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The
Things
We
Leave
Behind

A PREQUEL NOVELLA

TANYA ANNE CROSBY
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*the
things
we
leave
behind*

TANYA ANNE CROSBY

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CONTENTS

Foreword

Chapter 1

Also by Tanya Anne Crosby

About the Author

FOREWORD

Dearest reader,

I am fortunate to have such amazing readers, who are ready and willing to follow me into new worlds. This is a compliment above all compliments and the greatest gift you can give me as a writer. It says you trust me, and for that, I thank you.

Once again, “The Girl Who Stayed” is something different for me, although with the same voice my readers have come to anticipate. I believe that people are pretty much the same, regardless of era, physical space or culture and this is the essence of my storytelling. I strive for characters you will relate to, no matter where or when they may have lived.

“The Girl Who Stayed” is also a book of the heart and I couldn't be more thrilled to see its publication. In my twenty-six years of publishing, it's my first major hardcover release and brings me full circle to work with Lou Aronica, whom I first had the pleasure of working with while at Avon Books. It's also my very first non-genre novel, although you will find it a signature Tanya Anne Crosby read, filled with flawed characters, and brimming with emotion.

Set in Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, this book takes me home and is both deeply personal and intensely satisfying, in terms of pushing the

storytelling envelope. In a sense I've opened a vein with Zoe's story. I hope you'll enjoy her, and pull for her as she faces the greatest challenge of her life. "The Things We Leave Behind" is a prequel to "The Girl Who Stayed," a heartfelt gift to my loyal readers.

From me to you, happy reading!

Tanya Anne Crosby

If the house were on fire, what would you save? *The cat? The computer? The only existing picture of your dead sister?* Rather, the question should be: What would you be willing to lose?

For Zoe Rutherford the answer was: *everything*.

She had been hedging her bets now for years, making no decision at all rather than make a bad one. But that, in itself, was a decision, she realized, and this was where it was headed all along.

Directly above her head, blood peppered the ceiling, a “castoff” spray that permeated the pimply white paint. It looked a little as though someone had taken a straw filled with red paint and aimed it high. But then again, wasn’t that essentially what happened when you opened a vein? Not the creative sort, the ones beneath your flesh.

Essentially, blood left the body in a number of ways. It might spurt, drip, spray, ooze or gush. And even if you didn’t hit an artery, head wounds bled more than most. The stain on the textured ceiling above was a spatter pattern, consisting of minute red stains that reached areas of the ceiling no human hands had touched since the sheetrock was taped and bedded. At five-foot five, there was no way Zoe could reach up to wipe away the evidence and, more to the point, she wasn’t in the mood to try.

There were a number of spots on the backsplash as well, behind the oven, which might have easily been the remnants of a fat, juicy steak, but if they tested the blood Zoe was pretty sure they'd find human DNA. The spatters had been there about a week now. Neither she nor Chris had bothered to wipe them off—Zoe, because she couldn't see fit to put more effort into this pretense. And Chris most likely because he'd found it easier to keep his blinders on. Stopping to see and, consequently, wipe down blood stains would mean that he would have to face what happened here that day, and he was a master at denial. To be fair, so was Zoe.

But not today.

“What time will you be home?” she'd asked him as he stepped out of the shower this morning, before he put the towel to his head.

Tall, lean, he was far more muscular than he appeared—and stronger. “The usual time,” he said, swiping the towel across his pubes first, then lifting it to his head.

Everything he did was repulsive to her now—including the tiny smile he gave her as he worked the towel through his dirty blond head.

The usual time, he'd said. The usual time.

If he also left at *the usual time*, she would have approximately seven hours to get her shit together and get out. Turning over in the bed, Zoe yanked the covers over her head, trying not to vomit as her nerves played Ping-Pong with last night's meal. Mac and cheese, straight from the box. Only a few bites, because how could you eat surrounded by your own blood?

As she lay there contemplating her escape, every sound was amplified to Zoe's ears. The water running interminably in the sink. The scratch of a razor against his whiskered jaw.

