

THE LOST

NATASHA PRESTON

For Elizabeth

*I was blown away when you told me you'd driven for fifteen
hours from Florida to Texas to come and meet me at a signing.
I will never forget getting to hang out with you for a while,
and I'm so incredibly proud of where you are now.*

Ten *runaways*. That's what the police are calling them.

Ten teenagers have disappeared from our town this year, and it's only June.

I gaze out the window of the aging café, the chipped, pale, magnolia paint making it look borderline derelict, but the food is good. It's summer, but the weather hasn't gotten the memo. Dark gray clouds swirl in the sky, threatening rain again. It's been like that all day, short smatterings of drizzle. Rain that fizzles out as quickly as it appears. We have a long, school-free summer stretching out in front of us before our senior year. But we won't be able to have any fun if the weather doesn't get with the program.

"Piper, another one bites the dust," Hazel says, waving a news article on her phone at me from across the table. She pushes her shoulder-length, dark curly hair behind her ear. "Look."

ELEVENTH TEEN RUNAWAY.

Eleven gone.

“Who is it this time?”

“Lucie Bean, seventeen years old. Same age as us again. She lives about thirty minutes away. Last seen two days ago outside Huck’s Café with friends. It says she left on her own but never made it home.”

We live in Mauveton, population 5,839. It’s a densely populated but small town with nothing to do, and the biggest city near us is more than an hour away, which makes it one of the most boring places on earth.

But still, eleven *runaways* in seven months seems high.

They’ve all completely vanished without a trace.

“Where did Lucie go to school, Hazel?”

“St. Drake’s.”

“Wow. Isn’t that, like, the third person from that school?” I chew on my lip as I reach for her phone, so I can read the whole article.

“What are you thinking?” she asks, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“I’m thinking it’s only a matter of time before someone we’ve shared a classroom with disappears.” There’s always been a high percentage of people taking off from this dead-end town, but over the last year or so, it has gotten worse. Much worse.

Hazel puts her phone down and drops her hands to the table on either side of her plate of fries—fries that she ordered for *breakfast*. Gross. “You seriously think they’re missing, like someone has taken them, and they haven’t just run away?”

“If people are going to take off from here, they tend to do it when they’re eighteen. The number of younger runaways is multiplying. Don’t you think something is very wrong with that?”

She chews another fry and swallows. “Maybe. The cops don’t seem to share your concerns.”

I shrug at her comment. “Well, they probably know better than me.”

“I don’t know... What if you’re right? What if they don’t think anything strange is going on?” She’s playing devil’s advocate here.

But what are we supposed to do about it? Just because I love watching mystery movies and TV shows doesn’t mean I’m qualified to find actual, real-life missing people.

Potentially missing people.

“What do you recommend we do, Hazel?”

“Duh. We can try to find them.”

Oh, simple as that. “How?”

“By acting like average teenagers.” Lifting her eyebrows, she looks at me in triumph. “We’re going to go to parties and hang out with them...wherever they hang out.”

“I’m not following you here.”

She rolls her dark brown eyes. “To find teens, we need to live like teens. Stereotypical ones, I mean. I don’t think we count.”

Hazel has a good point. Neither of us are extroverts. We spend most of our time hanging out at my house or hers, watching rom-coms after creepy mystery and thriller movies.

“We definitely don’t count,” I confirm.

“We’re going to change that.”

“Why? I mean, why are you deciding to try and figure this thing out, Haze?”

Tilting her head to the side, she replies, “What else are we going to do all summer?”

Well, nothing. Maybe we won’t find anything, or maybe we’ll discover where these people have run away to.

But either way, it seems like a maybe we'll end up having a decent summer instead of spending the whole time indoors.

The call of even a smidge of social life is too loud to ignore. It might actually be nice to get out. We might be missing something by staying inside and by ourselves all the time. "All right, I'm in."

"Yes," Hazel cheers. "Ooh, do you think we'll uncover some sick serial killer's lair?"

