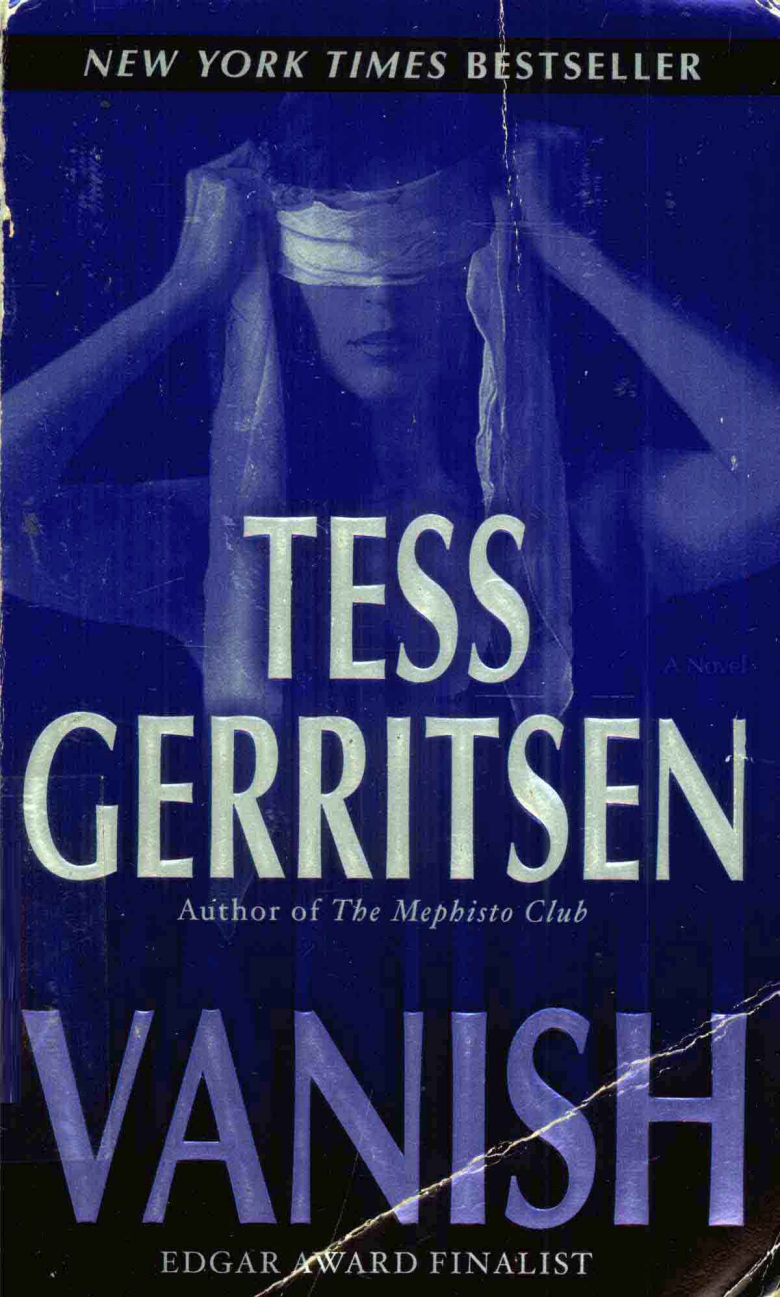


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



TESS GERRITSEN

A Novel

Author of The Mephisto Club

VANISH

EDGAR AWARD FINALIST

VANISH

A Novel

**TESS
GERRITSEN**

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ONE

My name is Mila, and this is my journey.

There are so many places where I could begin the story. I could start in the town where I grew up, in Kryvicy, on the banks of the Servac River, in the district of Miadziel. I could begin when I was eight years old, on the day my mother died, or when I was twelve, and my father fell beneath the wheels of the neighbor's truck. But I think I should begin my story here, in the Mexican desert, so far from my home in Belarus. This is where I lost my innocence. This is where my dreams died.

It is a November day without clouds, and large black birds soar in a sky that is bluer than I have ever seen. I am sitting in a white van driven by two men who do not know my real name, nor do they seem to care. They just laugh and call me Red Sonja, the name they have used since they saw me step off the plane in Mexico City. Anja says it's because of my hair. *Red Sonja* is the name of a movie which I have never seen, but Anja has seen it. She whispers to me that it's about a beautiful warrior woman who cuts down her enemies with a sword. Now I think the men are mocking me with this name because I am not beautiful; I am not a warrior. I am only seventeen,

and I am scared because I do not know what happens next.

