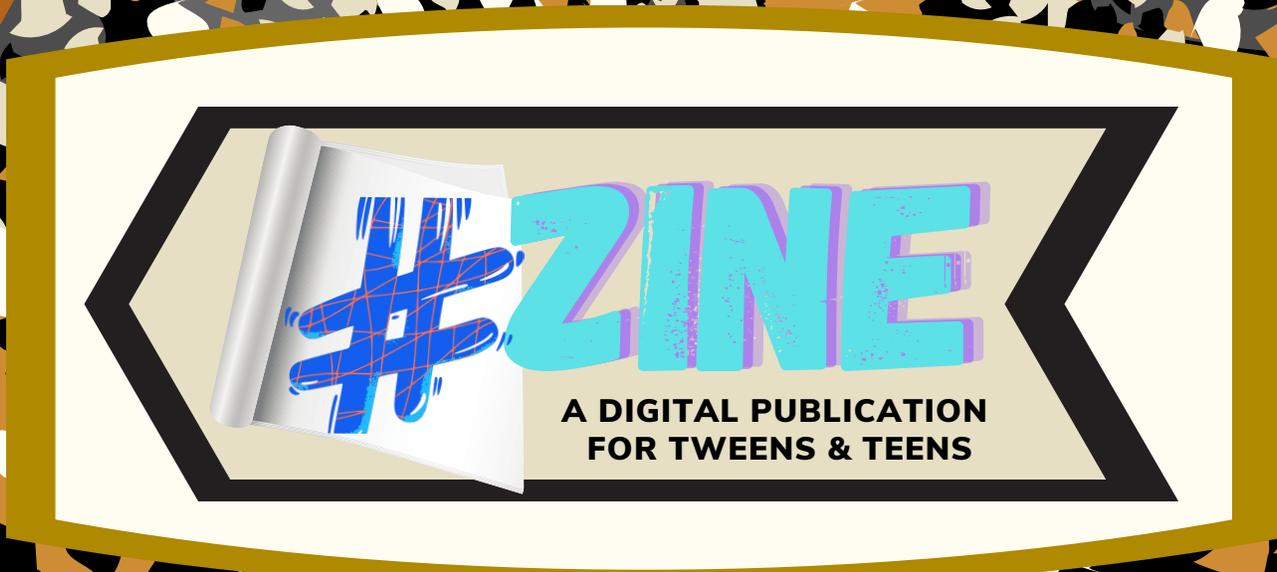


Issue #8: Spring 2024
Mystery Writing Contest



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A NOTE FROM MISS BLAIR



Once again the Teen Advisory Group (TAG) hosted a super fun writing challenge which tested the skills of local tweens and teens in creating mystery stories to chill and thrill.

The TAG teens had their work cut out for them when it came to picking the winners- but they ended up choosing the top three middle grade stories and the top three high school stories that are included in this edition of #ZINE. We hope you enjoy them. And if you can't get enough, check out the last pages of #ZINE for mysterious book recommendations, and information on joining TAG or the Write Spot.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MIDDLE GRADE WINNERS

FIRST PLACE

Page 2).....“The Dark Forest Experiment” by Lilyana Ferris

SECOND PLACE

Page 5).....“Mystery at Blackwood Hollows” by Zelia Hanna

THIRD PLACE

Page 8).....“Missing” by Ember Barnum

HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS

FIRST PLACE

Page 11).....“The Summer of 1983” by Tatum Doren

SECOND PLACE

Page 15).....“Forgotten Heart” by Connor May

THIRD PLACE

Page 18).....“The Twisted Trail” by Lily Merrill

Page 22).....Mystery Book Recommendations

THE DARK FOREST EXPERIMENT

by Lilyana Ferris

Charles

My eyes flicker open. I stand up. The moon's silver glow bathes the clearing in an eerie sheen. This place has never seen the light of day. The pine trees cast striped shadows across the frigid grass. Somewhere in the distance, obscured by fog, a wolf howls. What else is out there? I notice the blonde lying next to me. I pull him to his feet. He has dark circles under his eyes and a thin blue jacket on his shoulders.

"What's your name?" I ask awkwardly.

"Jimmy." he holds his hand out. I take it.

"Charles." I reply. I notice the rest of us, lying in a circle, spring to their feet at once.

I search the faces of everyone around me. There's a redhead looking ready to fight. A scientist in his lab coat has something in his eyes. a dark-skinned man in a blue shirt locks eyes with me. A woman with her hair dyed pink holding hands with a tall man. Their wedding rings flash in the moonlight. A teen in a colourful Hawaiian print shirt is shaking. A tall man with a scar over his eye scares me. A woman has her black hoodie pulled over her face. A man in sunglasses stares directly at Jimmy. Something about the blonde in a green t-shirt seems suspicious. A mountain of a man in a suit with a glorious moustache waves. Someone with a black shirt stares into the forest.

Suddenly, a voice booms through the night.

"Welcome to the Dark Forest experiment. You, along with thirteen others, are trapped here. Your goal is to survive as long as possible. Anything is a threat to your survival, so the safest option is to kill it before it kills you. I am among you, ensuring that this will occur. If you kill me, all will return to normal. Good luck, and may the odds be ever in your favour."

