



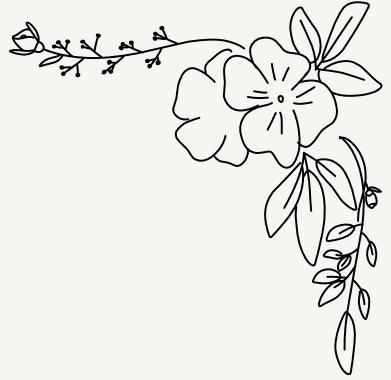
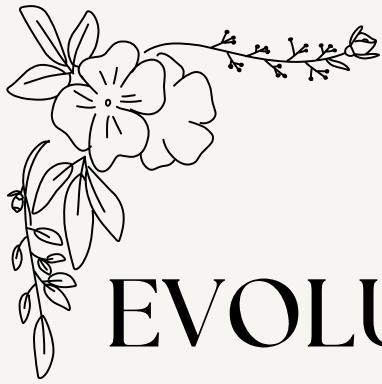
ISSUE NO.



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EVOLUTION
SPRING 2023





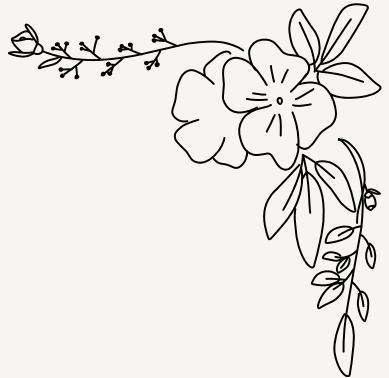
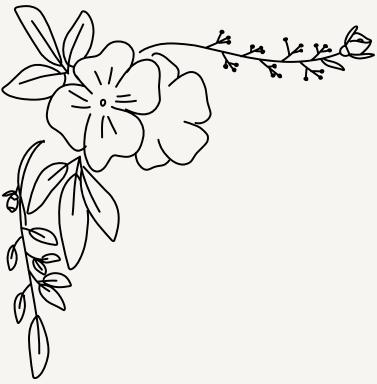
EVOLUTION

A Growth Literary Journal

2023 Evolution Press

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FOREWORD

Dear Readers,

We invite you to read through the spring 2023 issue of Evolution and share in the accomplishment of growth of creative skills. In this very first issue, we encouraged contributors to take a look at writing they've done in previous times compared to their more recent work and submit examples of both. As we all continue to develop and change, we can take a second to look back on where we started in order to see just how far we have come. We hope this issue of Evolution gives you the chance to enjoy the creative work of those brave enough to share pieces of themselves, but also think about your own work and how much you have evolved.

This concept of evolving, or personal evolution, is what inspired the name of the journal. For this issue, we wanted to demonstrate this by accompanying each author's work with pictures of flowers, one of the flower in its early stages of growth, matched with the first creative piece, and then another after it's fully bloomed, matched with the second. Along with the photography, there are also graphics of plants and flowers on each page to remind us of the purpose behind the journal.

As the Editor-in-Chief, I am deeply honored to have been part of this very first edition of Evolution and the amazing team that put it together. I am beyond proud to see our hard work as editors and authors grow from just an idea into a fully published journal. Thank you to each and every individual involved in the creation, no matter how big or small your role was.

Sincerely yours,

Maddie Dulle

Evolution Editor-in-Chief



SHORT STORIES



Missing Pieces: The Best Friend



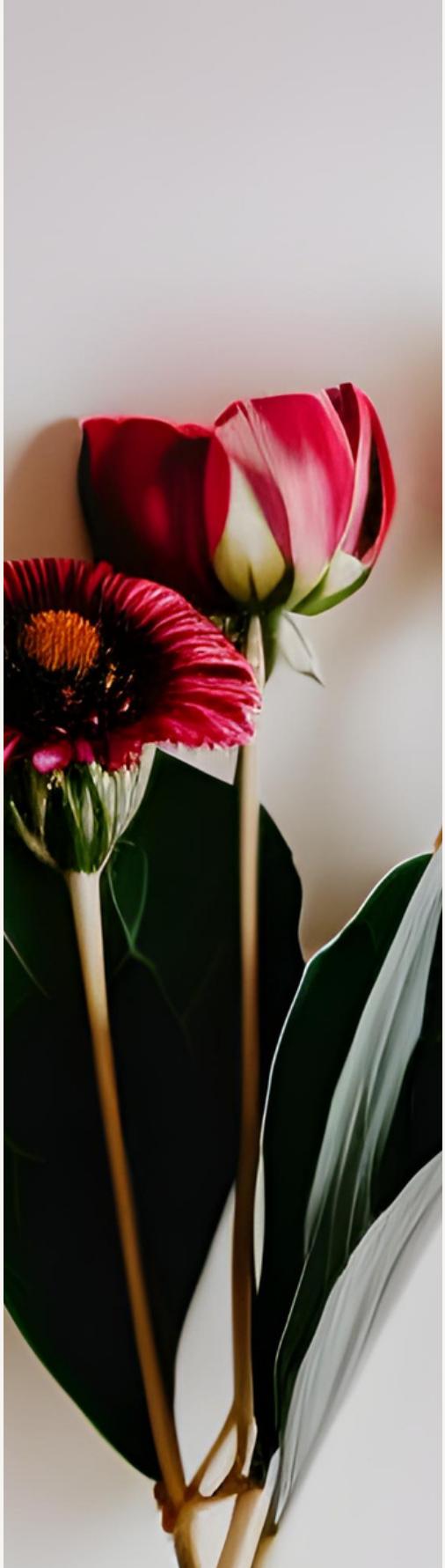
Missing Pieces: The Detective



Insanity



The Highest Stakes



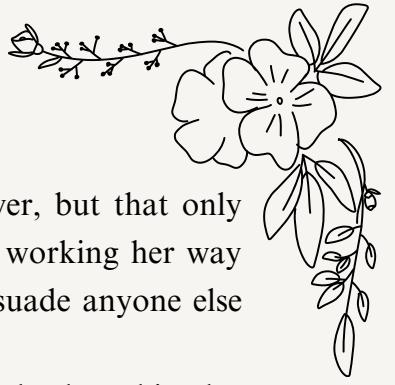
Missing Pieces: The Best Friend

Kira Berger
previous piece

Dani's gaze is glued to the clock hung over the classroom door, watching the seconds tick by and time slowly make its way to the end of the school day. Academically, it hasn't been a hard day. Classes have all but been canceled, despite attendance still being required, as each period wasn't filled with learning, just endless conversations about her best friend. Though Amber has only been absent for a few hours, rumors have spread like wildfire so that now the whole school believes something bad has happened to her and is taking bets on who in town did it. What doesn't help is Amber's father, Mayor Alan, showing up and interrogating anyone he can get his hands on. Avoiding him and anyone else looking to her for answers has been a nightmare, so Dani is beyond thrilled to escape the overly crowded hallways, which normally bring her comfort, once the final bell rings.

She's the first out of the classroom, having never really unpacked her books, and sprints to her locker. In the rush, she misses the second number on the lock and curses herself. Every second longer that she stays, the more questions she could receive.

Finally, in her locker, she yanks out her bag and slams the door shut, not bothering to organize her textbooks before doing so. Despite the force behind it, the loud metal echo is quickly lost in the noisy chatter of the students filling the hallway. As she makes her way



towards the exit, a lot of them try to reach out to her or call her over, but that only makes her walk faster. She puts her headphones on as she continues working her way through the crowd and pulls her chin closer to her chest to try to dissuade anyone else from talking to her.

When she comes to the split in the hallway, she turns left towards the back parking lot while everyone else takes a right to the front of the building. Immediately her surroundings become less crowded, and she can finally take a breath.

The back lot isn't where Dani normally parks, in fact, she's never parked out there before. It's unkept and filled with potholes. The lines between parking spaces no longer exist as they've all faded away so anyone who does use it, really only maintenance and students hoping to sneak out early, makes up their own spots. She debated what people might think if she parked her car out there, due to its reputation, but was glad she hadn't decided against it this morning.

The only other people out there with her are a group of kids huddled along the side of the building. They don't even look up as she opens the door and makes her way to her car so she doesn't pay them, or the rings of smoke rising above them, any attention either.

After making it into the driver's seat of her car, her phone starts to buzz. Even though she knows it won't be Amber, hope flares in her as she pulls it from her coat pocket and reads the screen: Mom.

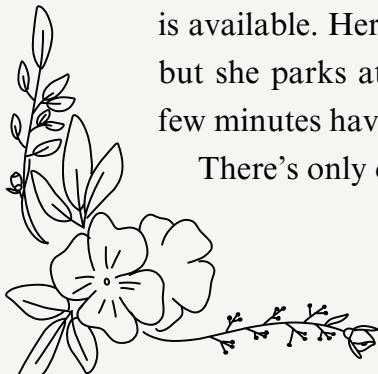
She debates answering but knows she can't lie to her mom so she lets it go to voicemail as she wonders what the call was about. Seconds later she gets her answer when a text comes through.

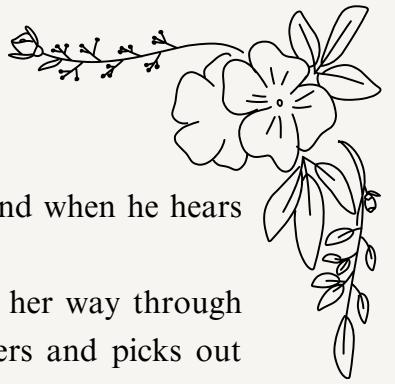
You on your way home? Amber's dad is here wanting to talk to you. Did you know Amber is missing?? Call me please!

Again, Dani debates answering. She doesn't want her mom to worry but also doesn't want to face the mayor, which is exactly what she'll have to do if she goes home. So, instead of going home, she decides to go to the only other place she might logically stop on her way from school: the gas station.

During the short drive there she blares the music as loud as she can stand and disconnects her phone from bluetooth trying to provide herself with whatever distraction is available. Her car doesn't actually need gas, in fact, she just filled it up a few days ago, but she parks at a pump anyways. She keeps up the appearance by going inside once a few minutes have passed.

There's only one worker manning the store, a guy maybe in his early twenties. His





is to the entrance and he's leaning against the counter, but turns around when he hears the chime of the bell hanging on the door go off.

Dani gives him a small smile as he greets her and starts weaving her way through the isles, trying her best to pass the time. She makes it to the coolers and picks out a bottle of water, but unfortunately, the store isn't very big with only a few selections of everything so it's not long before she finds herself back at the front, only this time closer to the register.

What she failed to notice before is that there's a small tv stashed under the window behind the counter with the worker. On it, a basketball game is playing and it must be an intense one because he appears to be glued to the screen. In the middle of a play, the game is interrupted and replaced with a broadcast from the local news. Knowing what it'll be about, Dani turns away from the screen and busies herself with admiring the various flavors of gum at the counter. She only turns back to it, when she hears the word suspect.

“Although we still have no comment from the chief of police, we believe this means that Amanda Alan, the beloved mayor’s daughter, might not just be a missing person, but a victim of homicide. If you, or anyone you know, has any information that might be useful to the police as they work to solve this crime, please do not hesitate to call the hotline provided on the screen below. And as always, we will continue to bring you updates as soon as we receive them. This has been Leslie with Station Seven.”

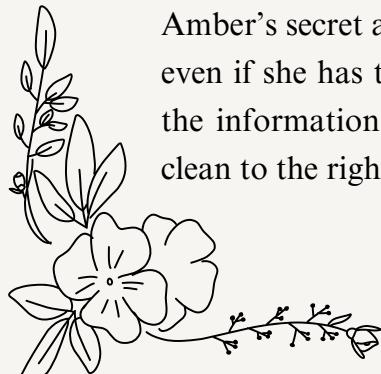
Dani stares at the screen, mouth open and eyes wide, as she comes to terms with what this means.