We are holding hands, Anja and me, as the van carries us, and five other girls, through a barren land of desert and scrub brush. The "Mexican Package Tour" is what the woman in Minsk promised us, but we knew what it really meant: an escape. A chance. You take a plane to Mexico City, she told us, and there will be people to meet you at the airport, to help you across the border to a new life. "What good is your life here?" she told us. "There are no good jobs for girls, no apartments, no decent men. You have no parents to support you. And you, Mila—you speak English so well," she told me. "In America, you will fit in, just like *that*." She snapped her fingers. "Be brave! Take a chance. The employers will pay your way, so what are you both waiting for?"

Not for this, I think, as endless desert rolls past our windows. As Anja huddles close against me, all the girls on the van are quiet. We are all beginning to wonder the same thing. *What have I done?*

All morning, we have been driving. The two men in the front say nothing to us, but the man on the passenger side keeps turning to give us looks. His eyes always seek out Anja, and I do not like the way he stares at her. She doesn't notice it because she is dozing against my shoulder. The mouse, we always called her in school, because she is so shy. One glance from a boy will make her blush. We are the same age, but when I look at Anja's sleeping face, I see a child. And I think: I should not have let her come with me. I should have told her to stay in Kryvicy.

At last our van leaves the highway and bumps onto

a dirt road. The other girls stir awake and stare out the windows at brown hills, where boulders lie scattered like old bones. In my hometown, the first snow has already fallen, but here, in this winterless land, there is only dust and blue sky and parched shrubs. We roll to a stop, and the two men look back at us.

The driver says in Russian: "It's time to get out and walk. It's the only way across the border."

They slide open the door and we climb out one by one, seven girls, blinking and stretching after the long ride. Despite the brilliant sunshine, it is chilly here, far cooler than I expected. Anja slips her hand into mine, and she is shivering.

"This way," the driver orders, and he leads us off the dirt road, onto a trail that takes us up into the hills. We climb past boulders and thorny bushes that claw at our legs. Anja wears open-toed shoes and she has to pause often, to shake out the sharp stones. We are all thirsty, but the men allow us to stop only once to drink water. Then we keep moving, scrambling up the gravelly path like ungainly goats. We reach the crest and start sliding downward, toward a clump of trees. Only when we reach the bottom do we see there is a dry riverbed. Scattered on the bank are the discards of those who have crossed before us: plastic water bottles and a soiled diaper and an old shoe, the vinyl cracked from the sunlight. A remnant of blue tarp flutters from a branch. This way have so many dreamers come, and we are seven more, following in their footsteps to America. Suddenly my fears evaporate, because here, in this debris, is the evidence we are close.

The men wave us forward, and we start climbing up the opposite bank.

Anja tugs on my hand. "Mila, I can't walk anymore," she whispers.

"You have to."

"But my foot is bleeding."

I look down at her bruised toes, at the blood oozing from tender skin, and I call out to the men: "My friend has cut her foot!"

The driver says, "I don't care. Keep walking."

"We can't go on. She needs a bandage."

"Either you keep walking or we'll just leave you two behind."

"At least give her time to change her shoes!"

The man turns. In that instant, he has transformed. The look on his face makes Anja shrink backward. The other girls stand frozen and wide-eyed, like scared sheep huddling together as he stalks toward me.

The blow is so swift I do not see it coming. All at once, I am on my knees, and for a few seconds, everything is dark. Anja's screams seem far away. Then I register the pain, the throbbing in my jaw. I taste blood. I see it drip in bright spatters on the river stones.

"Get up. Come on, get up! We've wasted enough time."

I stagger to my feet. Anja is staring at me with stricken eyes. "Mila, just be good!" she whispers. "We have to do what they tell us! My feet don't hurt anymore, really. I can walk."

"You get the picture now?" the man says to me. He turns and glares at the other girls. "You see what

happens if you piss me off? If you talk back? Now walk!"

Suddenly the girls are scrambling across the riverbed. Anja grabs my hand and pulls me along. I am too dazed to resist, so I stumble after her, swallowing blood, scarcely seeing the trail ahead of me.

It is only a short distance farther. We climb up the opposite bank, wind our way through a stand of trees, and suddenly we are standing on a dirt road.

Two vans are parked there, waiting for us.

"Stand in a line," our driver says. "Come on, hurry up. They want to take a look at you."

Though befuddled by this command, we form a line, seven tired girls with aching feet and dusty clothes.

Four men climb out of the vans and they greet our driver in English. They are Americans. A heavyset man walks slowly up the row, eyeing us. He wears a baseball cap and he looks like a sunburned farmer inspecting his cows. He stops in front of me and frowns at my face. "What happened to this one?"

"Oh, she talked back," says our driver. "It's just a bruise."

"She's too scrawny, anyway. Who'd want her?"