The line from *The Hunger Games* sends shivers down my spine. I wonder what the scientist wants from us. A large something breaks through the ground. With wonder, I gaze up at weapons. The man in a lab coat charges towards it, reaching for a spear.

I realise Jimmy isn't by my side anymore. I spotted his blue jacket turned towards me.

"Jimmy, don't!" I cry out. The man in the lab coat spins around in a flash. A metal tip pierces through Jimmy's heart. He falls to the ground, dead. The man in the labcoat shows no remorse at killing a fellow human. It's not safe here.

All I can see as I run into the forest is Jimmy's body lying sprawled on the ground.



THE DARK FOREST EXPERIMENT – CONTINUED...

Anthony

As I run into the woods, all I can do is try to get the body of the man who had been named Jimmy out of my mind. I don't want to lose myself in here. I start repeating what I know about myself. It might keep me sane.

"My name is Anthony. I own a bakery. My name is Anthony. I miss my dog. My name is Anthony. My name is..."

What's my name again? Oh. Right. Anthony. Wow. this place is really getting to me. There's rustling in the bushes behind me. There's no wind. Where's it coming from? It's dead in front of me. A low growl emanates from the undergrowth. A piglet crashes past me, running as fast as it can.



"It's just a piglet." I say aloud. "It can't hurt me."

That's when I realise what's chasing it can.

I start following it, running as fast as possible. The blue of my shirt flashes at the edge of my vision. Something bursts out of the bushes behind me. It's gaining. A massive wolf steps out of the brush in front of me. More press in on both sides. I roll over flat on the ground. A heavy paw lands on my chest. The wolf bites my spine. In the back of my mind, something speaks.

"Two down, eleven to go."

Lizzy

We need to get away from there. If we run far enough, we might get out of here. Suddenly, he's gone. His hand brushes mine, our wedding rings flashing in the dim light.

"Lizzie!" he cries out, his voice echoing into the void. I barely manage to grasp his hand. We're safe for now.

At least, I thought we were safe.

A hand presses against my back. I'm falling. A bright shirt flashes above my head. Joel's beside me.

"I love you, Lizzie!" he says as the floor grows closer. "Goodbye!"

Black.

"Four down, nine to go."

James

I just killed someone. His body lies sprawled at my feet. Just a day ago, it would have been inconceivable for this to happen. I want to run into the woods, but I can't let anyone else get weapons.

THE DARK FOREST EXPERIMENT – CONTINUED...

I see a flash of black from the darkness. I charge forward, thrusting the spear crusted with Jimmy's blood. As I peer over, I see another body. A black-haired man with a moustache lies there, his suit wet with blood. The woods start speaking again. Jimmy's face shows. "Jimmy, Killed by James" "Anthony, killed by dire wolves". The two people I saw holding hands at the beginning flash in front of me. "Joel and Lizzie, killed by gravity." then the man whose dead body lies at my feet "Oliver, killed by James."

The teen in a Hawaiian print shirt steps out of the underbrush.

"Nice to meet you, James," he says. "My name is Joey. I'm the creator of this place. And I've got something you might want to hear."

Taylor

Five dead already.

Yesterday, my boss yelled at me for being late to work. Now I'm in the Hunger Games.

I know how to stop it.

I've just got to murder an unconvicted serial killer.

I start running. The clearing! That's where he would be. I grab a large stick lying next to me. I reach the clearing and see the flash of white lab coat I've been looking for. I don't want to do this, but if I do, it will all be over.

I bash the stick into black hair and he falls over. Once more, and he's dead. I wait to fade away.

Nothing happens.

I killed the wrong person.

"Looks like you guessed wrong..." A voice says from behind me. Something warm and wet drips down my neck. "If I'm going down, I'm bringing you with me!" I yell as I thrust James's spear through his heart. It all goes black.

I sit up on a white bed with the man in the red sweatshirt laying beside me. The smell of hand sanitiser wafts through the air. A paper with my signature on it lies beside me.

"I agree to be a part of the Dark Forest experiment." It reads "Signed, Taylor."

The teen in the colourful shirt whose name I later learn is Joey puts his hand on my shoulder.

"Sorry about that." he says. "Thanks for your help. You're free to go."

I leave, wondering if I'll ever get last night out of my head.



MYSTERY AT BLACKWOOD HOLLOW

Middle
Grade

2nd

by Zelia Hanna

“Call!” I heard someone shout, I opened my eyes groggily, the light from the triangle window shone across my eyes and I shielded my face with my blanket. It was my boyfriend Sabe, he walked over and ripped the blankets off my face before I could even say anything. He gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and said, “Get up. Your Uncle William needs you. He says it's urgent.” He pulled my arm. I lay there in my for a second before pushing myself up on my hands. Before I could ask what he was doing in my room he ran out and slammed the door behind him.

I run my hands through my messy brown hair and pull on my favorite pair of ripped baggie jeans. After quickly pulling on a plain olive green shirt which I tuck into my jeans and throw on a beanie. I rushed downstairs to where my Uncle was waiting, his arms crossed and brow furrowed.

“Sabe! You couldn't have gotten him here any sooner?” he says, grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the door.

“I'm sorry Uncle Will, but what's going on?” I look at him, and he looks worried.

