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Opening Extract from...

Buried Secrets

Written by Joseph Finder

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BURIED SECRETS

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headline

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Part One

There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told. Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes, die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed. Now and then, alas, the conscience of man takes up a burden so heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave. And thus the essence of all crime is undivulged.

– Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840)

ONE

If this was what a prison was like, Alexa Marcus thought, I could totally live here. Like, forever.

She and Taylor Armstrong, her best friend, were standing in a long line to get into the hottest bar in Boston. The bar was called Slammer, and it was in a luxury hotel that used to be a jail. They'd even kept the bars in the windows and the huge central rotunda ringed with catwalks, that whole cell-block effect.

She was checking out this bunch of guys behind her who looked like MIT frat boys trying too hard to be cool: the untucked shirts, the cheap blazers, all that product in their hair, the toxic fumes of their Axe body spray. They'd stumble home at two in the morning, puking on the bridge to Cambridge, bitching about how all the girls at Slammer were skanks.

'I'm loving the smoky eye,' Taylor said, studying Alexa's eye makeup. 'See? It looks amazing on you!'

'It took me like an hour,' Alexa said. The fake eyelashes, the black gel eyeliner and charcoal eye shadow: she looked

like a hooker who'd been beat up by her pimp.

'Takes me like *thirty seconds*,' Taylor said. 'Now look at you – you're this totally hot babe instead of a suburban prepster.'

'I'm *so* not suburban,' Alexa protested. She glanced over at a couple of skinny Euro-looking guys smoking and talking on their mobile phones. Cute but maybe gay? 'Dad lives in Manchester.' She'd almost said, '*I* live in Manchester,' but she no longer thought of the great rambling house she grew up in as her home, not since Dad had married that gold-digger flight attendant, Belinda. She hadn't lived at home in almost four years, since going away to Exeter.

'Yeah, okay,' Taylor said. Alexa caught her tone. Taylor always had to let you know she was a city kid. She'd grown up in a town-house on Beacon Hill, in Louisburg Square – her dad was a United States senator – and considered herself urban and therefore cooler and more street-smart than anyone else. Plus, the last three years she'd been in rehab, attending the Marston-Lee Academy, the tough-love 'therapeutic boarding school' in Colorado where the senator had sent her to get cleaned up.

Good luck with that.

Every time Taylor came back to Boston on break, she was rocking some different Girls Gone Wild look. Last year she'd dyed her hair jet black and had bangs. Tonight it was the skin-tight black liquid leggings, the oversized gray sheer tee over the black lace bra, the studded booties. Whereas Alexa, less adventurous, was wearing her ink skinny jeans and her tan Tory Burch leather jacket over a tank top. Okay, not as fashion-forward as Taylor, but no way was it *suburban*.

‘Oh God,’ Alexa murmured as the line drew closer to the bouncer.

‘Just relax, okay, *Lucia*?’ Taylor said.

‘Lucia—?’ Alexa began, and then she remembered that ‘Lucia’ was the name on her fake ID. Actually, it was a real ID, just not hers – she was seventeen, and Taylor had just turned eighteen, and the drinking age was twenty-one, which was way stupid. Taylor had bought Alexa’s fake ID off an older girl.

‘Just look the bouncer in the eye and be casual,’ Taylor said. ‘You’re *totally fine*.’

Taylor was right, of course.

The bouncer didn’t even ask to see their IDs. When they entered the hotel lobby, Alexa followed Taylor to the old-fashioned elevator, the kind that had an arrow that pointed to the floor it was on. The elevator door opened, and an iron accordion gate slid aside. Taylor got in along with a bunch of others. Alexa hesitated, slipped in, shuddered – God, she hated elevators! – and just as the accordion gate was knifing closed, she blurted out, ‘I’ll take the stairs.’

They met up on the fourth floor and managed to snag a couple of big cushy chairs. A waitress in a halter top so skimpy you could see the flower tattoo below her armpit took their order: a couple of Ketel One vodka sodas.

