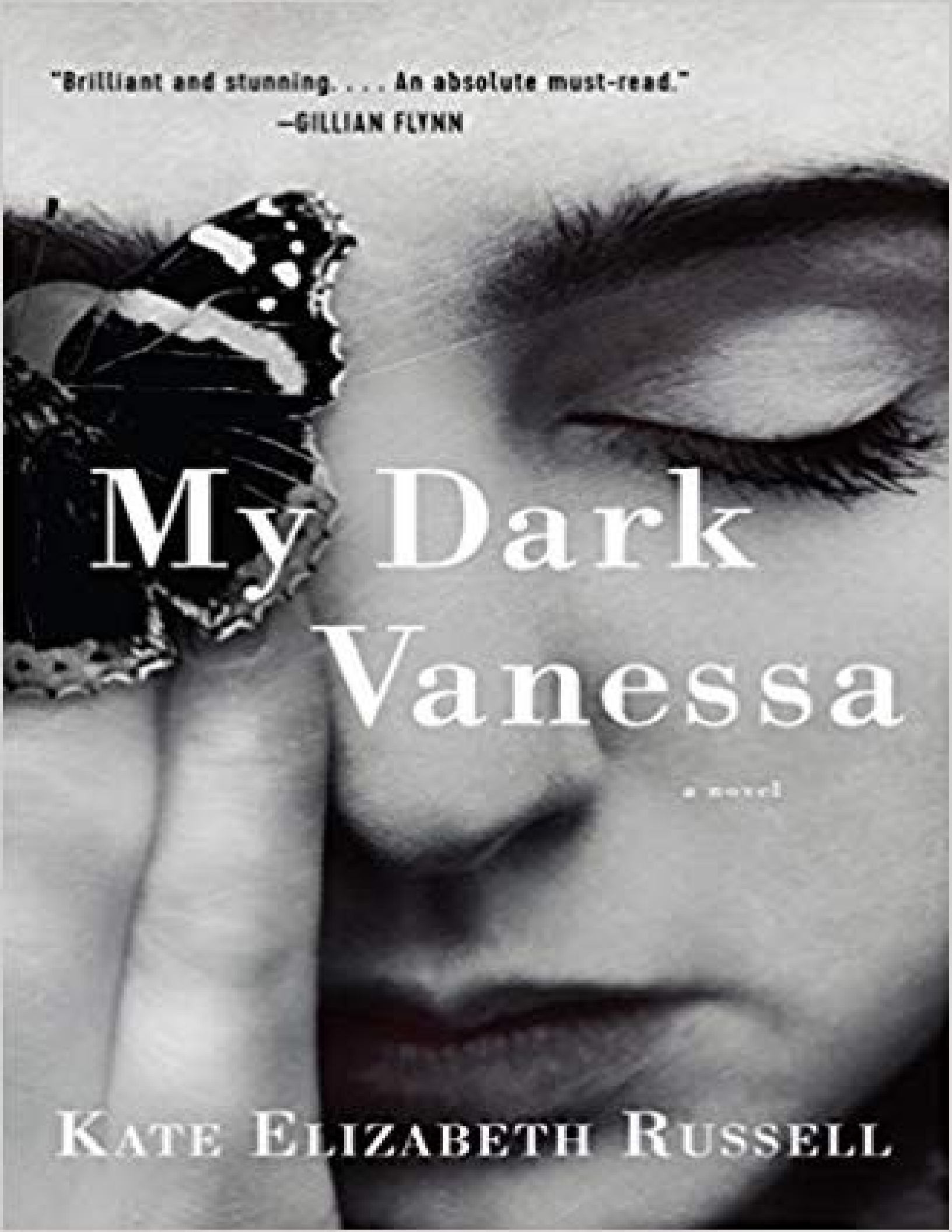


"Brilliant and stunning. . . . An absolute must-read."

—GILLIAN FLYNN



My Dark
Vanessa

a novel

KATE ELIZABETH RUSSELL

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The logo for W. Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'W' and 'M'.

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Disclaimer

I grew up in Maine and was educated there—first at a private (day) school in ninth and tenth grades, until I withdrew for personal reasons, and later at college. Because of the similarities between those broad facts and certain fictional elements of *My Dark Vanessa*, I am aware that readers who are loosely familiar with my background may jump to the erroneous conclusion that I am telling the secret history of those events. I am not; this is a work of fiction, and the characters and settings are entirely imaginary.

Anyone who has been following the news over the past few years has seen stories that suggest the narrative of this novel, recast by my imagination. Into that I have worked other influences such as critical trauma theory, the pop culture and postfeminism of the early aughts, and my own complicated feelings toward *Lolita*. All of that is the normal process of fiction writing. But in a surfeit of caution it bears repeating that nothing in the novel is intended as recounting any actual events. Apart from the broad parallels noted above, this is not my personal story nor that of my teachers or of anyone I know.