“Your sister's gone missing.” I felt a bolt of cold fear reach up through my stomach like lightning striking my torso. I stumble when my uncle shoves me out the door, and I fall back down the stairs. Tears fill my eyes. I'm in shock, Sabe runs over and helps me up.

“What's going on? Are you alright!” he dusts me off and touches my cheek “Callyx, look at me what did your uncle say.”

“Evelyn went missing.” Sabe looks at me and I wrap my arms around him. He pats my shoulder and I let him go, wiping my eyes.

“We have to get to the circus.”

Besides my Uncle William and my Uncle Stanford, my sister was my only family left. My parents were killed in a car accident a few years back and we had been sent here to the small town of Blackwood Hollow. My uncle, who we never saw before, owns a tourist trap called Corduroy's House of Mystery and his brother Stanford owns the old fairgrounds across town. They have hated each other for as long as me and my sister have known. But amid high school and my parents' deaths, my sister Evelyn was always there for me. I could always rely on her.

When we finally got to the circus My Uncle Stanford was standing outside the tent entrance with his little piglet, Mason. My uncle led us inside and said “Your sister wasn't in her room this morning and a note had been left on her nightstand. That's how we knew she was missing.”



Continued on Page 6

MYSTERY AT BLACKWOOD HOLLOW- CONTINUED...

“What did the note say?” I asked, cold hard fear had settled in the pit of my stomach like a bunch of rocks that had been left out in winter and were now frozen.

“It said...

*Seek me where the light no longer shines
where mirrors and blood mingle and the air runs thin.
You don't have long so hurry up!*

I felt chills as soon as I heard that something similar had been given to another townsfolk whose son had also been taken. It had scared me but I never thought it would happen to me or my sister.

Uncle Stanford looked at me with a worried expression very similar to the look Uncle William gave me back at the house. Strange, but no matter, he led me inside and I sat down on one of the many crates that were stacked up against the tent's rough canvas. My head fell into my open palms and Sabe rested his hand on my back. “It's going to be ok Callyx we're going to find her and the others.”

It didn't seem like that at the time but I knew in my heart that we would find her. My eyes filled with tears. I didn't even try to stop them as I got up and walked over to my uncle, Sabe, resting his hand on my shoulder. “What did the letter say again?” The wheels in my head turned as I thought about the words “Where mirrors and blood mingle and the air runs thin.” I said out loud.

“Could that mean an old mirror maze under the tent?” Sabe suggested. My uncle stroked his mustache. “It could be possible, though I don't know how the kidnapper would have gotten down there.” Suddenly my Uncle looked as though he had seen a ghost, his face went completely pale and he stumbled back, barely catching himself on one of the wooden crates.

“What's wrong?” I said, confused. “I just remembered that I left the trap door down to the mirror maze uncovered last night while cleaning the storage room. It's inconceivable even to think that I would forget.”



This was a problem but it could turn into something good. I grabbed Sabe by the hand and we ran toward the storage room.

When we got there I saw that the storage room was a mess and the trap door was sitting open right in the middle of all the wreckage. It looked like whoever the kidnapper was he liked to make a mess.

Continued on Page 7

MYSTERY AT BLACKWOOD HOLLWS- CONTINUED...

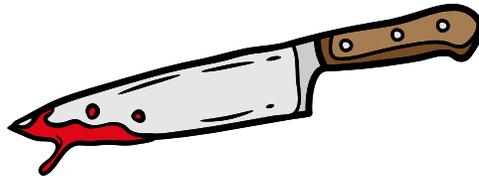
We opened the trap door and climbed the ladder down to the maze. Countless twisting corridors of polished shining glass barely reflecting the dim light from the opening went off into the distance “Where do you think they could be?” Sabe said, touching one of the mirrors. “I don't know but I know that they're down here,” I said, my voice echoing off the glass.

We walked for what seemed like hours before finally reaching something of what we were looking for. One of the town's residents by the name of Robbie was lying on the floor.

“Robbie!” I said rushing forward to him. I shook him but nothing happened.

“Callyx,” Sabe said, I didn't respond “Callyx, he's dead.” Sabe pointed to a small silver knife poking out of Robbie's chest. Tears filled my eyes, he hugged me and whispered in my ear

“Come on we need to find your sister.”



We had only walked for another maybe thirty minutes before we saw her. Huddled in a corner. To my surprise, I saw my Uncle William standing over her holding a knife.

Sabe immediately grabbed his phone and dialed 911. After a few seconds, he said “The police are on their way.” My uncle Will tried to run for a small opening in the opposite wall. I rushed toward him and tackled him, holding his arms down. “Will you please get him off me!” he said to Sabe. But Sabe shook his head and we waited.

The police arrived a few minutes later and cuffed my uncle. Before I could ask any questions they whisked him away leaving only us and a few officers to get Robbie and Evelyn out.

It's a few months later and I still don't know why my uncle killed Robbie and kidnapped Evelyn but I don't think it will happen again at least I hope.

MISSING

Middle
Grade

3rd

by Ember Barnum

Bam! The gun went off. "Well I guess it's done."

