

MAD LOVE Series: THE VALESSA ROBINSON CASE: A Special Report

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From their cells came words of devotion to the end. but their loyalty was about to be tested.

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The dust had barely begun to settle when the law split them up.

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Valessa Robinson, Adam Davis and Jon Whispel were handcuffed and lying on their stomachs along a ragged two-lane road in Texas, trying to keep their faces out of the dirt. Beside them was Vicki Robinson's green minivan, its tires shot out. Above them, in pointed cowboy boots, towered the Pecos County sheriff and the deputies who had chased them down.

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It was around noon on Thursday, July 2, 1998. The sun blazed almost directly overhead, flattening them all with a harsh, shadowless light. Valessa and her friends waited for whatever came next.

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Sheriff Bruce Wilson did not want the three of them talking and planning their stories. So he told his deputies to place them in separate patrol cars. The two cars that carried Adam and Jon turned toward the Pecos County Jail in Fort Stockton. The third, carrying Valessa, headed to the Fort Stockton courthouse, where Valessa would be turned over to juvenile authorities. Only 15, Valessa was too young to stay at the county jail.

Valessa was still amazed at the drama of the pursuit: the sirens and lights, the bullets ripping into the tires, the van spinning at high speed. Later, she would say that the whole thing reminded her of a scene from a movie.

Sitting alone in the back seat of the cruiser, Valessa asked the deputy behind the wheel why she and her friends had been arrested. The deputy, who did not know his passenger was a suspect in her mother's disappearance, told her it was because they had been caught in a stolen vehicle and were wanted by the state of Florida.

Valessa said the van wasn't stolen. She said it belonged to her mother. She asked if the authorities in Florida were coming to take her back home. They might, said the deputy. What about Adam and Jon? Would the authorities come for them, too? They might, said the deputy.

Are we in serious trouble? Valessa asked.

Yes, said the deputy.

After she was turned over to juvenile authorities, Valessa was taken to a detention center in Odessa. At first, she was quiet. But as she was escorted to a cell, she became hysterical. She said she was sick and needed medical attention. She wanted to know what had happened to Adam and Jon.

She was left alone in the cell. Later, an officer making checks heard a sound seeping through the vents in the cell door.

Valessa was crying.

She was no longer just a teenage girl. Somewhere on the road to Texas, she had become a puzzle.

What was Valessa's motive for questioning the deputy from the back of the cruiser? Was it possible that she truly did

not understand how much trouble she was in? Or was she simply fishing, trying to find out how much the police knew? Was she just naive, or was she working an angle?

It was the same with her tears in the cell. Why was Valessa crying? Was she crying for her mother, for Adam, for herself, or some combination of all three?

From that moment forward, everything Valessa did would be shrouded with ambiguity. Every word she uttered, every gesture she made, every expression that played across her face - they would all contain many possible meanings. And they would all become clues to be studied and dissected and applied toward the mystery at hand.

Something was happening to Jon Whispel.

His dark blond hair was falling out. Not just a few strands, but fistfuls.

Eventually, Jon was taken to the jail's infirmary, and his hair was shaved to a crew cut. Still the round bald patches showed through, giving him a bizarre, spotted look. They were the size of silver dollars.

It's the stress, they told him.

Most days, when it was time for another court hearing, Jon came shuffling into court like an afterthought, stooped and shackled and sometimes weeping. Because he had no money for a lawyer, the judge had appointed someone to represent him at taxpayer expense.

His attorney was Brian Gonzalez, a former University of Florida pitcher who practiced law as if he were hungry for another winning season. He talked so fast that sometimes it was tiring just listening to him. For Jon, Gonzalez was a gift. Around the courthouse, the Tampa native was well-liked by almost everyone, and he had defended clients long enough to know how things worked and how to make them work for him.

By now it was the spring of 1999. Analyzing the case, Gonzalez was sure his client had the best chance of any of the three teenagers to get a deal from the prosecution.

Unlike Valessa and Adam, Jon had not implicated himself directly in the murder. The facts seemed to indicate that he had simply followed Adam and Valessa into this mess, tagging along. The two of them had an obvious motive for killing Valessa's mother; Jon did not. When Gonzalez talked with Jon at the jail, he grew more confident about his client's prospects. Jon seemed quiet, reserved, polite.

Gonzalez tried looking at the case from the prosecutors' side.

Maybe they didn't need Jon to testify against Adam, since they had Adam's own damning words on tape. But Valessa was different. Almost no one believed her statement to police that she had killed her mother by herself.

Gonzalez thought Jon could add considerable bite to the state's case against Valessa. But before the lawyer could talk about a plea deal, he had to be sure Jon's story held up. So Gonzalez drove to Carrollwood, to the house on Carnal Avenue. Since Vick's death, it had been sold. Gonzalez had called the new owners and arranged to look through the house one day while they were gone.

Inside, Gonzalez tested Jon's account of the murder. He took pictures; he made measurements; he walked back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom that had been Valessa's.

Gonzalez went into the bedroom, to the place where Jon said he'd been during the murder. Jon had been specific about what he could and couldn't see going on in the kitchen. Gonzalez stood where Jon said he had stood, and sat where Jon said he'd sat, and tried to see what Jon said he had seen.

All of it checked out.

Gonzalez saw the lead prosecutor, Shirley Williams, in the crowded hallway of the courthouse.

I'd like to talk to you, he said.

I'd like to talk to you, she said.

If convicted of first-degree murder, Jon was looking at either a death sentence or life in prison.

The state offered 40 years.

Gonzalez countered. Less than 30.

For a few days, the negotiations simmered.

Then they talked again. Williams wanted Jon to plead guilty to second-degree murder. He would get 25 years in prison; in return, the state would get his truthful testimony against Adam and Valessa.