

THE VANISHED BOY

A SIZZLING MYSTERY SUSPENSE NOVEL FROM
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

HARMONY KENT



The Vanished Boy
By Harmony Kent

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This book is a work of fiction. Any similarity between the characters and situations within its pages and places or persons, living or dead, is unintentional and coincidental.

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For my husband, who loves to put ideas into my head.

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Unsplash

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I have set this novel during the month of September 2019, even though I actually wrote much of it in August 2020 and into early 2021. This is to avoid the tedium of the whole COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant changes such as face masks, social distancing, hand sanitising, etc., etc. I don't know about you, but I couldn't face writing all about it, not while it's still ongoing. And, as a reader, I'd prefer not to have to read about it either. So, rightly or wrongly, I've taken the decision to spare you from it here.

Also, as you read, you might notice spellings, words, and punctuation that you're not used to—depending on what you've grown up with. I'm a British English writer and use British English conventions in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. So, if you do notice differences, please note that these are not mistakes or errors, but simply another way of doing things.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this fun bit of fiction, and I'd

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love to hear what you think in a book review. If you're able to leave a review on Amazon and/or GoodReads and/or Bookbub, I'd be thrilled.

In the meantime, happy reading!

Harmony

Losing a child
Is like losing a limb.
And you wonder
Could it have ever been
So bad—
Your sin?

Harmony Kent

PROLOGUE

CAROLE'S DARLING boy gazed up at her with tear-filled eyes. 'Is Daddy going to die?'

Desperate to show a brave face to her son, she forced a smile and squeezed his hand. 'Daddy's gone to sleep now. He won't wake up. The doctors gave him something so he won't hurt anymore.'

Jayden blinked. 'So ... h-he's dead now?' He stared in horror at the shrunken body in the bed.

Carole closed her eyes and prayed for strength. 'No, sweetie. He's in a coma. But the doctors think he'll die real soon. Maybe within the hour.'

The boy nodded. When he spoke again, his voice had dragged itself from the vulnerable depths of a small child and back up to the relative heights of the eleven-year-old he was. It made her proud—he, too, had pulled on the reins of his fear and pain. At the same time, it hurt her that he had to.

Eleven was no age to lose a father.

Hell, thirty was no age to lose a husband.

Despite the numerous flower bouquets, which brightened the sterile room, the air carried the stench of hospitals the world over—disinfectant overlaying the vague odour of sickness and death. Carole shuddered. She'd never liked hospitals. Until Harvey had gotten ill, she'd avoided them at all costs. Thankfully, Jayden had never needed more than the odd visit to a GP surgery.

Monitors and wires and IVs surrounded the narrow bed. To mitigate Harvey's awful bedsores, the staff had placed a special gel mattress beneath his frail form. Every half an hour, nurses came in to turn him. He never stirred. The door opened, and two of the staff came in to perform the half-hourly ritual. Carole and Jayden stood and moved out of the way while the nurses worked. Apart from the steady beep of the machines and hiss of forced oxygen, a heavy silence filled the room.

When the nurses had finished, soft smiles eased their way back into the corridor. By her side, a quiet hiccup-sob bubbled out of Jayden. Carole uncrossed her arms and held his hand. She led them back to the bedside chairs—one armchair, and one hard plastic monstrosity. Carole seated herself in the armchair and pulled her son onto her lap. For the first time in years, he curled up and snuggled in for a cuddle. After a couple of minutes, she saw that his thumb had slipped into his mouth.

Despite her best efforts, tears streamed down her cheeks, and she no longer tried to stop them. Unwilling to disturb her son, she left her arms wrapped around him and let the liquid grief flood down her face, over her lips, and off the end of her chin. A steady succession of cool drips splashed onto her throat and chest. Once in a while, she licked the water from her lips and cringed at the salty taste.

At some point, Jayden fell asleep and snored in her lap.

Soon, the monotonous rhythm of the beep-beeps lulled Carole into a doze too. A sudden cacophony of various alarms jerked them both to wakefulness.

As Carole blinked the sleep from her eyes and tried to comfort her panicking son, doctors and nurses rushed into the room. Blood spurted from her husband's nose and mouth. Little Jayden screamed. An awful, high-pitched screech of 'Arghh, Arghh, Arghh!' that went on and on and on.

A member of staff helped lead mother and son from the room. All the way down the corridor and into the visitor's room, Jayden wailed and cried, 'Daddy! No! I want my daddy!'

A nurse sat with them. Carole mumbled, 'It shouldn't be like this. I wanted to sit with him while he went. We signed the DNR order. Please, why can't we be in there?'