"No, I think we'll find nothing, but we'll end the summer with the knowledge that we have soaked in some vital vitamin D and aren't total losers. So that's a plus, right?"

Hazel's shoulders sag. "Is your glass half empty today, Pipes?"

"No. I do believe something more is going on than teens skipping town, but I don't think we're going to find ourselves in the middle of some crime drama. We don't know what we're doing, and if the police can't find anything, there's nothing to suggest we'll be able to."

"I'm going to need full commitment from you here. We go into this with nothing but positivity."

"Fine. Whatever. Let's go catch a killer," I say to appease her.

"Yay!" She picks up another fry. I have two pastries and a coffee. Hazel has fries and a cup of tea. "Where do we start?"

"The lake?" I offer.

Her eyes widen like she's suddenly realized what this whole social life thing will entail. "Can we go there?"

"It's not private property. Why couldn't we go?"

"We've never been there. We've never been asked to go there."

"It's a public lake, Hazel. You don't need an invitation."

But I know what she means. Lake-related conversations echo down the halls at school. Everyone who is anyone goes there most weekends. Most weeknights, too, in the summer.

But no one has ever suggested Hazel and I should go. *We* haven't even suggested it to each other. We really do need a life.

"Okay," I say, taking a hair elastic out of my pocket and tying my long, dark hair on top of my head. "Let's do it! Let's meet at the lake tonight. And please act normal."

She scrunches up her face. "I don't know what you mean."

"That's what I'm afraid of. You know you can't hold back from telling people *exactly* what you think, and not everyone appreciates that. I'm not always going to be there to back you up."

"Ah, but you will be there tonight."

"Best. Behavior." I raise my eyebrows in warning.

The last thing we need on our very first outing is to be ostracized. I'm not really sure what kind of reception we're going to get anyway.

The café bell dings obnoxiously from the force of the door being shoved open.

Hazel and I look over at the same time to see two handsome college guys walk into the café, dressed in clothes that probably cost more than my parents' car.

I think their names are Caleb and Owen. I know of them because their superrich parents are part of an organization that donates a lot to local charities.

They live a few miles out in a development with the other wealthy people, and only come to this part of town when they're dropping off donations.

But are they donating to the café? Not that it couldn't use an injection of cash, but it's hardly a charity.

Hazel cranes her neck to get a better look at them. In fact, everyone in here is doing the same thing. I glance over my shoulder as they head to the counter. I can't figure out what they're saying, even though the room is so dead quiet, you could hear a mouse sneeze.

After a minute, they're handed two takeout cups of coffee. As they turn to leave, I swing my head back, biting my lips together.

Oh crap. I hope they didn't catch me staring.

My face heats up like an inferno, and Hazel's eyes widen at me. I don't know if she's trying to tell me that I'm busted? Or is she marveling at their chiseled beauty and matching, sleek haircuts?

What products do they even use to get their hair that shiny?

They pass by us, and out of the corner of my eye, I see one of them turn his head to look at me. What do I do?

Against my better judgment, I look. Crystal-blue eyes peer at me, unashamed and unapologetic. I'm very sure my eyes do not convey the same thing. I think the guy looking at me is Caleb. Both have blond hair, short and styled in a swept-to-the-side fashion. Both wear crisp, navy pants and button-up shirts with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. It's like the rich-guy uniform.

Caleb dips his head in my direction, his blond hair falling just a fraction out of place. And then he's gone.

The bell dings again as the door opens and closes.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, my head spinning from the lack of oxygen.

"Did you see that? He looked at you!" Hazel gushes. "Like, he

looked at you! And you know I love you, babe, but your hair is a total mess right now.”

“Thank you,” I mutter sarcastically. I push the rest of my pastry away. After that, I suddenly don’t feel much like eating. Caleb couldn’t have been looking at me really, though, could he? Not that it matters. I’m too young for him. “Let’s get our bikes. I need to go home and figure out my makeup before tonight.”

