AUTHOR PROFILE

Ruken Zeynep Ünal

Level B2

Genre Mystery

RED EXCLAMATION MARK

The air was cold. I was freezing, but my body was too numb to feel it. While waiting for the minibus, I lifted my head from the ground and looked around. I started thinking about everything. I was already a dreamer. “So be it,” I said. Still, I kept observing. Why was it so empty? Why was there no one? Normally, this place would be crowded with people every day. Traffic would be congested. But today it was completely empty. What was even happening today? I furrowed my brows slightly and continued to observe. When I saw the minibus approaching, I stood up and got in through the opened door. I handed over my money, found a place to hold on, and started following the road. This was a classic thing. When the minibus stopped at the stop below the school, I got off and started walking uphill. There were a few people here and there. Still, today felt like a strange day. Thinking “whatever,” I proceeded toward the school.

When I entered the school, I looked around. There was no one. The yard was empty. Maybe everyone was inside waiting because it was raining, I thought. Once inside, I again saw a few people here and there. It was surprising… The school was almost empty on the second day of the week. I didn’t care—why would I? I went to class and sat at my place. I was sitting by the window, in the third row. As I sat, sleep involuntarily crept up on me. I couldn’t resist. My eyelids slowly grew heavy. I fell asleep. I don’t know if it was during sleep or psychologically, but I had a dream. A man, dressed entirely in black, with his back turned, was walking away from me, and I persistently followed him. Eventually, he stopped. “Your home isn’t far from your school, right?” he said, and I replied.

“Do you know me?” There was a note of surprise in my voice at the correctness of his question.

“Yes, I know you. Don’t go home,” he said and quickly walked away. He didn’t even let me ask why. I stood there behind him and finally woke up from the dream.

Looking at the classroom, there were about fifteen people. I wanted to observe them. They looked strange for some reason. It was as if they had been forced there and were sitting reluctantly. Some looked pale, while others seemed to be trying to calm themselves. Maybe it was just me; I chose not to care. At that exact moment, the teacher entered. Once everyone settled, the lesson began. But there was something odd about it. Normally, the teacher, who always taught with laughter and couldn’t stop chuckling, was teaching as if a gun was pressed to his head. Words barely came out of his mouth; it was like he wanted to finish quickly and leave.

While I wondered if I was still under the effect of the dream, the classroom door was tapped. A female student entered. I think she was the hall monitor. She said a name and mentioned that the school administration was calling that person. But there was no such person in our class. I sat up carefully. I looked first at the teacher, then back at the hall monitor. Just as I was about to speak, a girl from the class stood up and left. Wait a minute, that wasn’t the person whose name was called. I knew her after all. I looked at the teacher for some explanation. He swallowed without saying anything. Were his eyes filling with tears, or was I seeing wrong? I didn’t know, but it was certain that something was off here. I silently stayed in my seat. Neither I nor anyone else in the class said anything. But that girl didn’t come back. I tried to think maybe she left, her family came. But her belongings were still in the classroom. And the teacher had already become strange anyway. What puzzled me the most was that, even though her name wasn’t called, she had left. What did that even mean? I thought maybe I was remembering wrong.

When the lesson ended after a long while, I opened the cover of the class register. I looked inside and took the class list. While checking the names one by one, I noticed two things. The teacher had crossed out the name of the girl who had just left. Why had he crossed it out? Wouldn’t she come back? I was confused.

Another thing was that next to my name, a red pen had drawn an exclamation mark. I furrowed my brows involuntarily. There were fifteen people in our class, yet only my name had an exclamation mark.

13 3367. Viola Rose.

I didn’t understand why this had been done. It looked strange to me. Actually, there was no “to me.” It was already strange. When people from other classes started entering, I felt like I was doing something wrong. I hurriedly put the list back in the register. I immediately left it on the desk and went back to my seat. Then I kept thinking. The whole day went roughly like this. The only difference was that the hall monitor didn’t come again. But the girl who had been taken away didn’t return either. When the day completely ended, I packed my things, grabbed my phone, and left the classroom. While walking in the corridor, my eyes caught the fire escape section. I could hear sounds from there. There were crying sounds. I approached the door slightly, but the crying sounds were nothing more than sobs and sighs. I didn’t touch the door. I was afraid that if I did, the sounds would belong to me. I listened for a few more seconds. The crying was muffled, suppressed. It was as if someone was forcing themselves not to cry. Then, suddenly, it stopped. That was worse.

