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Maggie Come Lateley

MICHELLE BUCKMAN



Sample from *Maggie Come Lateley* / ISBN 160006082X

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To teenage girls everywhere — live your faith, love for life.

P R O L O G U E

SHE KNEW INSTINCTIVELY that Maggie was leaning against the door. She didn't care. She had to take a shower. The baby book said so: "*When the baby's crying makes you too tense, place him safely in his crib and take a shower. It will relax you and drown out the noise of his crying.*"

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Hot water rained down her face, slid over her skin, and splashed at her feet. Steam rose around her. The sound of the water blocked out Billy's whimpers. In the confines of the shower, she was alone. Billy was in his crib. Tony was on the sofa where he'd fallen asleep watching a dinosaur movie. Her daughter, Maggie, was supposed to be playing dolls, but she didn't care what the little girl was doing, as long as there were no small hands pulling at her, no small voice pleading for attention. Maybe Billy would cry himself to sleep and she could slip into bed after her shower, just for a short nap.

Weariness dragged at her.

She scoured her skin with a pale blue washcloth, washing away the drudgery, then lathered her legs and picked up Frank's old double-edged razor to scrape away the shadow of three days' stubble. She loved watching it disappear strip by strip. Sweeping

one hand along her bared skin, she reveled in the idea of being a teenager again. Again? She was only twenty. Dreams of high school filled her mind: spending time with her friends, getting ready to go out on the town during those years before responsibility, before feeling trapped and helpless in motherhood before her time.

She pulled the razor around her kneecap and started again at the bottom. One, two, three strips. The fourth pass nicked her skin right at her ankle bone. She watched the blood ooze out and seep down her foot, mesmerizing her. It didn't hurt. She plugged the drain, then dropped to the bottom of the tub and propped her foot up against the side, watching it, thinking.

Frank had suggested she go back to the doctor, but what did he know? He was seven years older than she was. He hadn't missed out on high school, the part of life everyone else told stories about for years afterward. He couldn't understand what was going on in her head. He expected her to push herself out of this morose hole of postpartum depression. He couldn't understand it was quicksand that sucked ever harder, despite her thrashing lunges toward normalcy.

She told him she'd been back to the doctor, but she hadn't. What she wanted was to wake up and discover her world the way it used to be—life outside this house, outside of motherhood and marriage. Was this all there was? Laundry and dishes and dirty diapers? She remembered dancing and parties and kissing in the moonlight. She remembered life. What could the doctor do to bring that back? He couldn't change what she had become.

The baby was screaming now. Wincing at the noise, she squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to ignore his pleas.

The water was rising in the tub, hugging her feet, her buttocks, edging up her body, cloaking her in warmth. The cut

didn't sting like she expected. She'd cringe at a needle. She'd suck at a paper cut. But her foot, bathed in the warm water, didn't hurt.

Maggie pounded on the door. "Mommy, can I come in?"

Water still showered down, pelting every part of her. "Go away. I'll be out in a few minutes."

A thump. Maggie was sulking against the door, she knew.

"Let her," she mumbled. Even as she said it aloud, she regretted it. She loved her daughter, her redheaded baby with wide green eyes and a dimpled smile full of tiny, perfect teeth. She loved all three of her kids. But she wanted more. Somehow she'd lost sight of who she was, of who she was supposed to be when she grew up, and she didn't know how to get that vision back. It was like wandering around in a cave with a flashlight that was losing battery power, its light diminishing to a narrow beam cast into nothingness.

The blood was slowing. She looked at the razor. It moved of its own will, perhaps.

More blood. More peace to draw on.

She watched the blade as if it were in a stranger's hand. One hand to the other wrist. Away from the arguments with Frank. Away from the problems, the bills, the reality.

Pain seared through her as red gushed from her wrist. It made her sleepy to see it pouring out, blending into the water, running off her skin, rushing away.

"Mommy? Mommy!"

She sighed and made an effort to answer over the noise of the shower. "What?"

Maggie's voice sounded small, far away, muffled against the door. "Don't be mad at me, Mommy. I'll be a good girl."

She couldn't take her eyes off the red turning translucent in the stream of water. The water on her face warbled her words. "I'm not mad at you."

Maggie's voice rose a notch, hopeful, questioning. "I love you, Mommy."

Her lungs ached with shallow, inadequate breaths. *I love you, Maggie. I love you, but it feels so insufficient, so inconsequential. Who am I?*

Gradually, the blood ran slower. Her limbs hung heavily, too heavy to raise. Her chin hung low, as if in mockery of the haughty air she'd so often displayed, of the look she'd given her mother when she'd announced she was pregnant with Maggie at sixteen. She didn't feel haughty now.

"Mommy, I want you to hold me."

She could only turn her eyes toward the door. The love emanating from the little body on the other side drifted to her in a haze and brought unexpected warmth, followed almost immediately by a bone-deep chill as if the love had been sucked away. With sudden clarity, she realized where she was, what she was losing—the very meaning of existence: love. The thought came as her life ebbed away.

Her voice dissipated to a whisper. "I'm so sorry."

Four-year-old Maggie crumpled into a ball, knowing with the strange instinct of the very young that her life had just shifted and a void had appeared. The path before her would be walked alone.