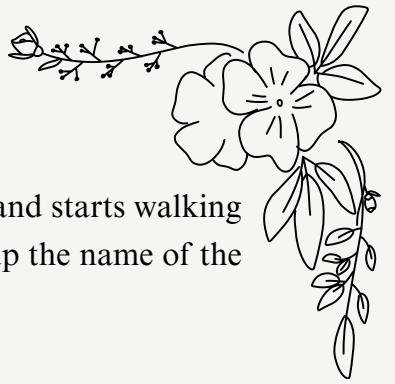
“Hey, I know that’s wild, but I’m sure they’ll make whoever it is pay for what he’s done.” The worker says to Dani, mistaking her reaction to the broadcast as fear.

“So they have someone in custody for a murder that didn’t happen?” She says, her heart rate starting to pick up.

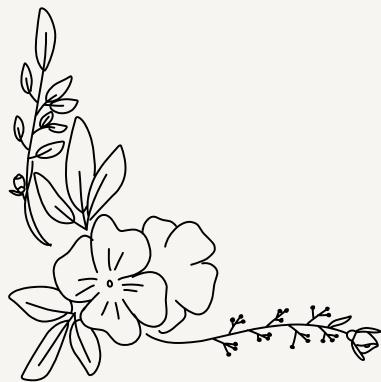
“Well, what else happened? It’s the mayor’s daughter, no one in their right mind would walk away from that kind of life. Besides, I hear that new detective is pretty good so I’m sure she’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Dani isn’t sure how everyone, including the police, has jumped to the conclusion that Amber was murdered so quickly, but she knows that she has to stop it. She can’t keep Amber’s secret any longer if it means a person goes to jail for a crime they didn’t commit, even if she has to get in trouble for it. All she can hope is that her coming forward with the information will grant her some sort of protection, especially if she’s able to come clean to the right person.





So before she can change her mind, she drops the water in her hand and starts walking away, ignoring the worker calling after her. Back in her car, she looks up the name of the new detective and heads directly to the police station.



Missing Pieces: The Detective

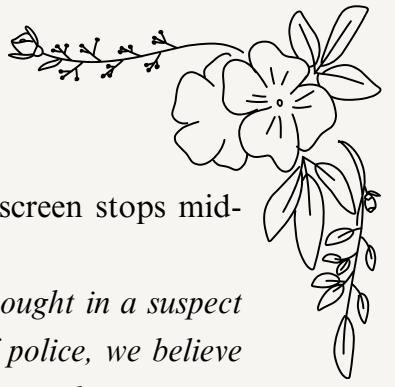
Kira Berger
recent piece

The small break room is packed when Detective Carter Poletti walks up. On a typical day, there wouldn't be more than an officer or two occupying the space at a time, not enough to make Carter hesitate before entering. It's the strong smell of coffee and her need for yet another caffeine boost that convinces her. As she fills her cup, she notices how loud she's being or rather how quiet everyone else is. The only other sounds in the filled room come from the old tv placed in the corner. A basketball game is on and based on the way the officers clustered around the screen seem to be frozen in time, with their eyes trying to catch every detail of what's being played, it must be a good one. Before the game can end, the screen goes black, breaking the silence of the room as Carter's coworkers loudly complain, and the local news station broadcast takes its place.

“Breaking news: We interrupt your regularly scheduled program with an urgent update in the Amanda Alan case. Our sources have informed us that Miss Alan, daughter of Mayor Alan, has officially been declared a missing person. The teen was last seen earlier this morning, outside the town’s local high school, but never attended any classes and hasn’t been seen or accounted for since. Up until now, the police have made no public comment although we expect-”

Carter and those in the break room, along with every





other person in the station she assumes, watch as the woman on the screen stops mid-sentence and puts her gloved hand to her ear.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we just received word that the police have brought in a suspect just moments ago. Although we still have no comment from the chief of police, we believe this means that Amanda Alan, the beloved mayor’s daughter, might not just be a missing person, but a victim of homicide. If you, or anyone you know, has any information that might be useful to the police as they work to solve this crime, please do not hesitate to call the hotline provided on the screen below. And as always, we will continue to bring you updates as soon as we receive them. This has been Leslie with Station Seven.”

The moment the news broadcast is done, it cuts back to the basketball game, one of the teams celebrating a victory but it’s long forgotten by now. Instead, the breakroom erupts in speculation about all Leslie with Station Seven had to say.

Carter doesn’t stick around for any of the conversations though. She grabs her coffee, sure to snatch the extra sugar packages she promised herself she’d start cutting back on, and heads to the chief’s office, knowing he’d summon her there anyways. Before she even fully closes the door, he starts in with his complaints.

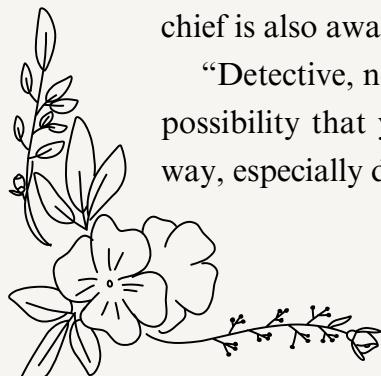
“The damn media is going to be the death of me.”

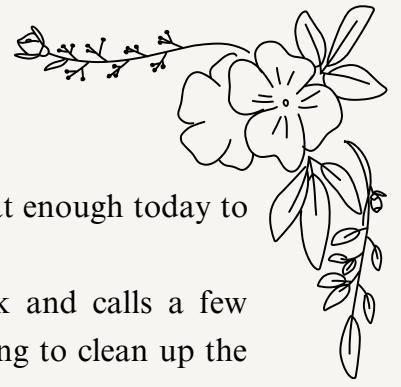
Carter laughs even though she doesn’t really think it’s funny, taking a seat across from him, “The media, huh? Well, it’s the Alan family that’s going to do me in.”

She doesn’t have to look up to know that the chief is giving her one of his infamous glares. It hasn’t been that long since she’s started here, but she’s learned a lot in the little time since then. The first thing she picked up on was that the chief, though he may be great at his job, is predictable and not very good at hiding his emotions. It’s one of the main reasons she’s come so close to inviting him to a round of poker; that and because he’s one of the few people in the station she actually doesn’t mind being around, though she’ll never admit it.

The other thing she’s learned, especially in the last eight hours, is that this town is run on politics. Rules don’t have to apply if you have the right amount of sway or money. This idea is great for those who do, but what about those who don’t? Carter has come to realize that those people don’t seem to matter in this town, something the chief is also aware of.

“Detective, need I remind you of who the Alans are? Or more importantly of the likely possibility that you’ll be looking for a new job elsewhere should you upset them in any way, especially during this case?”





Carter rolls her eyes, "No sir, trust me I've been reminded of all that enough today to last me a lifetime."

The chief gives her one last look as he gets up from his desk and calls a few more officers into the room. It's time for the department to start trying to clean up the mess the media has made.

Already knowing the information about to be shared, Carter moves towards the back and tunes out the chief's speech, taking the time to look around the room. The people that have been invited in are the station's most senior officers. They stand, scattered in various positions, all of their attention appearing to be fixed on what the chief has to say. From behind, she can't see their faces but she's wondering how many of them are letting their mind wander like her. She can't prove anything, but she has a feeling those who are already aware of the information have been told by the mayor himself because there's no way all of these people are lucky enough to have kept their job for as long as they have without some of them being corrupt.

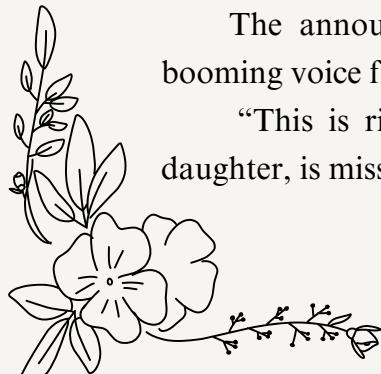
She finally breaks away from her thoughts and starts to listen to the chief once more as he begins to address the status of the case. He makes it clear that no suspects have been named nor has the case been declared a homicide, but that's where he stops. He doesn't mention that Amanda Alan has been declared a missing person, even though it's only been seven and a half hours since she was last seen. Carter is all for getting to the bottom of every case and reuniting families with loved ones, but what she's not all for is going about it the wrong way.

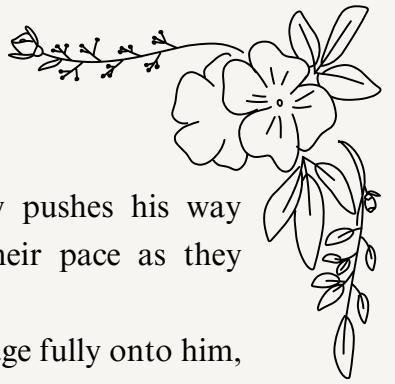
At this point, there is no evidence suggesting that Amanda Alan is in any sort of trouble. She could very well have played hooky at a friend's house or even went on a day trip she didn't ask permission for. There are too many different scenarios that could logically explain where Amanda is, but the media and the Alans won't consider any. What's worse is that, despite how much he complains about it, the chief is the one enabling them all.

Carter is on the verge of saying just that when a timid knock comes at the door and another officer sticks his head inside, "Sir, sorry to interrupt, but the Alans are here and have been waiting for you."

The announcement becomes unnecessary as a split second later, Mayor Alan's booming voice fills the room.

"This is ridiculous! How dare you keep me waiting! My daughter, the mayor's daughter, is missing and you are supposed to be doing something about it!"





Carter follows the chief as he curses under his breath and quickly pushes his way out of the office. The screaming continues so the two quicken their pace as they maneuver to the mayor.

Once there, he spots the chief in the crowd of officers and turns his rage fully onto him, even as the chief tries to calmly talk him down in order to take control of the chaos slowly erupting throughout the station. Eventually, after more yelling, some paper throwing and a lot of threats to put everyone in the building out of a job, the chief is able to get the Alans into the closest interrogation room where Carter and one other officer joins them.

When everyone is seated, the mayor continues: "So tell me, Detective, Chief," Mayor Alan says, nodding at both in turn, "why did it take me calling in a false lead to Station Seven's hotline for the police station to start caring about my missing daughter?"

It takes Carter a second to process the absurdity of what he's saying before she can find the words to reply, "I'm sorry, are you suggesting that *you* contacted the media and told them about a suspect being in custody?"

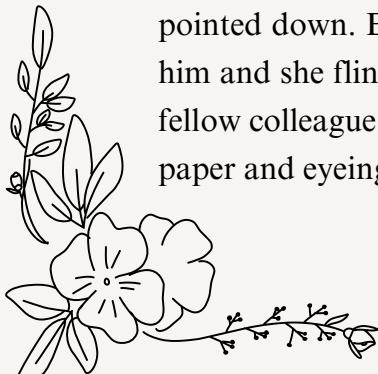
The mayor doesn't answer, just sits back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest so Carter continues, "You do realize how much trouble this is going to cause for us which is only going to make it harder to find your daughter, right?"

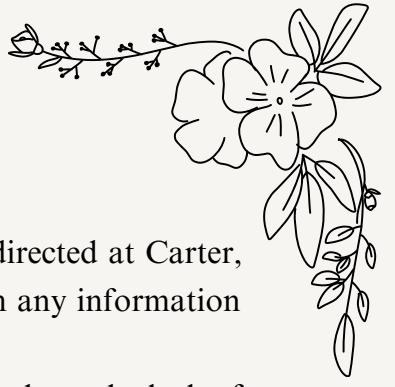
This he does respond to, "Well whose problem is that? Maybe this will convince you all to work a little bit harder around here. I can't even imagine the danger you've put my daughter in with the time that you've wasted already."

Carter can feel her pulse drumming in her ears as she tries her best to choose her next words carefully, "With all due respect, Mayor, it seems to me that Amber isn't in any danger at all. In fact, based on what we've been told so far, and since it's not even been a full day since she was last seen, it's likely that Amber left on her own accord making her fully capable of returning the same way."

Before she even finishes, the mayor is out of his seat pointing fingers in Carter's face, going on about how his daughter would never do such a thing. The chief finally has to cut in, pushing Carter back and doing his best to calm him down.

As Mayor Alan continues to yell about his daughter, all she can do is watch Mrs. Alan. She sits on the edge of her seat, hands folded together on the table, and gaze pointed down. Every so often, when the mayor gets louder in his replies, her eyes dart to him and she flinches ever so slightly. After a few incidents, Carter's attention shifts to her fellow colleague standing off to the side of the Alans. He's jotting down notes on a pad of paper and eyeing the camera in the corner of the room, something Carter wishes she





could do herself if she wasn't opposite of Mayor Alan and his wife.

