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Opening Extract from...

Secrets She Left Behind

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SECRETS SHE LEFT BEHIND

Maggie

They moved me from my cell hours later than I'd expected because of some paperwork issue Mom had to straighten out. I was afraid they weren't going to let me go. There'd been some mistake, I thought. A prison official would show up at my cell door and say, *Oh, we thought you were in prison for twelve months, but we read the order wrong. It's really twelve years.* It's amazing the things you can imagine when you're alone in a cell.

I sat on my skinny bed with my hands folded in my lap and my heart pounding, waiting. An hour. Two hours. I couldn't budge. Couldn't open the book I was reading. Just sat there waiting for them to come tell me how twelve months was a mistake and I couldn't get out today. I deserved the twelve years. Everyone knew that, including me.

But finally, Letitia, my favorite guard, came to get me. I let out my breath like I'd been holding it in for those two hours and started to cry. Outside the bars of my cell, Letitia's face was nothing more than a dark, wavy blur.

She shook her head at me, and I knew she was wearing that half sneer it took me a few months to recognize as a kind of affection.

"You crying?" she asked. "Girl, you cried the day you come in here and now you crying the day you leave. Make up your mind."

I tried laughing but it came out more like a whimper.

"Let's go," she said, unlocking the door, sliding the bars to the left, and I thought, *that's the last time I'll ever have to hear that door scrape open.* I walked next to Letitia as we started down the broad central hall between the rows of cells, side by side like equals. Two free women. *Free.* I needed a tissue, but didn't have one. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

"You'll be back!" one of the women called to me from her cell. Others hooted and hollered. Cussed and shouted. "Yo, bitch! Gonna burn some more kiddies, huh?" *BB* they called me. Baby Burner, even though the people who died in the fire were two teenagers and an adult. I didn't fit in. It wasn't just that I was white. There were plenty of white women in the prison. It wasn't that I was young. Sixteen was the age at which you were tried as an adult in North Carolina, so there were plenty younger than me. It was, as Letitia told me the first week I got there, that "they can smell the money on you, girl." I didn't see how. I didn't look any different from them, but I guessed everybody knew my story. How I'd laid a fire around a church to let my firefighter boyfriend shine in the department. How I didn't set the fire when I realized kids would be in the church, but how Keith Weston lit a cigarette, tossing the match on the fuel I'd poured without realizing it was there. How people died and burned and had their lives totally screwed up. They all knew the details, and even though some of them had murdered people, maybe sticking a knife in their best friend's heart, or they sold drugs to junior-high kids or robbed a store or whatever, they stuck together and I was the outcast.

At the beginning of the year I'd thought about Martha Stewart a lot, how even though she was a rich white woman, she made all these friends in prison and they loved her. Adored her, even. How

she came out on top. I told myself maybe that's how it could be with me.

As Letitia and I went down the wide corridor between the cells, I remembered the first time I'd made that long walk. The hooting and name-calling. I didn't think of the women as people then. They seemed like wild dogs and I was afraid one of them would break loose and run after me. Now I knew better. They couldn't get out. I learned it wasn't when they were in their cells that they could hurt me, but out in the yard. I was beaten up twice, and for someone like me who'd never even been hit, it was terrible. Both times, it was a girl named Lizard. She was six feet tall with thin, straggly, almost colorless hair. She was skinny and her body seemed out of proportion to the long arms and legs she could wrap around you like strands of wire. She let me have it, for no reason I could think of except that she hated me, like so many of the others hated me. I wasn't good at getting beaten up. I didn't fight back well. I cowered, covering my face with my hands, while she pounded my ribs and tore handfuls of my dark hair out by the roots. I had one thought running through my mind: *I deserve this.* You see people getting beaten up in the movies and TV all the time. There'll be cuts and some blood, but you don't get to feel the fear while it's happening. The not-knowing-how-bad-it'll-get kind of fear. Or the pain that goes on for days. Letitia saved me both times. Then I was "Letitia's pretty baby." LPB. They had initials for everything. A lot of the initials I never did figure out because I wasn't part of the in crowd. I wasn't the only outsider, though. Not the only one getting picked on. I wasn't the weakest by far. They'd find the ones who were least able to defend themselves and move in for the kill. All I could think was, thank God Andy wasn't the one to land in prison. He would never have survived.