Beep BEEP my alarm went off as I smelled my moms coffee. I rolled out of bed unaware I was on the edge, as I picked myself off from the floor I realized I should probably clean. I stumbled down the stairs only to see my moms back as she rushed off to work. I started to make cereal and ate as I watched the rain fall out the window. It was a usual day in forks. I got ready for school and was soon out the door in my small used car. As soon as I walked into the one and only high school my best friend jade ran to hug me,



"Did you hear?" she said.

"Hear what," I asked.

"Tessa's missing."

"What?"

"Her parents just reported it and there's not further info."

"Oh no," I replied sarcastically.

"I know you hate her but she could be dead."

Tessa Partridge, my ex best friend, I'd known her since before we were born. As children we were inseparable. But in our freshman year she betrayed me. She spread lies about me, posted photoshopped pictures of me. She's a piglet and ugly blonde liar.

"Attention all seniors please report to the gym immediately!" I heard our principle and knew what was coming. I walked with Jade to the gym. I took my seat and waited for the rest of the seniors to file in. The gym smelled of dirt and rotten milk. The principal solemnly walked to the platform. His long mustache stood out but his red eyes were prominent. It was inconceivable to believe she was missing.

"As some of you have heard Tessa Partridge was reported missing," he said. "The police are searching but no one has heard from her and if you have seen her after school or last night please notify us immediately." He started to get choked up. Soon tears were running down his face. I whispered to Jade, "Why is he so sad?"

"Because she was his niece," she replied. This whole thing was suspicious and I was starting to believe she wasn't missing but was hiding. As we were released to class I stopped because my phone rang. I picked up. "Hello," I said, it was my father.

"Hello why haven't you picked up your phone?" he asked.

"I'm in school," I replied. "So why did you call me?"

"Your moms in the hospital," he said.

"I'M SORRY WHAT?!!!!!!" I screamed.

Continued on Page 9

MISSING- CONTINUED...

"She was shot on her way to work."

"HOW ARE YOU SO CALM?" I screamed into the phone.

"She's not dead Ginger," he replied calmly as ever.

"OK but my MOTHER just got SHOT! Is she going to be okay?" I said

"Yes she's going to be fine."

"I'm on my way to the hospital," I said.

I ran out of school without telling anyone, I only had one class left do it was fine. As I sped through the rain I wondered who the hell shot her or why the hell they would shoot her. I regret not saying goodbye to her this morning, she could have died. I pulled into the hospital parking lot which was nearly flooded now. I ran into the main building right to the receptionist and asked to see my mom. Being in a town with 3400 people word spreads fast. She told me very calmly my mother would be fine and I should calm down.

"MY MOTHER WAS JUST SHOT" I screamed. I couldn't contain it any more I was mad sad and my mom would never be the same again. "Dear," she said softly, "Your mother will be fine I'll take you to her."

"thank you" i said. She lead me through hallways as i walked i started to rest a little.

The nurse led me into a small dimly lit room. I caught a whiff of sterile bandages and blood. I saw my mom she had her eyes closed and looked normal. She slowly opened her eyes and I ran to her. I started to cry and she did too.



"I'm so sorry mom," I said.

"Baby its ok im going to be fine," she told me.

"What happened?" I asked.

She said, "I was on my way to work everything was fine. I pulled into the parking lot I walked around my car to grab my work bag and all of a sudden my leg was shot I turned around to see a person with blonde hair run. I don't remember anything else because I fainted but someone called 911 and then I was transported to the hospital."

"Wow so you have no idea who shot you?"

"Nope," she said.

Later after I left the hospital and got home, I started digging. I looked on the surveillance cameras around the town and found nothing. Since my mom is a city worker I did some hacking into office building were my mom works and once I was on the cameras I looked for the 9:00 time an found the blonde figure. But I knew that blonde hair I could recognize from a mile away. I recognized the way the figure moved.

MISSING- CONTINUED...

It was Tessa Partridge. I was going to kill her. My mother was shot in the leg and the wouldn't be able to walk for a while. I called the police right away and told them. They told me to send images and they would arrest her right away. I heard my moms phone ring downstairs. I knew she was sleeping so I answered it for her. It was the hospital.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello is this Amada?" she said.

"No I'm her daughter my mom was there today and yesterday, if you're calling about the bills we have it covered," I told her.

"Oh no dear your father has been shot he's in the ICU you need to come now." What the hell my mom and dad shot in 48 hours. I woke my mom up right away, "Dads been shot I'm going now stay here,"

"Wait what?"

"Call me soon" I ran out the door grabbing my keys I sped to the hospital crying. I ran right into the hospital I told the lady right away and she led me to the ICU.

"Your sister is here too," she said.

"I don't have a sister," I said.

"Ohh well then it must have been your friend."

"Ma'amm where was my dad shot?"

"In the stomache. I'm sorry but he probably won't live." I started to cry. She hugged me and walked me into the room and all of a sudden I was face to face with Tessa Partridge. She was by my father holding a gun.

"I shot your mom, I killed your father and I will shoot you."

The nurse ran. I was left with a gun pointed at my heart. "Go ahead kill me the police know what you did."

BAM the gun went off. "Well I guess its done," she said.



THE SUMMER OF 1983

High
School

1st

by Tatum Doren

No one would have ever expected that in a small town like Leavenworth, a girl would get murdered.

It was the summer of 1983, me and my best friend Molly had been waiting for this summer for months. It was the last week of Camp Gallagher before we could be counselors. We have been going every summer since we were 9.

