

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Second Grave

How to Dig a Grave

Before you get digging, consider the weather.

Set up a tent to block the sun or the rain.

Then define the area you want to dig.

Usually the rectangle is 90 inches long by 36 inches wide.

Remove the top layer of soil with a flat-edged shovel and move it off to the side.

Step on the edge of the shovel and plunge it as deep as possible into the earth.

Rock it back, lift, turn, drop.

Don't be afraid to put your whole body into the motion.

You'll be stronger than a Harvard rower in no time.

It's probable that you will eventually run into roots and hard dirt, immovable objects that will prevent you from digging any deeper.

In a proper burial site, there will be heavy equipment there to help you remove and excavate the site.

But this is no ordinary cemetery.

Out here in the woods amongst the decaying leaves and crawling insects, a young girl's body is lowered into the ground and not nearly deep enough.

There is no headstone.

The weeping mourners are nowhere to be seen, for they do not know where their loved one is buried.

They only know that she has vanished.

Welcome to Sword and Scale Nightmares, True Crime for Bedtime, where Nightmare begins now.

Nine-year-old Elizabeth Alton was afraid of the dark.

What little girl isn't, after all?

As the sun began setting at 6.30 p.m. on October 21, 2009, Elizabeth's mother was keenly aware of this fact and wondered why her daughter hadn't come back through the door yet.

Earlier that evening, the house had been full of youthful energy.

Elizabeth was practicing lines and songs for an upcoming school play, annoying her older siblings as her mom prepared dinner.

Then, there was a knock at the door, and a familiar face added even more childlike frenzy to the scene.

It was Emma Bustamante, Elizabeth's six-year-old neighbor from a few houses down.

Emma wanted to see if Elizabeth could come outside to play, and when her mom said no at first, the girls began pleading, hopping up and down and playfully begging to be allowed to play together.

You can imagine the high-pitched screams and giggles that followed when Elizabeth's mom finally relented, allowing them one hour as they raced out the door, telling Elizabeth she had to be home by 6.

But it was now 6.30.

Elizabeth had her cell phone with her, but all of her mom's nonstop calls were going to voicemail.

Elizabeth's mom also called Emma's house.

All the kids there were accounted for, but Emma's grandmother insisted that Elizabeth

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was never there.

Body numbing panic starts to set in, and Elizabeth's mother calls the police.

They were there on the scene within 15 minutes.

An emergency ping signals placed Elizabeth's cell phone somewhere within the large, tangled woods of their surrounding neighborhood.

This location was somewhat alarming, as Elizabeth would not have needed to go into those woods to walk the distance back home from Emma's house.

Search teams assembled at the extreme body and paint shop at 7.30 p.m. and began working their way through the extremely dense forest floor, in hopes of locating an alive and possibly terrified Elizabeth Alton.

But the search continued through the night, with no success.

The next morning at 9 a.m., the Cole County Sheriff's Office announced during their press conference that they were in need of more volunteers.

An information hotline was set up, and by 1 p.m. that afternoon, the FBI was called in to help with the search.

By 2 p.m., it seemed Elizabeth's cell phone battery had likely died, as it was no longer responding to cell phone tower pings.

Search dogs were called onto the scene, dive teams scanned ponds and rivers, and home improvement

stores like Lowe's and Home Depot donated rain gear to help the literally hundreds of volunteers who showed up to look for Elizabeth in the pouring rain.

So many volunteers, in fact, that some had to be turned away.

In the meantime, there was really only one more lead to go off of, and that was the story of Emma Bustamante, the six-year-old neighbor who had begged for Elizabeth to come play with her that Wednesday evening.

Emma had been interviewed by the FBI, but her statement was simply that she and Elizabeth had played for an hour, as they had promised, and that Elizabeth started walking home, never to be seen again.

The six-year-old neighbor girl Emma continued playing outside until she got stuck in some thorn bushes.

At this point, she began screaming and crying for help.

She wasn't far from her home, where she lived with her grandma, 11-year-old twin stepbrothers, and 15-year-old stepsister.

Her stepsister, Alyssa Bustamante, was upstairs in her bedroom listening to a mix CD, when she heard Emma crying for help in the thorn bushes below.

Alyssa had also been interviewed by police.

If she heard Emma screaming for help in the briar patch, maybe she would have heard Emma and Elizabeth playing, or seen where Elizabeth walked off to.

But while Alyssa was aware that her neighbor had gone missing, she didn't have any additional information.

But around this time, something unusual was found in the backwoods behind the house where Emma lived with her grandmother and step-siblings.

