

VANISHED

A NOVEL BY
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SILENCE

I couldn't sustain this for much longer. The rushing thoughts. The shallow breathing. The pounding, pounding, pounding in my brain. It made me lightheaded, dizzy, and faint. All night I'd been trapped inside my eight-by-eight single room, watching the digital clock on my desk slowly count the minutes. Waiting. Waiting every moment for the phone to ring, for a text to come in. Waiting for any kind of direction.

I sat on the edge of my bed, still wearing my clothes from the night before, my palms slick with sweat as I clutched my cell phone. The same, stark message had been staring up at me all night long. Now the first pink light of morning crept through my window and still, nothing changed.

WE HAVE NOELLE LANGE. IF YOU GO TO THE POLICE, SHE DIES. IF YOU GO TO HER FAMILY, SHE DIES. IF YOU GO TO THE

HEADMASTER, SHE DIES. YOU WILL FOLLOW OUR EVERY INSTRUCTION TO THE LETTER, OR SHE WILL DIE. THE GAME IS ON, REED BRENNAN. THE PRIZE? NOELLE'S LIFE.

I rose and paced across the tiny expanse of my dorm room. The message was horrifying. And baffling. Who had sent it? Why? Where had they taken Noelle? Why were they doing this to us? What did they want with Noelle? Why would anyone want her dead? I couldn't stop thinking about the night before when my friends and I had stolen up to the Billings Chapel in the woods off campus for a meeting of our secret organization, the Billings Literary Society. Everything had been fine until the wind had taken out some of our candles. That was when the banging had started. Then the screams. In the total darkness, my Billings sisters and I had panicked, fear pulsating off us. What if I had reached for Noelle in the middle of it? Would I have been able to hold on to her? Would she still be here right now?

I shoved my free hand into my dirty brown hair, holding it back from my face. Did this have anything to do with the Billings Literary Society? Had the Billings Alums who didn't approve of our secret society taken Noelle to prove some kind of point? If I'd never started this thing up in the first place, we wouldn't have even been up at the chapel. Noelle would have been here on the Easton Academy campus, huddled away in her single room, studying or listening to music or tweeting about how damn boring Easton is during the winter. Was this my fault? Was this really all my fault?

But no. Someone had left the BLS book for me. Someone wanted

me to reconstitute the secret society. And Noelle had joined of her own free will. Besides, maybe it had nothing to do with the society. Maybe if we hadn't been in the old Billings Chapel last night they would have taken her from her room or the library or wherever she might have been otherwise. Maybe I wasn't to blame.

Not everything was always my fault. All evidence to the contrary.

But even if, by some slim chance, this wasn't my fault, I was still the one who had to deal with it. I was the one the kidnappers had chosen to contact. Why? Why me? I hugged myself tightly and turned toward the opposite wall. I had to keep moving, even if I had no direction, even if everything I did was pointless. The doubting, the regret, the terror, the endless questions—it all came in waves, crashing down on my chest over and over and over again until I felt as if I couldn't breathe.

But even worse than the hindsight was the current state of total silence. It had been seven hours since the text had come through. Seven hours of nothing. Where were these all-important instructions? If the "game" was, in fact, "on," then it wasn't a very exciting one. The text said that Noelle's life depended on my doing something, but what? When were they going to tell me? What was with the extreme delay?

I let out an angry growl and hurled the phone onto the bed. Even in my frustration I had the restraint not to throw it too hard. It was, after all, my only connection to my best friend. All along the hallways of Pemberly Hall, people were starting to stir. Someone's stereo flipped on, a hair dryer hummed a few doors down, the scent of espresso

wafted my way from under my door, thanks to the new coffeemaker Ivy Slade's roommate had received for Christmas. Outside the window, the sky was bright white now, screaming of impending snow. I blinked my dry eyes a few times, the skin around them tight and tired. What was I supposed to do? Get dressed and go about my day? Pretend as if nothing was wrong?

Or stay here and wait?

I turned and looked at the phone.

"Ring," I said firmly under my breath. "Ring. Beep. Vibrate. Do something!"

It stared back at me, silent and dark.

"Screw this."

I jammed open the accordion door on my closet and pulled out the first items of clothing I saw: a pair of dark green cords and a black turtleneck sweater. I was just yanking on the pants when I realized I should probably change my underwear. I shuffled over to my dresser and yanked open my underwear drawer. The red, lace tank top I had bought in New York on a dare from Noelle a few weeks earlier, practically sprang out of the over-packed space. Instantly I started to cry.

There was a quick knock at the door and it started to open.

"One second!" I said, springing for it and slamming it closed again.

"Ow. Reed! It's just me!" Ivy said.

"I'm half dressed!" I replied, trying to keep the tears out of my voice. "Hang on."

I wiped my face with the backs of my hands and took a deep breath,

rounding my shoulders and looking in the mirror. I was a complete and total wreck. Dark circles framed my bloodshot eyes. My nose was redder than the lacy underwear still clutched in my fist, and my hair was knotted and dirty around my face.

Quickly, I yanked on a pair of cotton underwear, fastened my pants around my waist, and ran a brush through my hair, pulling it back in a tight ponytail. Then I plopped a few drops of Visine in each eye, blinked at the ceiling a few times, and breathed in.

