

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Sugar

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It was late October of 2013 and 33-year-old Alice LaRue was sitting at her kitchen table surrounded by friends and family. On the table, cell phones, snacks, and paperwork were strewn about. This was the search team. Alice's eldest daughter, 18-year-old Aprena Paul, had been missing for over 72 hours. Alice sat in the days as her friends buzzed about, talking about the recent trips from the hotline they had set up. Well, simultaneously, crunching snacks. Alice was feeling lost. What else could they do? The police were on the case. Every day, the family handed out missing flyers with Alice's cell phone number. The pretty photo of Aprena in her periwinkle graduation cap and gown had been blasted through the local news and all-over social media. The message was out and tips had been flooding in. Alice wrote everything down. She scribbled furious notes for the detectives and listened to every tip, no matter how crazy they seemed. As Alice tried to shut her eyes for a moment to breathe through the chatter, her phone rang. She flipped it over. The screen lit up. The incoming call was from Aprena's cell phone. Her heart stopped. She swallowed nervously and picked up. Hello? She croaked. The line was silent for a moment. A pregnant pause that seemed to last a decade. I have a tip, a man's voice said. Check Rock County. What? Alice choked on her words. Who's calling from her daughter's phone? As she started to speak again, the line went dead. The man was gone. Alice threw her phone down on the table. Her friends stared at her. Why did I? Where is Rock County? Alice asked. She had to know.

Welcome to Sword and Scale Nightmares. True crime for bedtime. Where Nightmare begins now. Alice Leroux had always been proud of her oldest daughter, Aprena. Alice was a single mother who found out she was pregnant with Aprena when she was only 15 years old. But Alice struggled to be a teen mother. So after Aprena became a toddler, Alice turned over custody of her daughter to her mother so that she could finish school and get back on her feet. Alice stayed in Chicago while Aprena went to live her childhood in Miami. Down in Florida, under the loving care of her grandmother, Aprena thrived. Aprena was a bright young girl who found a lot of joy in school. She loved learning and was a happy social butterfly. Soon, Alice relocated to Madison, Wisconsin. She was doing great. It was time for ten-year-old Aprena to come home and resume life with her mother. The adjustment from Florida to Madison was easy for Aprena. She made tons of friends at her new school. She and Alice developed a strong bond and Aprena loved being a stepsister to her siblings. As Aprena grew from a girl into a teenager, she started showing a serious interest in caregiving, particularly nursing. Aprena loved kids, but she was also fascinated with the medical world. One day, when her younger brother, Elijah, became sick with a stomach bug, Aprena insisted on going with her mom to the hospital.

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There in the ER, she watched carefully as the nurses and doctors tried to figure out what was wrong. Everyone noticed how intently Aprena was studying the nurses' protocol and how many questions she asked. Over the next few weeks, Aprena showed even more fascination with medicine, and she told Alice she wanted to be a pediatric nurse. After she graduated from high school, Aprena enrolled in the nursing program at Madison College. To help pay for her studies, Aprena got a job at an elementary school, assisting with extracurricular activities.

Aprena was on her way to becoming exactly what she wanted to be. But then on October 27, 2013, in the early evening, Alice was resting in her bedroom when her son, Elijah, knocked on the door. He wanted to know if Alice had talked to Aprena today. Alice thought for a moment, then realized she hadn't received a call or text from her daughter in a few hours.

This wasn't too unusual. Aprena was living at her grandmother's house in Fitchburg, and she didn't contact Alice every day. However, Aprena did talk to her grandmother, the one who brought her up in Florida every single day. But she had not heard from Aprena at all that day. The family drove to the school Aprena worked at, but no one had seen her.

Something wasn't right. When Alice and her mother called the police, they said Aprena wasn't technically missing, not yet. It hadn't been 24 hours and she was a legal adult.

They couldn't start a search just yet. But as the hours ticked by and Aprena couldn't be located, Alice knew in her heart that something was wrong. The next day, she decided to go to the local news station. Alice insisted and Aprena's story got out.

Alice made missing flyers and put her phone number on the bottom. She posted them all over the city,

on social media, and accepted any call that came in, even if it was just another distraught parent with a missing child, telling Alice not to give up hope. The next day, the police showed up at Alice's house and decided to open an investigation. The search for Aprena had begun.

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For the first few days of searching, Alice remained hopeful. She worked closely with the detectives and did as much media as she could. She talked to anyone and everyone about her daughter,

hoping she'd magically show up with her pink makeup bag and sly smile, saying, Hey mom, I'm back. But after three days of waiting, Alice started to give up hope.

On the third night of the search, Alice was laying in her bedroom, going over her notes and tips. She felt hopeless and heartbroken. Everyone in the house had finally quieted down.