Once the mayor is done with his outburst, much of his anger still directed at Carter, the chief offers his apologies, promises to keep the family updated with any information that comes in, and has the officer escort them out.

When the door finally closes behind them, Carter voices her opinion about the lack of evidence to suggest Amanda Alan was a victim of homicide once more.

The chief runs a hand over his face before replying, "Detective, we've been over this. There's no solid evidence to suggest she wasn't taken, and the Alans have reason to believe she was so that's what we're going on." When he looks back at her, he must recognize the words about to come out of her mouth because he adds, "End of discussion. Why don't you take a breath, collect yourself, and we'll continue this conversation tomorrow after you've gone home and gotten a few hours of shut-eye." He doesn't give her a chance to reply before leaving Carter alone in the room.

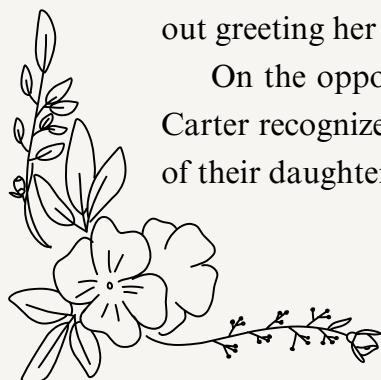
She lets out a sigh and pushes her hair behind her ears before gathering the papers scattered along the table and messily placing them back into their designated files. She stands, moves towards the door, and yanks it open, not bothering to push in her chair or turn out the lights before leaving the interrogation room. As she walks to her desk, she purposefully fails to notice the chief beckoning to her and flops the files down once she's there. She manages to throw her coat over her arm, unafraid of the cold weather that awaits her, and is just about to take her leave when a deputy blocks her path. Without giving him a chance to speak, she sidesteps the deputy and hopes that's enough to deter him from following.

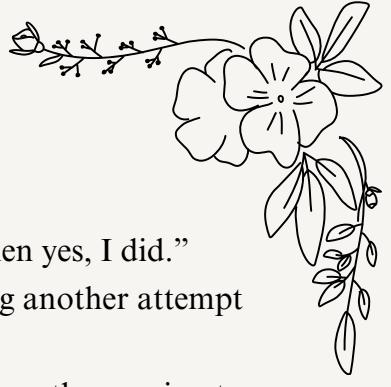
To her dismay, it's not as he yells after her, "Detective Poletti, there's someone here who needs to talk to you!"

"Tell whoever it is to see someone else. I'm going home."

"But Detective, I think you might want to handle it yourself," At this point, he's caught up with her. The fight leaves her as she realizes this means it's someone with information on the Amber Alan case and must be dealt with so she puts her head back for a second before nodding in response and gesturing for him to lead the way. She grabs the files back off her desk as the two head towards the interrogation room, the chair she left out greeting her as she enters.

On the opposite side of the table, a girl sits with her hands clasped between her legs. Carter recognizes her almost immediately from some of the pictures the Alans brought in of their daughter earlier that day.





"So, they tell me you asked to speak with me directly?"

The girl finally looks up as she replies, "If you're Detective Poletti, then yes, I did."

Carter gives her a few minutes, hoping she'll start to talk, before making another attempt at a conversation by asking for her name.

"My name is Danielle, but you can call me Dani," The girl takes a breath, seeming to gather her nerves before continuing, "Everything I say here stays between us, right? Like at a hospital, where a doctor can't talk about a patient?"

Carter's eyes flash to the camera's blue light, indicating it's recording, and wonders if anyone is still monitoring it with everything else going on. "Nice to meet you, Dani. Well, it's a little different than a hospital. Because this is an ongoing case, I'm going to have to share any information that might lead us to your friend, but I can do my best to help you remain anonymous if that's what you'd like."

That answer seems to satisfy Dani enough as seconds later she starts talking, blurting out everything as if she couldn't keep the information any longer. The story she tells is just as Carter suspected; Amber Alan ran away.

According to Dani, the two girls had spent the last month planning out how Amber could make a clean break, leaving both the town and her family behind. They had to gather food, supplies, and money slowly so as not to raise any suspicions. They also mapped out a few places Amber could go, but Dani doesn't know which one Amber decided on to make sure the mayor never finds her.

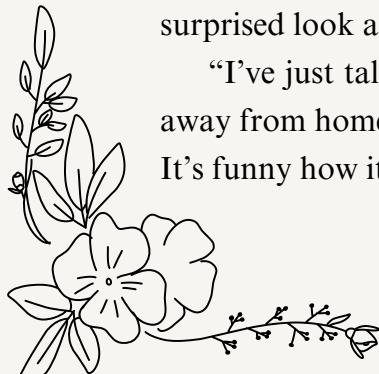
As she continues, Carter realizes just how much thought the girls put into their plan and how awful things must have been for Amber for her to take this drastic step. She already knows that Mayor Alan is the motivation behind the plan, but she asks anyway.

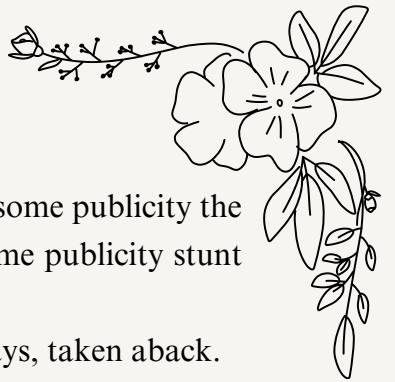
It takes Dani a second to answer and when she does Carter has to lean in to hear her. "I had to help her get away from him. I know he's the mayor, but he's not what he seems, which is why he can't find out. Please, please don't tell Mayor Alan."

Carter can see the desperation in her eyes as she pleads with her to keep the secret. She assures Dani that the mayor won't find out, giving her the most reassuring smile she can muster before leading her away from the interrogation room and out of the station.

Once she's out of sight, Carter heads straight into the chief's office, who gives her a surprised look as she enters.

"I've just talked to a key witness who informed me that Amber Alan had help to run away from home because she had to get away from her dad, your wonderful Mayor Alan. It's funny how it's not a homicide case just like I've been saying all along. And I bet you



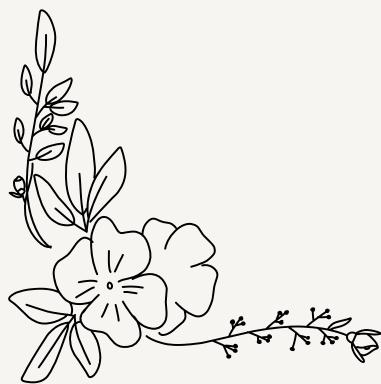


the mayor has also been aware of it the entire time but wanted to make some publicity the mayor has also been aware of it the entire time but wanted to make some publicity stunt out of his daughter's suffering."

"Now, come on, Detective, you sure you can trust that?" The chief says, taken aback.

Carter puts her hand up and shakes her head, refusing to hear any more excuses. "That story makes more sense than everything that's come from Mayor Alan so far. I'm sick and tired of the games being played here that are keeping me from doing my job." She throws the files down on his desk and takes her badge from around her neck before placing it next to them. "I think you'd be better off hiring a new detective. Maybe they'll be more inclined to follow the mayor's orders."

As Carter turns her back on the chief and walks out of the station, she realizes Amber Alan might have had the right idea leaving this town behind.





Insanity

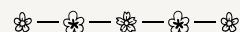
Kevin Green
previous piece

**TWO KILLED AND ONE IN FATAL CONDITION
AFTER CRASH**

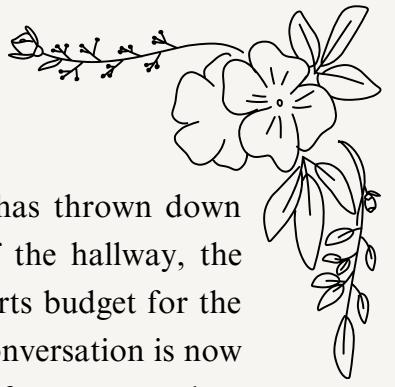
On Wednesday night, a fatal crash occurred around 8 p.m. According to police, the driver of a white SUV lost control and passed into the opposite lane, colliding with a minivan in the oncoming traffic. The minivan contained a family of three, known as the Browns. Thomas Brown and his wife Nicole Brown were killed instantly but their daughter, a seventeen-year-old minor, miraculously survived. She was flown to the nearest hospital and reported to be in a coma. Whether she will be able to pull through is still unclear.

The driver of the SUV is believed to have been under the influence and has not been taken into custody due to fleeing the scene on foot. Police advise citizens to be cautious until the perpetrator is found, as they don't know what else he might be capable of. If you are to see this man, please call the police hotline and report it.

We will continue to keep you updated on the status of the manhunt and the condition of the family.



I look up at the front doors of the school and brace myself for what's coming. Unfortunately, I know exactly what to expect. At the moment, a group of jocks are bullying a kid into handing over his lunch money and threatening to shove him into the smelliest trash bin if he doesn't cooperate. The new girl, who just finished attempting to open her locker—unfortunately located



right next to the boys' bathroom—for a seventh time with no luck, has thrown down her schedule in frustration and is stomping away. In the middle of the hallway, the art teacher has been arguing with the principal about the cut to the arts budget for the last ten minutes, and has managed to raise her voice enough that the conversation is now being ushered into an empty classroom. These interactions, a small few compared to the many that are occurring as I inch closer and closer to the school, aren't what I have to prepare myself for though, instead it's what will happen when the heavy metal doors close behind me.

Once I step inside, all interactions will cease. What previously held the jocks, new girl, art teacher, and everyone else's attention won't be as important as focusing on me. Everyone in the hallway will stare at me, and everyone not already in the hallway will do their best to get a glimpse too. Not only will I catch their eyes, but my appearance will invite them to poke fun at me.

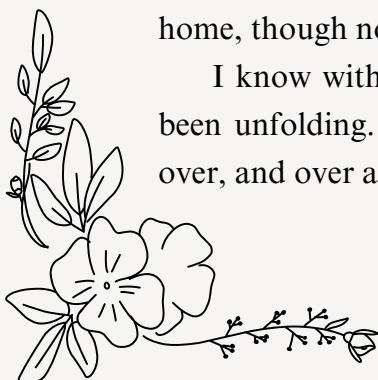
"Hey, it's Crazy Courtney!"

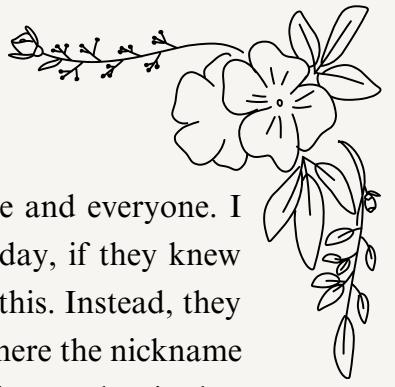
"What's up, nutcase?"

"How's it goin' luny?"

The comments will continue, only getting louder and more aggressive as I get closer to my first period. A group will even decide to block my way and surround me until I hand over some sort of response, which I won't, so eventually they'll lose interest in my silence and let me pass. I've learned that it's better to stay quiet, to let the tormenting happen, because giving any sort of reaction will only encourage them. At least when I'm silent, I don't provoke them or give them any reason to continue. So, that's what I'll do. I'll remain almost mute throughout the entirety of my school day, keeping my mouth shut, head down, and trying my best to roll with the verbal—though sometimes physical—punches. When I'm shoved into a locker in between third and fourth period, I won't fight back but instead press my back against the cold lock and wait for the crowd to pass so I can continue to class. Or when my lab partner flips my lunch tray, sending mashed potatoes flying, I'll stand there covered in carbs until the laughter dies down and I can start to clean myself up without causing another wave of giggles. I'll do these things, and so many more, until the final bell rings and I'm permitted to make my escape and go home, though not without hearing more shouts of how insane I am.