Scratch. Scratch.

Scratch. Scratch.

The scar on Zoe's forehead ached, but she pressed her face into the pillow to wait... and wait... until she heard the front door open and close. Moving to the bedroom window to watch Chris leave, Zoe carefully parted the blinds, peering out.

He didn't suspect a thing.

His briefcase went into the back seat first—a burnished leather saddlebag from The Frye Company, *cognac*, because *light brown* didn't sound quite special enough.

“What's that?” she asked him the day he'd brought it home, anger burning her guts from the inside out as he laid the bag down on the gray corduroy ottoman. She was sick of paying for his whimsies, but she guessed at the cost, rather than ask. Three hundred maybe? Chris never did anything half-assed.

“Gotta look the part,” he said with wink and a grin, completely oblivious to her seething fury. His shoes were new as well—Italian leather, despite that he hated “foriners” and had never lived anywhere except Baltimore or D.C. For his sake, Zoe hoped he'd keep the job.

Crossing her arms and leaning against the doorjamb as she'd peered into the living room where he stood admiring his new briefcase that would probably hold serious documents for a total of two months before giving way to fantasy football notes and women's phone numbers, Zoe said nothing. He didn't look at her again—probably to avoid the permanent look of resentment now etched upon her face, a look Zoe tried impossibly to hide. That morning, however, as he tossed the briefcase into the backseat of his car, what it might contain, or how much he'd spent for the damned thing, was the furthest thing from Zoe's mind. The instant he was out of the driveway, Zoe cast a glance at the clock: 8:45 a.m.

Seven hours, fifteen minutes and counting...

Shifting into high gear, Zoe started with the obvious—her clothes, her laptop, most of her toiletries. Most because, after eight years in the house,

there was a lot that had accumulated simply because she couldn't throw things out. Zoe wasn't a hoarder by any stretch, but this was a sad fact: when one partner splurged at every opportunity, the other developed a mindset of scarcity. Even five-year-old mascara seemed impossible to throw out. In Zoe's final minutes, it revealed itself as junk.

Starting over didn't have to be scary or painful if you looked at it for what it was—a clean slate, a chance to create something entirely different, a chance to discard all things that weren't in sync with personal philosophies. Hope. That's what it gave her most.

By 3:30 p.m., the trash bins were all overflowing and her ten-year-old Volvo was stuffed to the ceiling. Zoe wandered the halls, wondering what else was safe to take, wishing she'd made a list, despite having started one a few days ago—a dangerous prospect, she'd realized all too soon.

“What are you working on?” Chris had asked.

“Nothing,” Zoe replied, her fingers freezing on the keyboard.

Looming in the doorway of their bedroom, Chris looked at her strangely, as though something about her demeanor had already given her away. He was a snoop, that was true, but people who weren't trustworthy usually didn't know how to trust. Only, for once, he would be right to suspect. He'd stood there, with that calculating look in his dull blue eyes, and fear sidled up Zoe's spine, tightening the cords of her neck.

“I thought you might wanna join me for a drink?”

He wasn't trying to figure Zoe out, she realized. He was trying to figure out the best way to manipulate her. Zoe closed the laptop. “Where?”

“The Tavern.”

It was the one place Zoe hated most. Of course, he didn't actually want her to go, nor did she care to join him. The tension in her shoulders eased a little, realizing he wanted her to say no. Pretending to contemplate his invitation, Zoe relaxed a bit, realizing he didn't have a clue what she was doing. “Not tonight,” she said.

He flicked a bored glance at the computer in her lap. “Work?” he said, as though he expected it to contain nothing more.

Open account. Transfer money. Pack. The words burned through the screen onto the titanium, branding Zoe’s thighs. “Yeah.”

“Mind if I go out for a bit?”

Zoe used to mind. Not anymore. And yet *no* was also not the answer he would want to hear. *No* would make him think *Zoe wanted* him to go, which in turn would only make him suspicious. Any answer aside from *yes* was bound to start a fight. After all these years, Zoe realized it was all in how things were said. She’d learned a long time ago how to fake disappointment. “What time will you be home?”