Chapter One

MAGGIE DROPPED HER book bag on the floor and slumped against the kitchen counter. “Happy birthday to me.” The kitchen looked exactly as she’d left it that morning before school. Fluorescent green plastic bowls, the ones she’d splurged on at Wal-Mart last month, sat on the counter with dried-up milk cementing scraps of cereal to the edges. The pan from last night’s pork chops soaked in a sink of murky water—the suds replaced by globs of oil floating on the surface. A ragged dishcloth hung over the tap. Lime green monkey place mats—she loved monkeys—sat askew on the heavy oak table. A clay napkin holder that Tony had made in fifth grade sat in the center with one limp paper napkin collapsed upon itself.

No miraculously clean kitchen. No cake or flowers in sight. No balloons. No presents. Not that she wanted balloons or flowers, really, but something to commemorate turning sixteen would’ve been nice.

During the first years after her mother’s death, her father made an attempt to keep things normal. He bought her a birthday cake and hung streamers all over the house—at least on her fifth birthday. But maybe that was only because back then her grandmother

was checking in on her and her brothers. Meemaw had said that the three of them were her last ties to her daughter and that they ought to live with her because she had no faith in their daddy's raising them properly by himself. She said he had no notion of what to do with three babies. But her father stood his ground, and Meemaw eventually gave up and returned to Arizona. Since then her existence had faded into birthday cards, Christmas presents, and her annual letter, sent on the anniversary of the suicide to remind the three of them what a wonderful mother they'd had.

Some kind of wonderful.

Billy sauntered through the kitchen door and dropped the mail on the table. "Look, my skateboarding magazine finally came." He slapped the magazine on the counter in front of her, pulled a mason jar out of a cabinet, and filled it to the top with apple juice.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to drink the entire jug in one sitting? Save some for the rest of us. I can't get any more till next week."

He gulped it down, left the jar and the jug of juice on the counter, snatched up his magazine, and kept going. "I need some help with my math homework later, but I gotta go to Brad's house to practice soccer first. Later." The back door slammed behind him, rattling the tiny metal chimes hanging from the eaves of the porch.

Over the past couple of years, life had moved to a new level where her brothers no longer needed her in the sweet, loving way they had when they were little. They seemed to need her more nowadays, but in a detached, demanding way. Sure, Billy still sought her help with homework once in a while and sometimes even asked her advice about things, but the hugs she used to get regularly now came fewer and farther between. She wondered how long it would

be before he didn't need her at all, like Tony, who expected just as much from her but no longer gave any affection in return.

She sighed as she poured herself a small glass of juice and placed the jug back in the refrigerator before moving to the table to sort through the mail. Most of the envelopes were bills, but one was a card. "From Meemaw, of course." She tore it open and ran her fingers over the rose embossed on the front. A grown-up card, not some kiddy picture like years past, as if she finally just matured today. Meemaw didn't realize she'd been a grown-up for as long as she could remember, responsible for her brothers and the house and everything else her father couldn't handle.

A fifty-dollar bill lay inside. She gasped. *Fifty dollars!* Meemaw usually sent ten, which the boys spent long before it arrived every year. So, in truth, did she. But fifty dollars changed the game completely. She wouldn't spend it without really thinking through the purchase.

There was a verse inside about her sweet sixteen, but the scrawled note caught her attention first:

Margaret Ann,

*Today you are sixteen, a momentous occasion in a girl's life,
an official declaration that you are no longer a child, but a
woman. Step wisely, dear granddaughter, for on her sweet
sixteen, your mother, my sweet daughter, conceived you.*

Love and Blessings,

Meemaw

Maggie's hands trembled. She hadn't thought of her sixteenth birthday in those terms—her mother pregnant with her. Had she been scared? Scared to tell Meemaw? Scared to tell Daddy?

The back door creaked open, admitting Tony and his friend Webb. Webb was in the tenth grade like her, and a year older than Tony, but since Webb lived at the top of the hill, the two boys had been friends forever.

Tony peered into the refrigerator, his long brown hair flopping into his face. “What is there to eat?”

“Saltine crackers.”

Webb leaned against the wall. He wasn’t growing his hair out like most boys his age. It was just the right length, to his collar, and sleek black and shiny, not wavy red knots of hair like hers, or scraggly like Tony’s greasy mop. She noticed he had a bit of fuzz growing on his upper lip and wondered when he would shave it off.

Tony still had his head stuck in the refrigerator. “Crackers? I need some real food.”

“That’s what was on sale this week, so that’s what we’ve got.”

“Hey, Webb, how about a bologna sandwich?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“The bologna is for lunch, Tony. Crackers or nothing.”

He plopped the meat on the island and opened the pantry looking for bread.

“I said no. Put it back.”

“What’s it to you?”

“We have to get a new washing machine. I told you that. So we’re cutting back on groceries. Now eat crackers or you can wear your clothes dirty the rest of your life, ’cause I’m sure not washing them by hand.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Fine. Eat all you want. Just don’t cry to me when your clothes don’t get washed.”

Webb leaned forward and slapped his arm. “C’mon, man, let’s go to my house.”

“Whatever,” Tony said, following him out the door.

“Don’t forget you have to practice guitar,” Maggie hollered after him, “and you have that English paper due.”

Maggie watched them go, watched Webb go, and fingered the card still clasped in her hand. *My mother pregnant at sixteen, and I haven’t even been kissed.*