‘Check out the girls on the bar,’ Taylor shouted. Models in black leather butt-baring shorts and black leather vests were parading around on top of the bar like it was a catwalk.

One of the MIT frat boys tried to mack on them, but

Taylor blew the guy off: 'Yeah, I'll give you a call – next time I need tutoring in like *differential calculus*.'

Alexa felt Taylor's eyes on her.

'Hey, what's wrong, kid? You've been acting all depressed since you got here.'

'I'm fine.'

'You think maybe you need to change meds or something?'

Alexa shook her head. 'Dad's just, I don't know, being all weird.'

'Nothing new about that.'

'But like he's all paranoid all of a sudden? He just had these surveillance cameras put in, all around the house?'

'Well, he *is* like the richest guy in Boston. Or one of the richest—'

'I know, I know,' Alexa interrupted, not wanting to hear it. She'd spent her entire life dealing with being a rich kid: having to play down the money so her friends didn't feel jealous. 'But it's not his normal control-freak mode, you know? It's more like he's scared something's going to happen.'

'Try living with a father who's a friggin' United States senator.'

Taylor had started to look uncomfortable. She rolled her eyes, shook her head dismissively, looked around the now-crowded bar. 'I need another drink,' she said. She called the waitress over and asked for a dirty martini. 'How about you?' she asked Alexa.

'I'm good.' The truth was, she hated hard liquor, especially vodka. And gin was the worst. How could anyone voluntarily drink that stuff? It was like chugging turpentine.

Alexa's iPhone vibrated, so she took it out and read the text. A friend at some rager in Allston, telling her it was epic and she should come over. Alexa texted back sorry. Then, abruptly, she said, 'Oh my God, oh my God, did I ever show you this?' She flicked through her iPhone applications until she came to one she'd just downloaded, launched it, held the iPhone to her mouth. When she talked into it, her words came out high pitched and weird, like one of the Chipmunks: 'Hey, babe, wanna come back to my dorm and take off our clothes and do some algebra?'

Taylor squealed. 'What *is* that?' She tried to grab the phone, but Alexa yanked it away, swiped the screen and started speaking in the creepy voice of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings*: 'Must have preciousssss!'

Taylor shrieked, and they both laughed so hard that tears came to their eyes. 'See – you're feeling better already, right?' said Taylor.

'May I join you?' A male voice.

Alexa looked up, saw a guy standing there. Not one of the frat boys, though. *Definitely* not. This one had dark hair and brown eyes, a day's growth of beard, and he was totally a babe. Black shirt with white pinstripes, narrow waist, broad shoulders.

Alexa smiled, blushed – she couldn't help it – and looked at Taylor.

'Do we know you?' Taylor said.

'Not yet,' the guy said, flashing a dazzling smile. Late twenties, early thirties, maybe? Hard to tell. 'My friends ditched me. They went to a party in the South End I don't feel like going to.' He had some kind of Spanish accent.

'There's only two chairs,' Taylor said.

He said something to a couple seated next to them, slid a vacant chair over. Extended a hand to shake Taylor's, then Alexa's.

'I'm Lorenzo,' he said.

TWO

The bathroom had Molton Brown hand soap (Thai Vert) and real towels, folded into perfect squares. Alexa reapplied her lip gloss while Taylor touched up her eyes.

‘He’s totally into you,’ Taylor said.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Like you don’t know it.’ Taylor was outlining her eyes with a kohl pencil.

‘How old do you think he is?’

‘I don’t know, thirties?’

‘*Thirties?* I thought maybe thirty at the oldest. Do you think he knows we’re only . . .’ But another couple of girls entered the bathroom, and she let her sentence trail off.

‘Go for it,’ Taylor said. ‘It’s totally cool. I promise.’

When they finally succeeded in elbowing their way back to their chairs, the Black Eyed Peas blasting so loud her ears hurt, Alexa half-expected Lorenzo to be gone.

But he was still there, slouching a little in his chair, sipping his vodka. Alexa reached for her drink – a Peartini,

at Lorenzo's suggestion – and was surprised it was half gone. *Man*, she thought, *I am truly wasted*.