“Val this is going to be the best summer ever I can feel it!”

“I know, Molls, this year is going to be awesome!” she says as she ducks into her mom’s minivan.

“Bye, Val see you there!” I yelled as I popped into my dad’s passenger seat. This annoying unsettledness started to move in again onto my chest like something bad would happen. As we rolled up to the familiar pine trees, a wave of memories flooded through my mind. From tanning at the lake, my first kiss, and that one time when Molly ate bad chicken and got food poisoning. Molly jumps out of the van, “This year is going to be great Val, just get out of your head for once.”

We link arms, “Come on, let’s go find out what cabin we’re in!”

Cabin 10, one of the cleanest cabins off to a great start.

“I call bottom bunk!”

“Molly, you always get the bottom bunk.”

“Too bad I called it first.”

We unpack. I pinned my Journey poster and placed my Walkman next to my bed. We headed out to the lake to find our boyfriends Caleb and Ryan. It’s a best friend, best friend situation.

“Caleb I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too. It feels like it’s been forever.”

“All campers please make your way to the Mess hall.”

“Welcome to Camp Gallagher everyone, are you ready for the best summer of your lives?”

“YEAH”

“I can’t hear you.”

“YEAH”

“As the owner of this camp, the state has issued for me to inform you of the event that happened thirty years ago today. Thirty years ago this camp faced tragic events, this was known as the Camp Gallagher murders. Three kids died after a camper killed...



Continued on Page 12

THE SUMMER OF 1983- CONTINUED...

...his fellow cabin members, but don't worry they found him and he was given a lifetime in jail. Ten years later my father bought the camp and brought life into it. So now that that's over, dinner is in an hour. We're having piglet meat aka hotdogs. Welcome to Camp Gallager everyone!"

"That was dark,"

"Yeah, I know. I wonder why that kid did it."

"He probably was a schizophrenic freak,"

"Caleb shut up you can't say that it's not funny."

"Whatever Val you know I'm right. I didn't know that this place was that messed up."

"You know what, let's just stop talking about this and go hang out at the lake." Molly suggested.

"Yea girl let's go"

"Fine"

"Yeah, that's a good idea." We headed to the lake and layed down on the moist grass. Something was different: the air was more pungent, almost rotten. It was too quiet, normally kids were screaming in joy and-

"Val, are you ok?"

"What? Ya, I'm fine."

"Ok, whatever you say."

"All campers make your way to the mess for dinner."

"Oh thank god I'm starving"

"Ryan, you're always hungry."

One of Camp Gallagers traditions was that after dinner on the first night of camp, the teenagers would have a big campfire down by the lake and sing songs. After dinner, me and Molly headed back to the cabin to get ready for the party.

"Ugh, Val, I don't know what to wear. Should I wear a cute dress or jeans and a tank top?"

"Jeans and a tank top, it's more summery."

"Ok, what are you gonna wear?"

"Same thing."

"Ok cute, should we head down so we can be there early?"

"Yeah, that sounds good just give me a sec."

"Val hurry up!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming geez!"

As we started walking down to the lake we heard someone's screams echoing in the distance.



THE SUMMER OF 1983- CONTINUED...

“HELP!”

“Caleb, what's going on?”

“Some girl just got killed and no one saw anything.”

“Caleb, Molly, Ryan we have to get out of here.”

“Babe, what do you mean?”

“We have to call the police, the killer is still here. We have to go. Use the phone, and call the police.”

“Val wh-”

“Caleb do you want to get killed either shut up and do what I say or you can get killed just like her.” As we ran inside, to our surprise we found that the cell phone wires were cut.

“No this can't be happening.”

“The bus.”

“Ryan, what are you talking about?”

“We came in on buses, we get the keys and get out.”

“I know where the keys are! Wait, wait, the keys are in the library, that's halfway across camp.”

“It's fine we'll just make a run for it.”

I lace up my Converse and run out the door. We pull the doors open and walk in.

“Dang this place looks old and dirty.”

As the group was talking something caught my eye, “The Camp Gallager murders. Look, it's a book about what happened 30 years ago. In the summer of 1953, three kids were murdered after a 15-year-old boy lashed out and killed Michael, John, and Francis who were his fellow cabin members. This boy was Wayne Wallace.”

“No way!”

“Wait...what??” I didn't understand Molly's shock.

“Wayne Wallace? Like Alex Wallace, the lifeguard, you know the one with the big mustache?”

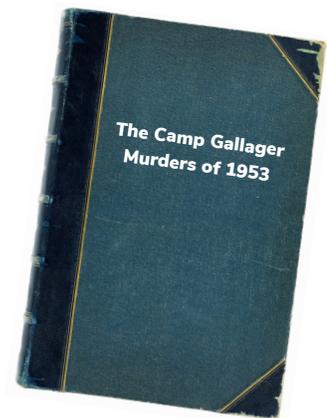
“Yeah...,” it starts to dawn on me, “Oh my gosh! Alex is 47 years old. It adds up: Alex and Wayne are brothers.”

“Totally! He probably killed that girl as a sort of revenge for his brother.”

“Let's take this book, keys, and get out of here.” Ryan hurriedly moves us on.