So she tried to rest her eyes for a moment. That's when she felt a cold breeze wrap around her shoulders. She shot up and opened her eyes. None of the windows were open. The room was still. Then she felt it again. A chilly, crisp wind that wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl. She started to cry. She could feel her daughter. That breeze was a Prina. Alice stood up and followed the icy ghost to the bathroom, a Prina's favorite place.

As she told everyone, a Prina lived in the mirror. Alice stood in the bathroom, feeling her daughter's spirit amongst the chill. And she knew a Prina wasn't coming back.

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The next day, when the family got up to hand out more missing flyers, Alice told her mother what she had felt the night before. The elder woman brushed it off and told Alice she was being crazy. She's okay, a Prina's grandmother said. We're going to find her. Don't think like that. But it was only a few days later when Alice looked out her window to see a crew of Rock County police officers walking towards her front steps. Her heart stopped. She knew. Alice told her aunt to get the door. She couldn't do it. She knew what the officers were there to tell her. We think we found a Prina, they said. Did she have a pink makeup bag? Yes, Alice whispered. We're so sorry, ma'am. Alice's heart sunk into the pit of her stomach as she collapsed into the couch. She let the weight of her cushions hug her body and her brain buzzed. She couldn't even hear what the officers were saying anymore. Nothing mattered. A Prina was gone. A Prina's aunt took over the conversation asking the police if they could see her body. No, they said. There is no body. What do you mean there's no body? A Prina's aunt screamed. What do you mean? Alice couldn't understand. The rage inside of her boiled up like a volcano and she exploded. She screamed at the police waving her hands helplessly as she stood up. All the emotions of the past week were bubbling over and out into her living room. The police explained that a Prina's body had been burned so badly that there was nothing left but fragments and charred bits. She'd been found in a fire pit on a residential property in Evansville, which was about half an hour from a Prina's house in Fitchburg. The person who owned the property was a 29-year-old man named Nathan Middleton. Nathan had a fiance, a baby on the way, and lots of secrets. The first secret was that he liked to sleep with women he would hire from Craigslist. But a Prina had secrets too. Aside from working at the elementary school, she had started answering sex ads on Craigslist to make a little extra cash. No one in her family knew about this secret part of a Prina's life. She used a fake name and didn't tell any of her friends what she was doing either. In 2013, many young girls in a Prina's shoes were doing the same thing. I wonder how many of them still are. The phenomenon of sugar babies had exploded. Everyone had an iPhone and selling companionship for the evening was an easy way for a pretty young college girl to make a killing next to her minimum wage job at Forever 21, that is. The allure was there, and it all seemed pretty safe. Kind of like getting into a stranger's car to take you to the airport. What could go wrong in this brave new world of technology? Besides, these were mostly older men that just wanted a little company or a little sex. On the morning of October 27, 2013, Nathan had placed an adult Craigslist ad looking for a young girl to spend the evening with. Maybe smoke a little weed and talk. A Prina answered the ad, and after some texts back and forth, Nathan agreed to pick her up in Fitchburg that evening. On his way to Fitchburg later that day, Nathan dropped his fiance at work, then he swung around and picked up a Prina. Once they arrived at his modest white house in Evansville, the two had sex in the shower, smoked some pot, and then had sex again in his bedroom. Then Nathan claimed he and a Prina fell asleep. The next morning, he woke up to find a Prina was not breathing. He claimed that he tried to revive her but a Prina was dead. That's when he decided not to call 911 but to instead wrap her body in a bed sheet and shove it in his garage, as you do. He threw her cell phone in a ditch down the street and then went to a local hardware store to get some kerosene and a shovel. He was going to make a bonfire in his backyard and burn the evidence. He started the fire. Nathan watched the smoke rise and the flames grow.

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He tossed in a Prina's clothes and purse, eyeing the items as they became engulfed in flames. He kept the fire going and when his fiancé arrived home, she suggested s'mores. I'm not fucking kidding you. This is a true story. While Nathan's allegedly clueless fiancé collected graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows, Nathan folded up a Prina's body into the fetal position and threw all 160 pounds of her into the deep, raging fire pit. Then he covered her up with slats of wood. He told the police that he and his fiancé tended the fire until 11.30pm, meaning s'mores and snuggling together near the warmth of the crackling flames. As they poked the fire with their little s'mores sticks, kind of like he did at camp, maybe Nathan would have gotten away with all this but for one mistake. Nothing was connecting Nathan Middleton to Prina Paul except for those messages on her cell phone.

Nathan burned everything a Prina had in that fire except her cell phone. After he placed that fateful call to Alice telling her to check Rock County, he threw the phone in a ditch. Well, that phone pinged and pinged and pinged, leading the police right to Nathan's door. That's when they found the burn pile, the bone fragments, and what was left of the pink makeup bag. When they showed Nathan a photo of a Prina and asked if he knew her, he said flatly, Yes, I know her. I burned her.