A small, shallow hole dug into the ground, which resembled a grave.

And by the look of it, it was the perfect size for a small child.

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There was just one problem.

The grave was empty.

The search for Elizabeth Olten was nearing its 48th hour, and an empty burial site just felt like a bad omen.

But then, 15-year-old Alyssa Bustamante, Emma's stepsister who helped her out of the thorn bushes, was brought out to the wooden area, where she casually admitted to something strange. Investigators processing the potential crime scene were attempting to answer a set of very important questions.

Had Elizabeth ever been in this empty grave?

Was she buried here at some point and then moved?

Or was this just a random hole?

Well, they were about to get their answers.

But in their place, a series of far more curious questions would begin to arise.

Why did 15-year-old Alyssa Bustamante dig a grave shaped like a hole in the middle of the woods?

Alyssa Bustamante had just told investigators that she was the one who dug the hole in the woods behind her house.

When asked why, she said she just liked digging holes, adding that she would bury dead animals when she found them.

Charming.

Well, unless Alyssa was planning on taking down a coyote Rambo style, this was no ordinary animal burial pit for a squirrel or a bunny.

When Missouri Highway Patrol Detective David Rice sat Alyssa down for taped questioning, she insisted to him that she just liked digging holes when she got bored, that she played rugby and loved getting dirt under her nails, and that she would just dig into whatever shape came to her mind.

Clearly, Detective Rice wanted more clarity, because to his eyes the hole was very specific and unique in its shape and size.

A perfect rectangle the size of a small coffin, with shovel marks straight down.

An alarming sight to investigators no doubt, given the timing of the missing girl.

Detective Rice wanted to know more about when Alyssa dug the hole, and more importantly, what she was doing in the hour leading up to her hearing her stepsister crying in the thorn bushes outside her bedroom window.

Also present for the interrogation and timing in with details when appropriate was Alyssa's grandmother, who not only remembered Alyssa charging down the stairs to help her stepsister, but also recalled that she saw Alyssa taking a shovel and walking into their backyard forest the previous Friday, five days before their neighbor Elizabeth Olten went missing.

Well now that the matter of when the hole was dug had been settled, it was important to get the why.

Detective Rice was certain that Alyssa hadn't been telling the whole truth.

No pun intended.

And also Detective Rice pressed Alyssa further about that Wednesday, the day Elizabeth disappeared.

Alyssa's initial story went like this.

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She went to school that day and got home sometime around four.

At five she decided to go for a walk in the woods.

Her stepsister Emma was supposed to come with, but Alyssa said Emma was annoying and that she ditched her.

Alyssa claimed that alone in the woods she hung out at a pond for a little while and then made her way toward what she referred to as a really cool cow pasture.

Whatever that means.

After an hour of peaceful moments and enjoying nature, Alyssa walked home and went into her bedroom.

That's when she heard her stepsister Emma crying for help.

She charged down the stairs and helped her out.

And when Emma noticed some blood on Alyssa's clothing, Alyssa said she had started her period and not to tell anyone.

By now it was almost 7pm, and as Elizabeth Olton's mom was frantically calling the police to report her daughter missing, Alyssa said she and her family went to church, which was hosting a youth dance function.

The following day, while hundreds of volunteers were combing the forest floor and soaking in the rain, Alyssa did what any devout churchgoer would do.

Skip school, smoke pot, and have sex with her 16-year-old boyfriend, Dustin.

Not exactly what you'd call a concerned citizen.

But then again she was 15 years old, so what do you expect?

Steve Rice asked Alyssa point-blank what she thought happened to poor little Elizabeth Olton.

Alyssa said it would take a sick person to put down their morals and just pick a 9-year-old. She didn't think Elizabeth was the kind of person who would run away or stay out all night on her own.

From what Alyssa knew of her, Alyssa was kind of girly, not natureistic.

And just like Alyssa's step-sister Emma, Alyssa said that her neighbor Elizabeth could also be annoying.

Alyssa just assumed that the two annoying girls decided to hang out with each other while Alyssa was out in the forest.

She didn't seem to know much else about the situation, but looking at a neighborhood map and following the path Alyssa claimed to have taken on her peaceful walk, it just didn't make sense that Alyssa wouldn't have seen or bumped into Elizabeth and Emma at some point during that critical hour.

Despite the inconsistencies, Alyssa said she would be willing to take a polygraph.

Clearly this line of questioning was reaching a dead end, at which point Detective Rice made a big pivot.

He asked Alyssa if she was aware that the FBI did a search of her bedroom.