It was neither a *yes* nor a *no*, and he smiled, not as smartly as he’d liked to think. “Not late,” he promised.

Zoe nodded, gauging her response. The last thing she wanted was sex, but seduction had its place. Disgusted with herself for the pretense, she turned on a smile. “Promise not to be too late?”

As though on cue, his answering smile turned lascivious, and the once handsome face appeared both diabolical and childlike—like a life-sized Chucky doll. “Yeah?” he’d asked, nodding with approval—as though Zoe had finally learned how to treat *her man*. His hand automatically moved to his crotch in a gesture that might have once seemed playful. Now, it only made Zoe’s skin crawl. “I know what you want,” he’d said seductively.

Zoe swallowed, wishing she hadn’t started *the list* on her computer. How many times had he said he could see right through her? If he had the tiniest suspicion, he’d march right over... and it would start.

Again...

Have fun, she wanted to say, but it might sound dismissive, so she said nothing.

He took her silence as a sign of her disappointment to being deprived the glory of his presence. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I won’t be late. Why

don't you put on a little sumpin' sumpin', and surprise me.”

“Yeah... I will,” Zoe had lied. And the instant he walked out the bedroom door that night, she opened the laptop and erased every word on the document she'd begun. And then, just to be sure he wouldn't sneak a peek after he returned to find her abed—asleep, because there wasn't any way in hell Zoe was going to be waiting for him hours on end so he could drunkenly grope her—she moved the file into the trash bin and then emptied the trash as well.

After that, she hadn't dared start another list, and now she felt in her gut that she was forgetting something important...

What could it be?

The house was full of things Zoe had bought: paintings, curtains, sofa, bed—everything came from Zoe's own sweat and hard work, while Chris had spent his sporadic paychecks on beer and shots for the bar. But as she glanced around the kitchen that she had cleaned and stocked for more than eight years, she realized that folding her hand and forsaking everything she had in the ante was the only chance she had of getting away scot-free.

In the center of the kitchen hung a wrought iron pot hanger. Heavy and filled with Belgian handcrafted copper cookware, it was bolted firmly to the high ceiling, as close to being a permanent fixture as something might get—like the blood. It had probably cost her more than two grand to stock the pot hanger, but a clean break was what she needed now.

She brushed a finger across a hanging pot, leaving a long smudge.

Chris would have a field day with that, because he'd already scoured his precious pots free of blood—that's right, he took them down, one by one, and polished each with painstaking care, while Zoe's blood remained on the ceiling and she'd cried herself to sleep in their bed.

It felt damn good not to care what he might say, and she wouldn't be around when he found the smudge. Zoe imagined him searching for the copper polish, then standing in front of the sink, frantically scrubbing at the

offending spot with murder in his eyes. This was the thing about Chris: he wanted perfection. Imperfections enraged him, and Zoe was anything but perfect. But all used things had flaws, and that included people. While Zoe might have more flaws than most, a real cook wouldn't care about blemishes on the copper. A real cook would take pride in the patina, he wouldn't fuss and fume over the spotless perfection of a pot. He would be more interested in the creation of a work of culinary art, the success of which would be reflected on the faces of his friends rather than the shininess of a cooking tool.

But Chris was not a real cook. Like a façade in a spaghetti Western, he displayed his culinary accomplishments on the kitchen walls, while behind the shining pots and culinary degree, he lacked what it took to make meals to satisfy the soul as well as the tongue. He was a bit of a hungry ghost—like the Chinese *ègui*, depicted in drawings with protruding bellies and tiny mouths, with bottomless chasms in place of souls and eternally ravenous appetites that could never be appeased.

That's what he was. Born that way, as far as Zoe could tell. It didn't matter what he had, he was always looking over his shoulder at what he didn't have and scheming over how to get it. And that included women. Zoe wasn't his partner, she was his trophy, and the thing about trophies is that they got old fast and, soon enough, you needed another conquest and another trophy on the shelf.

It was 3:45 p.m. Half an hour remaining if she was going to get away clean.

