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Opening extract from

Silence

Written by

Becca Fitzpatrick

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chapter

1

Coldwater, Maine

Present day

Even before I opened my eyes, I knew I was in danger.

I stirred at the soft crunch of footsteps drawing closer.

A dim flicker of sleep remained, dulling my focus. I was flat on my back, a chill seeping through my shirt.

My neck was crooked at a painful angle, and I opened my eyes. Thin stones loomed out of the blue-black fog. For a strange suspended moment, an image of crooked teeth came to mind, and then I saw them for what they really were. Gravestones.

I tried to push myself up to sitting, but my hands slipped on the wet grass. Fighting the haze of sleep still curled around my mind, I rolled sideways off a half-sunken grave, feeling my way through the vapor. The knees of my jeans soaked up dew as I crawled between the haphazardly placed graves and monuments. Mild recognition hovered, but it was a side thought; I couldn't bring myself to focus through the excruciating pain radiating inside my skull.

I crawled along a wrought-iron fence, tamping down a layer of decaying leaves that had been years in the making. A ghoulish howl drifted down from above, and while it sent a shudder through me, it wasn't the sound I was most frightened of. The footsteps trampled over the grass behind me, but whether they were near or far I couldn't tell. A shout of pursuit cut through the mist, and I hurried my pace. I knew instinctively that I had to hide, but I was disoriented; it was too dark to see clearly, the eerie blue fog casting spells before my eyes.

In the distance, trapped between two walls of spindly and overgrown trees, a white stone mausoleum glowed through the night. Rising to my feet, I ran toward it.

I slipped between two marble monuments, and when I came out on the other side, he was waiting for me. A towering silhouette, his arm raised to strike. I tripped backward. As I fell, I realized my mistake: He was made of stone. An angel raised on a pediment, guarding the dead. I might have smothered a nervous laugh, but my head collided against something hard, jarring the world sideways. Darkness encroached on my vision.

I couldn’t have been out for long. When the stark black of unconsciousness faded, I was still breathing hard from the exertion of running. I knew I had to get up, but I couldn’t remember why. So I lay there, the icy dew mingling with the warm sweat of my skin. At long last I blinked, and it was then that the nearest headstone sharpened into focus. The engraved letters of the epitaph snapped into single-file lines.

Harrison Grey

A devoted husband and father

Died March 16, 2008

I bit down on my lip to keep from crying out. Now I understood the familiar shadow that had lurked over my shoulder since waking up minutes ago. I was in Coldwater’s city cemetery. At my dad’s graveside.

A nightmare, I thought. I haven’t really woken yet. This is all just a horrible dream.

The angel watched me, his chipped wings unfurled behind him, his right arm pointing across the cemetery. His expression was carefully detached, but the curve of his lips was more wry than benevolent. For one moment, I was almost able to trick myself into believing he was real and I wasn’t alone.

I smiled at him, then felt my lip quiver. I dragged my sleeve along my cheekbone, wiping away tears, though I didn’t remember starting to cry. I desperately wanted to climb into his arms, feeling the beat of his wings on air as he flew us over the gates and away from this place.

The resumed sound of footsteps pulled me out of my stupor. They were faster now, crashing through the grass.

I turned toward the sound, bewildered by the bob of light twinkling in and out of the misty darkness. Its beam rose and fell to the cadence of the footsteps—crunch . . . sweep . . . crunch . . . sweep—

A flashlight.

I squinted when the light came to a stop between my eyes, dazzling me blind. I had the terrible realization that I definitely wasn’t dreaming.

“Lookie here,” a man’s voice snarled, hidden behind the glare of light. “You can’t be here. Cemetery is closed.”

I turned my face away, specks of light still dancing behind my eyelids.

“How many others are there?” he demanded.

“What?” My voice was a dry whisper.

“How many more are here with you?” he continued more aggressively. “Thought you’d come out and play night games, did you? Hide-and-seek, I reckon? Or maybe Ghosts in the Graveyard? Not on my watch, you aren’t!”

What was I doing here? Had I come to visit my dad? I fished through my memory, but it was disturbingly empty. I couldn’t remember coming to the cemetery. I couldn’t remember much of anything. It was as if the whole night had been ripped out from under my feet.

Worse, I couldn’t remember this morning.

I couldn’t remember dressing, eating, school. Was it even a school day?

Momentarily shoving my panic deep down, I concentrated on orienting myself physically and accepted the man’s outstretched hand. As soon as I was sitting upright, the flashlight glared at me again. “How old are you?” he wanted to know.

Finally something I knew for certain. “Sixteen.” Almost seventeen. My birthday was coming up in August.

“What in the Sam Hill are you doing out here by yourself? Don’t you know it’s past curfew?”

I looked around helplessly. “I—”

“You ain’t a runaway, are you? Just tell me you’ve got someplace to go.”

“Yes.” The farmhouse. At the sudden recollection of home, my heart lifted, followed by the sensation of my stomach plummeting to my knees. Out after curfew? How long after? I tried unsuccessfully to shut out the image of my mom’s enraged expression when I walked through the front door.