I stepped back. The corridor became more silent. The hum that had been there earlier was gone. It was as if the school was holding its breath. “Stop being ridiculous,” I said to myself. I was tired, sleepless, dreaming dream after dream. This was the logical explanation.

But just as I was about to go down the stairs, a voice came from behind me.

“Don’t go.”

I froze. The voice was familiar. Very familiar. But I couldn’t muster the courage to turn.

“Don’t go home today.” My heart was pounding as if it would burst from my ribs. That voice… it was exactly the same as the man in the dream. I slowly turned. The corridor was empty. There was no one.

“Who’s there?” I said. My voice trembled more than I expected.

No answer came. But at that moment I noticed something. The fire escape door was ajar. It had been closed a moment ago, I was sure. The voice came again from inside. But this time, it wasn’t crying. There were whispers. Multiple people were speaking. At the same time, repeating the same sentence.

“The list is filling up."

My head started spinning. I took a step back, but my feet didn’t obey. I walked toward the door. When I placed my hand on the cold iron of the door, a strange feeling rose inside me. It was as if someone had grabbed my hand and pulled it. I opened the door slightly.

The staircase was empty. The lights were off, but it wasn’t completely dark. A faint light shone from below to above. And there she was. The girl who had left in the morning. She was sitting on the bottom step. She had her knees drawn to her chest. Her hair covered her face. She lifted her head. Her eyes were completely red, but she wasn’t crying anymore.

“Why did they erase my name?” she said. I swallowed.

“I… don’t know.” She laughed. But there was no joy in that laugh.

“You don’t know, of course. You’re still marked.”

“What mark?” I said. My voice barely went beyond a whisper. She stood up. The echo of her steps on the stairs mixed with my heartbeat. She came toward me. Very close.

“Those with exclamation marks on the list,” she said. “Are the ones who noticed before leaving.”

“Before leaving?”

“Before disappearing.”

A door slammed behind me. I jumped. The corridor door had closed. I heard a lock. The girl’s eyes locked onto mine.

“Now it’s your turn,” she said. And the lights went out completely. I was left in the dark. Really left. I thought my eyes would adjust after a few seconds, but no. They didn’t. It was as if the darkness wasn’t normal. Denser. Like something was pressing down on me.

“Where are you?” I said.

My voice didn’t echo. That wasn’t normal either.

A breath came from behind me. Very close to my neck. I couldn’t turn. I knew I shouldn’t. It wasn’t instinct; it was clear knowledge.

“Don’t look,” someone said. The man from the dream. I’m sure.

“Why?” I asked.

“If you look, it will be erased.”

“Who will be erased?”

“You.”

Suddenly, the lights came on. I closed my eyes reflexively. When I opened them, the fire escape was gone. No stairs. No girl. The corridor had returned. It was long. Too long. Normally, the corridor wasn't this long. I checked my watch. It wasn't working. I took out my phone. The screen was on, but in the time section, only one thing was written:

My throat went dry. Class size. I slowly started walking. My footsteps didn't seem to belong to me. I stopped in front of a door. There was no class number above the door. But light was coming through the gap. Sounds... familiar sounds. I pushed the door. It was our classroom. But the lesson hadn't ended. The teacher was at the board. Same lesson, same moment. I was sitting at my place. By the window, third row. I froze.

"What the hell..." I said involuntarily. At that moment, me inside raised my head. We made eye contact. She didn't smile. She wasn't surprised. She just whispered: "You're late." The teacher at the board closed the class register. Slowly started counting names. "...twelve, thirteen..." I thought my heart had stopped. "...fourteen..." I stepped back. "...fifteen." He closed the register. "List complete," said the teacher. And at the same time, everyone in the class turned to me. All of them. With the same look.

One of them spoke. The girl's voice. "Now we're changing seats." The lights went out again. And this time... I didn't wake up. When the lights came back, I was in the classroom. At my seat. By the window, third row. For a moment, I thought everything had really returned to normal. The board, the desks, the gray light coming through the window... everything was in place. I took a deep breath. Everything that had just happened must have been a weird sleep state, maybe. But then I realized. The class was very quiet. Not normal quiet. The kind where no one even dares to move. I slowly looked around. Everyone was in place, but no one was looking at me. Heads bowed, eyes on desks. As if looking was forbidden. The teacher at the board was writing. The chalk's sound echoed more than it should. I looked at the clock. The bell hadn't rung. It hadn't rung at all.