Chris would leave the instant he could—right about four. At this very minute, he was probably making plans for his own escape. The office was fifteen minutes away. Barring his stopping for a drink—which was always a possibility, but one she couldn't afford to count on—he would walk through the door about 4:15 p.m. So this could go one of two ways: either Zoe walked out, got into her car, and drove away, right now, never looking back,

or she stayed. And that option would result in more blood. Probably not today, but another.

She peered up at the red spatter on the ceiling—as though she needed reminders—and lifted a hand to her forehead, pressing a finger against the scar.

“You can’t even please yourself; how can you please a lover, Zoe?”

Chris was right about that.

But absolving him wasn’t an option either. This wasn’t Zoe’s fault. She did not ask for a gash in her forehead. Grabbing her purse off the counter, she made a final sweep through the house, just to be sure she had everything. Because, hell no, she wouldn’t be returning—not today, not tomorrow, not ever. Whatever remained here would be lost to her as surely as though it had been engulfed in flames. Turning around, Zoe was confronted by ghosts from the past...

“You love me, Zoe?” he’d asked on a number of occasions. “Don’t you?”

Silence. Always silence, because the truth was that she was holding back.

Why? Because she was cold, because she didn’t know how to love? Or was it because she’d sensed something unhealthy about their relationship?

Zoe couldn’t meet his gaze. “Yes, of course,” she would say.

He was always sweetest in those moments, coaxing like sunlight to a budding rose. “Promise?”

Zoe had walked into the kitchen as he was searching for a beer. There were none remaining, of course—an entire twelve-pack gone in the space of a single day—and now, he either had to go out for another or talk Zoe into a night out at the local bar, where she must be his partner in crime. He’d shut the door and pulled her into his arms, steering her back against the cold refrigerator.

She hadn't answered yet, she'd realized. It was getting harder and harder to pretend. Her tone was full of resentment. "Yeah, sure."

"Yeah sure?" His anger lived close to the surface. "What the hell kind of answer is that?"

Zoe had merely shrugged, though not with any impertinence, because her resentment had quickly turned to fear.

It wasn't good to live like that.

Edging past the ghosts in her path, Zoe made her rounds about the house. Seconds counted now, and still she found herself standing quietly before each and every door, her eyes scanning the rooms just to be certain she had everything she needed... lingering, when she shouldn't.

Why?

Had she lived so long with this shame that it was a part of her now? Did she want to be caught? If, in fact, the house were on fire she would now be running for safety. So how was this any different? The scar on her forehead itched, forcing Zoe to move along.

In the bathroom, she snatched a bottle of 600 ml. Ibuprofen—given to her at the hospital. She didn't need it, but it had her name on it, and while nearly everything she owned would inevitably be left behind, the bottle was *her* prescription with *her* name on it. It had to go. She dumped it into her purse.

In the guest room she snagged a little bobble-head donkey—given to her by her nieces—and a painted wooden brush that lay neatly on a mirrored tray that was set out for guests who never came. The bristles were free of hair, except for a few dark blonde strands, because every once in awhile, Zoe had come in to stare into the dresser mirror and brush her hair and pretend she didn't live here anymore.

Avoiding a glance in the mirror today, she snatched up the brush, stuffing it along with the donkey into her purse, and then moved purposely

through the remaining rooms. In her bedroom, she lifted up a bloody rag from the floor, bringing that moment back in a blinding flash:

“Get away from me!” she’d screamed. “Get away!” She hurled the bloody rag at Chris, slapping him in the shoulder. It slid to the floor, leaving a wine-looking stain on his brand new blue shirt. He’d probably never wear the damned thing again and, like blood on the ceilings in the kitchen, the rag had remained for days, with Chris stepping blithely over it—like dog shit no one wanted to see, because to do so, meant you had to be the one to clean it up. Zoe eyed it balefully every time she passed by, refusing to pick it up. It was probably the most passive aggressive thing she’d ever done, because Zoe wanted Chris to be the one to pick it up. She wanted him to clean the rag, wring it out in the sink, squirt it with dish soap, and then wring it over and over, watching Zoe’s blood seep down the drain—*out damned spot! Out!* But blood was a stubborn stain, and in the end the rag would only be fit to burn. Nevertheless, in her mind’s eye, she watched him pick it up, snapping the body-fluid-stiff towel and marching angrily to the sink.