Does he know I can understand English? Does he even care? I may be scrawny, I think, but you have a pig face.

His gaze has already moved on, to the other girls. "Okay," he says, and he breaks out in a grin. "Let's see what they've got."

Our driver looks at us. "Take off your clothes," he orders in Russian.

We stare back in shock. Until this moment, I have held on to a wisp of hope that the woman in Minsk told us the truth, that she has arranged jobs for us in America. That Anja will babysit three little girls, that I will sell dresses in a wedding shop. Even after the driver took our passports, even as we'd stumbled along that trail, I had thought: It can still turn out all right. It can still be true.

None of us moves. We still don't believe what he has asked us to do.

"Do you hear me?" our driver says. "Do you all want to look like *her*?" He points to my swollen face, which still throbs from the blow. "Do it."

One of the girls shakes her head and begins to cry. This enrages him. His slap makes her head whip around and she staggers sideways. He hauls her up by the arm, grabs her blouse, and rips it open. Screaming, she tries to push him away. The second blow sends her sprawling. For good measure, he walks over and gives her a vicious kick in the ribs.

"Now," he says, turning to look at the rest of us. "Who wants to be next?"

One of the girls quickly fumbles at the buttons of her blouse. Now we are all complying, peeling off shirts, unzipping skirts and pants. Even Anja, shy little Anja, is obediently pulling off her top.

"Everything," our driver orders. "Take it all off. Why are you bitches so slow? You'll learn to be quick about it, soon enough." He moves to a girl who stands with her arms crossed over her breasts. She has not removed her underwear. He grabs the waistband and she flinches as he tears it away.

The four Americans begin to circle us like wolves, their gazes roving across our bodies. Anja is shaking so hard I can hear her teeth chatter.

"I'll give this one a test drive." One of the girls utters a sob as she is dragged from the line. The man does not even bother to hide the assault. He shoves the girl's face against one of the vans, unzips his pants, and thrusts himself into her. She shrieks.

The other men move in and make their choices. Suddenly Anja is wrenched away from me. I try to hold on to her, but the driver twists my hand from hers.

"No one wants *you*," he says. He shoves me into the van and locks me inside.

Through the window, I see it all, hear it all. The men's laughter, the girls' struggles, their cries. I cannot bear to watch; neither can I turn away.

"Mila!" Anja screams. "Mila, help me!"

I pound on the locked door, desperate to reach her. The man has shoved her to the ground and forced apart her thighs. She lies with her wrists pinned to the dirt, her eyes closed tight against the pain. I am screaming, too, my fists battering the window, but I cannot break through.

When the man finishes with her, he is streaked with her blood. He zips up his pants and declares loudly: "Nice. Very nice."

I stare at Anja. At first I think that she must be dead, because she does not move. The man doesn't even glance back at her, but reaches into a backpack for a water bottle. He takes a long drink. He does not see Anja come back to life.

Suddenly she rises to her feet. She begins to run.

As she flees into the desert, I press my hands against the window. *Hurry, Anja! Go. Go!*

"Hey!" one of the men yells. "That one's running."

Anja is still fleeing. She is barefoot, naked, and sharp rocks are surely cutting into her feet. But the open desert lies ahead, and she does not falter.

Don't look back. Keep running! Keep . . .

The gunshot freezes my blood.

Anja pitches forward and sprawls to the ground. But she is not yet conquered. She struggles back to her feet, staggers a few steps like a drunken woman, then falls to her knees. She is crawling now, every inch a fight, a triumph. She reaches out, as though to grab a helping hand that none of us can see.

A second gunshot rings out.

This time, when Anja falls, she does not rise again.

The van driver tucks the gun in his belt and looks at the girls. They are all crying, hugging themselves as they stare across the desert toward Anja's body.

"That's a waste," says the man who raped her.

"Too much trouble to run them down," the driver says. "You still have six to choose from."

They have tried out the merchandise; now the men begin to barter. When they have finished, they divide us up like livestock. Three girls in each van. I do not hear how much they pay for us; I only know that I am the bargain, the one thrown in as part of another deal.

As we drive away, I look back toward Anja's body. They have not bothered to bury her; she lies exposed to the sun and wind, and already hungry birds are

circling in the sky. In a few weeks, there will be nothing left of her. She will vanish, just as I am about to vanish, into a land where no one knows my name. Into America.

We turn onto a highway. I see a sign: US 94.

