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

And I'm Britt.

And quick disclaimer today,

we have a story out of France,

and I will tell you that all of our sources,

all the source material are in French that we had to translate.

So you're not going to hear them sighted within the episode,

but as always, we're going to link out to them in the show notes.

Otherwise, I don't think you would even hear the episode.

They're so long and so complicated,

unless we never forget Jacquees.

Jacquees, French is not our strong suit, folks.

No, no.

Just come say it now.

But I didn't want that to stop us from telling this story,

because it's an important one that I want you to hear.

It's about secrets, the price we pay to have them

and the price we pay to keep them.

This is the story of Allison and Marie-José Benitez.

It's a summer evening in 2000.

I'm going to show you what I'm going to show you today.

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It's a summer evening in 2013.

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And Cindy Philippiak, an organizer for the regional

French beauty pageant Miss Roussillon,

is a little concerned

when she doesn't see 19-year-old Alison Benitez

among the girls filing in for the Monday prep meeting.

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among the girls filing in for the Monday prep meeting.

A former winner herself, Cindy,

knows how committed her girls are to the contest,

which is less than a month away now.

And this pageant is a big deal.

The winner will compete for the title of Miss Frantz.

And Alison is one of Cindy's

fiercest competitors,

so Cindy can't help but notice her absence,

especially since Alison

had checked in the day before

to confirm what time they were meeting that day.

As the minutes tick by

and there's still no sign of her,

even the other contestants start to worry.

And I mean, they've all been preparing

for this thing for months,

and yeah, they're competitors,

but they've also become friends.

Alison would not be a no-show,

not to this.

Even if she was just going to be like 5 or 10 minutes late,

she would have reached out.

And she easily could reach out,

because she's a teenager, you know?

I mean, her cell phone is practically attached to her body.

Okay, but she's a teenager.

Cell phone fixation or not?

Teenagers aren't really known

to be the most reliable humans on the planet

or the most punctual.

True, but this is an important day,

like I said. I mean, honestly, at this point,

every day is an important day.

It's already the middle of July,

and the pageant is coming up on August 11th.

And not only that,

but everyone knows that Alison's mom, Marie José,

is nearly as excited for the pageant

as Alison is.

Because, duh, pageant moms are like

an elite class.

And they haven't heard from either of them,

so it's not just Alison, it's her mom, too.

However,

even though this seems like

an important time that they would never ever miss,

not everyone knows

every part of your life, right?
I mean, we see a fraction
of the real day-to-day
that people go through,
often a fraction of who they really are
as a whole.

So everyone there might not have known that Marie José had taken off

out of the blue before.

In fact, that's actually

what her oldest daughter, Lydia, thinks

is going on at this very moment.

You see, she had gotten a text

from her mom the evening before,

and the Google translation of that quote

says,

I made a difficult decision, but it's better this way.

I'm going to to lose with Alison.

I love you, call dad.

And she met her step-dad, Francisco,

who had been in her life since she was like

eleven, like her dad.

Yeah, so Francisco is Lydia's step-dad

and Alison's

biological father? Right.

Now, this text might be weird to some

and it is definitely a little

vaque, but Lydia has seen her mom

just take off before.

Just a few weeks ago, she had taken off for four days

and before that, she'd taken off

for as many as ten days at a time.

But most of this taking off

had been happening since

she and Francisco separated around two years ago.

So Lydia thinks

she does this maybe to keep Francisco

on his toes.

Also, they all still live together.

So I get wanting some

space.

Space at the very least.

I'd ever be home by choice, to be honest.

I know. It's a complicated setup.