“Teacher?” I said. My voice remained alone in the classroom. The teacher stopped. Slowly turned. His face was pale. When he looked at me, I saw a strange relief in his eyes. As if he had been waiting for me. “You needed to wake up,” he said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. He just took the register. The class register. He turned the pages. I heard that sound again. The rustle of paper. The kind that made my stomach twist.

“There’s someone missing,” he said to himself. A student from the class hiccupped lightly. I turned my head. It was the girl in the very last row. She had her hands clasped on her knees. Her lips were trembling, but she wasn’t crying.

“Who is missing?” I asked. The teacher

spoke without raising his head. “The one who left just now.”

“You didn’t say her name.” At that moment, something changed in the classroom. Everyone lifted their heads at the same time. Their gaze turned to me. Not individually. As a whole.

“Names are no longer said,” the teacher said. “If they are said, they stay.” My heart raced.

“What happens to those who stay?” This time, the teacher didn’t answer.

The kid next to me whispered. “Those who remain in their place are erased.” The register was placed on my desk. The cover was open. The list was in front of me. I looked at the names. Some were crossed out. Some had lines drawn over them. My name…

It was in place. But there was no exclamation mark.

“Where did the exclamation mark go?” I asked. For the first time, the teacher really looked at me. “It has been decided now.”

“What decision?” The bell rang.

But this time… it was the wrong bell sound. It lasted too long. Everyone stood up at the same time. The chairs didn’t even creak. They headed toward the door. Silently. In order.

I couldn’t move. The teacher stood in front of the door. He whispered to me: “Don’t go home.”

At that moment, the page of the register closed by itself. And on the cover, only one thing was written:

I wasn’t the first to leave the class. I couldn’t be anyway. After the door closed, the classroom was again plunged into silence. But this time, it wasn’t an empty silence. There was something inside it. Something waiting, watching. The register was still on my desk. I reached out. The moment I touched it, I shivered. It was cold. But not the cold of paper. More like… the cold of something that had been waiting. I opened the page again. There were only fourteen names on the list. My name was at the bottom.

Viola Rose

There was no number next to it, no exclamation mark. Just my name. The others were either crossed out or erased. Some had a single line drawn in red pen over them. Some names were completely

erased. As if they had never been written.

“Where did these names go?” I asked the emptiness. The answer didn’t come immediately. Then I heard a voice from behind me.

“They’ve changed places.” I turned. There was someone else in the class. The girl taken in the morning.

But… she wasn’t the same. Her face was paler. Her eyes were very tired. As if she hadn’t slept for a long time. But she was standing. Upright.

“You came back?” I asked. She shook her head. “There is no such thing as coming back.”

“Then where were you?” For a moment she paused. She looked away. Then looked back at me. “On the other side of the school.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. She came closer. Very close. She whispered, “This school isn’t just the place

you see. Some go, some stay. Those who stay… fill it.”

“Fill what?”

She looked at the register. “The empty spots.”

My throat tightened. “And me?”

There was a moment of silence. In that silence, I felt even the walls of the school were listening. “You were the last one,” she said. “No one can leave before fifteen are complete.”

“Leave?” I said. “I couldn’t leave anyway.” At that moment, I headed toward the door. The door was locked. I ran to the window. I looked down. The yard was still empty. But this time… it wasn’t completely empty.

People were in the yard. But they were frozen. They didn’t move. Their heads were raised. Looking at the school. All at the

same time.

“Who are they?” I asked. She swallowed. “Those who stayed earlier.”

My heart felt like it would explode from my chest.

“Then where’s the exit?” She slowly pointed to the fire escape. “You can leave from there.” A hope stirred inside me.

“How?” My eyes filled with tears.

“If you take someone’s place.”

“What do you mean?”

“The list doesn’t stay incomplete,” she said calmly. “If one leaves, one enters. Always like this.”

At that moment, everything clicked into place. Empty streets. Empty school. Crossed out names. And my name left alone.

“If I leave…” I said. “Will someone else take

my place?” She lowered her head. “Yes.”

“Then why are you here?” She smiled. But this time, it was truly a bitter smile. “Because I couldn’t leave.”

The bell rang again. This time closer. Harder. The register closed by itself. A new thing appeared on the cover.

And at the same time, the school lights went out. When the lights went out, the school didn’t disappear. More

like… it came closer. I could hear my breath in the darkness. It was very loud. I knew someone was next to me, but I didn’t turn. I felt I shouldn’t turn.

“You have time,” said the girl.

“For what?”