TWO

Dr. Maura Isles had not smelled fresh air all day. Since seven that morning she had been inhaling the scent of death, an aroma so familiar to her that she did not recoil as her knife sliced cold skin, as foul odors wafted up from exposed organs. The police officers who occasionally stood in the room to observe postmortems were not so stoic. Sometimes Maura caught a whiff of the Vicks ointment that they dabbed in their nostrils to mask the stench. Sometimes even Vicks was not enough, and she'd see them suddenly go wobbly and turn away, to gag over the sink. Cops were not accustomed, as she was, to the astringent bite of formalin, the sulfurous aroma of decaying membranes.

Today, there was an incongruous note of sweetness added to that bouquet of odors: the scent of coconut oil, emanating from the skin of Mrs. Gloria Leder, who now lay on the autopsy table. She was fifty years old, a divorcee with broad hips and heavy breasts and toenails painted a brilliant pink. Deep tan lines marked the edges of the bathing suit she had been wearing when she was found dead beside her apartment swimming pool. It had been a bikini—not the most flattering choice for a body sagging with middle

age. When was the last time I had the chance to put on my bathing suit? Maura thought, and she felt an absurd flash of envy for Mrs. Gloria Leder, who'd spent the last moments of her life enjoying this summer day. It was almost August, and Maura had not yet visited the beach or sat by a swimming pool or even sunbathed in her own backyard.

"Rum and Coke," said the young cop standing at the foot of the table. "I think that's what she had in her glass. It was sitting next to her patio chair."

This was the first time Maura had seen Officer Buchanan in her morgue. He made her nervous, the way he kept fussing with his paper mask and shifting from foot to foot. The boy looked way too young to be a cop. They were all starting to look too young.

"Did you retain the contents of that glass?" she asked Officer Buchanan.

"Uh . . . no, ma'am. I took a good whiff. She was definitely drinking a rum and Coke."

"At nine A.M.?" Maura looked across the table at her assistant, Yoshima. As usual, he was silent, but she saw one dark eyebrow tilt up, as eloquent a comment as she would get from Yoshima.

"She didn't get down too much of it," said Officer Buchanan. "The glass was still pretty full."

"Okay," said Maura. "Let's take a look at her back."

Together, she and Yoshima log-rolled the corpse onto its side.

"There's a tattoo here on the hip," noted Maura. "Little blue butterfly."

"Jeez," said Buchanan. "A woman her age?"

Maura glanced up. "You think fifty's ancient, do you?"

"I mean—well, that's my *mom's* age."

Careful, boy. I'm only ten years younger.

She picked up the knife and began to cut. This was her fifth postmortem of the day, and she made swift work of it. With Dr. Costas on vacation, and a multivehicle accident the night before, the cold room had been crammed with body bags that morning. Even as she'd worked her way through the backlog, two more bodies had been delivered to the refrigerator. Those would have to wait until tomorrow. The morgue's clerical staff had already left for the evening, and Yoshima kept looking at the clock, obviously anxious to be on his way home.

She incised skin, gutted the thorax and abdomen. Removed dripping organs and placed them on the cutting board to be sectioned. Little by little, Gloria Leder revealed her secrets: a fatty liver, the telltale sign of a few too many rums and Cokes. A uterus knobby with fibroids.

And finally, when they opened the cranium, the reason for her death. Maura saw it as she lifted the brain in her gloved hands. "Subarachnoid hemorrhage," she said, and glanced up at Buchanan. He was looking far paler than when he had first walked into the room. "This woman probably had a berry aneurysm—a weak spot in one of the arteries at the base of the brain. Hypertension would have exacerbated it."

Buchanan swallowed, his gaze focused on the flap of loose skin that had been Gloria Leder's scalp, now peeled forward over the face. That's the part that

usually horrified them, the point at which so many of them winced or turned away—when the face collapses like a tired rubber mask.

“So . . . you’re saying it’s a natural death?” he asked softly.

“Correct. There’s nothing more you need to see here.”

The young man was already stripping off his gown as he retreated from the table. “I think I need some fresh air . . .”

So do I, thought Maura. It’s a summer night, my garden needs watering, and I have not been outside all day.

But an hour later she was still in the building, sitting at her desk reviewing lab slips and dictated reports. Though she had changed out of her scrub suit, the smell of the morgue still seemed to cling to her, a scent that no amount of soap and water could eradicate, because the memory itself was what lingered. She picked up the Dictaphone and began to record her report on Gloria Leder.

“Fifty-year-old white woman found slumped in a patio chair near her apartment swimming pool. She is a well-developed, well-nourished woman with no visible trauma. External exam reveals an old surgical scar on her abdomen, probably from an appendectomy. There is a small tattoo of a butterfly on her . . .” She paused, picturing the tattoo. Was it on the left or the right hip? God, I’m so tired, she thought. I can’t remember. What a trivial detail. It made no difference to her conclusions, but she hated being inaccurate.

She rose from her chair and walked the deserted