Lorenzo smiled that awesome smile. His eyes weren't just brown, she noticed. They were light brown. *Tiger's eye*, she thought. She had a tiger's eye choker her mom had given her a couple months before she died. She couldn't bring herself to wear it, but she loved looking at the stones.

'If you kids'll excuse me,' Taylor said, 'I really need to get going.'

'Taylor!' Alexa said.

'Why?' said Lorenzo. 'Please stay.'

'Can't,' Taylor said. 'My dad's waiting up for me.' With a conspiratorial sparkle in her eye, Taylor gave a little wave and disappeared into the crowd.

Lorenzo moved to Taylor's chair, next to Alexa's. 'That's okay. Tell me about you, Lucia. How come I never see you here before?'

For a moment she forgot who 'Lucia' was.

Now she was definitely drunk.

She felt like she was floating above the clouds, singing along to Rihanna, smiling like an idiot, while Lorenzo was saying something to her. The room swam. She was finding it hard to separate his voice from everyone else's, a cacophony of a thousand individual conversations, little snatches, layer upon layer upon layer, none of them making any sense. Her mouth was dry. She reached for her glass of Pellegrino, knocked it over. Smiled sheepishly. She just stared at the spill open-mouthed, amazed that the water glass hadn't broken, gave Lorenzo a goofy smile, and he gave that

spectacular smile back, his brown eyes soft and sexy. He reached over and dropped his napkin over the puddle to blot it up.

She said, 'I think I need to go home.'

'I take you,' he said.

He tossed a bunch of twenties on the table, stood, reached for her hand. She tried to stand but it felt like her knees were hinged. He took her hand again, his other hand around her waist, half-lifted her up.

'My car . . .'

'You shouldn't drive,' he said. 'I drive you home. You can get your car back tomorrow.'

'But . . .'

'It's not a problem. Come, Lucia.' He steered her through the crowd, his arms strong. People were staring at her, leering, laughter echoing, the lights streaky rainbow and glittery, like being underwater and looking up at the sky, everything so distant.

Now she felt the pleasant clear coolness of the late-night air on her face.

Traffic noise, the bleat of car horns, smearing by.

She was lying down on the back seat of a strange car, her cheek pressed against the cold hard cracked leather. The car smelled like stale cigarette smoke and beer. A few beer bottles rolled around on the floor. A Jag, she was pretty sure, but old and skeezy and filthy inside. Definitely not what she imagined a guy like Lorenzo driving.

'Do you know how to get there?' she tried to say. But the words came out slurred.

She felt seasick, hoped she wasn't going to vomit in the

back seat of Lorenzo's Jaguar. That would be nasty.

She wondered: How did he know where to go?

Now she heard the car door open and close. The engine had been shut off. Why was he stopping so soon?

When she opened her eyes, she noticed it was dark. No streetlights. No traffic sounds, either. Her sluggish brain registered a faint, distant alarm. Was he leaving her here? Where were they? What was he doing?

Someone was walking toward the Jaguar. It was too dark to make out his face. A lean, powerful build, that was all she could see.

The door opened, and the light came on, illuminating the man's face. Shaved head, piercing blue eyes, sharp jaw, unshaven. Handsome, until he smiled and showed brown rodent's teeth.

'Come with me, please,' the new man said.

She awoke in the back seat of a big new SUV. An Escalade, maybe, or a Navigator.

Very warm in here, almost hot. A smell like cheap air freshener.

She looked at the back of the driver's head. He had shaved black hair. On the back of his neck, a strange tattoo crawled up from beneath his sweatshirt. Her first thought was: angry eyes. A bird?

'What happened to Lorenzo?' she tried to say, but she wasn't sure what came out.

'Just stretch out and have yourself a nice rest, Alexa,' the man said. He had an accent too, but harsher, more guttural.

That sounded like a good idea. She felt herself drifting

off, but then her heart started to race, as if her body realized even before her mind did.

He knew her real name.