I know without a doubt that this is how my day will unfold because this is how it's been unfolding. For the last 166 days, I've been stuck reliving the same day over, and over, and over again. When I first accepted what was happening I tried to figure out why

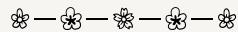




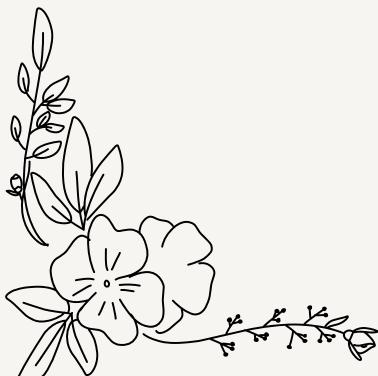
and how to make it stop. My initial instinct was to tell people, anyone and everyone. I would ask them if they remembered doing the exact same thing yesterday, if they knew what to say just as I had learned. No one took me seriously when I did this. Instead, they would stare, ask if I was okay, or tell me I'm crazy—which is actually where the nickname started. For some reason, the only thing everyone remembers from day to day is that I'm considered the nut job. The one that everyone avoids, that no one picks as a partner for a project, and that no one wants to sit with at lunch because they're scared they might 'catch the crazy.'

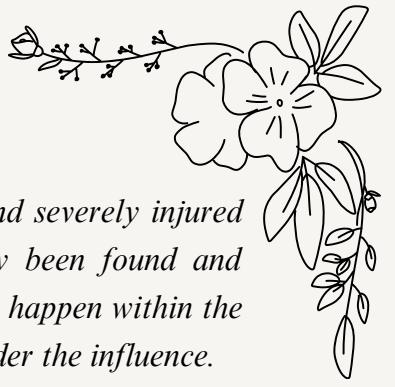
Even my supposed mother, who tries her best to be subtle, thinks I'm crazy and I'm not sure which is worse. At least the kids at school aren't afraid to point out how different they think I am, they'll tell me straight to my face. My mother, on the other hand, is constantly walking on eggshells, afraid I'll crack at the slightest mention of it. What I am sure of is that both reactions are beginning to actually drive me crazy. Dealing with that day in and day out, on top of living with 167 versions of how this one single day could go, is enough to drive anyone mad. That's why I tried so hard, especially in the beginning, to break out of whatever is holding me captive in this awful day. I tried going against what was so clearly supposed to play out, each day doing so in a different way. I skipped school, told the jocks to leave the kid and his lunch money alone, opened up the new girl's locker, gave the school a more than generous donation, and even tried showing up with an outfit besides my jeans and gray sweatshirt and running through the halls screaming. Nothing has worked.

Because of this, I've grown accustomed to acting as I'm supposed to, never breaking the norm. I go to school, endure all the torment that persists, then come home to be faced with a different type of torture. Every day when I walk in, my mother is wearing her stained apron making spaghetti—apparently it's my favorite—just for me. She'll ask how my day is, I'll purposefully avoid giving a straight answer and ask if I can be excused until dinner. Before she even has the opportunity to respond, I make my way up the stairs to a bedroom I didn't decorate. I have every intention of starting my homework, but each time I fall asleep. When I wake up, it's not the spaghetti that greets me, it's the fact that a new, yet completely old, day has started.



UPDATE ON FATAL CRASH

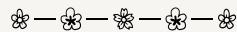




It's been exactly three days since the car accident that killed two and severely injured another occurred and a lot has happened. The perpetrator has finally been found and arrested. He is currently being held in the county jail and his trial is set to happen within the next month. He will be charged with second-degree murder and driving under the influence.

On a more depressing note, the seventeen-year-old minor who was put into a medically-induced coma due to the accident has taken a turn for the worse. Doctors had managed to keep the victim stable until early this morning when their methods ceased working. Whether or not the victim will pull through is unclear at the moment. Doctors say that they've done everything they can to help so it is now up to the victim if they are strong enough to survive, as everyone hopes they do.

As always, we'll continue to keep you posted on any new developments that come our way, both from the perpetrator and victim.



I wake up and immediately get the eerie sense that something's off. It's Day 168 of being stuck but I can't recall anything that would make it any different from the rest. Deciding I'm probably imagining things, I start my day as I always do. First is checking off another tally on the wall of ever-growing tallies, then it's getting ready for school.

When I head for the bathroom, that's when I hear someone say my name.

Courtney

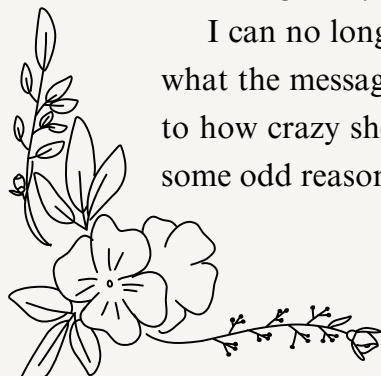
I don't recognize the voice, and it's definitely not in the normal script of the day, so I don't know what to make of it. I wait, giving it a solid ten seconds, before I continue with my routine as if nothing happens. Although this tactic works at first, it fails after a couple of minutes because the voice comes again, only this time carrying a different message.

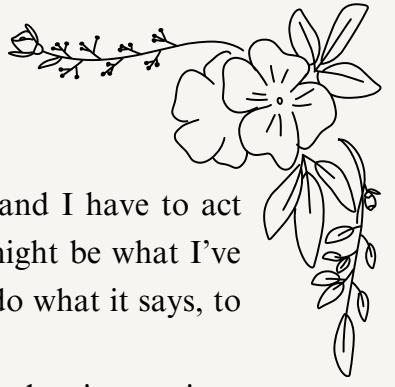
I know it's hard and you've been through so much, but please don't stop fighting.

Still confused on what I'm experiencing, I hesitantly try going about as I normally do.

I can't even imagine what you're going through but know that I'll be here once you come out of it. You just need to come out of it. Fight, Courtney, fight. Try something different, do something that you haven't before. Just keep fighting until you finally break free.

I can no longer ignore the voice that keeps growing stronger so I try to make sense of what the message means, not daring to run it past my mother because it will for sure add to how crazy she believes me to be. The only conclusion I can come to is that today, for some odd reason, is different. There's something special about today and I have to act





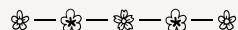
some odd reason, is different. There's something special about today and I have to act before the day is up. Maybe this voice will help me finally escape; it might be what I've been waiting for. I try not to get too excited as I make the decision to do what it says, to try something different and keep fighting.

Every time that I broke away from the normal events of the day in previous versions, I've done so individually. I've done something different, and then done everything else the same. So today, lucky Day 168, I'm not going to do just one thing out of the ordinary but everything.

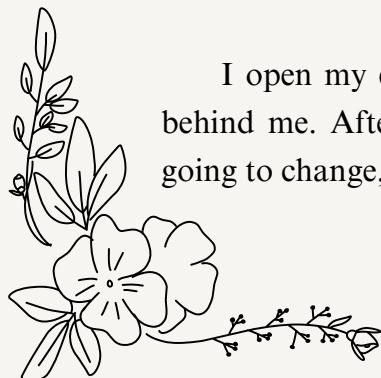
This starts by wearing something new to school. I run upstairs and throw on the first outfit I find, a hot-pink t-shirt with leopard print leggings, then make my way to school, sure to slow my steps so I show up late. Once I'm at school, I tell off the jocks for bullying the kid, open up the new girl's locker for her, and give the art teacher enough money to keep the program running. I even steal her purple clay and spread it on my face for good measure.

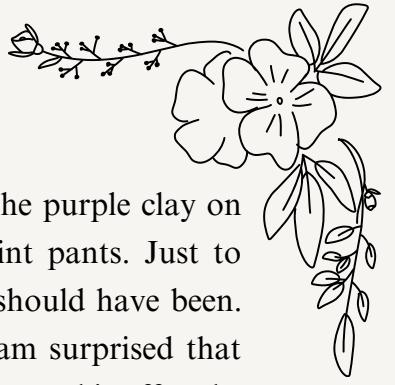
I keep up with these random acts of craziness, if you will, for the rest of the day. They earn me more than my normal amount of stares, laughs, and insults but I don't care. Whenever the kids do manage to get to me, I hear the encouraging voice again, urging me to keep fighting so that's what I do. I keep fighting against the norms I've been forced to live for the last 167 days until I feel like I can't anymore, and then I push to do more.

My last act of rebellion happens once I come home. Never once have I been able to taste the spaghetti that's supposed to be especially for me so to make up for it, I not only take a bite, but I throw it to the ground and proceed to make snow angels in it. It's warm and garlicky and tastes exactly as I've been imagining. I only stop when my mother comes in and sends me to my room for my outrageous behavior. I more than happily oblige, because I'm so physically exhausted I don't think I would have lasted much longer. For the first time ever, I gladly welcome the sleep I know is waiting for me once my head hits my pillow, though before I let myself completely doze off, I say a silent prayer that all of my fighting actually worked.



I open my eyes, ready to accept that I gave myself false hope yesterday and put it behind me. After 168 days you would have thought I learned by now that nothing is going to change, not even if I decide to bathe myself in spaghetti. Like normal, everything





reset itself as soon as I fell asleep. I can't taste the tomato sauce, feel the purple clay on my cheek, and I'm no longer wearing the pink shirt and leopard print pants. Just to double-check I decide to reach my hand up and touch where the clay should have been. I'm not at all surprised that I don't feel anything besides skin, but I am surprised that there's something there in place of it. It's rough and sticky as I attempt to peel it off and I realize it's tape. At the exact same moment I notice the tube attached to it that's also attached to my upper lip.

I don't know how I got it on me. It's never happened like this before so I start to freak out. I'm trying to feel around to see where else it is when a machine to my left starts screeching. My hands instinctively cover my ears and I look around trying to figure out where I am.

I see an open door that leads into a hallway where people in white clothes look as frantic as I feel. They're shouting something and I listen hard to hear what it is.

"She's awake! Page the doctor! He needs to come in here immediately,"

The doctor? Am I in a hospital?

All at once, a storm of people make their way into what I assume to be my hospital room. They are checking my vitals, asking how many fingers they're holding up, removing what I now know is an oxygen mask from my face, and anything else you can think of. Despite this, I'm still lost and frightened. I don't know what's happening. Clearly, I'm out of the repeating day but how? And why am I lying in a hospital bed?

"I'm Doctor Lars. Can you tell me your name please? Do you have any clue what this is about?" Doctor Lars says as he places his hand on my shoulder.

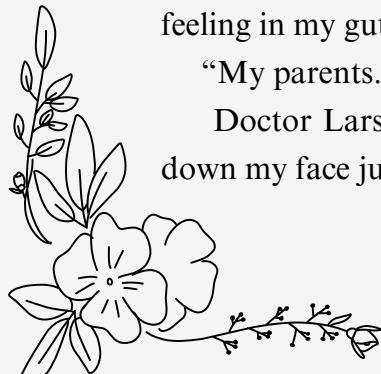
"I'm Courtney. No, where am I? What's going on?"

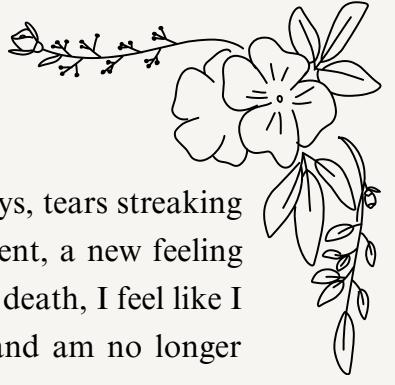
Slowly, he begins to explain, "You have just woken up from a seven day long coma, caused by a car crash you were involved in last Wednesday. We weren't sure if you were going to make it. Do you remember any details from the crash or beforehand?"

"A coma, for seven days? And a car crash?" All at once it comes back to me. Sitting in the backseat, Mom and Dad upfront, all three of us jamming out to the song on the radio. The headlights were the first thing I noticed, but not for long. I was only awake enough to hear Mom and Dad's screams and then nothing. I suddenly have this terrible feeling in my gut.

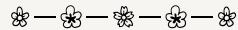
"My parents. They didn't make it did they?"

Doctor Lars averts his eyes and that's all the answer I need. Silent tears start to slip down my face just as someone else enters the room.



