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Vanish

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Sophie Jordan

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Vanish

Also by Sophie Jordan

Firelight

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Vanish

A Firelight Novel

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For my agent, Maura—for being more than an agent

The heart that truly loves never forgets.

—*Proverbs*



1

Sometimes I dream of falling.

Of course, I start out flying in these dreams. Because that's what I do. What I am. What I love.

A few weeks ago, I would have said it's what I love most in the world, but a lot has changed since then. Everything, really.

In these dreams, I'm racing through the sky, free as I'm supposed to be. And then something happens because suddenly I'm descending in a tailspin. I clutch air, my screams eaten up by angry wind. I plummet. A human without wings. Just a girl, not a draki at all. Powerless. Lost.

I feel that way now: I'm falling, and I can do nothing. I can stop none of it. I'm caught up in the old nightmare.

I always wake before I hit ground. That's been my salvation. Only tonight I'm not dreaming. Tonight I hit the ground. And it's every bit as painful as I expected.

I rest my cheek against the cool glass of the window and watch the night rush past me. As Cassian drives, my eyes

strain through the motionless dark, skimming over rock yards and stucco houses, searching for an answer, a reason for everything that's happened.

The world seems to hold its breath as we slow for a stop sign. My gaze drifts to the dark sky above us. A deep, starless sea beckoning, promising sanctuary.

Mom's voice drifts forward from the backseat, low and crooning as she talks to Tamra, trying to coax a response from her. I peel my cheek from the glass and glance over my shoulder. Tamra shivers in Mom's arms. Her eyes stare vacantly ahead; her skin corpse pale.

'Is she OK?' I ask again, because I have to say something. I have to know. Did I do this to her? Is this, too, my fault? 'What's wrong with her?'

Mom frowns and shakes her head at me like I shouldn't speak. I've let them both down. I broke the unbreakable rule. I revealed my true form to humans—worse, hunters—and we will all pay for the mistake. The knowledge presses on me, a crushing weight that sinks me deep into my seat. I face forward again, trembling uncontrollably. I cross my arms, pinning my hands at my sides as though that might still them.

Cassian warned me there would be a reckoning for this night's work, and I wonder whether it's already begun. I've lost Will. Tamra is sick or in shock or maybe something worse. Mom can hardly look at me. My every breath is misery, the events of the night burning inside my eyelids. Me, shedding my human skin and manifesting in front of Will's family. My desperate flight through crackling dry air to reach him. But if I hadn't manifested—hadn't flown to Will's side—he'd be dead, and I couldn't bear that thought. I'll never see

Will again, no matter his promise to find me, but at least he's alive.

Cassian says nothing beside me. He did all the talking he needed to do to get Mom in the car with us, to make her understand returning with him to the home we fled is the only viable option. His fingers hold tight to the steering wheel, his knuckles white. I doubt he'll relax his grip until we're free and clear of Chaparral. Probably not until we're safely back in the pride. *Safe*. I strangle on a laugh—or it could be a sob. Will I ever feel *safe* again?

The town flies past, houses thinning out as we near the edge of town. We'll be gone soon. Free of this desert and the hunters. Free of Will. This last thought claws fresh the already bleeding wound in my heart, but there's nothing to be done about it. Could there ever have been a future for us? A draki and a draki hunter? *A draki hunter with the blood of my kind running through his veins*.

That part of it all still stumbles through my head, refusing to penetrate. I can't close my eyes without seeing the flash of his shimmering purple blood in the night. Like my own. My head aches, struggling to accept this terrible truth. No matter how valid Will's explanation, no matter that I still love him, it doesn't change the fact that the stolen blood of my kind pumps through his veins.

Cassian exhales slowly as we leave the city limits.

'Well, that's that,' Mom murmurs as the distance grows between us and Chaparral.

I turn to find her looking back through the rear window. She's leaving all her hopes for a better future in Chaparral. It's where we were making a fresh start, away from the pride. And now we're headed back into their midst.

'I'm sorry, Mom,' I say, not just because I should, but because I mean it.

Mom shakes her head, opening her mouth to speak, but gets nothing out.

'We've got trouble,' Cassian announces. Straight ahead, several cars block the road, forcing us to slow.

'It's them,' I manage to utter past numb lips as Cassian pulls closer.

'Them?' Mom demands. 'Hunters?'

I give a hard nod. Hunters. *Will's family*.

