

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

Peter kicked his desk and walked out of the classroom.

'Hey!' shouted Mr Clark, the maths teacher, to Peter's back. 'Detention!' he called, but Peter didn't stop. Peter often walked out of class.

Maria didn't have her sports kit for class again. It was the second time this term. 'I forgot it,' she told the teacher. But it wasn't true.

'What's wrong, Maria?' asked her mother when the school called her. 'I put your clean sports kit on your bed this morning.'

'Nothing, Mum,' said Maria very quietly.

'Look at me and speak clearly,' said her mother, angry. 'I can't understand you.'

Maria didn't look up. She didn't want to answer any questions. She didn't want her mum to find the dress or the trainers either. Maria didn't want to explain where they came from. If her mum saw them there would be a lot more questions. 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. She knew why he was here because she was in his class. She saw him kick his desk so hard that it broke.

She imagined the conversation between Peter and the principal.

Principal Hughes: 'Why did you do that? Desks are expensive!'

Peter: 'Sorry. I get angry sometimes.'

Principal Hughes: 'You should say sorry to your teacher, not to me. And you can pay for the desk. Don't do it again, OK?'

Easy.

Money and 'I'm sorry' won't work for me,' Maria thought. Her mother was coming to school because the PE teacher wasn't happy. They were going to ask questions. Questions that might bring more questions.

Peter went in to the principal's office. She couldn't hear any of their conversation so they weren't shouting. Peter was probably saying sorry now. After a few minutes, Peter left. He didn't look at her. He was still angry.

Maria didn't speak for eighteen minutes. When her mother or Principal Hughes asked a question, she stayed silent. They stopped asking after a while. But that wasn't the real problem. 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 her new dress? And detention didn't really help her – he could wait outside school all night.

Peter and Maria were the only two people in detention on Monday. They were the only two on Tuesday too. They didn't look at each other on Monday, but they did on Tuesday. On Wednesday, Peter said, 'Hello again' when they arrived and Maria said, 'See you tomorrow', when they left. They both smiled at that.

On Thursday, Maria saw bruises on Peter's stomach when he pulled his school bag over his head. They looked old. He saw her looking. She looked away. He pulled his shirt back down and his face went pink. They didn't speak that day, but Maria felt it was like a conversation.

Does Peter have someone he's afraid of? Maria asked herself. Do they tell him to keep secrets? She knew how it felt. She knew the horrible feeling. Someone could be nice and then change. They could make you do things that you didn't really want to do.

On Friday, she decided not to put her phone on silent. She wanted the detention teacher to see the messages now. Maybe that would make it all stop. But the phone didn't make a sound. She pushed her jumper higher on her arms. For the first time in two months, you could see the bruises. She remembered the conversation with her mother: 'If you don't tell me, I can't help you.' It was time to start talking. It was time to answer questions. It was time to get help.

She didn't say anything, but she hoped Peter would see her arms and hear the silent question. 'You too?'

Maria didn't know what Peter thought when he saw her arms because he left detention without a word. That night she went to talk to her mother in the kitchen.

She didn't know how to start. 'Mum?' she said finally.

Her mother continued with the vegetables she was preparing. 'Mmmm?'

'There's a 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 the person is angry that you told someone?'

'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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