“Does ‘yes’ got an address?”

“Hawthorne Lane.” I stood, but swayed violently when blood rushed to my head. Why couldn’t I remember how I’d gotten here? Surely I’d driven. But where had I parked the Fiat? And where was my handbag? My keys?

“Been drinking?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

I shook my head.

The beam of the flashlight had slipped marginally off my face, when suddenly it was square between my eyes yet again.

“Hold on a second,” he said, a note of something I didn’t like slipping into his voice. “You’re not that girl, are you? Nora Grey,” he blurted, as if my name was a knee-jerk response.

I retreated a step. “How—do you know my name?”

“The TV. The reward. Hank Millar posted it.”

Whatever he said next floated past. Marcie Millar was the closest thing I had to an archenemy. What did her dad have to do with this?

“They’ve been looking for you since end of June.”

“June?” I repeated, a drop of panic splattering inside me. “What are you talking about? It’s April.” And who was looking for me? Hank Millar? Why?

“April?” He eyed me queerly. “Why, girlie, it’s September.”

September? No. It couldn’t be. I would know if sophomore year had ended. I would know if summer vacation had come and gone. I’d woken up a mere handful of minutes ago, disoriented, yes, but not stupid.

But what reason did he have to lie?

With the flashlight lowered, I looked him over, getting my first full picture. His jeans were stained, his facial hair tufted from days without a razor, his fingernails long and black under the tips. He looked an awful lot like the vagabonds who wandered the railroad tracks and shacked up by the river during the summer months. They were known to carry weapons.

“You’re right, I should be getting home,” I said, backing away, brushing my hand against my pocket. The familiar bump of my cell phone was missing. Same with my car keys.

“Now just where do you think you’re going?” he asked, coming after me.

My stomach cramped at his sudden movement, and I broke into a run. I raced in the direction the stone angel pointed, hoping it led to the south gate. I would have used the north gate, the one I was familiar with, but it would have required me to run toward the man, instead of away. The ground cut away beneath my feet, and I stumbled downhill. Branches scraped my arms; my shoes slapped against the uneven and rocky ground.

“Nora!” the man shouted.

I wanted to shake myself for telling him I lived on Hawthorne Lane. What if he followed me?

His stride was longer, and I heard him tramping behind me, closing in. I flung my arms wildly, beating back the branches that sank like claws into my clothes. His hand clamped my shoulder, and I swung around, batting it away. “Don’t touch me!”

“Now hold on a minute. I told you about the reward, and I aim to get it.”

He lunged for my arm a second time, and on a shot of adrenaline, I drove my foot into his shin.

“Uuhn!” He doubled over, clutching his lower leg.

I was shocked by my violence, but I didn’t have any other choice. Staggering back a few steps, I cast a hasty look around, trying to get my bearings. Sweat dampened my shirt, slinking down my backbone, causing every hair on my body to stand tall. Something was off. Even with my groggy memory, I had a clear map of the cemetery in my head—I’d been here countless times to visit my

dad's grave—but while the cemetery felt familiar, down to every last detail including the overwhelming smell of burning leaves and stale pond water, something about its appearance was off.

And then I put my finger on it.

The maple trees were speckled with red. A sign of impending autumn. But that wasn't possible. It was April, not September. How could the leaves be changing? Was the man possibly telling the truth?

I glanced back to see the man limping after me, pressing his cell phone to his ear. "Yeah, it's her. I'm sure of it. Leaving the cemetery, heading south."

I plunged ahead with renewed fear. Hop the fence. Find a well-lit, well-populated area. Call the police. Call Vee—

Vee. My best and most trusted friend. Her house was closer than mine. I'd go there. Her mom would call the police. I'd describe to them what the man looked like, and they'd track him down. They'd make sure he left me alone. Then they'd talk me back through the night, retracing my steps, and somehow the gaps in my memory would stitch back together and I'd have something to work with. I'd shake off this detached version of myself, this feeling of being suspended in a world that was mine but rejecting me.

I stopped running only to hoist myself over the cemetery fence. There was a field one block up, just on the other side of Wentworth Bridge. I'd cross it and weave my way up the tree streets—Elm and Maple and Oak—cutting through alleys and side yards until I was safe inside Vee's house.

I was hurrying toward the bridge when the sharp sound of a siren wailed around the corner, and a pair of headlights pinned me in place. A blue Kojak light was attached to the roof of the sedan, which screeched to a halt on the far side of the bridge.

My first instinct was to run forward and point the police officer in the direction of the cemetery, describing the man who'd grabbed me, but as my thoughts came around, I was filled with dread.

Maybe he wasn't a police officer. Maybe he was trying to look like one. Anyone could get their hands on a Kojak light. Where was his squad car? From where I stood, squinting through his windshield, he didn't appear to be in uniform.

All these thoughts tumbled through me in a hurry.