The middle-aged woman stared at Jayden pointedly.

Carole fought not to snap at her. 'He's old enough. For God's sake, that's his father in there.'

The nurse pursed her lips and bit back on a retort. At the realisation, Carole forced her anger into a box and put the lid on top. The woman was right. Jayden was too young to witness all the blood. None of them had anticipated such a development.

Still, the situation left her torn. Surely the staff had no right to dictate to the family in this way. Right then, Carole hated the needs of her son because they'd pulled her away from her dying husband. And she hated herself a damn sight more for feeling this way. Her little boy needed her now more than ever.

If only she'd known Harvey would go so soon. They would have had time to organise a home death. Or, at the very least, hospice care. It would have been much nicer

than this. If losing the love of your life could ever be called nice.

Eventually, Jayden's awful cries subsided into wails and then soft whimpers. He suffered the odd hiccup, and eventually, he cried himself to sleep. A subjective eternity later, which was only around 20 minutes, a grim-faced doctor entered the room.

When he addressed Carole, he looked anywhere but at her. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Kellow. Your husband is no longer with us.'

No longer with us? He hasn't been 'with us' for a long time. Carole blinked. Obviously, the guy had no clue how to handle cancer deaths or the victim's families. It was sheer bad luck that the dedicated cancer ward had been too full to take Harvey this time. But their luck had run out a long time ago, hadn't it? No longer able to hold back her fury and pain, she yelled, 'No longer with us? He's dead. My husband is dead. D.E.A.D. Dead. And you didn't let us sit with him. You bastard!'

While she vented, the doctor stepped backwards until he stood against the closed doorway. Hands held in front of him in a warding-off gesture, he muttered a lame 'I'm sorry,' opened the door, and backed out into the corridor. Carole became aware of the nurse's arms wrapped around her upper limbs. With a sob, she wrenched free and reached down to pick up Jayden, who had awoken at her outburst.

Heavy though he was, she held him and rocked him against her while murmuring, 'I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry ...'

Her son had no more tears left. Silent, which hurt worse than his earlier heart-wrenching wails, he simply snuggled into her with his legs wrapped around her hips and his arms

around her neck. His body heaved with dry sobs and unspoken grief.

Numb, Carole carried Jayden and followed the nurse back to Harvey's room so that they could say their goodbyes. It was useless, though; as soon as she walked in, the absence hit her full on. Her husband was gone. What good was saying goodbye to an empty shell?

The staff had cleaned up the blood, changed the sheets, and arranged Harvey as best they could. The small mercy filled her with a warm rush of gratitude. Though she'd vented at the doctor, in her heart, she knew they'd done the right thing. Spewing blood so violently was vastly different to slipping away quietly in your sleep.

Jayden wriggled from her arms and dashed to his dad's side. In his rush, his feet skidded and slipped on the highly polished and still-wet tiles. The colt-like clumsiness reminded Carole of him as a toddler taking his first steps. At the bed, he threw his skinny arms around Harvey and sobbed his little heart out. Mumbled cries and inarticulate words reached her where she stood braced against the wall at the far side of the room. She just couldn't bring herself to move any closer. After a few seconds, Jayden's words made sense.

He turned his neck to stare at her. Rage and grief twisted his usually calm features. With a glare of accusation, he yelled at her, 'It's not fair!'

Carole's heart squeezed in her chest, and pain like she'd never experienced before lanced into her neck and arms. Her knees buckled, and tears poured down her face. Her throat locked, and she felt as though she couldn't breathe. *I'm having a heart attack!*

And then a nurse was with her, kneeling by her side and whispering, 'It's okay, honey. You're having a panic attack.'

It's okay. Just breathe. Slow and deep.' She exaggerated her breaths so Carole could follow. "That's it. You're doing great.'

You're doing great. A ragged, hysterical laugh bubbled out of her. Her little boy's hate-filled glare filled her vision. The guilt of a mother who'd failed to protect her son swallowed her whole.

FRIDAY

A GLASS of *Chocolate Box Shiraz* in one hand, and a mobile phone on the table in front of her, Carole hits play on the fifth video. This one chronicles Harvey and her on Jayden's first day of school. God, but Jayden looks so young and vulnerable. The bravery shown on her son's tiny, frightened face fills her with pride. A stray tear slips down her cheek, and she wipes it away absently. With a heavy sigh, she hits pause and exits the video player.

Carole remembers she'd intended to message Jayden. Her son had promised he'd sort out the recycling to save her lugging the heavy tub around and hurting her back further. But, as has become a habit of late, he's forgotten. Annoyed, she sends him a text:

Did you forget something?