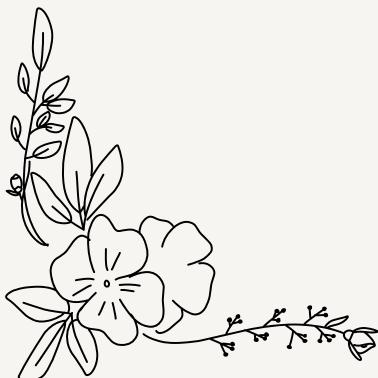


“Courtney, oh my God. You’re awake. You made it,” Aunt Alice says, tears streaking her face as she runs towards me, engulfing me in a hug. At that moment, a new feeling comes over me. Despite the grief I already feel coming over my parents’ death, I feel like I can face the world head on because I escaped the never-ending day and am no longer alone. I’m not sure why, but somehow I know I’ll be okay.



MIRACULOUS RECOVERY BY SURVIVOR OF FATAL CRASH

Since the fatal crash that occurred last Wednesday, the minor, now able to be identified as Courtney Brown, has been in a week-long coma. After many ups and downs, doctors were unsure whether Courtney would be able to pull through. Although this crash has caused and will continue to cause many hardships for the Brown family, one good thing has come out of it because the seventeen-year-old victim has surprised everyone by waking up. She is still being kept at the hospital so doctors can ensure there are not any more injuries but Courtney Brown is expected to make a full recovery. Once she is released she will be taken in by her aunt, due to her parents’ passing. I think it’s safe to say that the Brown family and the whole community are delighted by Courtney’s miraculous recovery.



The Highest Stakes

Kevin Green
recent piece

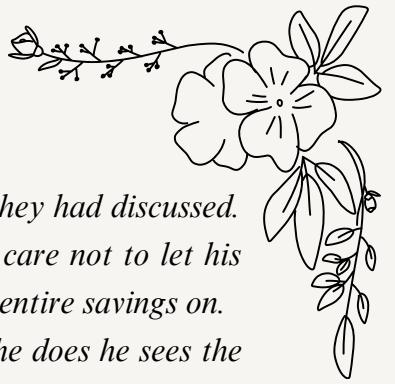
As Jake wipes up the third plate of spaghetti that's been spilled since he clocked in two hours ago, he realizes what a mistake it was to pick up yet another extra shift. When he called in asking for it, he thought it was what he needed. He couldn't stand being alone in his recently empty apartment, forced to look at all the places that used to hold her things any longer; he wanted to feel normal, but he didn't know what normal was anymore. So the next best thing was a distraction, and what better distraction was there than the night shift at Tino's, right? So far, he'd been wrong, as the only thing the shift had given him was a lack of patience. Even with this newfound frustration, the memories of that night still manage to flood his mind when he's least expecting it, hitting him with another wave of sorrow each time. A week had gone by since then, yet the pain is still just as fresh as if it had happened mere hours before.

They walk, hand in hand, down Main Street, the same way they had on their very first date. Jake concentrates as he tries to count the steps to the exact spot where they had shared their first kiss, but she keeps making him lose focus.

"Will you tell me what's happening, please? And where we're going?" She says, with a hint of annoyance in her voice. From the moment they left dinner, heading in the opposite direction of their parked car, she has been on edge. Jake can't blame her though; They have been walking for a while, but he wants it to be perfect and knows she'll understand once his plan falls into place.

When they finally reach the crack in the sidewalk that sits directly below the brightest streetlight in town, Jake





glances around, making sure the photographer he hired is in the position they had discussed. Once he's spotted him, Jake lowers himself onto one knee—taking extra care not to let his nerves knock him over—and pulls out a ring he'd recently spent almost his entire savings on.

It takes him a moment to steady himself enough to look up, but once he does he sees the realization flash in her eyes as she tries and fails to stifle a laugh. "Jake, you can't actually be serious," she said, already taking a step back so that she was out of his reach.

Had she looked at his face for more than a second or paid any attention to his shaking hands, she would have understood just how serious he was.

Jake is snapped back to reality when he hears Xavier, the one and only coworker he would consider a real friend in this place, calling him through the window in the kitchen, "Jake, your presence is requested in the back."

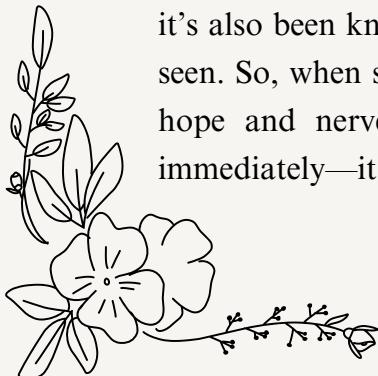
The floor is still sticky, but this gives him the perfect excuse not to drag the ancient mop out of the supply closet. Besides, maybe the extra traction will help keep the plates of pasta in everyone's hands.

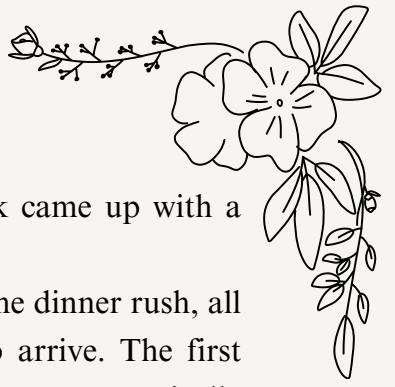
He takes the long way to the kitchen, weaving in and out of tables packed too tightly. As the rest of the staff has been saying for ages, it's only a matter of time before this place gets shut down—that is if it doesn't go out of business first. He's never fully agreed before but is now starting to see the logic in the statement. Between all the barely passed health inspections, the clear fire hazards in the overly cramped dining area, and the faulty open sign hanging lopsided in the front window, it's a miracle Tino's has even stayed open this long.

"And so the last of the crew has arrived," Xavier says as Jake slips through the double doors of the kitchen and takes his usual spot in the corner. He notices that the two waitresses working tonight, Cara and Natalie, are already flipping through channels on the mini TV mounted beside the sink.

Jake sighs, as he realizes what's about to happen. There's only one time a night when the restaurant is open that all its workers manage to be in the same place: when it's time to make The Bet.

As the only Italian restaurant in town, and a cheap one at that, Tino's is the go-to place for any date. While many great dates have played out inside these outdated walls, it's also been known to host some of the most embarrassing breakups this town has ever seen. So, when someone walks in alone, wearing their best attire, and radiating a mix of hope and nerves—the three tell-tale signs the staff has come to recognize almost immediately—it's not always clear which of the two occasions have been set up. To





provide a little bit of entertainment, the waitstaff a couple years back came up with a game that has long since become a tradition.

Every night the workers on hand gather in the kitchen right before the dinner rush, all but one placing their money in the pot, and wait for their victim to arrive. The first person to walk through the front doors and meet all three requirements automatically becomes the target of the night. They get seated at the infamous Heartbreak Table; the only table able to be seen from every spot in the restaurant. As the night progresses, the staff observes the victim, makes a guess of how their night will go down, and comes up with a backstory to go along with it, until the inevitable happens: either the date makes an appearance or the victim leaves as they showed up—alone. The catch: only the Insider, the server who doesn't participate, is allowed to interact with the victim and can't tell anyone else the details of what happens.

Due to the lack of customers Tino's has been suffering from recently and the need to keep the game away from the eyes of management, it's a hit or miss whether The Bet will happen. Although, with it being a Saturday night and the manager already having called in sick, the chances are pretty high.

Slapping his money into the pot, Xavier asks, "Who else will be joining me tonight?" As the cook he doesn't have the option to serve the victim so he always participates.

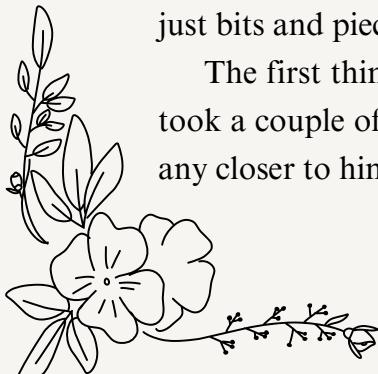
"You know I'm in. Let's see who's gonna get their heart torn in two tonight," Natalie says and then turns to Jake before doing her best impression of him, "You never know, it might be the opposite. Not everyone in this world is as cruel as you are, Natalie."

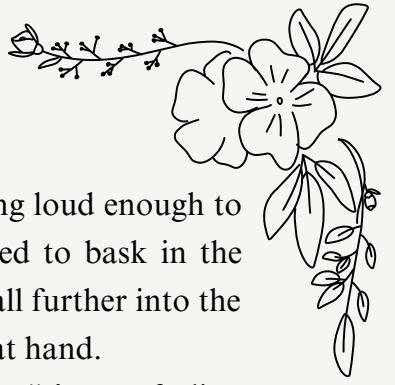
Normally Jake would agree, snapping back with something about the good that exists in most people, but after recent events, he isn't so sure and decides to stay quiet, which doesn't go unnoticed.

"What, did Mr. Hopeful not take his happy pill today? Or did he finally get his own heart broken and come over to the pessimist way of thinking?"

He doesn't usually let Natalie's comments affect him, but it seems inevitable today. And maybe it's because the pain is still fresh or because this one in particular strikes a chord, but Jake thinks of her, the one responsible for shattering his heart into what feels like a million pieces, for the second time this shift only this time it's not a full memory, just bits and pieces of a night he wishes he could forget.

The first thing that comes to mind is the way she pried her hands away from him and took a couple of steps back, like she no longer knew who he was and couldn't stand to be any closer to him than she had to. And then he remembers her laugh, the one he always





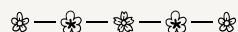
loved. It was just a mere giggle at first, but it escalated quickly, becoming loud enough to grab the attention of everyone around them, until a crowd had formed to bask in the humiliation he felt creeping up his neck. Before Jake allows himself to fall further into the details of all that went down, he forces himself to focus on the moment at hand.

Ashamed, he can't bring himself to meet anyone's eyes as he responds, "I'm not feeling it today, okay? Besides, I was in last time so I think it's my turn to sit out. Cara, that means you're in," He points at the other waitress and doesn't wait for a response before he makes his way out of the kitchen and heads towards the open sign—which is out again—in hopes of a new distraction.

No matter how many battery replacements it gets, the sign continues to flicker and dim, making it seem as if the restaurant is open one second then closed the next. All it needs is a bit of a jiggle to get it up and running again, something only Jake has figured out since no one else seems to care enough to do anything about it.

He reminds himself of this as he tries not to feel guilty about the way he stormed out on everyone. Normally, as the Insider he would happily sit in to listen to the stories they concoct and tell them how wrong they were, but not tonight. He can't deal with them today, especially with the off chance of one of their stories resembling his own.

Besides, they know where to find him if or when the time comes.

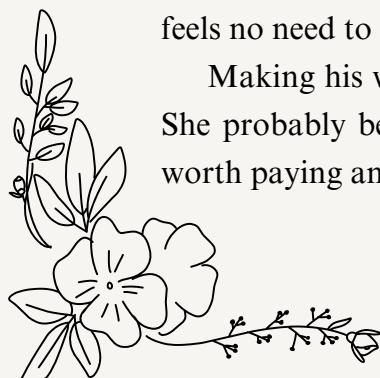


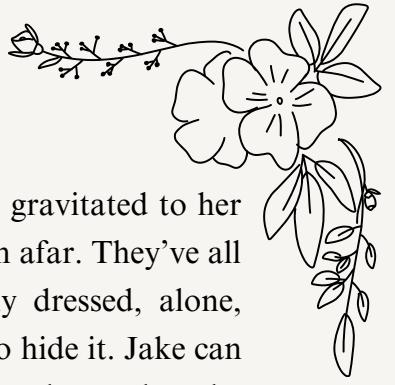
It's an hour or so later when Cara, a tray full of meals in her hands, brushes by Jake and quietly wishes him good luck, indicating that The Bet has begun.

He looks up from the table he was setting and immediately spots who she's talking about. A girl wearing a simple yet elegant red dress with her makeup done and hair curled has just walked in. She's standing by the hostess table and keeps switching between checking her phone and looking around, never letting her gaze stay focused on anything too long.