Glaring headlights pierce the dark and illuminate Cassian's face. His gaze flicks to the rearview mirror and I can tell he's contemplating turning back around, running for it in the other direction. But it's too late for that—one car moves to block our escape and several figures step in front of our car. Cassian slams on the brakes, his hands flexing on the steering wheel, and I know he's fighting the impulse to mow them down. I strain for a glimpse of Will, sensing him, knowing he's there, among them somewhere.

Hard, biting voices shout at us to get out of the car. I hold still, my fingers a hot singe on my bare legs, pressing so deeply—as though I were trying to reach my draki buried underneath.

A fist bangs down on our hood, and then I see it—the outline of a gun in the gloom.

Cassian's gaze locks with mine, communicating what I already know. We have to survive. Even if it means doing only what our kind *can* do. That very thing I already did, that got us in this jam tonight in the first place. And why not? It's not like we can reveal our secret *more*.

Nodding, I move, climbing out of the car to face our enemies.

Will's cousin Xander steps ahead of the others thrusting his smug face toward me. 'Did you really think you could get away?'

Crushing pain fills my chest, anger at what these monsters have cost me tonight. Ash gathers at the back of my throat, and I let the acrid burn build, preparing myself for whatever may come.

A hunter beats a fist on the back window, shouting at Mom and Tamra. 'Get out of the car!'

Mom steps out with as much dignity as she can muster, pulling Tamra with her. My sister's grown even paler since Big Rock; her wheezy breath scrapes the air. Her amber brown eyes, the same as mine, look cloudy, almost filmy as she stares into space. Her lips part, but no words escape. I step close and lend a hand, helping Mom support her. Tam's icy to the touch, her skin not skin at all. Chilled marble.

Cassian faces Xander, regal as the prince he essentially is. Light glints off the purple and black strands of his hair.

I moisten my lips, wondering how I can convince Xander he didn't see me manifest. 'What do you want?'

Will's cousin stabs a finger at me. 'We'll start with you—whatever the hell you are.'

'Get away from her,' Cassian commands.

Xander's attention swings to Cassian. 'And then we'll move to you, big guy . . . and how it is you fell off that cliff with Will and don't have a scratch.'

'Where's Will?' I blurt. I have to know.

Xander jerks a thumb to one of the nearby cars. 'Passed out in the back.' I squint through the gloom and notice a figure slumped in the back of a car. *Will*. So close, but he might as well be an ocean away. When last I saw him, he was promising to find me again. He was hurt, but

conscious. I shudder to think what his own family may have done to change that.

'He needs a doctor,' I say.

'Later. After I deal with you two.'

'Look,' Cassian begins, stepping in front of me. 'I don't know what you think—'

'I *think* you need to shut up. I'm doing the talking here!' Xander grabs his shoulder. Big mistake.

Cassian growls, his skin flashing a glimmering charcoal. There's a flurry of movement and then Xander's on his back on the ground, his expression as stunned as the half dozen others gathered around us.

'Get him!' Xander shouts.

The others converge on Cassian. I scream, glimpsing Cassian's face amid the hunters. I cringe at the smacking sounds of fists and move toward them, determined to help him, but hands restrain me.

An animal growl rumbles on the air. It's Cassian. Several hunters hold him down. Angus grins as he plants a boot on his back. With his cheek pressed flat into asphalt, Cassian's gaze locks on me. His dark eyes shudder, the pupils thinning to vertical slits.

Steaming air rushes past my lips, but I suppress it and shake my head, conveying for him to hold off, to wait, still believing, hoping we can talk our way out of this. That he doesn't need to reveal himself as a draki, too. Maybe I can still protect him. Maybe he can make it out of here with Mom and Tamra.

The cold kiss of a gun digs into my ribs and I freeze. Mom cries out and I raise a hand, stopping her from doing anything foolish to help me. 'Stay with Tamra, Mom. She needs you!'

Xander's dark gaze roves over me contemptuously. 'I know what the hell I saw. A freak with wings.'

It's a battle not to let the fear swallow me in a fiery wash—a shock that I don't shift into my draki skin right now.

'Jacinda,' Cassian shouts my name, renewing his struggles.

Xander keeps talking. 'Don't worry. I'm not going to kill you. It's just a tranq gun. We'll keep you alive and figure out what the hell you are.'

They're beating Cassian now as he fights to get free.

'Stop!' I shove past Xander, but Angus blocks me. I watch in anguish as they keep kicking him. 'Stop! Please, stop!' My heart twists. It's them or us.