She's actually going to be moving out in just a couple of months and Alison is going to go with her because they're super tight and Francisco had even agreed to pay for the new place, which he could afford because he is this, like, he has a super successful job basically in the French foreign legion, which is a branch of the French army. So it makes sense that he'll be helping them out financially. But until then, another last-minute trip doesn't seem all that unexpected. And everyone knows how close Alison is with her mom, so it makes sense that they'd be together, even maybe with all of this pageant stuff going on. So when she kind of pieced out before had Alison gone with her, would that be pretty common for them to both kind of go away together? So that is a good guestion and something that I actually wondered, but none of the source material I have says one way or another, like if she had gone before, if this was the first time. But still, whatever the situation was, this time, her going with her didn't seem out of the ordinary. Like I said, the two of them were super close. It's a level I can only hope to attain with Josie. Like, Alison's social media pages are filled with her mom writing these wonderful things for her daughter to, you know, just how much she loves her, how proud she is. And then Alison writes back saying she's proud of her mom. She even calls her Mamounette de More. And I think it roughly translates to Mommy of Love or Mommy My Love, which is now going to be the next word I teach Josie, like F English, it's whole lame. But that still doesn't explain why Alison

wouldn't have mentioned this trip to anyone from the pageant. That is fair. You're right. It doesn't. So does Lydia know that they're missing all of this? I kind of feel like we have two groups of people here who are aware that they're missing, but in completely different circumstances. Well, that's the thing. Lydia lives in Bezier, which is about an hour north of Perpignan where her family is. And I mean, she's like a fully grown adult with her own life, you know, so I don't think she, when you say they all know she's missing, I don't think she considers them missing. And she's not super keyed into Alison's day to day pageant schedule. The whole prep meeting, no show, no call, whatever thing. I don't even think that's on her radar. So in relation to those locations, where's to lose exactly where they said they were going? Well, part of these beautiful pictures I endlessly got lost in, it is this gorgeous city a little under three hours away by car. Oh, that's not a running away forever trip. That's like a hop, skip, and a jump, even a day or a weekend kind of thing. That's me driving to your house. Yeah, and especially because Europe has amazing public transport. You could, you know, take the train, no big deal. Okay, so it's not too far, beautiful, all great, but why to lose? Well, they both love that area to the point where they've talked about getting jobs there. So even though they don't have family or anything there that's like a real solid connection, the more Lydia moles it over, the more kind of makes sense that that's

where they would take off to for some kind of trip or more or whatever. Oh, yeah, jobs there sounds like moving there. So it sounds like maybe Lydia's not thinking this is just a little weekend trip. She's thinking they could have like left left. Well, still not at this point. I don't think so. I think maybe she's thinking they decided to visit before pulling the trigger on a really big move, especially again, if they needed a break. And actually, I say that thinking she knows things came to a head between her mom and her stepdad. So she thinks that this was the outcome of that. Oh, the outcome of what? Well, apparently Allison had found private messages between Francisco and a woman in Barcelona, like romantic messages. Oh, when she confronted him, Francisco tried to reassure her that it was no big deal, but he had confided in Lydia that he was in love big time. I guess I don't get it. What's the big deal then if they've been separated for two years and she and Allison are moving out? Well, I'm kind of spitballing here, but I think it could be a couple of things. I mean, they've been separated for two years, but like I said, they're just now making the move to live apart. So maybe it wasn't all that clean of a break, you know, it's totally possible that the intention was to try and work on things during the separation or maybe they just agreed not to see other people while they were still under the same roof just out of respect for one another. I don't know, but either way Lydia doesn't worry when she gets that text message on July 14th

because she has all this back history and she doesn't worry on July 15th or 16th when she doesn't hear any updates. But eventually she does try to call and to text and these new communications aren't getting any kind of response not from her mom or her sister and the same can be said for Lydia's other sister, Roxanne. In fact, she didn't even know they were traveling or off the radar but eventually both sisters check Allison's social media and they find that her pages have gone dark. And like you said earlier she's a teenager teenagers don't go dark on social media at least not by choice. Right. And I assume they've reached out to Francisco by now what's his read on the whole situation is he worried? Isn't that the question? I mean it seems like no because he says that him and his estranged wife had gotten into an argument about bills and she told him the same thing that she had texted Lydia that she and Allison were going to go to to lose. They'd even packed up a suitcase or two on their way out.

by July 22nd Francisco's changing his tune a bit.
By this time he's worried enough to actually make a visit to the police department although he doesn't stay long or accomplish much. Like he's not even there longer than 10 minutes and based on what I could gather police aren't too interested in taking a report at this time because

