:03pm and 10:13pm. All growing increasingly angry, like, "Why won't you answer the phone? Why are you doing this?" Almost staging the voicemails as if he thought that she would respond. So, we were asking him about why there was no activity, very long period of time for someone not to be on their phone when there's a lot of activity every other time. So, just some inconsistency there. He also voluntarily agreed to take a polygraph, which we allowed him to take. The phrase used by polygraph examiners is "indicated deception" on several of the questions. The results were reviewed by another examiner, and he also determined that deception was indicated. He came off to me as, like, total sociopath, zero conscience, and kind of acts like he owns the room. He's very calm, very emotionless. He didn't cry at any point. He showed no emotion about Markia. The only time he'd get upset is when we pressed him about the inconsistencies in his statements. Very antisocial, doesn't really speak with anyone, very limited contact with family and friends. So, we believe that his motive was that if he couldn't have her, then no one could.

NARRATION: MARKIA'S EX-BOYFRIEND SEEMS TO HAVE A CLEAR MOTIVE AND INCONSISTENCIES IN HIS ALIBI, BUT DETECTIVES STILL DON'T HAVE ENOUGH EVIDENCE TO MAKE AN ARREST.

DETECTIVE SMINKEY: He's still a person of interest. We know he's still in the area. He has been arrested for DUI, but nothing of violence. We're coming up on five years since Markia was murdered, and we have some evidence, but we're looking for some corroboration of that evidence. Someone that saw something, maybe someone that he has spoken to since, and confided in about what happened, or a version of what happened. We're just unable to file charges at this time, with what we have. We're just looking for a little bit more. What bothers me most about this case is, when I walked into that apartment, I 100% believed that it would be solved, and that it would be solved within a relatively short amount of time. And the fact that we don't have enough evidence to file charges is very, very upsetting. Markia was, by everyone's description, just a beautiful human being. Does what you're supposed to do. Goes to work, travels, living a beautiful life – the epitome of an innocent victim. She did nothing to deserve this. She comes from a beautiful family. They're awesome people. And it pains me that I haven't made an arrest for them, and for Markia, and to bring closure. And to know that the person that brought so much pain to their lives is still out there walking the streets, it keeps me up at night. And it's very, very upsetting for a detective to not be able to do that for a family of a purely innocent victim.

NARRATION: FOR MARKIA'S SISTERS, MONIQUE AND MONICA, THEIR CLOSE-KNIT FAMILY HAS BEEN THE CORNERSTONE OF THEIR WORLD. THEY TRY TO STAY POSITIVE AND KEEP THEIR YOUNGER SISTER'S MEMORY ALIVE.

MONIQUE BENSON: Monica and I have made a vow to always honor Markia in everything that we do, so that her memory stays alive. We celebrate her birthday every year, and we go to her plot, and we got flowers and her, yellow was her favorite color. So, we always put yellow flowers down based on the season and here we are five years later. So, we try to live from a place of positivity in regard to her. And whatever we do, and however we do it, we do it with her legacy in mind. That's all we can do.

NARRATION: IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ON THE MURDER OF MARKIA BENSON, LEAVE AN ANONYMOUS TIP AT PASSCRIMESTIPS@udpd.org, 610-734-3439 OR GO TO UNSOLVED.COM.

NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES...

BRYAN DENSON: These were really smart people. They were really successful at building fire bombs that really worked. As they progressed, they also were being evermore careful to avoid being caught by circumstantial evidence such as DNA.

—

Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13. It is executive produced by Terry Dunn Meurer and Chris Corcoran. Produced by Lloyd Lochridge, Christine Lenig, Courtney Ennis, Paige Hymson and Paul Yates. The Story Producer for this episode was Molly Ryan, and it was edited by Ryan Dann.

From Cadence 13, editing, mixing and mastering by Chris Basil, Andy Jaskiewicz and Bill Schultz. Production support by Sean Cherry and Ian Mandt. Artwork and design is by Curt Courtenay. Publicity by Josefina Francis and Hillary Schupf.

The original theme music was composed by Gary Malkin and Michael Boyd.

THANKS FOR LISTENING TO EPISODE 31 OF UNSOLVED MYSTERIES.