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The Lauras

Written by Sara Taylor

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SARA TAYLOR

THE LAURAS



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CHAPTER I

I could hear them arguing, the way they argued nearly every night now, their voices pitched low and rasping in that way that meant they thought they were being too quiet to wake me up. They were right in that their fights never did wake me up—but that was because I always stayed awake until they started. I could feel one coming like the promise of a storm thickening the air. When rain's on the way I can't sleep either. Even though I always heard them, when morning rolled around I pretended that I'd slept through it all, because I didn't know what else to do.

I listened to the rise and fall of their voices for hours some nights, for as long as it took for them to gradually calm. So on that last night, when they went from full pitch to silent in a moment, my stomach fizzed with swift fear: they never broke off in full flow. Then the sound of my mother's boots on tile as she came down the hall. When my bedroom door squeaked open I went stiff and limp at once, hoping that she'd think I was asleep and go back to the fight.

"Get up, Alex. Now."

Ma's hand on my back made me jump; her voice was urgent, hard-edged, and I guessed in that moment that something was really wrong. I sprang up, comforter bundled around and over me, and she pushed me towards my bedroom door. The mix of dark and light and the gumminess of my eyes made everything smeary so that I almost walked into the door frame. As she hurried me out with one hand gripping too tightly to my upper arm I dove for the mottle of shoes in the entryway, scrabbled, then clutched my muddy-soled hiking boots to my chest. Across the front porch, the splintered edges of the boards catching on but not quite sticking in the tough soles of my bare feet, then down the steps. The gravel of the driveway chewed them, and I jumped into the back seat when she opened the car door for me. I twisted up to look through the rear windshield, blinking to clear my eyes enough to see, searching for smoke, fire, anything that would explain the urgency, but she lifted a fold of my comforter over my head and pushed me down, so that the bump in the middle of the seat pressed against my hip.

I couldn't tell if Dad was still inside the house or if some of the footsteps were his, or if he'd gone out the back door while we went out the front. Then nylon rustled and something heavy landed in the footwell below my head: the backpack that Ma had kept by the shoes in the front hallway for so long that I'd stopped noticing it was there. Then the thunk of the car doors shutting and the grind and catch of the engine, the world dipping as we drove away.

It was a few moments before I realized that Dad wasn't in the car with us. I wanted to sit up, to ask why we'd left him behind, what had happened to make them stop fighting so suddenly, but I stayed where my mother had put me.

When she turned on the radio I pawed the cloth from my eyes, felt the chilly night air gusting through the fine opening of her window, watched the stars rotate over us as we turned under them, a right and a right, and a right, getting farther and farther away. I knew better than to ask questions, or to say anything—give her the slightest reason and all that cracking anger I'd heard her unleashing at Dad would be turned to me.

At some point my eyes closed on their own and the seat became comfortable beneath me, and I stopped pretending to be asleep.

"Hey there, chickie pie," she said, and I felt her hand shaking my leg.

I realized that we were no longer moving.

"You awake?"

The clouds were pink. We were caught on the thin, hungry edge of the morning, before the sun sliced itself open on the horizon and bled out across the sky. In front of us, on the far side of a sorry strip of dirt and weeds, was a freeway, cars zipping by now and then with their windshields dewed and misted, some with their headlights on. We were parked up at a truck stop, the few people moving slow, the eighteen-wheelers looking like they were asleep. The air was greased with the smell of

Southern breakfast, stronger even than the smell of Ma's cigarettes.

"You hungry?"

Walking into the truck-stop diner I felt naked—I'd gone to bed in thin flannel pajama bottoms, one of my dad's old shirts—chilly with the breeze that made my clothes feel like tissue paper and made my skin go tight and prickly. It felt obscene being in public in my pajamas, but Ma said that thirteen is just young enough to still get away with it; I look younger. She hadn't thought to grab my jeans on the way out.

Elsewhere, my classmates were getting ready for school, and I wondered if Ma would call in to say I wouldn't be there. My school backpack had been left in the car the day before, so at least I'd be able to get my homework done.

The smell of old fryer oil turned my stomach, which was still tight with sleep, but I dutifully flipped through the menu full of laminated pictures of pancakes and waffles and ugly pucks of sausage doused in lumpy brown gravy. Breakfast was a normal thing to do, even a truck-stop breakfast, even if I was wearing pajamas and boots without socks; it was like being on a road trip. Ma sat across from me and scanned the menu, and I imagined for a moment that we were on our way somewhere fun, taking a day off from life, and when evening rolled around we'd go back home and Dad and dinner would be waiting for us. Then she set down the menu and pulled out her wallet, slid the credit and debit cards out of their slots, then got up, went to the ATM near the door, and started withdrawing great wodges of bills.