I mean both women are adults. But again how hard did he really try? He's only there for 10 minutes max? Well yeah but we also don't know how hard the cops are pushing back saying they weren't going to file a report but maybe he kind of saw it as like I'm never going to get anywhere with this anyway yeah I'm going to spend my time elsewhere. Maybe. But trip or no trip by July 25th 11 full days of no one hearing a word from either woman Lydia drags Francisco to the police station again. She makes sure a report gets filed this time around and like right off the bat when police start looking into things they notice some inconsistencies. One of those inconsistencies was about how worried Francisco was and when like Francisco tells them that he was worried right away basically from the 15th on says he even tried to search for them on his own which I'm pretty sure is news to Lydia and then Allison's best friend comes forward and tells investigators that he'd stop by their apartment looking for Allison on either the 16th or 17th. So again after he says he's worried and looking for them and when this friend stops by Francisco had told him not to worry because they're in to lose

they turned off their phones everything's probably

worried and searching on the 15th but

he's telling this kid the very

fine. So he's all

next day or so that nothing's wrong and he knows exactly where they are. Yeah and obviously both can't be true right and at the same time investigators are figuring out some other concerning things like not only have neither of the women use their phones since the 14th and there's no sign of them on the internet or social media but they also haven't touched their bank accounts they're traveling without spending a single dollar doesn't add up right and the whole idea of them traveling actually doesn't make much sense either because the family car is with Francisco and neither woman have licenses anyway. When investigators check the CCTV footage at the train station they're not on it there isn't any record of them taking any form of public transportation to to lose or anywhere. Ashley what are you talking about it all makes sense of course they haven't spent anybody traveling these two must have freaking walked to to lose I mean honestly it's the only option that makes Francisco's story make sense nothing is adding up and at the end of July investigators put out a national broadcast asking the public for help finding the women and right away a few tips do filter in possible sightings of both of them I think but investigators initial hopes are dashed when they turn out to be false leads so on August 1st they finally turn their attention

to the family apartment for a search. Forensic texts comb through the place for like five hours wait wait wait I've been stuck on this it took till August 1st to look at the apartment ves so they go missing on the 15th we think and Francisco is just being in the apartment hanging out being worried then suddenly not being worried being worried again for over two weeks before investigators even take a look at the place yeah you're not yes there is this huge gap where they're not taking a look around at all and I know it sounds suspicious or it sounds like time was lost but I don't know if it mattered that they waited because as far as like evidence of a crime scene goes when they do this like five hour long search two weeks later they don't find any evidence of foul play okay but to me that's all the more reason it does matter I mean saying nothing's there now again 18 freaking days later does not mean there was always nothing there yeah and you're right and listen what they're saying isn't that they're not saying all all good here nothing happened here okay really what they're saying is that they haven't ruled anything in or out or any one in or out I mean they're still open to the possibility of a voluntary disappearance but they are still considering some form of foul play

by August 4th Francisco seems like he is just crumbling which becomes super clear when a video of him is posted online that day and just an FYI I'm a little unclear whether Francisco himself posted this video or whether it was shared with the media outlet that then posted it but either way in it he's speaking directly to the camera openly weeping I'm actually going to play a little bit of the clip for all of you and obviously most of us won't be able to understand the words he's saying but I want you it's more the emotion I want you to get because he is clearly distressed and in the video he is like declaring his unconditional love for his daughter and says that he's hoping for the safe return of both his daughter and his wife and he also refers to all of the pressure that he's under saying that despite his best efforts to hold on he's on the verge of exploding falling apart is exactly the right term to use he never puts himself back together because on the morning of August 5th the very next day his warrant officer where he works binds Francisco's body in the barracks he died by suicide between the hours of 5 a.m. and 7 a.m. that Monday and with this discovery the video from the day before starts seeming

