



THE  
SECRETS  
YOU  
KEEP

A NOVEL

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HARPER

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# Chapter 1

WAKE TO THE SMELL OF SMOKE.

It's faint but enough to rouse me and I jerk up in bed, eyes wide open. For a few seconds I freeze there, propped on an elbow and trying to make sense of it. What's *burning*?

I start to shove my legs out of bed, but the top sheet fights me. I have to wrench it loose from the mattress so I can force my feet to the ground.

As my eyes adjust to the dark, I realize that I'm not at home. I'm in a hotel room. I've been traveling on business . . . yet I can't remember where. The burning smell intensifies, boring into my nostrils and propelling my head back. Panic surges through me. Fire, I think. *Fire.*

Using my hands for help I edge around the second double bed in the room, fast as I can. Warning phrases I've read bombard my brain: *Fill the bathtub with water. Wet a towel and cover your mouth with it.* But I don't have time for that. I need to get *out.*

Then there's a noise, a tapping sound, and I realize someone's knocking at the door. Maybe hotel staff, warning people.

"I'm in here," I yell. "Don't go, I'm coming."

Now I can actually *see* the smoke wafting toward me. I stub my toe hard on the outside wall of the bathroom, but I keep going, practically hurling myself forward.

Suddenly I hear a man's voice—from behind me in the hotel room.

"Bryn, are you okay?" he calls out.

"Yes," I respond. "But we've gotta go."

"Wait," he says. "There's something—"

"I can't. We have to run. Hurry."

Reaching the end of the hallway, I frantically pat the wall until I locate the light switch, but nothing happens when I tap it. The power's off. Even without any lights, I see smoke boiling from the crack at the bottom of the door. I moan in anguish.

More fumbling until my fingers find the security latch on the door and flip it over. I grab the handle. To my relief it's not hot to the touch, just warm. I take a second, trying to picture the exist sign in the corridor. Was it to the left or the right? I have no freaking clue. I still can't recall the hotel, or the city, or even checking in at the front desk. I grasp the handle and press down, my fingers trembling.

Horrified, I feel the handle begin to dissolve. It sears the skin of my palm, and I snatch my hand away in pain. My lungs start to scald, and I cough again and again, unable to stop.

Somehow, though, the door swings open. *Yes, yes*, I think. Then I see it. A mass of smoke and pulsing red light fill the hallway. I stare at flames devouring the carpet, licking up the walls

There's no way to get out.

## Chapter 2

A MOMENT LATER I AM SURFACING, STRUGGLING through webs of sleep. It's only a dream, I realize. Another one of those nightmares. Though I'm fully awake now, my heart's still thrumming. My skin is hot, like I've sat too long in the sun, and the T-shirt I'm wearing is damp with sweat.

I glance around, not sure at first where I am. It's daylight, maybe late afternoon, and then I know. I'm on the screened porch in the house we've rented in Saratoga Springs. From outside I hear the distant, buzzy drone of a lawn mower and one short bark from a dog.

I hoist myself up and take long deep breaths, in through my nostrils and out through my mouth, a technique Dr. G taught me when I started having sessions with her.

Finally my pulse slows. I reach for a pencil and pad lying on the coffee table, and jot down fragments from the dream: hotel room, smoke, the wall of flames. It's at least the third dream like this I've had in as many weeks. Dr. G suggested I keep track of them because they seem to be about the car accident, the one I was in three months ago. She thinks writing them down will help calm me—and if I'm lucky, ultimately fill in some blanks.

I close my eyes again, trying to recall more details, but the dream begins to unravel in my memory, like a pile of dead leaves lifting apart in the wind. If it was trying to tell me something, I have no clue what it is.

I force myself off the daybed and traipse into the main part of the house. It's Victorian in style, built a hundred-plus years ago. Though there aren't a ton of rooms, they're spacious and elegant, with high ceilings and dark, intricate moldings and paneling. Not the kind of house I would have picked for myself—it's so prim and proper—but I'm okay with being here for the summer.

I wander back to the kitchen, with its white subway tiles gleaming in the June sun, and pour a glass of iced tea. I drain it in four gulps. Though the tea quenches my thirst, it does nothing to quell my unease. I glance at my watch. Four thirty. Guy will be home by six and I'm already looking forward to seeing him. Maybe we should eat on the patio since it's bound to be a beautiful night.

I will myself up from the chair and clear the soup bowl and utensils I used for lunch. Next I take two chicken cutlets out of the freezer and begin snipping the green beans I bought earlier.

Finished, I head upstairs and straighten the duvet in the master bedroom. For the first time I'm struck by the sheer ridiculousness—and irony, too—of me snapping the fabric into place. Until now my life has been, at least literally speaking, a litany of *unmade* beds, beds I've always been far too busy to bother with and happy to just stumble into at the end of crazy days. I know why I've given myself this little task each

day. It's a way to avoid what I'm really *supposed* to be doing.