I stood at the foot of the sloping bridge, gripping the stone wall for support. I was sure the maybe-officer had seen me, but I moved into the shadows of the trees bowing over the river's edge anyway. From my peripheral vision, the black water of the Wentworth River glinted. As kids, Vee and I had crouched under this very bridge, catching crayfish from the riverbank by inserting sticks speared with hotdog pieces into the water. The crayfish had fastened their claws to the hotdog, refusing to let go even when we lifted them out of the river and shook them loose in a bucket.

The river was deep at the center. It was also well hidden, snaking through undeveloped property where no one had forked out money to install streetlights. At the end of the field, the water rushed on toward the industrial district, past retired factories, and out to sea.

I briefly wondered if I had it in me to jump off the bridge. I was terrified of heights and the sensation of falling, but I knew how to swim. I only had to make it into the water . . .

A car door shut, yanking me back to the street. The man in the maybe-police car had stepped out. He was all mob: curly dark hair, and dressed formally in a black shirt, black tie, black slacks.

Something about him slapped my memory. But before I could truly grasp it, my memory slammed shut and I was as lost as ever.

An assortment of twigs and branches littered the ground. I bent down, and when I straightened, I was holding a stick half as thick as my arm.

The maybe-officer pretended not to see my weapon, but I knew he had. He pinned a police badge to his shirt, then raised his hands level with his shoulders. I'm not going to hurt you, the gesture said.

I didn't believe him.

He sauntered a few steps forward, taking care not to make any sudden movements. "Nora. It's me." I flinched when he spoke my name. I'd never heard his voice before, and that made my heart pound hard enough that I felt it clear up around my ears. "Are you hurt?"

I continued to watch him with growing anxiety, my mind darting in multiple directions. The badge could easily be fake. I'd already decided the Kojak light was. But if he wasn't police, who was he?

"I called your mom," he said, climbing the gradual slope of the bridge. "She's going to meet us at the hospital."

I didn't drop the stick. My shoulders rose and fell with every breath; I could feel air panting between my teeth. Another bead of sweat slicked beneath my clothes.

"Everything's going to be okay," he said. "It's all over. I'm not going to let anybody hurt you. You're safe now."

I didn't like his long, easy stride or the familiar way he spoke to me.

"Don't come any closer," I told him, the sweat on my palms making it hard to grip the stick properly.

His forehead creased. "Nora?"

The stick wobbled in my hand. "How do you know my name?" I demanded, not about to let him know how scared I was. How much he scared me.

"It's me," he repeated, gazing straight into my eyes, as if he expected lights to coming blazing on. "Detective Basso."

“I don’t know you.”

He said nothing for a moment. Then tried a new approach. “Do you remember where you’ve been?”

I watched him warily. I moved deeper in my memory, looking down even the darkest and oldest corridors, but his face wasn’t there. I had no recollection of him. And I wanted to remember him. I wanted something—anything—familiar to cling to, so I could make sense of a world that, from my vantage point, had been twisted to distortion.

“How did you get to the cemetery tonight?” he asked, tilting his head ever so slightly in that direction. His movements were cautious. His eyes were cautious. Even the line of his mouth was politic. “Did someone drop you off? Did you walk?” He waited. “I need you to tell me, Nora. This is important. What happened tonight?”

I’d like to know myself.

A wave of nausea rolled through me. “I want to go home.” I heard a brittle clatter near my feet. Too late, I realized I’d dropped the stick. The breeze felt cold on my empty palms. I wasn’t supposed to be here. The whole night was a huge mistake.

No. Not the whole night. What did I know of it? I couldn’t remember the whole of it. My only starting point was a slice back in time, when I’d woken on a grave, cold and lost.

I drew up a mental picture of the farmhouse, safe and warm and real, and felt a tear trickle down the side of my nose.

“I can take you home.” He nodded sympathetically. “I just need to take you to the hospital first.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, hating myself for being reduced to crying. I couldn’t think of a better or faster way to show him just how frightened I really was.

He sighed—the softest of sounds, as if he wished there were a way around the news he was about to deliver. “You’ve been missing for eleven weeks, Nora. Do you hear what I’m saying? Nobody knows where you’ve been the past three months. You need to be looked at. We need to make sure you’re okay.”

I stared at him without really seeing him. Tiny bells pealed in my ears but sounded very far off. Deep in my stomach I felt a lurch, but I tried to stuff the queasiness away. I’d cried in front of him, but I wasn’t going to be sick.

“We think you were abducted,” he said, his face unreadable. He’d closed the distance between us and now stood too close. Saying things I couldn’t grasp. “Kidnapped.”

I blinked. Just stood there and blinked.

A sensation grabbed my heart, tugging and twisting. My body went slack, tottering in the air. I saw the gold blur of the streetlights above, heard the river lapping under the bridge, smelled the exhaust from his running car. But it was all in the background. A dizzy afterthought.

With only that brief warning, I felt myself swaying, swaying. Falling into nothing.

I was unconscious before I hit the ground.