like something of a suicide note yeah especially like you said with the translation of it being like on the verge of exploding trying to hold himself together saying how much he loves his daughter it's heavy stuff and it also introduces some troubling questions like yeah it seemed like he was being sincere in his video and I do I think he was being sincere but the question becomes sincere about what? Sincerely devastated about the disappearance of his wife and daughter or sincerely guilt-stricken by the knowledge of how they disappeared and this is really when investigators change their tune publicly whatever discretion they've been exercising up to this point regarding their suspicions of Francisco it's pretty quickly set aside at a press conference that same day the deputy prosecutor acknowledges that the women probably aren't alive and he indicates that the chances of any sort of voluntary disappearance on their part are rapidly diminishing and he goes even further acknowledging that it's quote difficult to accuse a dead person but he's also doing little to hide the fact that that's what he's doing now that Francisco's gone basically their only real possible witness to the women's disappearances investigators decide to seize cell phone and laptop as well as to take another look at the family's apartment while those items are being analyzed they also establish a national

tip line because they're having a really hard time finding witnesses who can either confirm or dispute elements of Francisco's story and I think that's in part just due to the time of year it is because July and August are the months that a lot of French people go on extended vacation so a lot of people who live in this area are out of town while all of this is going down I got to say Europeans are onto something with the whole month-long vacation thing listen I want to want that so badly and you know this but I'm quite literally allergic to vacation so true I might actually be like taken out by the plague if I was to go out that long yeah that'd be dangerous for you agreed anyway even with France being in its peak season at this point investigators eventually track down some neighbors of the family who confirm overhearing frequent arguments coming from their apartment but which we kind of already knew right I mean we know they were separated Francisco even said that they left after an argument that they'd had right that's true this really isn't new information although it does tend to support the conclusions that investigators are already reaching and the next tip that they get makes them certain that they're on the right track because it turns out this isn't the first time a woman closely associated with Francisco has disappeared under highly suspicious circumstances they get this tip from a man named Claude but really Claude is calling on behalf of his four teenage

kids who he had had with a woman named Simone de Oliveira Alves because when Francisco's face flashed across their television Claude and Simone's kids couldn't believe what they were seeing or rather they couldn't believe who they were seeing you see and back in 2004 nearly a decade before Alison and Marie José went missing 40-something year old Francisco had been stationed in the French city of Nîmes and although he was very much married at the time and a father to Alison who was around 10 years old he insisted to Simone this 28 year old Brazilian mother of four that he was single and childless and having no reason to disbelieve him Simone and Francisco began this passionate affair and things got kind of serious serious enough that she introduced him to her kids and based on what they tell investigators he hadn't just met them he practically acted as a stepfather to them for months right up until the day their mother vanished without a trace according to Simone's sister it was when Simone found out about his whole other family that she disappeared and not just that again according to the sister Simone might have even been pregnant and it's not like no one noticed when she went missing back then I mean she had four kids so authorities opened an investigation into her disappearance

but it doesn't seem like it got very far before it went cold all investigators were really able to determine was that Simone and Francisco had gotten into some kind of argument and on the evening of November 29, 2004 she had texted him to say that she was leaving and she wasn't coming back and then poof she was gone so this guy didn't even come up with a new story she texted him I mean it worked pretty well the first time because investigators got nowhere either they thought she really left or maybe they had suspicions that they couldn't prove I don't know basically a couple of years after her disappearance her case had pretty much been abandoned no one was digging into it but now in 2013 another woman connected to Francisco has sent this big text that she's leaving and basically has fallen off the face of the earth then he takes his own life just as police are starting to like squeeze on him so yeah maybe it's time to reopen that 2004 case and they do now it's also around this time that they get results back from Francisco's electronics and right away they're pretty interested in a call he made just prior to ending his life it was to a woman in Spain named Maria Teresa is this the woman he was seeing before the one that Allison had found communications with yes same woman well literally it was about to follow

up on that like I was wondering if they ever tracked her down and talked to her to see if she knew anything I get the impression they didn't know anything about her before they found the records of this call which is kind of weird like again I don't know if they're not talking to Lydia it's a little muddy and again might be getting lost in the translation as well but either way they know about her now they track her down and she tells them that not long after the two women had quote unquote left she had a romantic rendezvous with Francisco at the family apartment how long is not long less than a week I mean I think she was there on July 19 Jesus Christ we keep it classy Francisco if I remember correctly that was before they were even reported missing right right and that is an important point because as far as I can tell Maria Teresa had no reason to think anything was amiss when she was there but there was something that she didn't fully appreciate at the time that now she's thinking might be important she tells investigators that she had noticed something disturbing you see when she was there the apartment had this terrible smell without the necessary context she didn't really question Francisco when he told her that the smell was nothing to worry about just the smell of the neighbor's garbage