She was concerned about the marijuana seeds she possessed, but Detective Rice said he didn't care about that.

He was more interested in the diary they found.

In the hours leading up to Alyssa and her grandmother sitting in that interrogation room, the FBI had executed a search warrant and discovered that Alyssa's bedroom was that of a deeply

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disturbed teenager.

There were writings and drawings all over the walls, some in pen, some appear to be written in blood.

On one wall, the eerie silhouette of a figure with slashes across the forehead.

Next to it, the name Emma, Alyssa's stepsister.

On the next wall over, a poem of sorts that read,

I cut to focus when my brain is racing.

I cut to make physical what I feel inside.

I cut to see blood because I like it.

I don't like to cut, but I can't give it up.

Other walls contain cards and letters from her father, written to her from his prison cell.

Strange social media photos would eventually go viral, namely an image of Alyssa with joker-like makeup melting from her eyes and mouth, pointing her thumb and index finger like a gun to the head.

But amongst the muddy clothes and shovels, hiding under a blanket, a journal containing Alyssa's innermost thoughts, was found.

Back in the interrogation room, Detective Rice asked Alyssa if it made her angry to think that police would be able to read her secrets and other private personal thoughts.

If Alyssa was upset, she hardly showed it.

She muttered a nonchalant, I don't know, yeah?

The detective asked her more directly, do you think they went through your diary?

And when she agreed, he talked to her about forensic technology, and explained that even if you've taken a pen and scratched over what you've written, every word, every stroke, will still be there.

The detective reminded Alyssa that her nine-year-old neighbor, Elizabeth Alton, was still missing. Her family wanted to find her and recover her.

He told her point blank, we have your diary, we've read your diary, including the last entry.

A full minute of silence went by, as Alyssa and Detective Rice stared at one another, crying each other out.

Alyssa Bustamante was breaking, and what she was about to confess to was more disturbing than anyone could have imagined.

Detective Rice hadn't said out loud what he'd read in Alyssa's diary.

He needed to hear the truth directly from her.

He once again emphasized that Elizabeth's family needed closure, and offered Alyssa a chance to begin her story again, asking if this was planned or if it was an accident.

Alyssa took the bait, declaring it all an accident and crying with her hands over her face.

Her second version of events was somewhat confusing because it was mostly a lie.

But Alyssa then admitted that her nine-year-old neighbor Elizabeth was with her in the woods.

She went on to say that she and Elizabeth were just messing around in the forest when Elizabeth fell and hit her head, which killed her.

Not knowing what else to do, Alyssa built a fire and burned Elizabeth's body.

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Dr. Rice wasn't buying the story, either, patiently explaining that whether or not Elizabeth's body was found burned, they'd be able to tell the manner in which she died.

The detective said to her, nine-year-old girls don't just die, and when Alyssa exhaustedly insisted again that they were messing around, that Elizabeth fell back, she hit her head and died, the detective asked her something surprising.

Was her throat cut?

Alyssa took a quick breath, finally revealing the beginning of the truth with a simple yeah.

Elizabeth's grandmother, who'd been stunned into silence over the last hour, wailed in an utter dread and horror at Alyssa's admission.

Her grandmother was then escorted out of the interrogation room, where she continued screaming in the hallway.

The shock, the horror of realizing what your own flesh and blood has done, the guilt of wondering what you might have done to have caused her to be this way.

Ultimately, the third and actual version of events was revealed.

Alyssa used her six-year-old stepsister, Emma, to lure Elizabeth outside on that Wednesday evening.

Alyssa was already armed with a kitchen knife, and sent her sister home while she and Elizabeth began the 15-minute walk into the woods, directly to where Alyssa had already dug a grave five days earlier.

At this point, Alyssa began strangling Elizabeth, and when that didn't kill her, Alyssa slit her throat, and then Alyssa stabbed her in the chest.

She thought only twice, but the autopsy revealed it was eight times.

Afterward, Alyssa buried her, just as she had always intended.

Back at home, Alyssa washed the bloody knife off in the sink, leaving it there, and eventually bumped into her stepsister, who'd gotten stuck outside in a thornbush.

Emma had seen blood that day, but it wasn't from Alyssa starting her period.

And then there was the matter of Alyssa's diary.

In earlier entries, she'd written about her suicidal thoughts and wanting to burn her grandparents' house down.

She'd also written about her cell phone dying, and she couldn't talk to anyone about the depression and rage she was feeling.

In another entry, she wrote,

If I don't talk about this, I bottle it up, and when I explode, someone's going to die.

But most important was the entry she'd written on the night of the killing.

