

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

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

'Hey!' shouted Mr Clark, the maths teacher, to Peter's back. '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 didn't have her sports kit for class again. It was the second time she'd 'forgotten' her kit and towel this term. She didn't have any more excuses.

'Not good enough, Maria,' said her mother when the school called her. 'I put a clean towel on your bed this morning. What's going on?'

'Nothing, Mum,' said Maria, not loudly enough for her mum to hear.

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

Maria didn't look up. She didn't want her mother to ask questions. At least her mum hadn't found the dress or the new trainers or the earrings – the presents that Maria had hidden in her wardrobe. Maria didn't want to explain where, or who, they came from. That would be bad. And there would be more 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 outside the school principal's office. Peter was looking at the wall angrily. Maria looked at him and then quickly looked away again. She knew why he was here because she was in his class. Today, he'd hit the desk so hard it hit the window and broke the glass.

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

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

'Sorry. I was just angry with the teacher. I get angry 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 had refused to do PE again. Her mother was on the way to the school. Maria knew there would be questions. Questions that might bring more questions.

She watched Peter go in. She couldn't hear any of their conversation so they weren't shouting. Peter was probably doing the apology part now. After a few minutes, Peter left without looking at her. He still looked angry.

Maria didn't speak for eighteen minutes. She imagined herself floating above her mother's and Principal Hughes' heads, watching what was happening. When they asked her a question, she lifted her shoulders in a silent shrug. It wasn't a great plan, but it must have worked because they stopped asking after a while. Unfortunately, it hadn't solved the real problem though. She could feel her phone vibrating inside her bag. She knew it was him. Later she would have to answer his questions. Where had she been? Was she wearing her 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 didn't look at each other on Monday, but they 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 looking. She looked away as if she hadn't seen anything. He pulled his shirt back down and his cheeks went pink. They didn't exchange words that day, but Maria felt as if, somehow, it was a kind of conversation.

Maria wondered if Peter had someone he was afraid of. Someone who was nice at first and then later seemed to change into a different person. Someone who made him do things that made him feel uncomfortable. Someone who kept secrets and told him he had to keep secrets too.

On Friday, she decided not to put 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 pushed her sleeves up to above her elbows. For two months, she'd been so careful to hide her arms, but now the bruises were clear. She remembered what her mother had said about helping her. It was time to start talking, time to start answering questions so someone could help. She didn't say anything, but she hoped Peter would see her arms 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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