wafting in through the bathroom window the closed bathroom window yeah it's totally that right so hearing all of this investigators are thinking that the smell wasn't trashed and the woman's bodies aren't in the apartment by now they know that they looked through the apartment but could they have been on July 19th or in the days leading up to it which we would have known if they didn't take nearly 20 days to even look at the apartment well again I mean they weren't reported missing even at that 19th time so no one would have known to even go there on an official basis but you do wonder I mean like if the smell lingered if there was something to be found on day 11 when he was dragged to report them missing maybe they were still there maybe there was something too fine then rather than waiting till day 18 or whatever I don't know and was Lydia ever in the house during this time smell anything or think anything was off this is so frustrating but I don't know I can only assume yes since we know she was in town on the 25th to go to the police department with Francisco but I can't say for sure so if she saw or smelled anything off in the apartment I don't know now around this time investigators expand their search efforts from the family home to include the facilities Francisco had access to while working with a french foreign legion because it's not like he just had

your run of the mill office job he had access to living quarters and stuff and when they start poking around in those areas and interviewing colleagues from the barracks they realize that he had been doing some bizarre things in the days after his wife and daughter disappeared like for one they track down a witness who says that he helped Francisco transport a freezer from the family's home to the barracks on July 17th seemingly out of nowhere Francisco had decided he wanted to donate this freezer to the french foreign legion you know as one suddenly wants to do when one's family is missing so he had this colleague come to the family's apartment to help him move this thing and did this guy notice a smell in the apartment? actually that's a great question but something that again the source material doesn't say anything about but what they do mention is something else that he noticed he noticed while he was there that a sink was clogged with this thick red liquid and did he ask why? I don't think so but keep in mind this is all happening before the women were reported missing so he just made a mental note of it probably not even super consciously and then went about helping Francisco move this freezer and when they get the freezer out to the barracks Francisco decided

it needed a deep cleaning which the point you made earlier seems like a strange priority for him to have at the time especially in retrospect and if that isn't chilling enough another soldier comes forward and tells them he'd encountered Francisco washing what looked like bloodstained sheets and a floor mat at the barracks in the same time frame and no I don't know exactly what this floor mat is possibly a floor rug but again translation issues what I do know is this guy did ask like what the heck is going on and Francisco's response was quote I thawed meat huh? I mean yeah so again like no it's just no that's not an answer I think some form was there right you're trying to explain it like blood on like a rug or a mat no it doesn't make sense so obviously when investigators hear this they know that they need to check out this freezer see what might have been left behind in it and when they go it's still there and they secure it they run tests and what they find are traces of Allison's blood deposited within it his daughter's blood investigators find additional traces DNA definitely Allison's and possibly also Marie José's and that was in a washing machine at the barracks that Francisco was known to use

when another French foreign legion colleague comes forward in early September and tells investigators that he'd see Francisco washing his hands in the bathroom at the barracks and that the sink was stained with red marks but I probably don't need to tell you what everyone assumes he'd been washing off his hands is there any hope about finding the women alive at this point or has this basically become a mission to recover their remains for the investigators remains I mean I don't think they've been super optimistic for a while but once these traces of DNA are discovered they know and actually this is when the case is officially reclassified as a homicide investigation and this is at the beginning of September well what about the remains I mean even with all this evidence does any of it help investigators narrow down to begin to look for it not to mention actually find their remains I mean the freezer and the DNA stuff doesn't but other stuff might because using geolocation on his devices and reconstructing the GPS data on his car they determined that Francisco drove to this specific area a little over 30 minutes away in the days following the women's disappearance it was to this nearby resort town of Lucca and he didn't just drive there once they were like three separate times all between the 14th and the 17th of July so by September 10 they've got search teams out at a couple of the town's water treatment plants