Dedication

*For the real-life Dolores Hazes and Vanessa Wyes whose stories have not
yet been heard, believed, or understood*

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I get ready for work and the post has been up for eight hours. While curling my hair, I refresh the page. So far, 224 shares and 875 likes. I put on my black wool suit, refresh again. I dig under the couch for my black flats, refresh. Fasten the gold name tag to my lapel, refresh. Each time, the numbers climb and the comments multiply.

You're so strong.
You're so brave.
What kind of monster could do that to a child?

I bring up my last text, sent to Strane four hours ago: So, are you ok . . . ? He still hasn't responded, hasn't even read it. I type out another—I'm here if you want to talk—then think better and delete it, send instead a wordless line of question marks. I wait a few minutes, try calling him, but when the voicemail kicks in, I shove my phone in my pocket and leave my apartment, yanking the door closed behind me. There's no need to try so hard. He created this mess. It's his problem, not mine.

At work, I sit at the concierge desk in the corner of the hotel lobby and give guests recommendations on where to go and what to eat. It's the tail end of the busy season, the last few tourists passing through to see the foliage before Maine closes up for the winter. With an unwavering smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes, I make a dinner reservation for a couple celebrating their first anniversary and arrange for a bottle of champagne to be waiting in their room upon return, a gesture that goes above and beyond, the kind of thing that will earn me a good tip. I call the town car

to drive a family to the jetport. A man who stays at the hotel every other Monday night on business brings me three soiled shirts, asks if they can be dry-cleaned overnight.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say.

The man grins, gives me a wink. “You’re the best, Vanessa.”

On my break, I sit in an empty cubicle in the back office, staring at my phone as I eat a day-old sandwich left over from a catered event.

Checking the Facebook post is compulsive now; I can’t stop my fingers from moving or my eyes from darting across the screen, taking in the rising likes and shares, the dozens of you’re fearless, keep telling your truth, I believe you. Even as I read, three dots flash—someone is typing a comment right this second. Then, like magic, another appears, another message of strength and support that makes me slide my phone across the desk and toss the rest of the stale sandwich in the trash.

I’m about to head back out into the lobby when my phone begins to vibrate: INCOMING CALL JACOB STRANE. I laugh as I answer, relieved he’s alive, that he’s calling. “Are you ok?”

For a moment, there’s only dead air and I freeze, my eyes fixed on the window that looks out on Monument Square, the autumn farmers’ market and food trucks. It’s the beginning of October, full-blown fall, the time when everything in Portland appears straight out of an L.L.Bean catalog—pumpkins and gourds, jugs of apple cider. A woman in plaid flannel and duck boots crosses the square, smiling down at the baby strapped to her chest.

“Strane?”

He exhales a heavy sigh. “I guess you saw.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I saw.”

I don’t ask questions, but he launches into an explanation anyway. He says the school is opening an investigation and he’s bracing himself for the worst. He assumes they’ll force him to resign. He doubts he’ll make it through the school year, maybe not even to Christmas break. Hearing his voice is such a shock that I struggle to keep up with what he says. It’s been months since we last spoke, when I was gripped with panic after my dad died of a heart attack and I told Strane I couldn’t do it anymore; the same sudden onset of morals I’ve had through years of screwups—lost jobs, breakups, and breakdowns—as though being good could retroactively fix all the things I’ve broken.

“But they already investigated back when she was your student,” I say.

“They’re revisiting it. Everyone’s getting interviewed all over again.”

“If they decided you didn’t do anything wrong back then, why would they change their minds now?”

“Paid any attention to the news lately?” he asks. “We’re living in a different time.”

I want to tell him he’s being overdramatic, that it’ll be ok so long as he’s innocent, but I know he’s right. For the past month, something’s been gaining momentum, a wave of women outing men as harassers, assaulters. It’s mostly celebrities who have been targeted—musicians, politicians, movie stars—but less famous men have been named, too. No matter their background, the accused go through the same steps. First, they deny everything. Then, as it becomes clear the din of accusations isn’t going away, they resign from their jobs in disgrace and issue a statement of vague apology that stops short of admitting wrongdoing. Then the final step: they go silent and disappear. It’s been surreal to watch it play out day after day, these men falling so easily.

“It should be ok,” I say. “Everything she wrote is a lie.”

On the phone, Strane sucks in a breath, air whistling through his teeth. “I don’t know if she is lying, at least not technically.”

“But you barely touched her. In that post, she says you assaulted her.”

“Assault,” he scoffs. “Assault can be anything, like how battery can mean you grabbed someone by the wrist or shoved their shoulder. It’s a meaningless legal term.”

I stare out the window at the farmers’ market: the milling crowd, the swarming seagulls. A woman selling food opens a metal tub, releasing a cloud of steam as she pulls out two tamales. “You know, she messaged me last week.”

A beat of silence. “Did she.”

“She wanted to see if I’d come forward, too. Probably figured she’d be more believable if she roped me into it.”

Strane says nothing.

“I didn’t respond. Obviously.”

“Right,” he says. “Of course.”

“I thought she was bluffing. Didn’t think she’d have the nerve.” I lean forward, press my forehead against the window. “It’ll be ok. You know where I stand.”