

Bad secrets are only bad until you tell someone. What is Maria's secret and who will help her get out of trouble?

Peter kicked his desk and stormed out of the classroom. Students in the rows next to him jumped, startled by the noise.

'Hey!' shouted Mr Clark, the maths teacher, to Peter's back as he continued down the corridor. 'Detention!' he called after him. Peter pushed his hands in his pockets, head down and shoulders up around his neck as if he was cold. It was the third time this month that he'd walked out of class.

Maria had forgotten her sports kit for class again. Last week, she'd avoided PE with a note from her mum. Her mother hadn't written it, of course. Maria had forged her mum's writing and hoped the sports teacher wouldn't notice. It was the second time she'd 'forgotten' her kit and towel this term. She was running out of excuses.

'Not good enough, Maria,' said her mother when the school called her to tell her Maria needed her kit. 'I put a clean towel on your bed this morning. I don't need the school calling and reminding me as if I'm a lazy mother. What's going on?'

'Nothing, Mum,' mumbled Maria.

'Look at me and speak clearly,' said her mum, annoyed. 'I can't understand a word you're saying.'

Maria carried on looking down at the floor. At least her mum hadn't found the dress or the new trainers or the earrings – the presents guiltily hidden in her wardrobe. Then she would really be furious. And she'd start asking questions that Maria didn't want to answer.

'Fine. But if you don't tell me, I can't help you.'

A week later, Peter and Maria were sitting outside the head teacher's office. Peter was staring at the wall angrily as if he was silently arguing with it. Maria glanced at him and then quickly back at her bitten fingernails and then back at him again. She didn't need to wonder why he was here because she was in his class. She'd never spoken to him before, but she'd seen him walk out of class. Today, she'd seen him kick the desk so hard it hit the window and cracked the glass.

She wished she was here for something easy and straightforward like that. If she had damaged school property, it would be easy to apologise and promise never to do it again. She would pay for the damage and everyone would forget about it. Boys, especially teenage boys, were just aggressive sometimes, weren't they?

She imagined the conversation Peter would have inside the head's office.

'Why did you do that? Do you know how much furniture and windows cost?' Mr Hughes would say.

'Sorry. I was just angry with the teacher. I have a bad temper sometimes,' Peter would reply.

'It's not just me you need to apologise to. Here's the bill for the damage. Just don't do it again and the problem's solved, OK?'

Easy.

This simple solution of 'I'm sorry' and money wouldn't work for her. She was in trouble again about refusing to do PE. Her mother was on the way to the school, and Maria knew she was going to be asked questions that might lead to more questions.

She watched Peter go in, slamming the door behind him. Even though she was sitting near the door, she couldn't hear any of their conversation. That meant they weren't shouting, so Peter was probably doing the apology part by now. After a few minutes, Peter left without looking at her. He didn't seem any less angry than before.

Maria didn't speak for eighteen minutes. She imagined herself floating above her mother's and Mr Hughes' heads, watching what was happening. Whenever they asked her a question, she lifted her shoulders in a silent shrug. It wasn't a great strategy, but it must have worked because they gave up eventually. It hadn't solved the real problem though. She could feel her phone vibrating inside her bag. She knew exactly who it was. Later she would have to answer his questions. Where had she been? Was she wearing the new dress? And detention wouldn't save her if he decided to wait outside school all night.

Peter and Maria were the only two students in detention on Monday. They were the only two on Tuesday too. They ignored each other on Monday, but exchanged nods on Tuesday. On Wednesday, Peter said, 'Hello again', when they arrived and Maria said, 'See you tomorrow', when they left. They both managed a smile at that.

On Thursday, Maria noticed bruises on Peter's stomach when he pulled his school bag over his head. They looked like they'd been there a while. He saw her staring and she looked away, pretending she hadn't seen anything. He pulled his shirt back down and his cheeks coloured. They didn't exchange words that day, but Maria felt as if, somehow, a kind of conversation had taken place anyway.

Maria wondered if Peter had someone he was afraid of. Someone who was nice at first and then later was like a different person. Someone who made him do things that made him feel uncomfortable. Someone who kept secrets and told him he had better be good at keeping secrets.

On Friday, she didn't bother putting her phone on silent. So what if the detention teacher saw the messages? Maybe that would be the beginning of the end of the nightmare. But the phone didn't make a sound. She deliberately pushed her sleeves up to above her elbows. She'd been so careful to hide her arms, but now the bruises were clearly on display. She remembered what her mother had said about helping her. She didn't say anything, but she hoped Peter would see them and hear the silent question. 'You too?'

Whatever Peter thought when he saw her arms, Maria didn't know because he left detention without a word. That night she waited until her mother was busy in the kitchen to talk to her.

She didn't know how to start. She practised different sentences in her head but she couldn't get the first word out of her mouth. 'Mum?' she said finally.

Her mother didn't look up from the vegetables she was preparing. 'Mmmm?'

'There's this boy at school and ...' Maria stopped. 'I saw something.'

'Saw what?' She had her mother's attention now.

'Something he didn't want me to see. A secret.'

'What kind of secret?' her mother said carefully.

'A bad secret – like I think someone is hurting him,' Maria said. But what if you tell someone and everyone thinks it's your fault? And what if you get someone in trouble and they get angry?'

'Bad secrets are only bad until you tell someone,' her mother said. 'This boy needs to tell someone. 'But he has to choose the right person. A person who isn't going to say it's his fault, who's going to help.'

'Who is the right person?' asked Maria.

'An adult,' said her mother. 'One he trusts.'

Maria took a deep breath. She took her phone out of her bag and opened up the messages. The first word still wouldn't come. 'Mum?' she said finally. 'I have to tell you something ...'

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