Fire erupts in my contracting lungs and climbs up my windpipe.

I can't let them take us.

Before I can release the blazing breath, a sudden gust of cold swirls around me. An unnatural chill. I shiver against the swift change in temperature.

As I whirl around, my throat constricts at the sight of Tamra. She stands alone, Mom watching with wide eyes several feet behind her.

My sister's face is dead pale, her eyes not her own anymore. Not like mine. The ice-gray chills my heart. A vapor rolls off her like steam. Except it's cold. The frigid mist grows, swelling in an ever-expanding cloud around us.

She arches her body in a sinuous ripple, tearing at her blouse, ripping it in a fierce move with her hands. Hands that suddenly wink and glimmer with a lustrous pearly sheen.

I've only seen such color on one other soul. Another draki. Nidia: the shader of our pride. I watch as the roots

of Tamra's hair turn a silvery white that bleeds through the rest of her hair.

The vapor intensifies, a chilling mist that reminds me of home, of the fog that covers the township in a cool blanket. Shielding us from intruders, from any who would hunt and destroy us; obscuring the minds of those who stumble into our sanctuary.

'Tamra!' I reach for her, but Cassian's there, free from his attackers, his strong arm pulling me back.

'Let her,' he says.

I glance at his face, recognize the deep, primal satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. He's . . . *glad*. Happy at what's happening. What *can't* be happening. Tamra's never manifested before. How can this happen now?

In the moment I look away, it's done. By the time I look back to Tamra, she has risen several feet off the ground. Her gossamer wings snap behind her, the jagged tips peeking above her silvery shoulders.

'Tamra.' I breathe, absorbing the sight of her, grappling with this new reality. My sister's a draki. After so long. After thinking we would never have this in common. More than that—she's a shader.

Her eerily calm gaze sweeps over all of us on the road. Like she knows precisely what to do. And I guess she does. It's instinct.

I can't move as I watch her, both beautiful and terrifying with her shimmery skin, her hair leached of all pigment. She lifts her slim arms. Mist rushes over us like fast-burning smoke. So thick I can scarcely see my own hand before my face. The hunters are completely hidden, but I hear them as they holler and shout, bumping into one another, coughing, dropping onto the road like

so many dominoes. First one, then another and another. Then nothing.

I strain for a sound in the sudden tomblike silence as Tamra's fog does what it's supposed to do and shades, shades, shades . . . everything in its path, every human nearby. *Will*.

I break away from Cassian and fight desperately through the cooling vapor that clouds both air and mind. Hunters sprawl at my feet, lowered by Tamra's handiwork. I see nothing through the all-reaching mist; my arms swing wildly through the cold kiss of fog, groping, searching for the car where Will lies.

Then I see him slumped in the backseat of the car. The driver's door yawns open, letting in the fog. The smoky haze curls around his sleeping form almost tenderly. For a moment I can't move. Only stare, strangling on my own breath. Even bruised and battered, he's beautiful.

Then action fires my limbs. I pull open the back door and reach for him. My shaking fingers brush his face and smooth back the honey strands of hair from his forehead. Like silk against my hand.

I jerk as Cassian roars my name. 'Jacinda! We have to go! Now!'

And then he's found me, drags me away toward our car. His other hand grips Tamra. He thrusts her at Mom. Her sparkly new body lights the desert night, cutting us a path through the great billowing mist.

Soon it will fade, evaporate. When Tamra's gone. When we've escaped. *The mist will fade. And with it, so will the hunters' memories*.

I'd once suggested to Tamra that her talent just hadn't manifested yet. That she was simply a late bloomer. Even

though I didn't believe it, I'd said it. To give her hope. Even though, deep down, like the rest of the pride, I thought she was a defunct draki. Instead she's one of the most rare and prized of our kind. Just like me.

Behind the wheel, Cassian guns the engine and then we're shooting down the highway. I look behind us through the rear window at the great cloud of white. Will's in there. My fingers dig against the seat cushion until I feel the worn fabric give and tear beneath the pressure. No, I can't think about him now—it hurts too much.

My gaze drifts, brushes over the pale version of my sister, and I have to look away. Alarmed at the sight of my own twin, now as foreign to me as this desert.

I inhale a deep, shuddery breath. We're going home, to mountains and mists and everything familiar. The one place it's safe to be me. I'm going back to the pride.