There are still a few items to place, though with all his coworkers' eagerly glancing at him and the many tables already being unoccupied on their busiest night of the week, he feels no need to follow through with the task at the moment.

Making his way towards her, he suspects this girl has no idea what she's walked into. She probably believes she looks like everyone else seeking a meal from Tino's—no one worth paying any extra attention to. Knowing just how wrong she is, Jake wants to tell





her to look closer; it's not hard to notice that the eyes of every worker gravitated to her the moment she stepped through the doors, trying to figure her out from afar. They've all been trained to know the signs like the back of their hands—nicely dressed, alone, nervous—and this girl checks every box, no matter how hard she tries to hide it. Jake can tell she thinks it's going to be a special night, one she will always remember. What she doesn't understand is that it no doubt will be memorable, though it won't be how she hopes if any of the waitstaff have it their way.

Jake can't remember the last time he went to church, but just as he reaches the hostess stand, he finds himself having a quick one-sided conversation with God. The last thing anyone needs is to experience a heartbreak like the one he's still reeling from, especially this girl who's so obviously glowing with excitement.

He greets her with their overly scripted welcome speech and proceeds to ask how many will be in her party even though he suspects he already knows the answer.

"Two please, my fianc-," she slaps a hand over her mouth, but it doesn't fully cover the giddy smile that lights up her face as she corrects herself, "I mean boyfriend, whoops, will be joining me shortly."

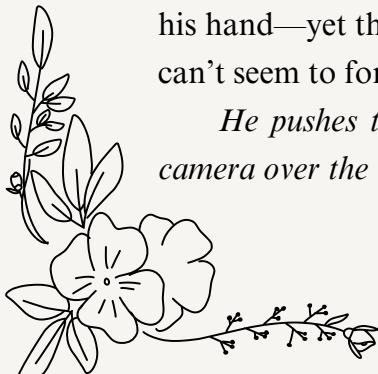
Even though there's not a soul around whom it will matter if Jake tells, the girl still feels the need to express her concern as he grabs two menus and leads her to the Heartbreak Table, "Listen, so I might have found out that my boyfriend plans on proposing tonight, and I really don't want to ruin what he has planned, despite my slip up. So if you wouldn't mind, I'd love to keep that bit of information between the two of us, you know?" She trails off, unsure of how to go on.

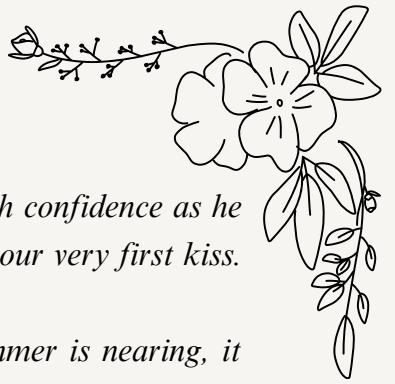
Jake smiles, appreciating the respect she has for the planning that goes into a proposal, "Of course, ma'am. I wouldn't want to be the one to ruin your special night." At least there's someone still out there that takes a life-changing event like this seriously. Jake just hopes the same can be said about the girl's boyfriend.

"Oh, thank you so much," she says and then grabs his hand as she continues, "And I feel so rude asking this, but can you do me a favor?"

He freezes; the last time he was asked for a favor was a week ago. The situations were completely different—he wasn't the vulnerable one and it had been another girl holding his hand—yet the simple gesture and similar request force him back to that awful night he can't seem to forget.

He pushes the ring box out towards her and opens it. He faintly hears the click of a camera over the thumping of his own heart and knows that's his cue to begin the speech





he's been practicing on their dog when she wasn't home. So, with as much confidence as he can manage, he does, "Five years ago today, in this very spot, we shared our very first kiss. Call me a hopeless romantic, but I knew right then and there that you—"

"Jake stop," she hisses under her breath. Since the beginning of summer is nearing, it isn't a cold night, yet she crosses her arms over her chest and tucks her hands into the folds of her dress. She's refusing to look at him, instead choosing to glance around the now increasingly busy street.

Jake, suddenly aware of the crowd of spectators that seems to be forming around the two of them, feels his cheeks start to heat up. It's not until she spots the photographer—no longer hidden in order to capture the moment through the line of people surrounding them—that hers begin to do the same. She's never been a fan of public displays, but when the idea for the date had come to mind, he couldn't imagine a better way to ask for her to spend the rest of their lives together. Since then, he's been planning out every second for months.

It's this thought of all the hours and effort he put into this that makes him decide he won't let a few nosy people and a bit of embarrassment ruin it for either one of them. Before he can even get out another word though, she steps forward and takes his hands in hers, pulling upwards ever so slightly, "Jake, please. Just do me a favor..."

He doesn't understand what she is asking because all he can think about in that instant is why it's taking her so long to say yes.

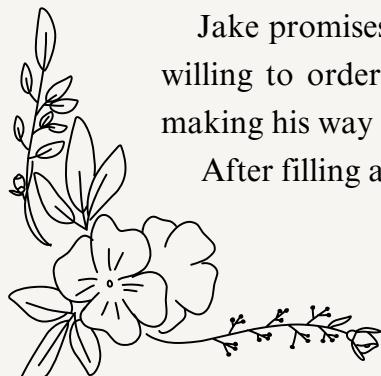
The slight squeeze his fingers feel is what brings him back this time. He shakes his head, trying to clear it of the memory, and apologizes.

The girl quickly brushes off his unprofessionalism, muttering something about off-days, and continues with her request.

"I was just wondering if you wouldn't mind keeping an eye out for my, uh, boyfriend? I'm sure you're busy, but I want to make sure he knows where I am when he comes in and two sets of eyes are better than one. He's driving a red Mustang. He just got it so it'll probably be the cleanest car out there—he acts like it's his baby, always coddling it and stressing over it. I tried to tell him it wasn't a smart decision when it comes to finances and safety but he's been wanting it for a while now so there was no talking him out of it, though I guess that's beside the point. Anyways, do you think you could do that for me?"

Jake promises to do his best then jots down her drink request—the only thing she was willing to order without her date. He stops at a few of his other tables as well before making his way back to the kitchen.

After filling an ice water and grabbing an extra set of silverware, he's just about to





return when Xavier steps in front of the door, blocking his path out.

“Hey man, what’s going on?”

Jake understands the underlying question, as it was one he had been anticipating all week, but chooses to play dumb anyways and puts one hand in the air, “Listen you know the rules, I can’t tell you anything about the girl. Even if you are my friend.”

Xavier lets out a small laugh, “As if I need to cheat to win. But seriously, I meant what’s going on with you? You’re not acting like your normal cheerful self, and you weren’t even scheduled to work tonight, again. Since when do you ask for extra shifts?”

His question reminds Jake of last weekend when she had asked him something similar:

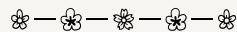
“Jake, you’re acting weird, is something going on? What aren’t you telling me? I thought this was supposed to be a fun night.”

Jake wants to tell him everything—how long it had taken to plan out their night and how quickly it went wrong, the way he should have seen it coming but was too busy being Mr. Hopeful as Natalie calls him to pick up on any of the signs, the extra shifts he’s been covering not only as a distraction but to try to remember how he got that nickname in the first place, and so much more—but he holds back. He doesn’t know if he would be able to talk about any of it without breaking down so instead he averts his eyes, choosing to stay quiet. Any excuse he gives is going to be a crappy one.

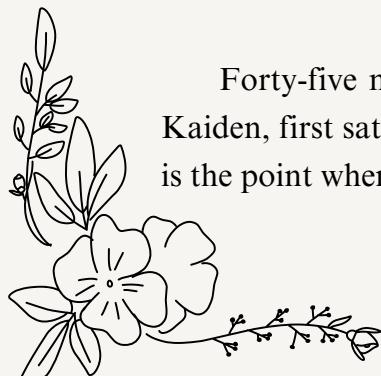
Thankfully Xavier seems to pick up on his hesitation and drops the subject, instead moving out of the way and letting him pass, “Well since you’re here we might as well take advantage of you. Cara said the sign’s out again and you’re still the only one who can fix it, so go work your magic.”

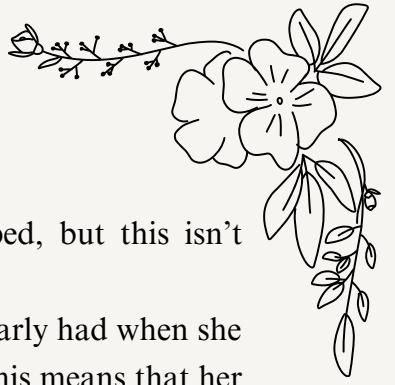
Jake, grateful to have such a good friend, nods as he leaves Xavier behind in the kitchen and ventures over to the open sign.

Xavier wasn’t lying, it’s so dim you can barely see the neon lights reflecting back in the window. Jake gives it a good shake and waits. After a minute, it slowly flickers back to life and once he’s sure it’ll stay that way, at least for the time being, he gets back to checking on each of his tables.



Forty-five minutes have passed since the girl, who Jake has since learned is named Kaiden, first sat down at the Heartbreak Table and still she remains alone. Normally this is the point when the victims’ confidence starts to crumble as they realize their date might





not be showing up, at least not in the way they had originally hoped, but this isn't the case with Kaiden.

So far, she has remained optimistic; the excitement and jitters she clearly had when she first arrived still appear to radiate off her. The waitstaff seem to think this means that her breakup is going to be the worst one they've bet on in a while, especially Natalie. Jake, despite his best efforts to keep away from their guesses tonight, had overheard her telling Cara how Kaiden was going to "run out of here weeping."

Jake on the other hand isn't so sure. He's come to realize that Kaiden is different from the other breakup victims he's encountered. Instead of sitting in silence and watching the minutes tick by, Kaiden has resorted to starting little conversations with Jake every chance she gets. The topics don't really seem to have any rhyme or reason to them, just things that come to mind when Jake checks in on her—from the history of parmesan cheese and using oil versus water to cook pasta noodles to shitty first jobs and bad parenting skills—but all have brought a smile to his face. Even when the topics veer towards the future she sees with her boyfriend Jake still finds himself enjoying the chance to learn about Kaiden, despite the fact that these often remind him of the bright future he used to imagine for him and his girlfriend.

There is one in particular, about the dog breed she hopes to have, that is able to bring Jake back to the first happy memory since that fateful night: the day they decided on the dog to adopt from the local shelter. To most, this moment would be insignificant compared to the day the dog was able to be brought home, but to him it meant just as much.

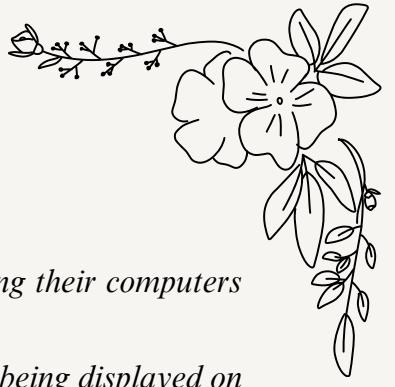
The two are sitting on their couch, wrapped in a giant blanket, and consumed by the laptop screens sitting in front of them. The TV plays in the background, though they couldn't tell you what show is on since the movie they chose ended an hour ago. Even before the credit scenes began rolling, they were too wrapped up in their search to be paying any attention.

It has been months of going through website after website, scouring the internet for a dog to adopt, but Jake doesn't mind. He can't remember a time when she was more invested in anything so he's happy to devote as many months as it takes to make the perfect match.

Just when he thinks he's found one, she screams out, hitting him across the arm to let him know she's done the same. Excitement fills his body as the two try to decide who should go first.

"You go ahead," they say at the same time. "No, you!" they say again.





"I think we should do it together," she says, between bursts of laughter.

"On the count of three?" She nods, and the two begin counting, flipping their computers to face the other once they make it to three.

When he sees her screen, he realizes that the dog she picked out is the one being displayed on his own screen. Miraculously, they had both found the same dog from the same organization. As he stares at the adoption page, he doesn't just see a dog in that picture, but a family he's starting with her. It may be small now, but he imagines what it will look like years down the road as they've had time to grow it together and he can't wait.

Coming to the same realization, she abandons her computer and embraces him. He doesn't have to ask to know that they just found their dog.