I got over the whole Martha Stewart fantasy real fast. After the

first couple of days, I didn't even try to make friends. I kept to myself, reading, thinking about how I was supposed to be in college at UNC Wilmington this year. Maybe a business major, which seemed totally ridiculous to me now. Business? What did that matter, really? Who could I help with a degree in business? What good could I do for anybody but myself and maybe some blood-sucking company? I tried to keep a journal, but I threw it away after a couple of months because I couldn't stand rereading what I'd written in the first few days about Ben and how I still loved him even though he betrayed me. How I did something so stupid out of love for him. How I killed people. *I took lives.* I wrote those words over and over on four or five pages of the journal like some third-grade punishment. I'd touch the latest cut on my lip from Lizard or the bruises that crisscrossed my legs and think *these are nothing.*

Letitia led me into a room that was the closest thing to freedom I'd seen in a year. It was the room where I'd checked into the prison, but it didn't look the same to me now that I was facing the windows instead of the door that led to the cells. There was a long counter, a few people working at desks behind it. There were orange plastic chairs along one wall. The windows looked out on a sky so blue I barely noticed the rows of barbed wire at the top of a tall chain-link fence. There was something else out there, too: a crowd on the other side of the fence. News vans. People with microphones. People carrying signs I couldn't read from inside the room. People yelling words I couldn't hear, punching the signs in the air. I knew that the crowd was there for me, and they weren't there to welcome me home.

"Yo, girl," Letitia said when she saw them. "Sure you don' wanna stay here wit' the devil you know?"

Letitia was a mind reader. I was shaking so hard my teeth chat-

tered. There was a kind of protection I had in my cell that I wouldn't have once I walked through the prison gate.

"You sign over here, Lockwood." A man behind the counter handed me a sheet of paper. I didn't bother reading it. Just scribbled my name. My hand jerked all over the place.

I spotted my mother and Uncle Marcus on the sidewalk leading up to the building. Delia Martinez, my tiny but tough lawyer, was with them, along with two guards, helping them push through the crowd. I reached for the doorknob.

"It's locked, girl," Letitia said. "They goin' buzz 'em through. Just hold on."

I heard the buzzer. One of the guards opened the door, and Mom and Uncle Marcus burst into the room, Delia behind them.

"Mama!" I said, though I'd never called her "mama" before in my life. We crashed into each other's arms, and then I started crying for real. I held on to her, sobbing, my eyes squinched shut, and I couldn't let go. I didn't care who was watching or if anyone thought I was holding on to her for too long. I didn't care if I seemed nine instead of nineteen. I didn't care if Mom had had enough—though I could tell she didn't care about anything either. It felt awesome, knowing that. Knowing she'd hold me as long as I needed to be held.

Uncle Marcus hugged me when Mom and I finally let go of each other. He smelled so good! If anyone had asked me how Uncle Marcus smelled, I would have said I didn't have a clue. But now that I could breathe in his aftershave or shampoo or whatever it was, I knew I'd been smelling that scent all my life. His hand squeezed my neck through my hair and he whispered in my ear, "I'm so glad you're coming home, babe," which started me crying all over again.

"When we go out there, Maggie," Delia said when I finally let go of Uncle Marcus, "you don't say a word. Okay? Eyes straight ahead.

No matter what you hear. What anybody says. No matter what questions they throw at you. Not a word. Got it?"

"Got it." I looked over my shoulder at Letitia, and she gave me her weird sneer.

"Don't ever wanna see you in here again, hear?" she said.

I nodded.

"Okay," Delia said. "Let's go."

The guards led us out, and the moment my feet hit the sidewalk, the people went crazy. I could see some of the signs now: Life for Lockwood. Murderer Maggie.

"Eyes straight ahead," Delia repeated, her hand on my elbow.

Mom's car was parked right outside the gate so I wouldn't have to walk very far through the crowd. Still, when we got close to the car, the camera crews threw microphones toward us on long poles. They shouted so many questions I couldn't separate one from another, not that I planned to answer any of them. I nearly dived into the car, Mom right behind me. Delia got in front, and Uncle Marcus jumped in the driver's seat.

People pressed against the car as Uncle Marcus slowly drove through the crowd. The car swayed and shook, and I pictured the mob of people lifting up one side of it and rolling it over, crushing us. I put my head down on my knees and protected it with my arms—the crash position for flying. I felt Mom lean over me, covering me like a blanket.

"All clear," Uncle Marcus called as we turned onto the road.

I lifted my head and the angry shouts of the crowd faded away. Would they follow us to our dead-end street in North Topsail? Surround our house? Who would protect me then?

I could hear Delia and Uncle Marcus talking quietly, but not what they were saying. After about a mile, we pulled to the side of the road behind a black Audi.

Delia turned around and reached for my hand. "I'm getting out here," she said. "Call if you need me. You stay tough."

"Okay," I whispered, thinking that I wasn't the tough one in the car. Delia was, and I owed my puny twelve-month sentence to her. She'd gotten a bunch of charges against me dismissed or reduced. I had mandatory counseling ahead of me, where I guess I was supposed to figure out why I did what I did so I never did it again. The fire had been a one-time deal. No question there. I didn't feel like talking to anyone about the whole frickin' mess. I wasn't sure *what* I needed, but I knew it had to be some kind of total overhaul, not a few sessions with a shrink. Then I had three hundred hours of community service. No college for me for a while. Restitution to the families, but Mom was managing that by taking money out of my inheritance from Daddy. How did you pay families for their dead kids?

You'd think after a year in prison, we'd have a lot to talk about, but it was quiet in the car. Sometimes there's so much to say that you don't know where to begin.

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