as well as in some nearby pine forest and foothills

so you said they were thinking it was

like the 14th to the 17th

or between them

honestly with the smell and stuff I kind of thought it would be later

yeah that's what they're thinking and I don't have

like the other data from the car

GPS but maybe it shows that

he didn't really travel anywhere

after that

and I mean we know that his girlfriend was at the apartment

with him by the 19th

so that could be part of it

too because remember she smelled this weird smell

but she didn't see anything

but either way they're pretty

sure the women's remains were dumped

in that chunk of

of time from the 14th to the 17th

okay but then what's the smell on the 19th

I think the insinuation is

maybe just lingering odor

from whatever happened to the women

in that apartment

but you're right like I mean I can't quite

wrap my head around the time frame

like to me the way the dates

it's like not lining up quite right

not perfectly but I think we're probably

missing some pieces

but either way within just days by September 12

the search is put on pause

it seems like there's only one organization

in the country that's got

a limited number of cadaver dogs

there's like eight or so

and the dogs get called to another mission

so it's not until the 24th

that they're back at those water treatment plants

this time with dive teams

and I have to tell you this job

whatever the divers are doing

it sounds intense

because I don't think they're just diving in water according to what one outlet reported an engineer familiar with this project says that they're diving into aeration basins or something like quote molasses at least in texture and density that sounds incredibly unpleasant to say the least but the same engineer suggests that the swampiness of the liquid might actually work if they find anything to investigators benefit because it would likely slow down any kind of decomposition and vet investigators don't find any sign of the women's remains not in the aeration basins or in the nearby bodies of water not in the foothills or in the pine forests and by October 30th the search is officially called off so where the f**k are they they don't know they should have been here or they thought they should have been here but clearly a piece of the puzzle is missing or maybe it's all there and they're just actually missing the women because of this molasses that they're diving in now there is talk at some point of revisiting the water treatment plants the next summer of possibly even having them drain just to be sure but from what I can tell these plans run into some kind of technical issues and they're just not pursued and the case goes pretty cold and it stays cold until

September of 2016 that's when Marie-José's brother Eric approaches investigators with a new lead he'd been contacted on social media by a woman who had been vacationing on the beach near Lubacara another coastal town close to Perpignan where the family lived and this was back in the summer of 2014 and she was shocked when her dog dug up what appeared to be human bones now to be clear another source says that he found these bones in April of 2015 so I'm not sure what's up with that or why she didn't report it like then either way though investigators descend on this beach in 2016 and they excavate the spot where the bones had been found and shockingly they do find more bones and for just a few hopeful days it seems like maybe finally Marie-José and Allison's remains have been found but it's a crushing blow and the analysis of the bones comes back just a few days later and concludes that the remains were of an animal not any human and that is where things stand to this day the secrets Francisco took to his grave all those years ago in 2013 remain buried with him I mean there have been theories over the years Eric even had one back in 2015 that

he thought investigators failed to explore he thought that maybe the women never came out of that apartment building dead or alive because apparently in the apartment building that they lived in there's this crawl space under the building's garage that contains an old septic tank filled with sand and he thought that the women's remains could be in that and it's hard for me to wrap my mind around it exactly but he was pretty convinced at the time I mean so much so that his lawyer filed a formal request for the area to be searched although they were all ignored though I will say if this was the case maybe this to me is one of the only things that explains the like timeline and the smell right like you would still smell it but eventually it would stop smelling I don't know like but it's possible now like I said they never ended up searching it apparently it's super difficult to access and police say that even Francisco wouldn't have been able to without leaving some kind of trace behind but at least for a time some suspected that with his military training he just might have found away now as far as I can tell nothing ever came of Simone's reopened investigation to this day neither Simone's family nor Marie Jose and Allison's families have any idea what happened to them so now all anyone can do is wait and hope hope that with time and with patience long-buried secrets will find their way to the surface once again

Francisco's death
was devastating to this case
because it left a void where justice should be
you can find all the
source material for our episode
at crimejunkiepodcast.com
and you can follow us on Instagram
at 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?