Squeezing her tighter, he says through her hair, "We need to schedule the adoption as soon as possible."

"You make the call, and I'll get the champagne. We finally found one!" She says, giving him one last kiss before getting up and heading towards the kitchen.

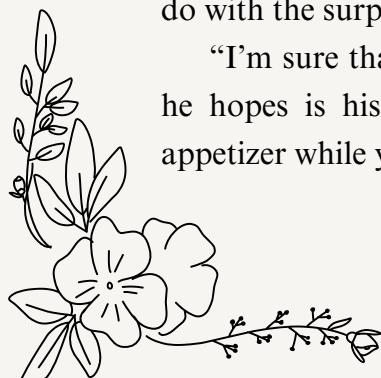
Thinking of this memory made him smile. Of course, it no longer gives him the same warm feeling it used to as it is tainted with the events from last weekend, just like every other memory she made an appearance in is, but hearing Kaiden talk of her own dog search reminds him of how he felt about that day before everything went wrong.

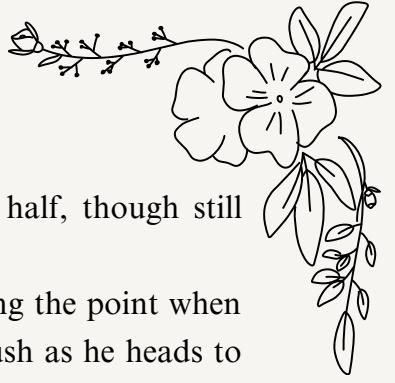
So maybe it's this small talk and variety of life stories, or possibly the bits and pieces of his old self that still exist, but he can't seem to accept that Natalie might be right. He wants to believe that Kaiden isn't the only one that's different, maybe this boyfriend of hers is too.

As he goes up to check on her again, he notices she's on the phone. He slows his pace, trying not to eavesdrop, but can't help overhearing part of the conversation.

"So, you haven't heard from him then?... No, no. It's fine. I've only been here for a little bit, and I don't want to ruin the night he has planned. I'm sure he'll show up soon... Hey, I've gotta go, I'll talk to you later," She puts the phone down and turns her attention to him, "Sorry about that. I was just calling to check on my boyfriend. He said he might be a little late, but I wasn't expecting to have to wait this long. I'm sure it has to do with the surprise."

"I'm sure that's what it is," Jake hears the question in her voice and flashes her what he hopes is his most reassuring smile, "Can I get you another refill and maybe an appetizer while you wait?"





She nods her head, more to herself than him, and gives him a half, though still grateful, grin as she waves him away. With that, Jake takes his leave.

In the time he takes to talk to Kaiden, most of his tables are nearing the point when they'll be asking for checks. He mentally prepares for the oncoming rush as he heads to the back to grab a handful of to-go boxes, only stopping once to fix the open sign, which, to his surprise, came back to life quicker than usual this time.

--*-*-*

Jake feels like he's fighting a losing battle as he rushes around the restaurant, maneuvering between tables and leaving customers, trying to take care of the remaining people. Whenever he feels like he has it under control, another customer stops him and gives him more requests to fill. And it's not until the end of the rush, when all but two tables have gone, that he's able to check on Kaiden again, at least from a distance.

She's twirling her straw in what he suspects is a warm lemonade, the ice having already melted, and looking around when he notices her picking up her phone again. He's too far away to hear anything, but her expression tells him whatever it is isn't good; one second she's sitting at the table fidgeting with her drink and the next she's frozen in her seat, her face drained of all its color. He watches as she grabs her purse and scrambles out of the booth, tossing some bills over her shoulder as she makes her quick exit. Unfortunately, the need to get out of a situation as quickly as possible is something he knows all too well.

He raises himself off of his knee and tries to ignore the people around them, "You know I'll do anything for you, just name it."

She sighs and starts to say something, but Jake cuts her off, "Do you want the wedding dress of your dreams? It's already worked into the budget! What about a bigger apartment? Consider it bought!"

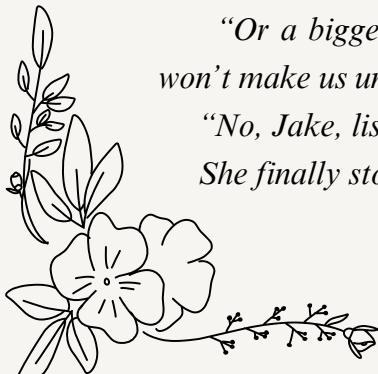
He takes a step towards her, his arms outstretched and ready to wrap around her in an embrace he's been anticipating since the date started, but she takes another step away from him.

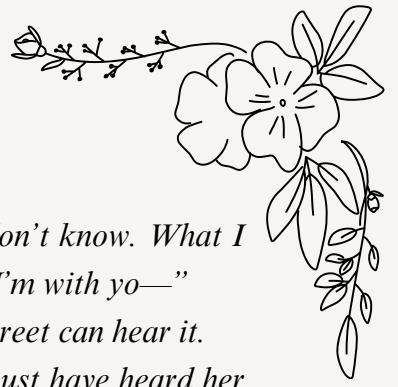
"Jake—"

"Or a bigger car, possibly one that's safe for kids. I'm sure we can find a model that won't make us uncool parents."

"No, Jake, listen—"

She finally stops moving away and lets him take hold of her hands, which only encourages





him. "You're right, we're too young. Maybe we won't even have kids, I don't know. What I do know though, is that whatever the future holds I'll be happy as long as I'm with yo—"

"I don't want to marry you!" she yells, loud enough so that the whole street can hear it.

This not only stops Jake in his tracks but leaves him speechless. He must have heard her wrong; the love of his life couldn't have just rejected his proposal.

She pulls her hands from his and starts to fidget with the chain of her purse. "Jake, I've been trying to tell you for a while now, and I thought you were starting to see it too," she says, gesturing between the two of them, "This—us—we aren't working out."

The audible gasps that come from the people around them seem to be the last straw as Jake jerks away from her and snaps at them, "Back the hell off, all of you!"

Facing her once more, a new wave of heat rushes to his cheeks, the horror of what he just did already sinking in. He takes a deep breath, trying to control his racing heart, then asks her if they can go somewhere private. It's only a second before she agrees, but even the slightest hesitation she seems to have about being alone with him hurts.

As they walk, he goes to place his hand on her lower back, intending to guide her through the crowd but drops his hand suddenly realizing the gesture is no longer appropriate. Not that she would have noticed, as she's been focused on her phone since they started walking away probably to avoid a conversation with him as long as possible. It's at this moment that he also spots the photographer, unsure of what to do, so Jake waves him off. He doesn't need any more evidence of how wrong this night has gone.

She stops him, much closer to the crowd than he would have preferred, and doesn't even give him a chance to say anything before explaining just how long she's been wanting to break up with him.

"Please, can we not work on this? If there's something I can fix, I'll do it," he says, begging her to not give up so easily.

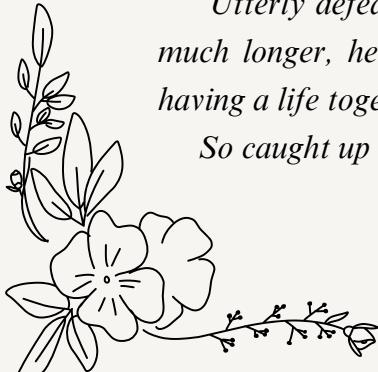
"Jake, it's over."

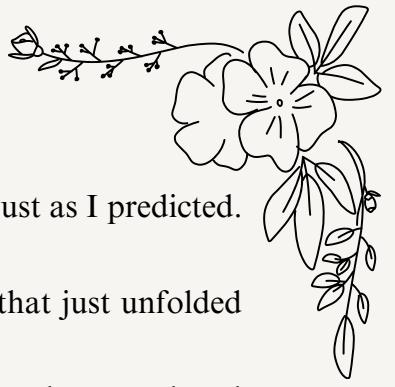
"Wow. Okay, well I guess we can work out the details on the way back to the car."

She pulls away again and points behind her towards the street, "Actually, I already have a ride coming. I'm so sorry, Jake."

Utterly defeated and knowing he won't be able to keep himself from breaking down for much longer, he gives her a tight smile before walking away from her and any hopes of having a life together.

So caught up with what just happened and the onslaught of his own memories, Jake didn't





didn't notice Natalie coming up beside him, "Looks like she left crying just as I predicted. I say that counts as a win, wouldn't you Mr. Hopeful?"

Jake barely registers what she says, still trying to process the scene that just unfolded before him, but nods anyways.

"Okay, well if it's cool with you I'm gonna go tell the others what happened and collect my prize. You've got the remaining tables, right?" She doesn't wait for him to agree, just heads back to the kitchen, leaving Jake still standing there.

He takes a moment to try to collect himself and then continues waiting on the final tables, receiving some nasty glares from customers that had been friendly up until now, but he can't blame them for his sudden shift in moods.

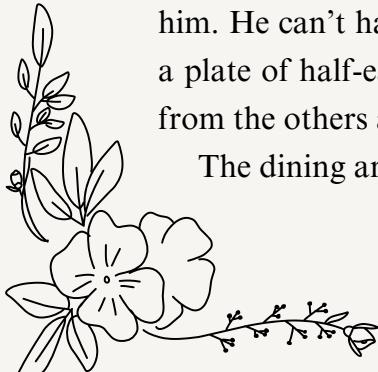
Once he's finished, and the last of the customers leave for the night, he makes his way back to the kitchen, preparing himself for the full celebration mode everyone is bound to be in. He expects Natalie to be the most excited, with it being her personal win, though Cara and Xavier will share her joy because successful Bets are few and far between these days, but as he walks in he finds the exact opposite.

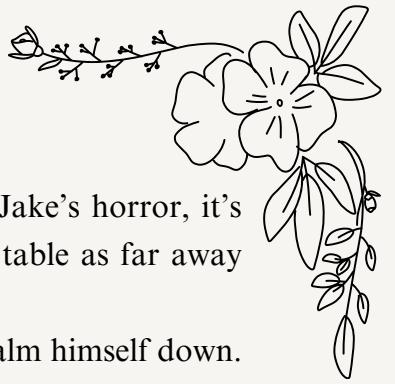
There are no whoops and cheers, jumps of joy, or friendly trash-talking about losers; instead, there's complete silence. The three are huddled together by the sink, their eyes glued to a program on the mini TV Jake can't see from where he stands. Curious as to what has them all so intrigued, he makes his way back there. To his surprise, it's not flipped to the normal channel that Natalie and Cara try to deny sneaking back to watch throughout their shifts, but the local news.

On the screen, a reporter is standing in the middle of what looks to be Main Street, right up the road from Tino's. The wind blows her hair in her face as she attempts to report on the scene behind her involving *One Dead in Fatal Hit and Run*, as the caption reads. The scene looks like pure chaos: cop cars are scattered everywhere, each of their lights casting a blue and red shadow over everything; an ambulance is in the corner, medics nowhere to be found; a fire truck sits off to the side, a hose extending from it; and in the dead center of the shot is a red mustang, flipped over and smoking, tiny flames still visible.

Jake backs away from the TV, slowly at first and then quicker as the realization hits him. He can't handle watching another second of it, and in his rush to leave knocks over a plate of half-eaten lasagna, but he doesn't care. He has to get out of the kitchen, away from the others and the TV.

The dining area, normally dark after close, is dimly lit by a blue and red glow, the





same one that's lighting up the crash less than a block away, and, to Jake's horror, it's what he uses to find his way towards the front of the restaurant to a table as far away from the sound of the broadcast as he can manage to stumble to.

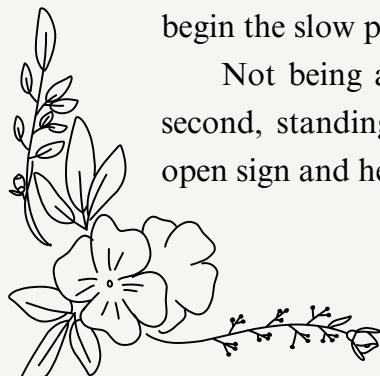
His lungs work overtime as he takes deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself down. No matter how many times he tells himself to breathe, it doesn't seem to help his racing heart or his sudden urge to vomit—neither does the lingering smell of garlic and pasta sauce that never leaves the dirty dining area of Tino's.