What would he ask himself then?

Would he have regrets?

Did it matter anymore?

Zoe dropped the towel back onto the floor, glancing at the bedroom clock: 3:52.

Twenty-three minutes left.

Except that the digital numbers shifted as she stared and the clock’s panels turned to 3:53.

Twenty-two minutes left.

Now he would be grabbing his coat. But because it was his first paying job in more than six months, his I-don’t-give-a-shit attitude wasn’t quite ripened yet. The boss usually left at four sharp to miss the traffic, so Chris would chat a bit on the way out, unwilling to meet Boss Man in the

elevator. But he wouldn't stop to talk to the women, not at this point. If there were more than two in the office he was interested in, he wouldn't choose one until a) he figured out a way to have them both, or b) he determined which of the two would be the best lay and ask the fewest questions.

He was like a gerbil spinning a wheel, unable to stop the cycle.

Was Zoe one too?

Now was her test. It was time to go. But just in case, Zoe checked beneath the bed. Chris's side harbored a mess. A few pair of shoes. A pair of women's panties—not hers. An open pack of shoelaces. A belt. A package from Nordstrom holding God only knew what, something else Zoe had unknowingly paid for.

On the other hand, her side of the bed was dead empty. For a moment, she stared at the empty space, remembering...

One year, she had gone home to visit her brother Nick—alone, because some part of her had never been able to fully embrace Chris as a lifetime partner. When she returned home, she'd come back to a spotless house. Floor-to-ceiling spotless. Clean and uncluttered. Many of the photos were gone as well. Zoe found them later in the closet, stuffed in a box, with a pillow Chris always hated sitting on top. He wasn't even smart enough to unhide the evidence. Or maybe he just didn't care. Rifling through the cardboard box, Zoe had found her precious knick-knacks and pictures of her brother's children. A few of her and Chris together. So why did he hide them? She knew the answer even before she asked.

"What's this?" she'd asked him.

"What's what?"

Distracted by the TV—some stupid new sitcom—Chris couldn't be bothered to turn and acknowledge Zoe standing in the doorway of the living room with her box full of stuff. Finally, he turned and half shrugged. "Oh that."

“Yeah, *this*. Why was my stuff hidden in the closet?”

Cool, unruffled, Chris always seemed to believe his own lies. “It wasn’t hidden, Zoe. I put it there because I was cleaning up.”

Convenient.

The box was full of Zoe’s things, not Chris’s, and she knew exactly why he’d hidden her stuff in the closet. She’d been gone two full weeks, time enough for him to get used to pretending Zoe didn’t live here. Time enough to bring home some blonde bar slut who worked hard to make her rent payment and who wouldn’t ask questions when she had the good fortune to attract a cute guy with a house like this. But the house and everything in it was Zoe’s... until the instant she walked out the door...

What would you be willing to lose, Zoe?

Everything, she reminded herself. Everything.

On her way out of the bedroom, she glanced at the clock.

3:56.

He was heading for the office door now, impatient to leave and too stupid to care that people were glaring at his back. He was the new guy, after all—how dare he work the same hours as the boss. His charm would get him just so far. Three weeks into the new job and the guys in the office were already getting tired of practiced sound bites. Yes, they liked football, and sure they would join his fantasy football league in the fall. No, they couldn’t meet him for a drink; not tonight. The women would be a little longer coming around. But after a while, like his copper pots, eventually the shine would wear off. Sometimes, Chris would come home and stand in the doorway, half drunk because he’d bought a few rounds for the bar and charged it to Zoe’s bank account. “Where’ve you been?” she would ask.

“Work?”

“It’s nine o’clock, Chris.”