When the diary was first obtained, this final entry was completely scribbled out in deep, methodical strokes of blue ink.

But just as Detective Rice promised, further forensic analysis revealed every chilling word Alyssa had written.

I just fucking killed someone.

I strangled them and slit their throat and stabbed them, and now they're dead.

I don't know how I feel at the moment.

It was amazing.

As soon as you get over the, oh my god, I can't do this, feeling, it's pretty enjoyable.

I'm kind of nervous and shaky though right now.

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Okay, I gotta go to church now, lol.

When asked why she did it, Alyssa told Detective Rice she didn't know.

She just wanted to know what it was like to kill someone, and Elizabeth was just someone nearby.

Following her verbal confession, Alyssa led authorities directly to where she murdered and buried nine-year-old Elizabeth Olten.

When she was first declared missing, searchers were scanning the area for a scared missing girl.

Not a shallow grave, but with this awful reality in mind, a closer look revealed that Elizabeth was not well-covered, with parts of her body still exposed.

The missing cell phone her mother insists she'd take with her was still in her pocket, a pair of blue jeans with pink ribbons on them.

Now reunited with her family, Elizabeth was laid to rest on October 28, 2009, one week after her shocking murder.

This time her tiny pink casket was brought to a cemetery by a horse-drawn carriage, where she was given a proper burial, surrounded by loved ones who described her as outgoing, carefree, lover of Barbie, bike-riding, and animals.

As for the graveyard out in the woods, detectives were still unsure that Alyssa was being truthful, when she said that she acted alone and told nobody what she had done.

After all, she'd spent the day after the murder, getting high and having sex with her boyfriend Dustin.

Surely, she confided something in him, but who knows?

The fact of the matter is that two shovels were recovered from Alyssa's bedroom. Maybe he even helped her out, or maybe he didn't.

Over the course of the week after the murder, 16-year-old Dustin was interviewed on eight different occasions.

He denied knowing anything about Elizabeth's death, and when the FBI told him about it, he became ill and vomited.

Strangely, he failed a polygraph, but ultimately he was never charged with a crime.

As is typical and unfortunate in these stories, it's only the killer saga that continues to fascinate us.

After being charged with first-degree murder, Alyssa was certified as an adult and pled not guilty to the crime.

Years went by as her trial got delayed over and over again, until it was set for early 2012.

And then, on January 9, 2012, Alyssa withdrew her not guilty plea, adjusting it to guilty of second-degree murder and armed criminal action, rather than having a trial.

At one point, during Alyssa's sentencing hearing, the victim's grandmother shouted from her wheelchair.

Alyssa should get out of jail the same day Elizabeth gets out of the grave.

Alyssa's grandmother, who had to leave the interrogation room during her granddaughter's confession, once again, ran out of the room crying.

Alyssa was sentenced to life in prison, plus 30 years, and with the possibility of parole.

The following day, Alyssa formally apologized to Elizabeth's family, saying if she could

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give her life to get her back, she would.

Over the years, Elizabeth's mother filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the Pathways Behavioral Clinic, who was treating Alyssa's mental health issues and ignored very clear signs that would have prevented her daughter's murder.

According to the complaint, Alyssa's violent propensities were well-documented from a young age, including but not limited to a declaration on her MySpace page that her hobbies were cutting and killing people.

A video wherein Alyssa electrocutes her younger brothers and a picture of Alyssa holding a knife to another girl's throat.

It should also be noted that Alyssa had attempted suicide on Labor Day two years earlier and had previously carved the word hate into one of her arms.

Charges against the health care clinic were ultimately dismissed, but Alyssa continued to be listed as the defendant.

She was ultimately ordered to pay Elizabeth's mother \$5 million, plus 9% interest until the debt gets paid.

Something tells me it never will.

And while questions of Alyssa's potential for parole were still swirling around, given how young she was when she committed her crimes, as of November 2022, legislation that might have granted her a parole hearing was just overturned.

So for now at least, having just turned 29, Alyssa Bustamante isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Does Alyssa deserve to spend the rest of her life in prison for planning and committing a murder before she even got her driver's license?

Before you answer, consider this.

Back in October of 2009, investigators found two amateur graves out in the woods.

Remember, Alyssa originally admitted to digging the empty grave they came across.

It wasn't until after her confession that she took detectives to the filled grave where Elizabeth was actually buried.

To this day, it's never been clear who was the second grave for.

Was it for Emma, Alyssa's annoying stepsister, or was it meant for someone else?

Just someone nearby, unaware that the little girl behind them just wants to remember what it feels like to kill.