Time to start lying my ass off.

"Hey!" I said with a bright smile, opening the door. "Sorry about that. I was kind of underwear-free."

"No problem." Ivy stepped into the room, her dark eyes trained on my face. "Are you okay?"

She looked perfect, of course, her black hair shining on her shoulders, her ivory skin scrubbed and blushed, mascara accentuating her gorgeous eyes. She wore a black wool skirt, black knee-high boots, and a red sweater. Like today was not only a normal day, but maybe even a special one. She had her white coat slung over one arm and her Stella McCartney bag on her shoulder.

"Yeah. I just got something in my eye," I lied, closing the door behind her. "I was trying to use drops to flush it out, but no luck."

I scrounged an old paper napkin out of the side pocket on my messenger bag and used it to blow my nose.

"Getting stuff in your eyes is the worst."

"Totally," I said.

Yeah right. As opposed to, say, getting kidnapped in the middle

of the night right out from under your friends' noses? As opposed to being the person the elusive kidnappers had contacted and then forgotten about? "The worst" was kind of relative at the moment.

Ivy crossed her arms more tightly, holding her coat against her stomach, and walked casually past me into the room. She looked back at me over her shoulder with narrow, almost sly eyes. "So?"

My heart skipped erratically.

"So, what?" I asked, even though I knew exactly what "so" meant.

Her eyebrows arched. "Have you heard from Noelle?"

I turned my back to her and looked in the mirror again, my palms slick with sweat. I fished a lip gloss out of my vinyl cosmetics bag, but my hand was shaking, so I put it down. I had come up with a cover story for this, hadn't I? Sometime around three a.m. when I'd hidden Noelle's bag and phone under a stack of sweaters on the top shelf of my closet?

"Yeah," I said finally. "She came by last night to get her stuff."

"She did?" Ivy said, her tone accusatory. "Why didn't you come tell me?" She walked up behind me, the better to glare at my reflection in the mirror.

"Sorry. It was late," I said with a shrug. "I figured you were asleep. It's not as if you've ever cared that much about Noelle anyway."

Ivy glanced away. She couldn't argue with that. "So what happened?"

"She had to go home for a few days. Some kind of family emergency," I replied, steeling myself long enough to finally apply the lip gloss.

Ivy looked up at me through her long lashes. "What? That makes no sense."

"I don't know what to tell you. That's what she said," I replied, rummaging through my closet for a pair of sneakers. I wondered if she'd noticed that I'd yet to really look her in the eye.

"But then why did she disappear from the chapel? And why did she leave her bag and cell phone there?" Ivy asked, dropping her coat and bag on my bed.

"Oh, that."

"Yeah. That," Ivy said acerbically. Clearly she was annoyed, but I knew her annoyance was directed at Noelle and not at me. Ivy was perpetually irritated with Noelle. Or angry with her. Or full-on furious with her. It just depended on the day and the situation.

"That was a prank," I told her, looking up briefly. "She was trying to make it look like she was grabbed or something, just to mess with us. After all the candles went out, she snuck out the back door and came down to campus to wait for us, but when she got there she got a call from her mom on her backup phone and she had to leave right away."

Ivy's eyes narrowed as she pondered this. My ribs rattled with each pound of my heart. She had to buy the story. She had to. It was the best one I had. The only one.

"Unbelievable," she said finally, shaking her head. "She scared the crap out of us. God. What a total bitch."

"I know! I know," I said, breathing a slight sigh of relief. "I told her how everyone was freaking out. She felt really bad about it."

"I'll bet," Ivy said sarcastically.

Something inside of me snapped. "I know you don't like her, but do you really have to call her names all the time?" I demanded. "She is one of my best friends."

Ivy looked stunned for a moment. Not surprising. I wasn't normally big on the outbursts. But Noelle didn't deserve to be called a bitch. Especially not now. Especially when she might already be . . .

I swallowed hard and looked at the floor. Ivy threw up her hands in surrender. "Sorry. I'll try to control myself from now on. But if she keeps pulling crap like this I make no guarantees."

She crossed to my bed, which was still made since I hadn't slept at all last night, and sat down. As she leaned back on her hands she knocked my phone across the bed toward the wall. My heart flew into my throat as she turned to pick it up. The "game on" text was still up on the screen.

"I got it!" I said, lunging at her and snatching the cell away before she could look at it.

"Wow," Ivy said. "Grab much?"

I forced a laugh that sounded more like a strangled cough, and shoved the phone into the depths of my bag.

"Come on," I said, grabbing my coat off the back of my desk chair. "I'm starving."

"Me too. I hope they have French toast this morning," Ivy said, bouncing off my bed. Her total lack of sadness, foreboding, and fear made me feel even more miserable and more alone. "I seriously can't believe Noelle, though," she said as she slipped past me out the door,

shrugging one arm into the sleeve of her coat. "Although I guess I shouldn't be surprised. When has she ever given a crap about anyone other than herself? Sooner or later that girl is going to get hers."

So much for controlling herself.

She shoved her other arm into her coat as I banged the door closed behind us, biting down on my tongue to keep from lashing out again or crying, or both. Laying into Ivy was not going to help Noelle. I had to try to stay calm and in control. I had to make sure I was ready for whatever was coming next.

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