While I chewed a biscuit and washed the pasty slurry down with chocolate milk she sat across from me, ignoring her plate of eggs but sipping at her coffee, and I listened while trying to make it seem like I wasn't paying attention as she pulled out her cellphone, called the number on the back of each card in turn and reported it lost, then carefully cut them all into pieces with scissors she'd borrowed from the waitress. The little phone had sat in the cup holder of her car, except when it was charging on the kitchen counter, for as long as I could remember, in case of flat tires or accidents that had never happened; I had never seen her use it before.

Usually when a person looks back they have to reconstruct, invent, guess at what was said or felt or smelled. That twenty-four hours, starting with the moment we left home, was burned into my memory. Even now, years after, I can't forget the grease and smoke, the flannel on skin, the fear of realizing that my life was taking a ninety-degree turn. Some part of me knew, as I listened to my mother's footsteps coming toward my bedroom door, that everything was about to change, wouldn't admit it to the rest of myself in the diner as I watched her turn her credit cards into confetti. The tipping feeling, of everything I knew and thought and trusted being pulled out from under me, has stayed with me for thirty-odd years, as if she branded it into my skin with her fingertips when she dragged me out of the house.

She dropped the card bits into three different garbage cans on our way across the parking lot, put the backpack in the trunk, tossed the cell into the passenger footwell

as if it had outlived its usefulness, put the car in gear while I was still buckling my seat belt.

The phone began buzzing as we got onto the freeway. She'd let me sit in the front seat, to keep me from throwing up or to make things easier when I did throw up, and after a few seconds I reached for it.

"Leave it, kid."

"It's probably Dad."

"I know."

The phone continued to buzz every little while, skittering on the floor like a giant insect. I wondered what she'd do if I picked it up and answered it myself, decided that, given the circumstance, that was a bad risk to take.

While we were stuck in rush-hour traffic halfway across a bridge Ma decided she'd had enough. She flicked her cigarette butt out the open window, ducked abruptly to the side, her hand flailing between my knees but eyes still on the road, and pitched the trembling phone off the side of the bridge and into the river.

I was too stunned to say anything.

"It was more than six years old," she said after a little. It sounded almost like an apology. "I should've thrown it away with the cards—cops can use them to track you down if they want to. I'll get a new one once we sort life out."

"Couldn't you have just talked to him?" I asked.

"Peanut, sometimes things go way beyond what talking can fix."

I didn't say anything, but she must have read my silence as expectant because, after a few minutes, she continued: "Maybe I'll give it a shot, in a while."

My mother had never been much of a storyteller. I knew the vagaries of her life—the foster homes and that she had a green card, the fact that she hadn't spoken to her parents since she was a teenager—but it wasn't until we left home that she began writing in the details. Maybe she began telling me then because she felt guilt, or whatever her version of guilt was, over leaving and taking me with her and not explaining anything. Maybe the stories had finally backed up in her and she had to let them out.

Around sundown on the day that she threw her phone out the window we pulled off the road into one of those graveled roads that cross the tree-covered median where cops sometimes sit to watch for speeding drivers, and that's when she started telling me about her childhood. I wanted us to be stretched opposite each other on the cold, solid ground, with a wood fire between us casting shadows across her browned, unlined face, because that's how stories were supposed to be told. Instead, we were in the front seat of the Civic, my feet barely reaching the dash but propped up anyway, passing deli bags of salami and provolone and a can of Tab back and forth, the windshield dark with evening, the headlights rushing by on the highway on either side of us blocked out with spare clothes and the blanket from my bed, their edges caught between the windows and frames to make curtains. I sucked the flavor out of each slice of salami before swallowing it whole, kept my eyes wide and intent on her and nodded at intervals, trying to show how close I was listening.

When we'd stopped in the late afternoon for the salami and Tab and more cigarettes we also went to the Goodwill next door, found a few pairs of jeans that fit me, several men's flannel shirts that were too big for both of us so we could share them back and forth, plus odds and ends like socks that we couldn't do without. It was cold for May but the flannel would keep us warm enough, and I hoped that the fact that she'd not gotten jackets or coats or even sweatshirts meant that Ma wasn't planning on us being away from home long enough to need them, even though she'd pitched her phone rather than talk to my dad.

