

BENEATH THE SURFACE -
EXCERPT

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

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There are no secrets in life; just hidden truths that lie beneath the surface.

- MICHAEL C. HALL

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Content Warning: Elements of this novel may include death and/or dying, suicide, drug and alcohol use/abuse, abuse (physical, mental, emotional, verbal, sexual), and self-harm. Some readers may find these triggering.

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THE ROOM WAS dark and chilly, with only the moonlight for illumination. Grace woke, soaked in sweat, feeling lost and unsure of where she was. Images from the dream flashed through her mind. Blood-splattered walls. Loud, insistent sirens. Gurgling water. Sharp thorns from overgrown bushes. Stinging cuts on her arms. An abandoned trail. Someone yanking her arm, pulling her along. Running. Panting. Now, she was awake and short of breath. Her eyes darted around the room, trying to remember where she was. She placed her hand to her pounding chest. The room smelled damp, like wet towels marinating on the floor for days. Relief overwhelmed her. She was in her bedroom. She took a deep breath, but the images lingered.

Another nightmare. Just another nightmare. That was all. Eventually the fear, and a feeling she couldn't quite place, subsided. The song from *Frozen* popped into her head. Oh, for fuck's sake. She hadn't heard that song in years. How did she still know every word, even now at seventeen? Still, it was enough to break her from the nightmare's hold. She picked up her damp hair, the curls clinging around her fingers, and splayed it out behind her on the pillow. Minutes ticked by. She stared at the ceiling as sleep eluded her. The *Frozen* song continued. *Let it go, let it go.*

She leaned over the side of her bed and grabbed her phone from the floor.

It read: 1:43 a.m. *She groaned, placing the phone under her pillow. She still needed to get through the rest of the night.*

The apartment was quiet. Too quiet. Her father had yet to come home. Maybe he was dead, she mused. Wouldn't that make things easier? Knowing she wouldn't have to face him tonight, she pulled the worn covers up around her. She hugged her knees against her chest, trying to fit comfortably on the tiny bed. At five feet ten inches, it was a challenge. Sighing, she flipped over, doubled her deflated pillow in two, and began crafting her favourite dream: her own bedroom with lots of fat pillows and thick, warm bedcovers blanketing the enormous bed. Bedside tables, stacked with books, and simple lamps to read by.

Shivering at the bitter cold coming through the cracked window, she added long, heavy curtains to her wish list. Ones thick enough to keep out the winter cold. Geez, she would be happy with windows she could actually open, snapping her back to reality. Hell, she was lucky to have a roof over her head. That hadn't always been the case.

She returned to her nightmare. Images of red flashed through her mind. She rubbed her hands along her arms, reassuring herself there were no cuts. But she felt as if there were. Everything in the dream felt real. The nightmares were always the same and they were coming more frequently of late. What was that about? She didn't understand it. She yawned, pushed the thoughts aside, and turned toward the cold cinderblock wall. Thinking again of the image of the beautiful bedroom she would one day have, she finally drifted back to sleep.

Grace's crusty eyes flew open, when she heard her father's keys thunk against the front door. When they hit the ground, he cursed loudly, his hand slamming against the door. She scoffed, knowing it was probably to balance himself. Grace eased up from her pillows, and reached for her phone underneath. The brightness seared her eyes, sending pain zinging into the back of her head. She adjusted quickly. The display read: 2:36 a.m.

Shit.

"Grace! Get tha fuck... here!" His words slurred more than usual. She could barely understand him. "Now!"

The front door slammed behind him with a metallic thud. She was sure the neighbours next door were aware of her father's return. Who was she kidding? The whole complex probably heard him. How could they not? Especially at this time of night.

She eased out of bed, her heart in her throat. Trouble was coming. Taking the risk, she reluctantly opened her bedroom door a little. The light blinded her momentarily. She smelled her father before she saw him, a stark aroma she couldn't quite place.

"Yes?" she whispered.

"I said, git tha fuck ou here!" he bellowed. Neighbours definitely heard that one. She opened her door a little further, her eyes adjusting to the brightness, assessing the scene. There was no way she was going to walk out to him, so she kept the door as a barrier between them.

Her father slouched at the front door, his stained jeans hanging off his hips, his hands thrust into his pockets. He was tall at six feet, but his thinness made him look gaunt in his oversized blue t-shirt. His greasy brown hair flopped onto his forehead, accentuating the deep lines etched into his face. He looked a decade older than his fifty years. His boots were wet even though it was not raining outside. She hated to think from what. She opened the door further but stayed where she was.

"Dad, I have school tomorrow," she said, leaning heavily against the door. She was exhausted, but her mind was on high alert. She could feel his anger from across the room.

"Dun give a fuck wha' ya doin' tomorrow. I's what ya did t'day. Stealin' fr'm me now?" God, he was plastered.

"What? No." She bolted upright, defensive against the accusation. Stealing? What the hell did that mean? "I mean, I grabbed some money from your wallet. We needed food, and you were still asleep this morning when I left."

"You stup'd bitch. I need'd tha money."

"Sorry, but we had nothing to eat," Grace mumbled, picking at her cuticles.

"Wha? Ya job does'n pay now?" She wanted to scoff. He knew it didn't pay much, but at least it covered the rent he never seemed to have the money for.

"It's not enough to live on," she said. He had to know that.