Coming to Saratoga for the summer and renting a nice house here was meant as a chance for me to get my mojo back now that my broken bones have mostly healed. I was also going to conceive and pound out a proposal for my new book, the one that had been delayed by the car accident and recovery. But it's just not happening. I alternate between bouts of panic and feeling totally jet-lagged, like a traveler who's stumbled off an airplane after crossing a dozen time zones.

And then there's the writer's block. I knew it might take a while to get back in a groove but I've spent days now staring at a blank computer screen. It seems at times as if my brain's been sucked dry by aliens. At my most panic-stricken I worry that I'll never squeeze out another word, never again share what I've learned, never again command a room of appreciative readers.

As I give the duvet a final shake, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror above the dresser. Because, until recently, I needed to negotiate shampooing and blow-drying with a cast on my arm, I chopped my light brown hair fairly short. The cut is cute enough, I guess, but because of the weight loss, my overall appearance leans towards beleaguered. I look like I'm ready to board an orphan train.

My cell phone rings, startling me from my thoughts. I tug it from the pocket of my sweater. I smile to myself when I see Guy's name.

"Hey, babe," he says. "I didn't disturb a siesta, did I?"

Is that the impression I've been giving him? That I indulge in a postlunch nap every day? Well, I do, don't I?

"No, just taking care of a few things. How about you?"

“I’ve got a donor crisis on my hands but hopefully nothing I can’t handle.”

Guy runs the development office for Saratoga’s small but well-regarded opera company, and his job calls for reeling in contributors and then keeping them on board.

“Oh, that’s a shame. Which donor?”

The guy who pledged a hundred grand last week. Unfortunately I’m going to have to grab drinks with him and see if I can fix this.”

“*Tonight?*”

“Yeah, sorry. But if I don’t put this fire out now, it’s only gonna get worse”

I sense him catching himself too late about the phrase he’s used, probably wondering if he should excuse the comment and then deciding it would be worse to draw attention.

“I’m sure you can fix this, honey,” I say.

“Hope so. I’m going to try to find one of the singers and ask him or her to join us.”

“How wickedly clever of you.”

He chuckles, and I can picture the grin on his handsome face. Guy’s a fixer, a solver, a person undaunted by problems that can frazzle many of us, like canceled flights, lost luggage, and credit card snafus.

“It’s a cheap trick, I know, but it worked before with another donor who got skittish.”

He asks about my day, and without having intended to, I find myself padding the details, Hamburger Helper–style. I say, “I went shopping this morning,” instead of *I bought a bag of green beans at that little market.* I say, “I took a walk,”

instead of *I stood in the backyard and watched the ferns shiver in the breeze.*

“How’s the writing coming?” he asks next. “You starting to feel in the swing again?”

“Yup, a bit. I made some notes for the next book,” That’s not exactly true either. All I did was *write the word reinvention with a question mark and stare at it for twenty-seven minutes.* “Shall I wait and have dinner with you when you get home? I don’t mind eating later.”

“No, don’t wait. I’m honestly not sure how long I’m going to be. Just stick a plate in the fridge for me, okay?”

“Will do,” I say, disguising my disappointment.

“You feeling all right about tomorrow night?”

“Yes, definitely. It should be fun.” Tomorrow I’ll be playing hostess for the first time in this house, at a dinner party we’re hosting for two opera company donors and their wives. It’s a chance for Guy to take advantage of the house, and yet I know he’s hoping I’ll find it enjoyable, a way to engage again and meet a few people from the town. It’s being catered through his work, so I won’t have to lift a finger, just spend the night chatting with the guests, the kind of activity that until March of this year I’ve *relished*, both in my personal life and my work. But I find myself dreading the mental effort it will demand.

“That reminds me,” I add. “I should poke around the dining room and see what’s in there in terms of napkins and stuff. Both donors are bringing their spouses, right?”

“Yes, though there’ll actually be five besides us,” he says. “I decided to invite that journalism professor from Ballston College, Derek Collins. The one I met when he brought his class

to the theater for a discussion. He's a big fan of your books."

"He's not bringing anyone?"

"No, he's single and said he'd prefer to come alone."

"All right, I'll see you later then."

"Looking forward to it. I love this new luxury of being able to see you every night now."

Up until three weeks ago, Guy and I have had a commuter relationship for the entire two years we've been together. He understood that I wasn't up for relocating to a small town, and he's been more than happy to travel to Manhattan on weekends until the time comes for him to pursue a job in the city. And though we've made the commuter thing work, seven days a week in each other's company instead of two and a half has been a great change for us.