She ate six or seven pieces of salami and cheese rolled up together like a cigar, cracked open the soda, took a swig, handed it to me, then said, "When I was fourteen, just a few months older than you are now, I ran away from home to be a ranger," like she was talking to the steering wheel or the night on the other side of the windshield.

She wanted to be a caretaker of the wilderness, wandering the national parks counting birds and paring back mistletoe, carrying all that she needed with her and going days and weeks without seeing another person. She checked all of the survival books out of the library, read them under her bed because it felt more secret there, and took notes in a marble composition book that she'd shoplifted from the five and dime. When she had filled three of these with lists of things you could eat and things not to, instructions for making fires and building shelters and choosing drinking water she set off, in her

younger brother's boots—her parents said that girls didn't need boots—with as little as she couldn't spare crammed into a backpack fished from a dumpster. She made her first mistake then: the boots didn't fit properly and her socks were too thin. Her feet blistered, and they found her a day later.

"The first thing you do is take care of your feet," she told me. "Keep them dry and comfortable, stop when they tell you to stop. Good shoes aren't cheap, but you only ever have one pair of feet."

After that, she began to save her lunch money and the pennies she found in the sidewalk seams and the crumpled one-and five-dollar bills that her mother forgot crammed deep in the pockets of her jacket, and on the day that she had enough she dumped it into a one-gallon freezer bag, skipped school to go into town, bought a pair of size five-and-a-half putty-green walking boots with yellow laces and space in the toes, and three pairs of cotton boot socks, because she's always had a weakness for good socks. They felt like sinking her feet into cake batter. She hid the boots under her bed until the days lengthened and warmed, then photocopied maps from library reference books and bought lightweight food. When they found her the second time she'd hiked nearly one hundred miles of the Appalachian Trail.

I was scared to ask where we were going, but even so I wasn't relieved when the cop knocked on our window at five the next morning and asked the question for me.

"To my parents' house in Lexington," Ma said, not

bothering to specify whether it was Lexington in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Virginia, or somewhere else.

"You realize your husband's called out a search for this car?"

"Domestic tiff. We didn't get violent, and the car is in my name. I can take my kid to visit my parents for a few days, can't I?"

I shuffled in the glove box for the registration, which was in fact in her name, and after some hemming and hawing and muttering into his radio he had to let us go.

"I can't tell you how to run your marriage, lady, but I recommend you make up quick. Your kid or not, your husband can charge you with kidnapping."

"We aren't actually married," she said levelly as she took the registration back, but I could tell she was getting annoyed. "So there isn't, in fact, much he can do. As you undoubtedly know. Good day, officer."

"Are we really going to Lexington?" I asked as we pulled back onto the highway, and then when she didn't answer for a few minutes added, "Where *do* your parents live?"

"We are going to find somewhere to get breakfast. Then we're going to get ourselves to the other side of the West Virginia border, just in case the state brass are still looking for us. And then we're seeing what we can do about this car."

We pulled off a few hours later in a one-horse, one-stoplight town, where the morning sun didn't touch yet because it had gotten caught on a spur of the mountains. It was nothing more than a strip of buildings along the

highway—a diner with a *Waitress needed* sign in the window, a post office barely worthy of the name, and a gas station/convenience store/mechanic's garage with out-of-date sodas and stickers on half the pumps that said they'd failed inspection by a representative of the Bureau of Standards—with the barest promise of more buildings farther into the trees. Ma said she'd be right back, and as her boots crunched across the gravel and scattered the auto glass that littered the parking lot I crawled into the footwell and peeled up the carpet. Linty coins were ground into the floor and stuck to the inside of the cup holders and fallen under the seats. I left the little caddy of quarters alone; that was for tolls. Ma didn't carry a purse, instead crammed a billfold into the back pocket of her jeans until it wore permanent lines into the denim, so my scope for plunder was limited. She'd disappeared into the mechanic's garage; I cracked the door open wide enough to slip out, and padded down the grassy shoulder of the road to the post office.

The counter was manned by a single perm-haired postal worker, who watched me through eyeglasses with plastic frames the same clear red as jolly ranchers as if she suspected that I was going to take off with her entire stock the moment she looked away. Her glare made my spine crawl as I picked out a postcard, not one of the *Welcome To!* or *Greetings From!* ones, but a placeless one with dogs playing around a water pump on the front—I wasn't worried about being tracked down by the postmark, since we were on the move, but I didn't want to make it too easy, if Ma really didn't want to be found.