Her finger hovers over 'send', and then she snaps a picture of the offending rubbish and adds the image, along with a smiley face to soften the tone. When he hasn't replied by five—long after school would have let out—she sends another text:

Did I upset you? Xx

And later still ...

Call me.

By six-thirty, she's had enough and opens up a WhatsApp video call. Jayden answers after a few rings. He appears flustered and is in the act of hurrying into the hallway of someone's house. It looks big and expensive. Nicely done out.

Carole raises her brows. 'Where are you? Did you get my messages?'

Jayden frowns and adopts a guilty posture—shoulders raised and bunched forwards. 'Yeah. Sorry, Mum. I totes forgot.'

'Again. This is the third time. When are you coming home?'

Her son glances behind himself, and his shoulders hunch briefly. A sure tell. What's he hiding? Or does he feel embarrassed in front of his mates? He's always been such a sweet child. 'Um, I'm not sure. We might go on all night.'

Carole stares hard into the camera. 'What? What are you doing?'

'I'm at a study group. We have our chem final next week, remember?'

She doesn't. 'Of course. Well, call me later, yes? You okay for food? Money?'

Jayden smiles. The gesture morphs him into an adorable eleven-year-old, but the expression disappears as quickly as it arrived. 'Yeah. Look, Mum, I gotta go. See ya later.'

'Okay. Look after yourself. And don't do anything I wouldn't. Love you.'

Jayden waves and says, 'Later.' The connection breaks.

To make sure, Carole activates the tracking app, which she's connected between her phone and Jayden's. After a cycle of seconds, the dot blinks just outside Wadebridge.

Carole sighs. The study group must be meeting there. She watches for a while until satisfied her son isn't on the move. A twinge of guilt makes her flinch. If Jay knew she'd put a tracking app on his phone, he would not be happy with her. At eighteen-years-old, he's fiercely independent. But she has to have some way of knowing where her boy is. Not all the time; just sometimes. With a sigh, she exits the app.

Sad under the heavy blanket of memory, Carole sighs and pours another glass of *Shiraz*. She spends much of the evening flicking through family photos online and playing the many videos they'd shot using their smartphones. How the years have zoomed by.

Memories sabotage Carole. Harvey stole her heart in high school. In such a small rural community, there wasn't an abundance of fish in the sea. When he'd chosen her, she'd become the envy of every girl in sixth form. They married at eighteen, and Jayden came along ten months later. Some people believed she'd thrown her life away. But not marrying Harvey and bearing his child would have been even more of a loss. Especially as the love of her life died so young.

But what fun they'd had. Now all that remains are memories, photos, and videos. All the school events. All the family holidays. The pranks. The love. The steady decline of her husband's health, and the videos they'd made of them sharing the burden of doing everything they could to fight the lymphoma, which then metastasised to his lungs.

Carole and Harvey enjoyed a mere eleven years before the cancer took her husband. Since, she and Jayden have grown slowly apart more and more. The one thing they have that keeps them close is Jayden's love of art, which he's inherited from Harvey.

Tears stream down Carole's face. On impulse, she

locates the final video of the three of them. The one that shows a family hopeful Harvey would soon return home. A sob escapes, and she takes a shuddering breath in. She hits delete. Before she can change her mind, she goes to the computer trash bin and empties that too. No going back now.

Next, she strides to the kitchen junk drawer, where everything accumulates, and retrieves the 2012 calendar, open at August. The 13th displays, in all caps, ~~DAD COMES HOME TODAY!~~ Again, on the 24th. Once more, crossed out. And then nothing.

Harvey died on August 23rd, after lying in a coma for two days. The chaos of violent bleeding and a young boy's screams assault her afresh.

Distraught, Carole fishes out the emergency matches from the same junk drawer, carries those and the calendar out to the back garden, and sets all twelve pages on fire. She holds the corner and watches the paper curl up and brown. Smoke blows in her face, along with blackened bits of burning paper and ash. Carole coughs and drops the hot mess. It hits the long, wet grass. After a few seconds, the flames fade and fail. For a full five minutes, unheedful of the Cornish mizzle soaking her clothes, and oblivious to the piercing cries of the gulls, she stands and stares at the remains, lost in thought.

Her neighbour, John, brings her out of her trance when he yells over the fence between their properties, 'You all right, maid?'

She shakes herself and nods. With a sniff, she scrubs at her cheeks and clears her throat. 'Yes. Thanks. Just ... well, you know.'

His kindly eyes crinkle at the corners. 'It gets you at the most unexpected times. That it does.' John nods and walks