We took the book, keys and bolted to the bus. We drive off and left never come back. After a couple of minutes, we pull into town and stop at a police station.

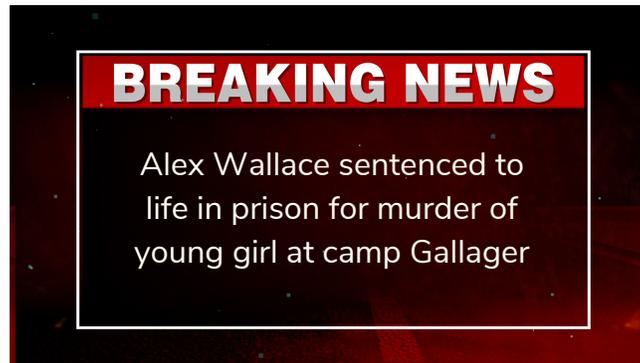
“Someone was just murdered at Camp Pine Rock and we know who did it.”



THE SUMMER OF 1983 – CONTINUED...

Two Months Later

“Local news. After a tragic incident at Camp Gallagher, Alex Wallace was sentenced to life in prison after killing a young girl. In revenge for his brother Wayne Wallace who was involved with 3 killings over 30 years ago.”



“Molly, all of this doesn’t add up. I’ve been thinking, after the girl was killed Ryan seemed weird, not scared weird like guilty weird. What’s his last name anyway.”

“I...I...I don’t know, look in the yearbook.”

“Oh. My. Gosh.”

“It’s Wallace.”

We rushed to Ryan’s house and questioned him.

“Ryan, you have lots of explaining to do. You never told us your last name because your last name is Wallace.”

“UGH, I did it ok? Alex is my dad, I killed the girl to show my dad I was loyal to him, he flipped out, and after you told the police he took the blame for it. It’s inconceivable I know.”

“You killed her and then said you found the body?”

“Yes I did.”

“We have to tell the police, Ryan.”

“I don’t care anymore, my life couldn’t get any worse.”

High
School

2nd

FORGOTTEN HEART

by Connor May

Darkness. Light. I'm everywhere and nowhere all at once. I feel everything of myself stretch across the world. I can see anyone or anything. I can see the single mother comfort her child. They look so alive. I can see the old man with cancer smiling. Only months to live yet he's happier than I could remember being. I could see myself lying on the floor. Dead. The lack of life around me seems to taint the air like a fog. But there's something else. I wasn't supposed to die yet. The aura of a death with life left in it was sickening.



“What did you do to deserve this?” the voice seemed to come from all around me before it focused on a shimmering figure in front of me. I can't make out anything about them or their voice, they seemed like they had every trait one could have at once. A deep voice that was somehow high pitched, dark eyes that glowed green, a clean-shaven face with a large mustache, and dark hair with a blonde shine. “Usually when someone is killed like this it's a deliberate act of malice. The person who died has a goal that keeps them tethered here. But you, there's no feeling of anger or rage. Nothing to keep you around. What do you want?”

I wish I could answer. Instead I can't remember anything. Who I was, how I died, what I was doing. It was like a hole in my head was keeping my thoughts echoing around instead of being able to focus into a clear memory. Everything I knew just bounced around and right when I felt like I could grasp that thought it flew in another direction.

“You seem confused. Is everything alright?”

“I...” my voice sounds strange. Foreign. It couldn't have been any different than it was before but now it sounded so alien. “I don't know who I am?”

“You've forgotten yourself. Most forget things they don't need to know to achieve their goal, but you don't seem to have a goal, do you?”

I shake my head.

“A lost person. In more ways than one. The goals of many here aren't noble. They're full of hate and anger. They want revenge. They want to make someone feel the pain...”

Continued on Page 16

FORGOTTEN HEART- CONTINUED...

...they feel they received. But those goals are something that distracts people from who they are. Everyone has a heart, and hate gets in the way of that.”

They stop and examine me. Before it was like I could observe the entire world, but now it felt like the entire world was observing me.

“But I suppose forgetting yourself gets in the way of knowing your heart. Come, shall we find it?” they extend their hand to me.

I don’t want to take it. I feel like taking it would only lead to things I don’t want to see. But I take it and feel myself being pulled away. Pulled into myself.

The world isn’t filled with the aura of my death anymore. It’s filled with life. I look around and see people in a park. They’re running and playing and smiling. But I can’t feel myself anywhere.

“A spirit without a heart is usually reduced to their base desires of revenge. But your only desire seems to be happiness. A desire that usually leads to one keeping their heart. To see someone not full of hate losing something so precious is almost inconceivable.”

I ignore the voice and walk through the park. I do want this. But I don’t have it.

“Being happy seems like something everyone wants. Why am I different?”

“Many people have it, and many of those that don’t seem to have given up. For you it must be something you crave so much yet can’t find. You never stopped wanting it yet you never claimed it.”

And I can feel the truth behind their words. And I remember something. I find myself pulled into another scene, this one feels much worse and I can feel myself.

It’s a room. There’s a cradle in it with a small stuffed pig in it. Nothing else seems to matter. Nothing else seems to exist. The walls seem fake, as if they were forgotten along with everything else in the room besides the cradle. I walk up to the pig and grab it.



“Piglet. From Winnie the Pooh. It was her favorite.”