“I stopped off at the Tavern.” Or O’Brien’s. Or Pacci’s. Insert bar name here. The key was to be random enough that Zoe wouldn’t simply walk in

and catch him at any given place.

She would walk toward him, sniffing the air around him, like a hound. He smelled of alcohol—not the sweet scent that floated off the breath. More that deep-down alcohol sweat that said his liver was working too hard.

“I got fired today, Zoe,” he would say, and Zoe would nod. And instead of comforting him, she might walk by to the sink, turning on the faucet. She wasn’t thirsty, but she would open the cupboard, grab a small cup, and fill it with water, every instinct in her body screaming to toss the water into his face. *Sober up!* She would want to scream.

Was that perfume she smelled as well?

The never-ending cycle sickened her, and yet Zoe stayed, quaffing down a glass of water, as though it were all she needed—water to put out the fire raging in her.

Get out, Zoe.

Leave.

Now.

Mentally going through everything she had placed in the car, Zoe moved toward the kitchen. Angrily, she ripped off a paper towel and leaned over the stove to wipe up the droplets of blood on the backsplash. It might seem she cared enough to keep it clean and that she was setting the stage to unpack the car but no, this was her blood, and she didn’t want it to remain in this house.

It was 3:59 p.m.

At the last minute, Zoe went back into the bedroom and picked up the dried, bloody rag. And then, taking both the paper towel and the rag, she placed them both into a plastic zip bag she plucked out of the box beneath the sink. She stuffed the bag inside her purse. The purse was beginning to bulge now, filled with last-minute items.

It was 4:00 p.m. Chris would be in his car, she was pretty certain, watching Boss Man pull out of the parking lot. He would wait a few

seconds to be certain the man was gone before he started his car, but then thirty seconds later he would be on the road, heading home.

At 4:01 p.m. Zoe stood in the living room, the front door easily within reach. There must be something truly wrong with her that she was still standing beneath this roof. *Her roof*. With forty years' worth of her life still stashed within its walls.

If your life were on fire, what would you save?

Yourself, right?

It was the only right answer.

Zoe removed the front door key from her key ring and set it down on the coffee table and then moved purposely through the room and walked out the door.

ALSO BY TANYA ANNE CROSBY

MAINSTREAM FICTION

The Girl Who Stayed
The Things We Leave Behind
Redemption Song
Reprisal
Everyday Lies

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

Leave No Trace
Speak No Evil
Tell No Lies

DAUGHTERS OF AVALON

The King's Favorite
The Holly & the Ivy
A Winter's Rose
Fire Song
Lord of Shadows

THE PRINCE & THE IMPOSTOR

Seduced by a Prince
A Crown for a Lady
The Art of Kissing Beneath the Mistletoe

THE HIGHLAND BRIDES

The MacKinnon's Bride
Lyon's Gift
On Bended Knee

Lion Heart
Highland Song
MacKinnon's Hope

GUARDIANS OF THE STONE

Once Upon a Highland Legend
Highland Fire
Highland Steel
Highland Storm
Maiden of the Mist

THE MEDIEVALS HEROES

Once Upon a Kiss
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Viking's Prize

REDEEMABLE ROGUES

Happily Ever After
Perfect In My Sight
McKenzie's Bride
Kissed by a Rogue
Thirty Ways to Leave a Duke
A Perfectly Scandalous Proposal

ANTHOLOGIES & NOVELLAS

Lady's Man
Married at Midnight
The Winter Stone

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tanya Anne Crosby is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of thirty novels. She has been featured in magazines, such as People, Romantic Times and Publisher's Weekly, and her books have been translated into eight languages. Her first novel was published in 1992 by Avon Books, where Tanya was hailed as "one of Avon's fastest rising stars." Her fourth book was chosen to launch the company's Avon Romantic Treasure imprint.

Known for stories charged with emotion and humor and filled with flawed characters Tanya is an award-winning author, journalist, and editor, and her novels have garnered reader praise and glowing critical reviews. She and her writer husband split their time between Charleston, SC, where she was raised, and northern Michigan, where the couple make their home.

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