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Has anyone seen the bride and groom? Sorry, sorry, we're here.

We were getting lucky in the limo when we lost track of time.

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What was left of Apprina Paul's charred bones was sent to experts out of state to try to determine how she had died. But nothing could be determined. The wreckage was too severe.

She'd become dust. Nathan Middleton never admitted that he killed Apprina.

He swore that she just died unexpectedly. He also claimed that Apprina had been using cocaine while they were together that evening. But Apprina's mother told police that that was impossible. Apprina had a medical condition that caused her to have large polyps inside her nostrils.

One was so big it was practically coming out of her nose. She was unable to breathe properly, and was due to go into surgery soon to have them removed. Blowing her nose was tough, so snorting any drug would have been impossible. Even Apprina's doctor corroborated the story. But none of this really mattered because in a court of law, there wasn't enough evidence to charge Nathan with murder. He could only be charged with two felonies, hiding and mutilating a corpse.

He pleaded guilty to both counts, and the judge who was appalled and disgusted by the crime gave Nathan the maximum sentence of 20 years. Nathan also had prior felonies for burglary,

and was on probation at the time of Apprina's homicide. He was a known criminal with a shady past, the kind we keep letting out over and over again. Sorry, I said I wasn't going to do that. It's also alleged that his father has been in jail since the 1970s for a crime almost identical to Nathan's. He raped and murdered a young black girl in her home. Her spread that Nathan had told people his crime would be bigger and better than his father's, and that he'd never get caught. Now, I bet you're wondering what happened to Nathan's fiance. Well, she claimed she knew nothing of Apprina or her death. She was completely unaware that the fire she roasted her chocolatey s'mores in contained the body of an 18-year-old nursing student. Yeah, sure. I'm not even going to say it. Needless to say, they couldn't even charge Nathan, so there was no way they were going to charge his fiance. They had no actual proof that you could use in court of her involvement. Later, Alice told media outlets that she took a screen grab of a post from Nathan's fiance which read, that n-word got what she deserved. After Nathan was sent to prison, Apprina's family tried to revel in the small victory of his conviction, but since he was never actually charged with her murder, Apprina's case remains open to this day. No files or police records can be released to the public. You never know when a piece of evidence could lead to a murder conviction for Nathan, and they wouldn't want to mess up any chances of finally bringing him to justice. On the anniversary of Apprina's murder, Nathan sent Alice an eight-page front and back letter from his cell. In the letter, Nathan wrote an intricate story professing to Alice that he was innocent. He claimed that another man who owed him money actually killed Apprina. Nathan said he really loved Apprina. In fact, she could have been carrying his baby. They were more than friends, and he wouldn't have done anything to harm her. But Alice knew this was all lies. The police had told her that the way Nathan spoke about Apprina during his confession was despicable. He talked about her as though she was nothing more than garbage on the side of the road. In the letter, Nathan wrote out all the disgusting, shameful details of how this mystery man murdered Apprina. As Alice told the media, Nathan told me that this person did this and did that to my daughter. But I really think that he was trying to tell me what he did. If I was a weak-minded person, I would have been in a straight jacket after that letter. But the craziness with Nathan didn't stop there. In December, he tried to escape from prison. Yeah, the story's wild. According to court documents, Nathan bragged to other inmates that he was going to get out, and he told his mother to buy explosives online so he could bomb his way out of jail. Despite all his haphazard planning, Nathan actually managed to escape, but was quickly arrested and thrown back in jail. Today, Alice LaRue mourns for her daughter. And though she was angry for years about Apprina's risky behavior, which led to her death, she's forgiven her. She couldn't let that resentment and anger hold her down any longer. Apprina was like any other college student who dabbled in the sugar baby world. She clicked on the wrong ad on the wrong day on the wrong website, and she ended up with the wrong person. She wasn't meant to cross paths with a deviant like Nathan Middleton. Alice LaRue has spent the last decade of her life telling her daughter's story in the hopes that other girls in Apprina's position can learn from what happened. In a heartfelt interview, Alice said that the one thing she regrets is not telling Apprina how much she loved her every single day and how proud she was of her daughter. The way Apprina was taken from this world did not reflect how much good she did in her short life. So tell your daughters you love them. Remind them of the monsters that walk amongst us. Teach girls and women to live defensively in a dangerous world. Because the predators

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are out there in every state, in every city, in every block, and more often than not, they are hiding in plain sight.

If you enjoyed the show, please consider joining plus at [swordandscale.com slash plus](http://swordandscale.com/slash/plus).

But if you can't, consider leaving us a positive review on your preferred listening platform. Sweet dreams and good night.

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Deli, I guess?

Uh-huh, in my dentist's office. More than once, actually.

Do I have to say?

Yes, you do.

In the car, before my kids' PTA meeting.

Really?

Yes.

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