“Who’s ‘her’?” the figure asks.

I can’t answer.

“Is she the one you’re missing?”

“If I’m missing a person wouldn’t I remember them?”

“Possibly. Or you miss what they represent.”

I look around the room. It still seems forgotten and empty but it could be right. It’s the room of a child. It’s a room that should be full of life. But it isn’t.

“Was she my daughter? Did she die?”

FORGOTTEN HEART- CONTINUED...

“I do not know.” the figure draws their fingers across the cradle. “If she did then I can promise you I did not see her. She would be somewhere better. With her heart.”

I pull Piglet closer to me. It seems to make everything more real.

“So where does that leave me? If my daughter died then...” I almost choke on my words, “Then that would hurt. A lot. But why does that explain me being here? My death, or forgetting everything.”

“Forgetting is normal. It is to be expected. But your daughter... she would be life. She would bring you happiness. Isn't that right?”

It's a question, and they seem to actually want an answer.

“Yeah... I guess.”

“So losing her would lose your happiness. It would take away your purpose. But you still wanted it. You lose your happiness, and you want it back. But your happiness comes from a person to take care of. It's not directed at a specific person. It's a cry to the universe to give you someone to care for so you can care for yourself. So when you die you still want someone to be there for, but it's not... personal in a way that you would remember them.”

It makes sense. Or at least as much sense as any of this has made.

“So how did I die?” I feel the pills go down my throat.

The figure looks at me. I can feel the sadness coming from it.

“You didn't have a purpose. I don't think losing your purpose was something you could handle. And I think you know what that made you do.”

I hesitate. I don't want to say it. But I do. And I know it's true.

“I'm so sorry.” The figure places its hand on my shoulder.

“It's alright.” Tears drip down my cheek. “I'll learn for next time.”



THE TWISTED TRAIL

High
School

3rd

by Lily Merrill

Emily Greenwood pulled into the parking lot of the trail. She parked the car, then began her sunset hike.

She'd only hiked for a few minutes when she saw the blood, creating a path with its ruby drops. She only felt mildly worried. She knew the trail was populated by large predators that took small prey to devour. She followed the drops cautiously, hoping to spot one of the beasts in deadly action. Nature, in all forms, had always fascinated her.

Around a tree, the blood continued, lengthening into strokes too thick to be from an animal. Her fear growing, she followed the streaks to a cave. The cavity was dark as the ocean's deepest abyss. Stalagmites and stalactites dripped from top and bottom, making it look as if she were entering the mouth of some hellish beast. Her heart pulsed against her skin. She crept towards the back of the cave. When Emily saw it, her echoing scream broke the night. She turned to run, but then she heard the voice:

"Hello, Emily."

Hours later, across town, Wren Holloway flopped out of bed. She looked into her mirror, seeing her messy dark hair and pajamas: flannel pants and a shirt with a piglet dressed as a dinosaur that read "Jurassic Pork." She brushed her hair, threw on jeans and a striped t-shirt, then raced out the door.

Her best friend Ozzie waited outside like he had every Saturday for twelve years. He was trying a new style, like he did every few weeks. Today, a black leather jacket, white shirt and jeans with aviator sunglasses, along with his tousled dark hair, made him look like he was from Top Gun. Surprisingly, it kind of worked. Except... Wren looked closely at his face and burst out laughing.

"What's with the mustache?" she giggled.

"You don't like it? I thought it matched the outfit."

"It looks like a caterpillar!"

"But how many sixteen-year-olds have mustaches? I'm a rebel." He struck a pose.

"Take it off," she said, ripping off the adhesive stache herself.

"Ow!" he complained, "you didn't have to do it that fast!"

Wren laughed. "C'mon, they're probably waiting for us."

They walked towards the police station. Ozzie's dad was Chief of Police, and every Saturday, ten o'clock sharp, they stopped in for a donut and to chat about the case of...



Continued on Page 19

THE TWISTED TRAIL- CONTINUED...

...the day. Sometimes their insights helped solve cases. Ozzie's dad joked that they were the best detectives he had. But today something seemed different. The officers all looked tired and stressed. Ozzie's dad waved them over.

"Hey. Been a bit rough today. We found a body on Crooked Trail."

Homicides were awful, but usually not enough to cause this reaction.

"Someone was kidnapped after discovering it. It was bait. This has happened three times in the last week. The person kidnapped is always the next victim."

"Autopsy?" Wren asked.

"There are forty stab wounds. Overkill, like the others. Passion is a probable motive, but there isn't a single person linking them all."

"Enough to make someone lose their appetite," Ozzie said, taking a huge bite of his double-chocolate donut. Wren slapped his arm.



"Names?" Wren asked.

"Victim's Ron Greenwood. Missing's Emily Greenwood. Cousins."

"Interesting."

"Every victim connects to the next. Boss, boyfriend, barber, cousin."

Ozzie picked up the file.

"That much damage to one person?" he paused, "Inconceivable!"

"We're pretty busy. You two should clear out."

"Yes sir," they left.

Outside the police station, Wren and Ozzie continued the conversation.

"Wren, we HAVE to see that cave. Pleeeeease!"

"Okay."

"Wait, actually? I thought you'd say no!"

"You thought wrong. I was thinking the same thing."

