

LEST SHE FORGET by Lisa Malice

EXCERPT

The loud heavy beat of my heart echoes in my ears, pulsing in sync with the car's wipers as they furiously slap at the snow alighting the windshield. The frantic rhythm draws me in as I stare ahead into the darkening night and the thick snowflakes swirling in the beams of the headlights. The effect is almost mesmerizing.

My eyelids start to droop. I want nothing more than to sleep, let my mind shut off. Under slumber's spell, the ache in my heart would subside, the guilt in my soul would vanish, and, if I was lucky, I'd wake up to find that the words I heard earlier today were just part of a gruesome dream, an awful nightmare.

She's dead.

My chest tightens, my heart races as my thoughts are pulled toward our last moments together. Fraught with suspicion, accusations, anger. My eyes tear up.

It's your fault.

The words reverberate in my ears as my head starts to throb. How could I have been so stupid and naïve to fall for that man's lies, his manipulations? If I could go back in time and change everything, fix my mistakes, right a host of wrongs, I would. Things would have turned out differently. Two—*no, three*—people would still be alive. But there's no going back. Worse, I see no path forward, at least not one I can live with.

My gaze is drawn to a hazy pair of headlights reflected in the rearview mirror. A chill runs down my spine, even as a bead of sweat trickles down the side of my face. My fingers, clenched atop the steering wheel, go numb as my foot presses down on the accelerator.

"Calm down," I tell myself. I can't let fear trick me into imagining what is not there.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second, then open them again and glance into the side mirror. They're still there, those headlights, keeping pace with me. I focus on the road in front of me, take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Get a grip," I tell myself. "If he wanted me dead, I wouldn't have made it this far."

Staring ahead, a forest of tall pines engulfs the road, blocking out much of the remaining daylight and casting a gloom all around that grows blacker and grimmer with each fleeting

moment. But I can't go back. Not now. I'd have to face the truth, accept my own culpability, surrender myself, my life, my future. I'm not ready to do that.

I turn on the radio and press the scan button, hoping for a distraction. Music pours through the speakers in short clips—Spanish, hard rock, country, polka—and then a soft, familiar melody, its words just on the tip of my tongue.

“ . . . I would surrender my soul, if it would bring back yours . . . ”

My gut twists with remorse. The pain is cut short as the radio scanner moves to the next station.

“ . . . Could you forgive me, if I made it to Heaven . . . ”

Tears well up in my eyes as the radio, again, moves on.

“ . . . My name won't be on St. Peter's list . . . ”

A mournful sob erupts from deep inside me. My hands, clutching the steering wheel, suddenly go weak and start to tremble. Those songs, their lyrics—words that never held any personal meaning—now haunt me. It's as if some cosmic disc jockey knows what I've done and doesn't want—no—won't let me forget it.

“Please, no more!” I shout.

A woman's voice pops over the speakers, a news program. “Finally, I sigh, poking the scan button to set the station.

“ . . . it's time for a quick station break, after which we'll go to a weather update with WCVA's meteorologist, Alec Bohanan. Our weather team says this blizzard hitting Virginia and much of the East Coast, the first significant snow event of 2017, is a bad one. It could be a killer, so sit tight at home and keep your radio dial tuned to this station . . . ”

She's right. The snow is coming down thicker and heavier with each passing mile. The roads will only get worse. But I need to press on. I must get home. I can think better there. Figure out what options I have left.

My attention is pulled back to the voice on the radio. “When the last segment of *The June Jeffries Show* returns, we'll join the Virginia State Police press conference with breaking news on the missing person case of—”

It's your fault.

The words echo in my ears, pulsing louder and faster with each echo, drowning out the newscaster's voice. I slam my fist down on the radio's power button.

Suddenly, flashes of light bounce off the windshield. The muscles in my jaw tighten. My neck stiffens. My hands, locked in a death grip on the steering wheel, grow cold, numb. My gaze darts to the rearview mirror. Unable to look away from the looming vehicle behind me, I throw my left arm up to block its intense beams.

The steering wheel jerks to the right, pitching the passenger-side wheels off the road. I grasp the steering wheel with both hands and pull to the left, but overcorrect. The car careens across the snow-swept blacktop, skids beyond the center line.

When I finally pull the car into the right lane, my heart is pounding, my body trembling, while my grip on the steering wheel goes weak.