Except when Guy's work hijacks one of our evenings.

"Ditto."

After I hang up, I feel a little swell of guilt from having deceived Guy about what I've accomplished today. I don't like telling him little white lies. At a time when we've never been closer, it only adds distance.

But in the last month or so I've begun to sense a small tear in his patience, a silent chafing at my inertia and failure to rebound. Isn't that so often the case, that sympathy for someone ends up weirdly entangled with irritation, or maybe even spawns it? People feel sorry, they truly do, but they also want to stop worrying about you at some point, however much they love you. They want you to reassure them that their concerns are exaggerated, that the crisis is past, and that you will be soon be more yourself again. So they check if you're still

fatigued and taking afternoon siestas. They invite journalism professors to dinner in order to goad you into thinking about your own work again.

The key is for me to get my energy back. And then there won't be a need for little white lies.

I wander back downstairs, to the small room near the kitchen that I'm using as an office. When Guy found the house for us, he reported that there was a perfect spot for me to write in. What he had in mind was the room in the turret reached by stairs from the second floor. It would be like a writer's garret, he said, but I found it both dusty and claustrophobic, and I preferred the idea of being on the ground floor. So I've commandeered the tiny room across from the kitchen, once a mudroom, I assume, and moved a desk in there. Hardly ideal—there's a lingering scent of wet wool and rubber boots emanating from the wainscoting—though I doubt the words would be flowing wherever I was.

I check email, diverting most of them to my assistant in New York to contend with. Though I send off quick replies myself to friends inquiring how I'm doing, and one in response to my brother, Will, in his third year of working for a bank in Jakarta. There are several requests for interviews, which I politely decline, and two from my speaker's bureau about well-paying gigs. These get nixed as well. Speaking to groups about the subjects of my books has always been a thrill for me, but I can't fathom pulling that off right now.

My gaze falls to the icon for the proposal folder on my computer desktop. Maybe I should make another go at it before I fix dinner. But the mere thought makes my stomach

tense. My phone rings, sparing me. It's Casey, my agent, returning a call I made to her earlier.

"How's it going up there?" she asks. "Have you seen what's-his-name race yet? Seabiscuit?"

I laugh at her little joke. "Seabiscuit died in the nineteen *forties*. But they've got a big statue of him on the main street in town and I've petted it a couple of times."

"It sounds like you're getting out and about."

"Yup, starting to." After seven years and three books together, I consider Casey a friend as well as a colleague. At forty-two, she's only three years older than me and she's always got my back, but I've been cautious about divulging too much to her about my situation. I've confessed that I'm in a bit of a slump. What I've never uttered to her is the phrase Dr. G. used: *acute stress reaction*. Or maybe worse for Casey to hear: *hopeless writer's block*.

"Well, I bet a summer away will be great for you. The publisher asked for a meeting to discuss the paperback launch, but I told them they'll have to do everything by phone for a while. You're not planning to be back in the city, are you?"

"No, not until September . . . By the way, do you know if they finally hired a replacement for Paul yet?"

There's a beat before she answers.

"Uh, I heard they promoted the guy who's been filling in," she says.

"Oh good to know. He seems strong . . . Here's the reason I called actually. I've been thinking of contacting Paul's widow, Stephanie, and just wanted a second opinion on the idea. I've always felt so bad that I wasn't able to attend the funeral."

Maybe because of the dreams, Stephanie—who I’ve never met—has been on my mind even more these days. I keep thinking that a conversation could be beneficial for both of us, possibly help me from feeling so stuck.

“You mean write her a letter? I thought you did that three months ago, after the accident.”

“Yes, but I was thinking of having a talk with her.”

There is total silence on the other end. I glance at the screen to make sure the call hasn’t failed.

“I don’t know,” Casey says at last. “I heard she’s still reeling. Maybe now’s not the right time.”

“Okay.” Her answer actually surprises me, but I trust Casey’s instincts.

“Before I let you go,” she says, “do you mind if I nudge a little?”

Oh God, I should have realized this would happen if I called her.

“Sure.”

“They’re getting restless about the proposal. I’ve put them off a few times, and they’ve been understanding so far, but you’re under contract for another book and their patience is going to start to wear thin. You’ve made them a ton of money and they’re hungry for even more.”

“Casey, there’s no way I can turn in a proposal any time soon. I . . . I haven’t even really started.”

“Do you have an idea at least? A working title?”

“How’s ‘Self-Help Author Fails to Help Self Write?’”

“You really don’t have anything?”

She’s surely wondering why the woman who wrote the

bestseller about choices can't make a decision herself.

"I have a germ, maybe."

"Okay, that's really all you need to bide your time with. I know you like your proposals to be fairly fleshed out, but they'd be more than happy with five pages. It would reassure them. And it might even help kick things in gear for you."