"Bestie mind reading!" Ozzie gushed.

Wren rolled her eyes.

They stopped by Wren's house for snacks and supplies.

"Be careful!" Wren's mom warned as they left. She'd become more nervous and protective since Wren's dad died in a car accident years previously.

"We will, Mom!" Wren said.

"Yeah, Mrs. Holloway, I'll protect her!" Ozzie pulled another mustache out of his pocket and slapped it on his face.

Continued on Page 20

THE TWISTED TRAIL- CONTINUED...

They found the cave quickly and ducked the police tape, looking around at the horrifying sight. The victim was gone, but the blood remained, painted on the rock walls. Wren stood in shock as Ozzie examined the cave.

“Wrennie, look at this,”

“What?” Wren said, snapping to attention.

“This paper. It was poking out from under this rock. It's got an address.”

“Huh? How did the police not find it?”

“Dunno. Maybe the murderer came back,” he joked.

“That street is close. Let's check it out.”

Minutes later, they stood in front of an old warehouse.

“Wait,” Ozzie said, “I know this place. It was my grandpa's, before he passed. My dad said he owned the whole block, before another old dude stole it.”

“Let's check the door.”

It was unlocked.

They had found the killer's home base. All of the victims' names were written across the wall, connected with red string, the dead crossed off.



“Wren,” Ozzie whispered, “Look at the end.”

Wren looked. The final two names: their classmate, Maria Wright, and Wren Holloway. Wren paled. Then she ran. All the way to Ozzie's house. He trailed close behind.

“Wren!” he shouted, “what are you doing?”

“We have to tell your dad!”

“Check his office.”

Wren ran inside, yelling for the chief.

He was sitting at his desk, phone in hand.

“Hi, Wren,” he said casually, “Just looking through the victim's phone.”

“Cool, but you've got to see what me and Ozzie found...” Wren trailed off, “wait... the file said the victims were all missing their phones.”

“Yes, Wren,” he said, with the tone of a kindergarten teacher, “Because I took them.”

“But... You're Chief of Police. How... how could you...?”

THE TWISTED TRAIL- CONTINUED...



“Motives can be tricky.” He remained calm. He pulled out his gun, beginning to polish it, “Mine was my father. And your grandfather. My father owned this town, until your grandfather saw fit to steal it, bankrupting my dad, buying it piece by piece. And now you live off my money. It makes me mad enough to kill someone. Namely, you, since your father died. But it couldn't just be your murder. That would be far too basic, too simple. So I made it a fun little game, making the chain, planting the address. And I'm about to win.” He aimed the gun at Wren's chest. Her eyes closed, praying for it to end quickly.

That's when Ozzie walked in.

As soon as he saw the gun pointed at Wren, he moved without thinking, throwing himself in front of her.

Everything went dark.

Ozzie woke up a week later in a clean, white hospital room. Wren sat by his bed, holding his hand.

“Ozzie,” Wren had tears in her eyes. “Everything is okay. Don't worry. We escaped. I'm so sorry Ozzie. You must be so confused.”

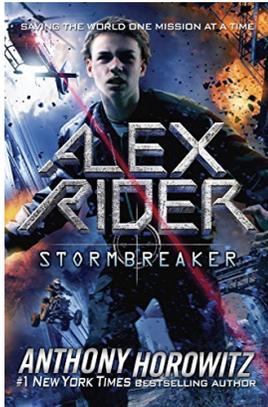
Ozzie sat up. He couldn't believe his father tried to kill his best friend.

“I... honestly don't know how I feel about anything. But, Wren, we did it. You're safe now!”

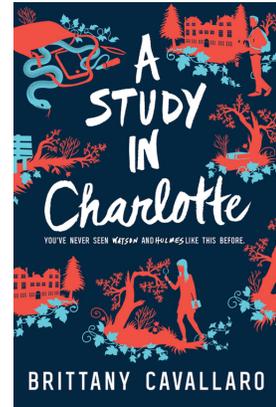
Wren nodded and hugged him tightly, covering the newspaper she held.

The headline read, “Former Chief of Police Escapes Top Security Cell.”

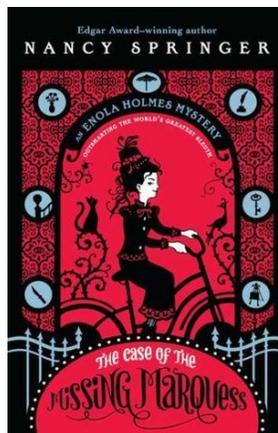
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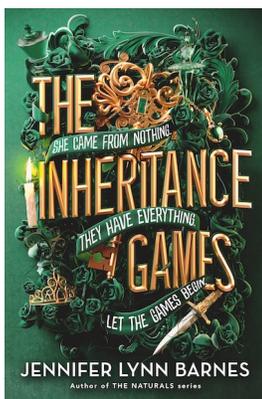
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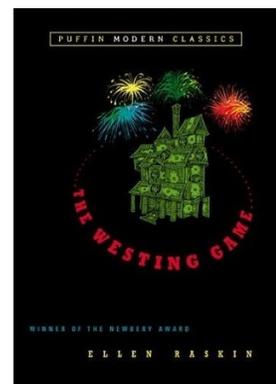
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