She didn’t answer. Something appeared in

front of me. The class register. Not on the desk. Floating in the air. It opened by itself. The pages slowly turned. This time, the names didn’t seem familiar. But the faces… yes. The ones frozen in the yard. The register stopped on a name. My heart tightened.

“No,” I said. My voice trembled, I couldn’t hide it.

“You don’t have to choose,” said the girl. Then she added:

“Being chosen is also an option.”

Sounds came from the corridors. Footsteps. Not irregular. Very orderly. They were approaching. The page of the register trembled slightly. Names were shifting. As if in a hurry.

“I can’t do this,” I said.

“No one can anyway,” said the girl. The footsteps got closer. A breath brushed against my neck.

“If you don’t touch it,” the girl whispered, “the next name will be yours.”

I looked at the register.

I saw my own name. There was nowhere to escape. No doors. The windows were dark.

My finger shook as I moved it toward the page.

It was as if the register was breathing. I paused for a moment. Then I touched it. The register closed. The footsteps stopped. There was a silence.

But it wasn’t comforting. The register opened again.

A single sentence appeared at the bottom: “Missing.”

The girl stepped back. “This wasn’t supposed to happen,” she said.

“What do you mean missing?” I asked her.

For the first time, there was fear in her eyes. “The person you chose didn’t come,” she said. “And the school… doesn’t like emptiness.” At that moment, the bell rang. But it wasn’t a class bell. This… was the beginning.

When the bell stopped, the school froze for a moment.

Really froze. The hum ceased, the footsteps were gone. It was as if everything was holding its breath.

“An emptiness has formed,” said the girl. Her voice was now very close.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“The school wants balance restored.”

A door appeared at the end of the corridor. It hadn’t been there before. There was no class number or writing above it. Only a single word scratched into it:

EXIT

My heart raced. “Is this it?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “But for one person only.”

I walked toward the door. With every step, something inside me grew heavier. I turned back.

“And you?”

She smiled. “I already belong here.”

I reached for the door handle but couldn’t touch it. Something stopped me. The register appeared again. This time it wasn’t open. On the cover, there was a single question:

“Has your place been filled?”

“No,” I said.

“Wrong,” said the girl.

The corridor suddenly filled. But not with people. From classrooms, stairs, door gaps... the same face appeared. My face. Dozens of them. All staring at me.

“What... is this?”

“You,” she said. “Your remaining state here.”

I stepped back.

“I want to leave.”

“You can,” said a calm voice. The man from the dream stepped out of the darkness. I still couldn’t see his face.

“What’s the condition?” I asked. He stepped closer. “Your place must be filled.”

The register opened by itself.

The last line was blank. A pen appeared in the air. And it began to write.

Viola Rose

“No,” I said.

“Look,” said the man. “You were already written. The exclamation mark was for this.”

“I wasn’t chosen.”

The man’s voice softened. “No. You were chosen.”

At that moment, everything clicked into place. Empty streets. Missing classes. Those who hadn’t gone home.

“If I leave from here…” I said.

“Someone else will wake up,” said the girl.

The door opened behind me. Cold air hit my face. It was daytime outside. Normal. Noises. Laughter. Bell sound… everything was as it should be. I took a step. Then stopped. I looked at the register. At the blank line. I held the pen. And wrote a name.

I stood on the doorstep. Outside was bright. Too bright. Like a normal day. Noise, laughter, bell sound… all as it should be. Behind me was the school. Silent. Waiting. The register was still in my hand. The cover open. The last line blank.

The pen felt heavy between my fingers.

“One name is enough,” said the man. “Whoever it may be.”

“And if I don’t write?” I asked.

“You are already written,” said the girl.

I looked at the page. My name was there like a pale shadow. Not fully erased. But not completely still either. I thought for a moment. Then I looked at the sounds coming from outside the door. Laughter. Running footsteps. I lowered the pen.

I couldn’t make it to class in the morning. The yard was crowded. No one noticed anything strange. I entered the classroom and sat at my seat. By the window, third row. The register was in front of me. Open. The list

had fifteen names. All were in place. But one was different.

13 3367. Viola Rose

No exclamation mark. I thought I could relax. At that exact moment, the girl next to me whispered:

“Someone will be missing today.”

“Who?” I asked. She looked at me.

I didn’t know her. But her eyes… very familiar.

“She hasn’t been written yet,” she said.

The bell rang. The teacher entered the classroom. He took the register. The pen hovered over the cover. Then he wrote. In red. He had put an exclamation mark next to my name. And at that moment, I understood. I hadn’t been saved. I had only… my turn had come.

Generated by **ReadRunner**.