Daddy— I started it because Ma said he sometimes worried that I was getting too old to want him around, to not be embarrassed of him. Too old for him to be my daddy. Which I was, but hey. The cheap blue pen chained to the counter spluttered, and I went over the word again and again, until it stood out in ridges on the glossy side of the card.

Mom is all right and I am all right. Though I think she's still upset. If she doesn't want to come home, I will when I can, so don't rent my room to anyone.

I'd meant that to sound funny, but it just sounded juvenile. But you can't erase pen.

I love you. And miss you. —Me

I counted coins into the woman's hand to pay for the card and a stamp, then held it for a moment before dropping it into the dark slot of the blue U.S. Post box, not quite a wish and not quite a prayer, but something between the two.

Ma was leaning against the car when I walked back, watching a man with pierced ears and a goat beard inspect the workings of her engine.

"Where'd you get off to?" she asked when I got within hearing distance.

"Looking for something to read," I said. "Nothing."

"Your school books are in the back seat—you should take a crack at them."

The bearded man finished his inspection, nodded at her, and ambled back to the garage.

"What's he doing?" I asked.

"Mr. Freeborn over there is willing to trade out this car for a hatchback he owns," she answered. "We might be staying here a while—the diner needs a swing-shift waitress, and there's a room to rent within walking distance."

"Are we moving here, then?" I thought guiltily about my postcard, pushed it out with thoughts about home, wondered if it was safe to ask more directly how long we were staying for.

"Not really. Just laying low for a little while. I want to figure out which end is up."

I had found my mother's green card before, in a desk drawer with my father's birth certificate: her gap-toothed smile looks nothing like mine, her cream umber skin darkened as she aged. When I first found it she wouldn't tell me what it was, why she didn't have a birth certificate, and my father had explained that it meant that Ma was "off the boat." And I hadn't known much more than that until I asked her, sitting in the car in the turn-off near the West Virginia border just after the cop knocked on the car window, where my grandparents lived. Somewhere between breakfast and the town where I'd thought we wouldn't be staying, she started in on that story.

In 1970 her parents emigrated, messily, from a little farming village in Sicily; she'd been six years old. Her mother's father—my great-grandfather—had traded his stonecutting skills for U.S. citizenship, and only moved back to his own father's hometown when he'd saved

enough to start a family, but even with her inherited citizenship it had been difficult for my grandmother to bring her family across to America. An elegant woman with a degree in fashion design, she had been forced to take a factory job sewing men's shirts in New York for the lowest legal wage; my grandfather worked construction, then started a business of his own. My mother and her brother had been left in a Catholic orphanage in Palermo for the six months it took for their parents to save their money, rent an apartment, and sort out all the papers that would let them stay in the country. Ma wouldn't explain why her parents hadn't left them with family instead, why an orphanage had been the solution they'd fixed on; it wasn't until later that I found out that my grandmother's parents had thrown her out and my grandfather's had disowned him, and that none of their relatives would speak to them at the time, let alone volunteer to take their two kids.

When Ma arrived in the States her language marked her out: a rural, southern dialect that other Italians barely understood and held in contempt. The Americans she met didn't care; all wops were the same: filthy, immoral, stinking of garlic and barely more than animals. She learned Spanish before she learned English, from following her father to building sites and listening to the foreman's shouted instructions. Most of her English she learned from the secondhand TV her parents bought to keep her and her brother company on the long nights when they were locked in the apartment together, both parents working overtime.

As the language came to her she waited to feel like she fit in, but even when she had learned to diagram sentences and could recite entire scenes of Shakespeare by heart, she never did: she did not know how to act American. She did not even know how to act female—her mother had been at her place on the factory floor for hours by the time Ma woke up, and so for years she went to school with her stockings run and back to front, her brassieres the wrong size, her hair tangled, no packed lunch and no money to buy one. It wasn't until she met my father that she learned the difference between scrambled, fried, poached eggs; she never stopped wildly mixing her metaphors.

She learned to blend in, to fade into the foreground, killed her accent so that she didn't stick out, but every word she learned took her farther from her parents and the country where she had been born. She wedged herself into an in-between space: not American, despite the social security number they gave her in her late teens; not Sicilian, despite her green card; but eternally other, so that she could only be comfortable when no one expected her to belong.