"Don't backtalk me!" he roared, his speech now clear. Before she knew it, he was across the room and dragging her back toward him by her hair. She yelped, trying to twist and find her footing at the same time. She could smell the cheap beer and that unfamiliar stink. Damn, he was using, but she just didn't recognise what.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she cried. "I wasn't stealing, I swear." He pushed her hard against the wall. The force knocked the wind out of her.

"Ya don know wha you did." His sticky fingers dug into her arm. She locked eyes with him. He blinked and for a moment, she saw him, her father, looking at her with a gentleness she hadn't seen in a long time. He released his tight grip a little. He seemed confused, as if in a daze. Was this fit over? He blinked again, and her father was gone. All that was left was rage, dilated pupils and the rank smell that was making her feel nauseous. Not knowing what he was on frightened her more than his fists. At least his fists were somewhat predictable.

"It was only twenty dollars," she gasped when his grip retightened around her arms. She knew what was coming.

He whipped her around and pushed her up against the wall, pinning her arm behind her. Her face was wedged flat against the cold brick. She whimpered in pain, too afraid to scream. She didn't dare move, knowing she was in a position where he could snap her arm. He'd done it before.

"You're a fuckin' thief." His rancid breath expelled against her cheek. She felt the spittle left behind as he hurled the accusing words at her. "I don' need this shit. One more time an' you're out, ya hear me?" She nodded, tears in her eyes. To be certain she was listening, he lifted her arm higher up her back, driving unbearable pain. His left fist rammed into her kidneys, leaving her breathless. He released her, and she crumpled to the floor. He kicked her squarely in the ribs, then stumbled off to the bathroom.

"Stupid, fuckin' bitch."

She lay on the floor until she heard the bathroom door close. Then, leveraging herself up using the nearby chair, she limped quietly back to her room and softly closed the door. Ignoring the pain, she rushed to the chair in the room's corner, tossed her uniform to the floor, and

shoved the chair under the door handle. She needed to protect herself from another beating tonight.

She listened for her father's movements. The splash of urine in the bowl carried in the small apartment, and ignoring the flusher, she heard the bathroom tap rush with water. Grace stayed at the door, hunched over in pain, listening, waiting. She could barely move, barely breathe. Everything hurt. But it wasn't her first rodeo. She knew with his kick that he'd broken a rib. Maybe two.

Grace held her breath when she heard her father stumble past her room. She jumped when he beat his fist against her door. But he kept going. He slammed his own bedroom door with another expletive. She yelled. Then, finally, the place was silent. She released her breath, knowing he'd be passed out, splayed across his bed, still dressed in his soiled clothes. What the hell was going on with him?

Guessing his rage was doused for the night, Grace took a deep breath but felt the pain shoot through her like she'd been prodded by a hot poker. She'd be sore for weeks. She needed to avoid him. Usually, he left her alone for a week or two after the beatings. But lately, something had changed. It left her feeling uncertain. No, not uncertain, scared. Only months before, he was predictable. Now she didn't know what to think. She was anxious. Her nails were surrounded by strips of bloodied raw flesh and wisps of dangling skin, her cuticles eager to be picked.

Grace tiptoed to her bed, reached down, and doubled her two thin pillows over to sleep in a more upright position. It was a trick she learned last time. She eased herself down on to the bed and froze when the springs creaked. Thankfully, the only sound coming from her father's room was his snoring. She lay her head against the pillows and let her breathing return to normal, at least as normal as it could be with a broken rib, then let the tears stream silently down her face.

Four more months. Just four more months. Turn eighteen. Finish high school. Freedom. That was her mantra. She couldn't wait to move on from this miserable life. She was exhausted, emotionally and physically. Getting beaten up was no dream. She missed her dad. She missed the fun times they had in the past. But that was a long time ago. Since moving to Sydney, things had changed. She didn't know

why and and there was no way she was going to ask him. She just had to get out.

But then what? Dread filled her. She had no money to live on, no way to support herself. She covered the rent of their cheap, mouldy, bottom level apartment in North Ryde, but she could barely afford to buy groceries with what was left. She was stuck. And yet, she had no choice but to get away from her father. The question was how? Her friend Lowell offered his place to stay, but... No. he didn't need her mooching off him. She would work something out. She had to. Whatever her father was into now, he was becoming dangerous.

Maybe she should stay with Lowell, even if it was for a little while. At least until she found somewhere else. But...no. His apartment was tiny, barely enough for him. And, he'd just opened his own business. He didn't have room for her, and he certainly didn't need some seventeen-year-old to deal with either. Still, Sydney was expensive. Maybe she'd have to get out of the city, find somewhere cheaper. But where?

Four more months. Just four more months. Turn eighteen. Finish high school. Freedom.

Yeah, she didn't need this shit either.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 2011, Tara ditched the corporate desk, emptied her nest in 2017, and travelled the world for three years, working as a travel writer and photographer. Today, she lives in Tasmania, Australia. She has pivoted her writing focus to fictional stories, writing about women overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges, revealing who they are and what they're made of.

If you enjoyed this chapter, you can find *Beneath the Surface* on Amazon, Apple, Kobo, Barnes & Noble, and wherever you find your favourite books.

Tara publishes a monthly newsletter, sharing information about the books she's currently working on, her writing process and other random nuggets.

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