"Um, that seems doable." In truth the idea makes my heart start to race so fast I can hear the blood pumping in my ears. "Can you give me two weeks?"

"Sounds like a plan."

After we've said our good-byes, I rest my head on the desk, one cheek against the cool surface. How will I ever summon the energy for five pages? I don't even know if I can stand the idea I've drummed up.

Finally I force myself out of my office and prepare dinner, just a simple sauté for the chicken, along with the green beans. I put one plate in the fridge for Guy and take mine out onto the screened-in porch, along with a glass of wine.

The porch is my favorite room of the house, with its antique iron daybed and the black wicker couch and armchairs, their cushions done in faded floral. Living in Manhattan, I almost forgot that places as serene as this still existed.

As the daylight finally fades, I don't bother to switch on a lamp right away. I just sit in the darkness, listening to the voices of children calling to each other in a nearby yard. Do kids still play capture the flag? I wonder.

It was a game that I was bewitched by from the moment a neighborhood kid returned from a weekend at a cousin's house and taught a bunch of us how to play it. While other twelve-

year-old girls I knew were already boy crazy, this was my personal obsession. I loved the rush that came from darting through the darkness, eluding capture again and again, setting people free from jail, and, best of all, grabbing the other team's flag and racing to home base.

In a certain respect it was the model for how I came to approach every challenge in life: assess, plunge ahead fearlessly, and savor every second.

I wasn't naïve enough to think that this strategy would work after the accident. There was no flag to capture this time. But I told myself that if I refused to hole up in Pity City and just put one foot ahead of the other, it would all get better in time.

The crash happened just thirty minutes west of Boston on a cold, crisp March day. I'd gone there to deliver a speech based on my most recent book, *Twenty Choices*. The audience, as usual, was made up mostly of women, many of them hoping that they still had time to make a choice that would put their lives or careers on a course closer to the ones they'd always fantasized about. I loved connecting with people at talks like this, loved the comments they offered as they had their books signed later. And it thrilled me that something I said might inspire them.

To my surprise, Paul Dunham, the paperback director for my publishing house, had sidled up to the table just as I was signing books for the last few people in line. Tall and broad shouldered, Paul was a guy who'd played college football and looked like he had, though his face, topped by his short blond hair, had a Waspy patrician look.

He was in town on business, too, he said, staying at another hotel, and had decided on the spur of the moment to drop by. It was a chance to hear me speak, he said, plus an opportunity to check out my fan base, which would prove useful as he planned for the paperback launch. When he invited me to dinner, I explained I had other plans that night, but I accepted his offer for a lift back to the city the next day. I thought it would be easier than taking the train.

But it hadn't been easier at all. On a perfectly dry stretch of the Mass Turnpike, Paul had run the car off the road, smashing into a guardrail at close to 70 miles an hour. Somehow I'd managed to free myself from the air bag, stagger out of the car, and tumble hard down a ravine. Or at least that's what I learned later. I remember nothing from the minutes before the accident and little from the time immediately after. Just hazy memories of heat and flames and dark smoke billowing from above the ravine. Sirens. Then waking later in the hospital, with a broken arm and pelvis. And finding out that Paul hadn't survived

I didn't need a shrink to tell me that I was suffering from more than grief afterwards. There was guilt, too, tons of it. I had lived and Paul had died. And I still had no idea how he'd lost control of the car.

As unmoored as I felt, I saw it as part of a process. It would take time, but I'd get better, physically and mentally. Throwing myself into my work would surely aid in that. However, a month later, shortly after my life seemed to normalize again, my grief began to shape shift into something else. The bouts of panic started, followed by stretches of numbness and leth-

argy. When I finally tried to write again, nothing materialized. Making words come was like trying to generate warmth on an autumn hike when your clothes are soaked through with rain.

Finally I get up and switch on a table lamp. As I do, my eyes fall to the pad on which I scribbled notes from my dream. I pick it up and stare at the words again: “hotel room, smoke, dissolving doorknob, wall of flames.”

My recent nightmares all have the same terrifying elements, but slightly reconfigured each time, as if my brain prefers to torture me with a fresh twist each time: There’s always a hotel room I’m surprised to find myself in, the smoke and the flames, and the fact that I’m never able to escape, though the reason changes. Once it was because the door was too heavy to open. Another time because there was no door at all, just a thick, impenetrable wall.

And then I remember. There’s a detail about my dream today that I’ve neglected to write down: the unseen man calling out my name.

It’s brand-new. Until now, I’ve always been alone in the room.

I don’t think the man was Guy. The voice belonged to someone else, not a voice I can place, but not a stranger’s either, because there was nothing about the man’s presence that frightened me.

So who was he? I wonder, my heart skipping. And why was he insisting that I wait?