Hazel stands. “Don’t forget to do something with your hair, too.”

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I lock my bike to the rack outside the library.

It's eight at night, but the sun hasn't yet set yet behind a sea of gray clouds. Shame it's still drizzling, too. I walk down the long path to the lake and pull my hood up.

I straightened my hair, and it now hangs to my waist. It took forever, but it does look much better. I didn't bother with much makeup since I'd probably come out looking like a clown. But I have on mascara and some lip gloss, which is more than I usually bother with.

I reach the path leading to the dirt trail down to the lake when a guy, an impossibly good-looking guy, runs across the road from the other side. He doesn't even look where he's going...because his eyes are on me. Wait. It's Caleb. Again?

He stops in front of me and smiles. Wow, he has a nice pearly white smile. "Hey," he says.

"Hi," I reply, trying not to frown. "Are you okay?"

Why is he here?

“Yes. Sorry, I saw you from back there.” He scratches the back of his neck as if he’s nervous talking to me. “And this morning. Are you going to the lake?”

He remembers me from this morning!

“That was the plan. Can I help you with something?” I say, keeping my voice ice cool like a total champ. Inside, I’m somersaulting.

“Kind of,” he replies with an amused grin. “You could talk to me.” Sort of an odd request from a virtual stranger.

“Talk to you?” I ask.

Shrugging a shoulder, he replies, “Why not?”

Oh, he smells nice, too, like he’s fresh out of the shower. I want to step close.

“I don’t know you.”

“I know. Do you see my problem now?”

I shake my head. “No, not really.”

Laughing, he steps closer. “I’m Caleb,” he says.

I know who he is, but I don’t know him.

“Piper,” I reply.

“Nice name.”

“Thanks.” What is he doing talking to me?

“Are you at the university here or...?”

I shake my head, feeling like a child. “High school.”

“Ah, I thought you might be.”

“I look like I’m in high school then,” I mutter. Maybe I should have tried a little more makeup. *Nah, I would’ve looked like a clown.*

“No. The opposite actually. It’s just my luck that you’re not yet eighteen, so I can’t ask you out.”

Lifting my eyebrow, I feel some of the initial shock of him coming up to me beginning to wear off and the snarky girl returning. “What makes you think I would want to go out with you anyway?”

His blue eyes shine in amusement. “I think I could convince you.”

I think he could, too.

“Well, Caleb, I guess we’ll never know. I’m not quite eighteen yet.”

And by *not quite*, I mean my eighteenth birthday is ten months away.

Chewing on his lip, he watches me for a second, his mind seeming to work overtime. God, I would love to get inside his head right now. I wait to see whether I’m going to be privileged enough to hear what he’s thinking. “I’m twenty-one.”

Four years isn’t that much of an age gap. Okay, who am I kidding, and why am I even thinking about this?

Dusting off the stupid thoughts running through my mind, I take one step back as if the slightly larger distance will somehow make me think straight. “I should find my friend. She’s waiting for me at the lake.”

He looks down the trail, his eyes scanning for something or someone, then his attention is back on me. “You’re going alone?”

“Yeah. I left my bike at the bike rack outside the library.”

He looks back at the trail to the lake. “Let me walk you.”

“Thanks, Caleb, but I’ve done this tons of times before.”

So, maybe not *tons*, because Hazel and I haven’t been here before, but I don’t want to sound like a loser in front of him. For some dumb reason, and this is the first time this has happened, I care what someone thinks of me—what a *boy* thinks of me.

Oh, how things can change in a heartbeat.

“You’re sure?” His prominent frown deepens. “I don’t like the idea of you walking alone.”

“Totally. Thanks anyway.” I turn to leave, but Caleb captures my wrist.

“Wait a sec. Are you on Facebook?”

“There are still people who aren’t?”

He chuckles. “I’ll find you, Piper...?”

“Willis.”