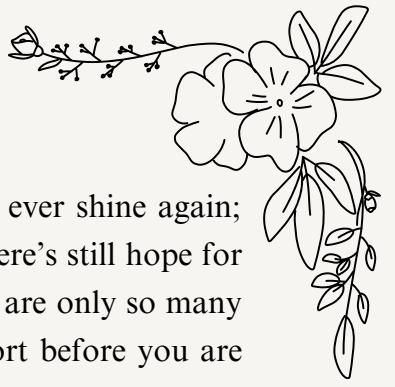
He tries closing his eyes and resting his head on the table he practically fell onto in his mad rush from the kitchen, but that only makes it worse. Instead of the flashing blue and red lights, he sees images of Kaiden, the innocent look in her eyes and then her face draining of all its color as she receives what he could only imagine was the worst news of her life. If only he had known what was happening at the time; was there something he could have done? He then remembers the favor she had asked of him earlier in the night and realizes that he never actually kept watch for her. The thought makes him even more upset, and he has to use the back of his hand to wipe away a stray tear that falls down his cheek.

Of all the ways he thought this night would end, he never imagined this and knows that even Natalie, with all of her pessimistic attitude, couldn't have predicted it either. It was supposed to be the best night of Kaiden's life, ending in smiles and happy tears; a night she would cherish the most over time, always looking for the chance to tell someone about. Instead, it ended up being the worst night of her life, concluding with tears that were not shed out of joy. Yes, she would look back at this in years to come, but with a pain in her heart instead of a smile on her face and Jake couldn't understand what anyone could possibly do to deserve a fate as cruel as Kaiden's.

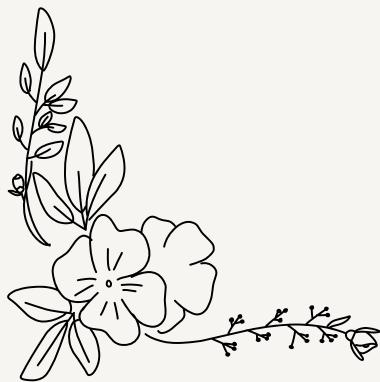
Maybe she's in the middle of the mess, demanding to know how this tragedy occurred through the blood-curling sobs that he imagines rake her body. Or perhaps the police have reached her already, the EMTs wrapped her in one of their thermal blankets you see on first responder shows, and she's waiting to be transferred to the hospital with her boyfriend—by God, Jake hopes not. He hopes for her sake, and part of his own, that someone has come to get her, to comfort her, and take her away from it all so she can begin the slow process of healing and finding her new normal.

Not being able to help himself, Jake looks up to see if he can spot her for even a second, standing anywhere near the wreckage, but instead of Kaiden his eyes find the open sign and he notices that it's not working once more. The difference is that this time





there isn't even a flicker of light or any sort of hint that the light will ever shine again; perhaps not as bright as it used to, but enough to tell the world that there's still hope for it. His instincts tell him to fix it, but he stops himself mid-reach. There are only so many times you can trick yourself into believing something is worth the effort before you are forced to accept it's not.





POETRY



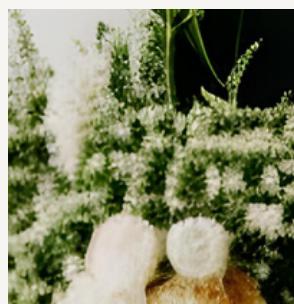
Book Nerd



Classic Mystery



Ode To My Cat



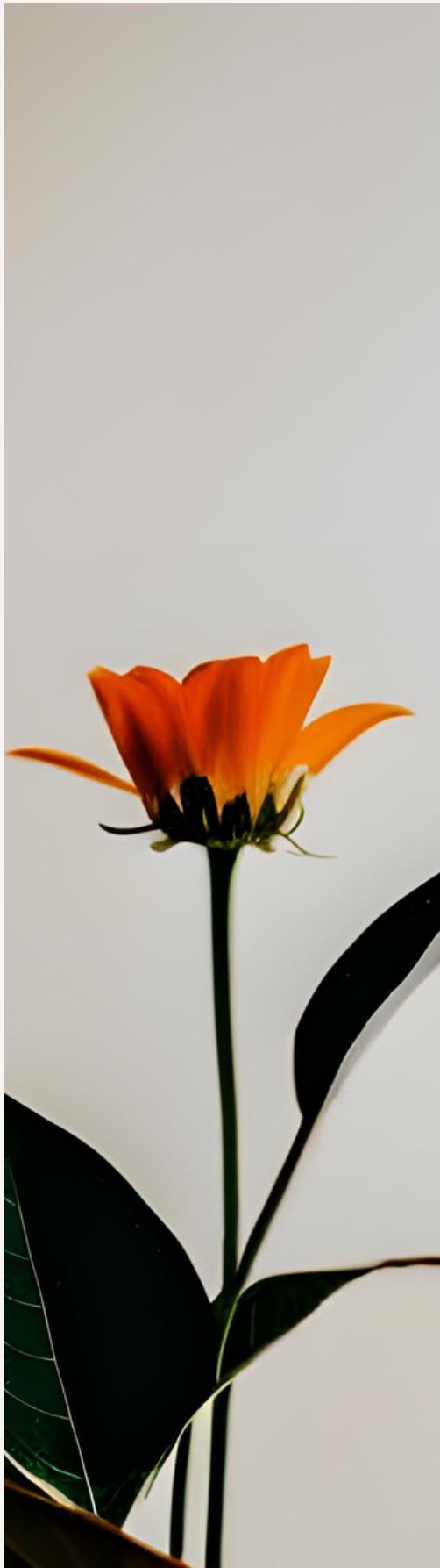
In The End

Book Nerd

Rowan Finley

previous piece

A girl always obsessed with books
Draw in from the very first hook
The more she'd collect
The less she'd reject
And buy them all based on one look



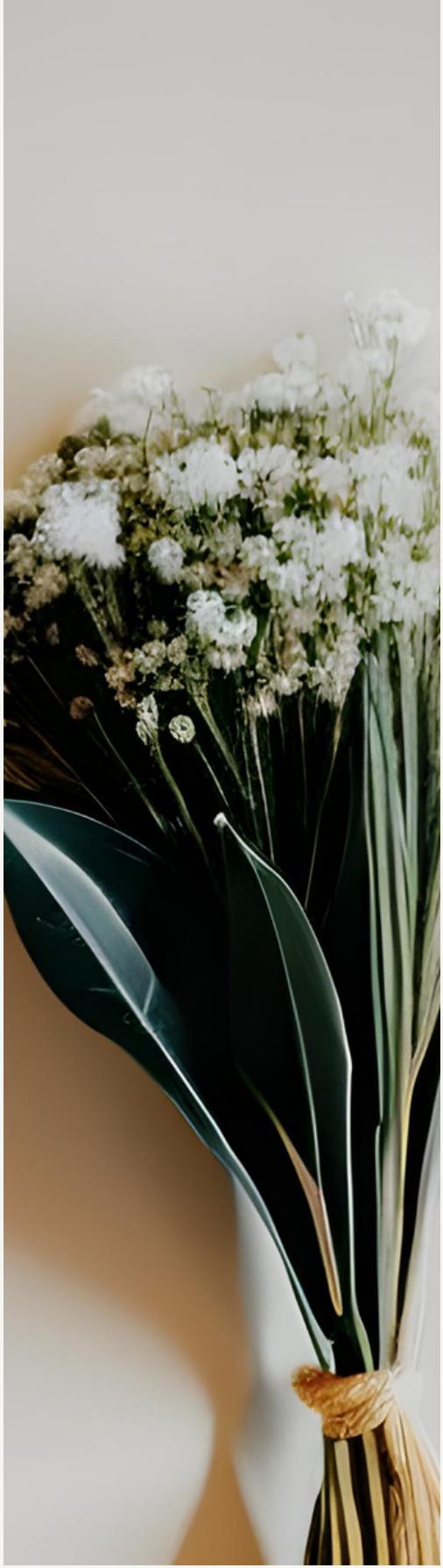
Classic Mystery

Rowan Finley

recent piece

The idyllic town
A secret, lies, questions, whispering
Who, what, and where did they kill?
Was it showing her dark side?
Or the poisonous culprit?
Or was it playing its last deadly note?
Solve the mystery where nothing is as it seems





Ode To My Cat

Savannah Hull

previous piece

At first she was timid and shy,
Always choosing to run and hide.
She'd peek her head around the corner, only ears fully
showing, and disappear before your eye.
You'd try your best to make her stay,
Entice her with treats or offers of play,
But no matter the effort, she would always think better,
and choose to run away.

As time began to pass,
She grew more and more relaxed
Instead of disappearing she'd stay, eyes alert, and glare
with a look of sass
Under the window she'd lay
Bathing in the sun's many rays
But if you got any closer, she'd return to old habits and
choose to run away

Now that she's no longer timid or shy,
She never runs or hides.
She makes herself known, gets right in your face, and
never stops saying hi
If she doesn't get her way
She causes trouble that's not okay
So much that sometimes I wonder, if it would be better
should she choose to run away

In the End

Savannah Hull

recent piece

Work, work, work, it's what they recommend

So I add even more to my plate,

It'll be worth it in the end

Sign up for more classes than I can attend

And complete the assignments, I can't miss the due date.

Work, work, work, it's what they recommend.

Take any and all offers so that you can depend

On recommendations that'll make you look great,

It'll be worth it in the end.

Take any and all offers so that you can depend

On recommendations that'll make you look great,

It'll be worth it in the end.

Put your job and school first, not your friend

That's what is important, all else can wait.

Work, work, work, it's what they recommend.

Don't worry about how much time you spend

Dedication and patience are both good traits.

And it'll be worth it in the end.

When you start to question it all, just pretend.

Because the path to success is not always straight.

Work, work, work, it's what they recommend.

It has to be worth it in the end.





AUTHORS' NOTES

Kira Berger

Missing Pieces: The Best Friend - Missing Pieces: The Detective

I am currently a college student about to graduate with a bachelors degree in English. I have been reading since I was a child and picked up writing once I was in grade school. These two hobbies are what motivated me to major in English once I started college.

I wrote the first piece a few years back based on a conversation I had with a friend. Recently, I've been attempting to pick up my old writing and work on bettering it in some way. This personal project is where my second piece comes in as it is meant to serve as a continuation of the story from my first piece.

Kevin Green

Insanity - The Highest Stakes

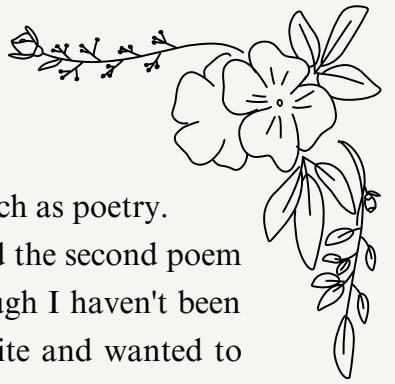
I am a proud father of two very talented creative writers. I love to read and always talked about how I could make a create a better story than some of the entertainment I've consumed so my daughters challenged me to do just that.

My first piece was written a few years ago, at the start of this challenge, when my oldest daughter took her last creative writing class in college. The second piece I wrote over the past couple of months alongside my youngest daughter as she was teaching her very first creative writing class.

Rowan Finley

Book Nerd - Classic Mystery

I'm a graduate student who is most comfortable with writing short stories and fiction.



I've recently been challenging myself to create other forms of writing, such as poetry.

I wrote my first poem, included in this journal, a few months ago and the second poem I submitted was finished the week before submissions opened up. Though I haven't been writing poetry for long, I'm already seeing progress in the poems I write and wanted to share.

Savannah Hull

Ode To My Cat-In The End

I graduated from college a few years ago and am currently working as a Digital Marketing Manager. Despite my degree and career not involving the type of creative writing I once imagined myself doing, I am still writing in my free time as a hobby.

This first poem was written when I was a little girl about my childhood pet. The second poem I wrote towards the end of my college career.