With a sharp nod, he lets go of my wrist and walks away.

He’s going to find me on Facebook. What is my life right now?

I head down the trail to look for Hazel, and the rain finally stops. There are people from all three high schools in the area. The size of the crowd is easily over a hundred, so finding Hazel isn’t going to be easy. She left before me and lives closer, so she has to be here already.

It’s really warm tonight, so why anyone felt the need to light a damn bonfire, I’ll never know. Though I’m impressed they got the fire going with the drizzle. Hazel hates heat, so she won’t be near that. I’m the opposite; I’d rather be too hot than even a little bit cold.

By some miracle, I spot her right away. She’s talking to three girls I don’t recognize. Her arms are folded, and one of her eyebrows is arched. She looks as if she’s giving them attitude.

This will be fun.

I power walk over to her, and it’s only when I get close that I realize what this is about: Lucie. Missing girl number eleven.

“How do you not know? She was your friend!” Hazel says.

The three girls look at each other.

“What’s going on?” I ask Hazel, stopping beside her and smiling at the girls who look a little scared of my socially awkward friend.

Hazel's head tilts in my direction. "Lucie's friends don't know why she left or where she's gone."

"Everyone wants to get out of this hellish town," the one in the middle shoots back, firing one impressive death glare at us.

Hazel might be a little blunt, but she's my friend. "Still weird, though. I mean, she was your friend and you had no idea that she was going to take off?" I say.

They turn their attention to me, and the girl in the middle, the spokesperson for the group apparently, huffs. "Get out of our business. You don't know Lucie, so save your opinions."

"I'm not judging you, but who runs away without telling a single person where they're going? Or at least leaving a hint?"

"Well, obviously people who don't want to be found, like Lucie."

I raise my palms. "Okay. We were just curious."

"Well, don't be. This has nothing to do with you," the girl snaps. She walks off first, and the other two follow like good little puppets.

I turn to Hazel. "What was that about?"

Shrugging, she raises her eyes to me. "I overheard them talking about Lucie, saying she hadn't replied to their texts."

"And you couldn't help yourself?"

She turns her nose up. "I think it's a disease."

Laughing at her, I nudge her toward the cooler. "Come on, let's at least act like we belong here."

"You don't think it's weird? Lucie's best friends know nothing about her wanting to leave town. I mean *specifically*. Where does Lucie want to go? What does she want to do? Surely those are things that her friends would know?" Hazel asks as we head to get a can of...something.

“Sure, but I don’t think they’re going to tell us anything since you didn’t exactly make friends back there.”

She scoffs. “Whatever.”

“Do you think anyone here knows anything about the runaways?”

“I bet they do.”

I stop walking. “Ooh, maybe some of them are involved in human trafficking? Or doing some creepy, cultish sacrificing?”

“Calm down with the horror movies, Piper.”

“You never know,” I grumble.

Hazel reaches down and grabs us two Cokes from the cooler. “I’m bored of this now. It was a mistake, it’s not fun. When can we leave?”

“I *just* got here!”

She turns her nose up, her curly hair bouncing in the breeze. “That’s your problem. I’ve already been here for ten minutes. The only people I’ve spoken to are those girls, who are super-hostile, and this guy who thought it was appropriate to kiss me.”

“Someone kissed you?”

“He *tried*.”

Yeah, we’re definitely not going to make friends here.

“This is a bust,” she says.

“I did mention we wouldn’t be solving crimes by being stereotypical teenagers, if you recall.” Not a total bust, though, because I did get to meet the cutest guy on the way here. Why haven’t I told Hazel? She would relish the thought of me talking to a guy, even if I never see him again. Because I’m too young to go out with Caleb, but Hazel would try to convince me to do it anyway. I haven’t had a boyfriend in a year, and I can’t really call him a *boyfriend* since we were together

five days and I only got a peck on the cheek. Apparently, I was too boring for him. I could have saved him five days if he'd just asked me if I was an exciting person at the start.

"We should Facebook stalk Lucie's friends," I suggest. And also maybe check to see if Caleb has found me on there yet. If he even bothers to look me up at all. He wouldn't be the first guy to say something and not follow through.

"You know Lucie?"

I turn to the owner of the voice. A guy, probably our age, glares at us. From the dark look in his eyes, I think it's safe to assume he heard every word I just said.

So now, not only are we accusing people of being terrible friends, but we're also advertising the fact that we're indulging in a little online stalking.

Fantastic.

Hazel takes a small step back. "Not exactly. We heard about her taking off, but we didn't know her."

He watches me for, like, an hour. Well, it certainly feels like an hour.

"Why are you questioning Lucie's friends?"

I shrug. "We just bumped into them."

"You here to gossip? She's not just another runaway, a number. She's my friend."

This is going swimmingly. "We don't think she's just another runaway. It's weird that people keep disappearing. No one else seems to be all that concerned."

He folds his arms and looks at me the way Hazel was looking at those girls.

He can bring it. I'm not intimidated.

Straightening my spine, I gain an inch and stand almost as tall as him. "Do you think Lucie ran away?"

His left eye twitches. "No, I don't. But she obviously wanted out of here more than she wanted me."

Oh, she was more than a friend to him. He's hurting. Of all the people who could have overheard us talking about Lucie, it had to be him. My traitor of a friend seems to have lost her voice. How convenient.

"I'm sorry your friend isn't here," I say. My words are sincere. I am sorry.

Shaking his head, he turns on his heel and walks off like he doesn't want to waste another second on us.

"Well," I say, turning to Hazel. "Is there anyone else here you feel like insulting, or can we leave?"

"We can so leave."

In unison, we turn and head up the path.

"Thanks for the backup there," I say sarcastically, tossing my Coke can into a recycling bin.

Hazel laughs. "You seemed to have things under control. I didn't feel like you needed backup."

I glance over my shoulder to take one last look at the group at the lake. Around the back of it is the river that runs through town. Lucie's boyfriend stares at us with folded arms and a deep frown. Whatever.

"What do you think is going to happen if we find her? And the others?" Hazel asks. "They might not want to be found."

"I don't know. But I can't imagine it's easy for the people who love

them not to know where they are and if they're okay. Besides, what are the chances of us actually finding them? Because I'm thinking it's an absolute zero."

"We're not trying to solve crimes; we're looking into the weirdness of all the runaways, and it still beats sitting home all summer, remember?"

As we walk, I twirl the cotton friendship bracelet on my wrist. Hazel and I made each other one when we were ten. Mine is black and purple, and it's a basic braid with black beads at each end where the knot is. Hazel's is black and pink.

Neither of us like purple or pink anymore, but we both keep them on.

We reach the end of the path, and a car pulls up beside us.

The dark window slides down.

"Caleb," I say, my heart doing a little flip. Beside him is his friend Owen, who lifts his hand in a lazy greeting.

"Get in, Piper. I'll give you a lift."

"Err," I say, turning to Hazel...whose mouth is practically sitting on the road.

Maybe I should have mentioned meeting Caleb to her, after all. She's going to have a lot to say when we get back to my house.

Caleb laughs. "Both of you."

"We have our bikes," I start to explain, looking back.

"I know, but more rain is forecast anytime now. You can get your bikes tomorrow."

Hazel's mouth snaps shut. She nudges me. "Yeah, we can just get them tomorrow, Piper."

"Okay," I concede. I don't really want to get soaked anyway.

Hazel walks around to the other side of the car.

I open the back door and get in. “Thanks, Caleb.”

He looks at me in the rearview mirror and smiles. “Anytime.”

Hazel shuts the door.

Caleb drops his eyes and pulls out onto the road. I watch him in the mirror, though he’s now focused on the road. His eyes turn hollow, and his smile falls. He presses something on his door, and the car doors lock.