

THE
TRUTH
ABOUT
KEEPING
SECRETS

savannah brown

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SEEING THE BODY WAS SUPPOSED to be cathartic, but the man in the lipstick wasn't my dad.

I mean, he was. But he wasn't. There was so little Dad left in him that the emotional experience wasn't too dissimilar from gazing upon a giant steak in a suit: there was discomfort, and a sick sort of a fascination, but mainly a desire for the moment to end. That sounds callous. Maybe it was. Maybe it was a symptom of overresearching; the night before I had spent hours reading about embalming to prepare myself for what this would be like, and now all I could focus on were his glued-together eyelids, his sewn-shut mouth, and

his bloated limbs stuffed into clothes tailored well enough to distract everyone from the fact that he looked like a Jim Henson fever dream.

Benjamin Whitaker, the artist formerly known as Dad, had hugged a telephone pole while traveling at approximately sixty miles an hour. Swerve, smash, gone. Well, not really, but *swerve, smash, unconscious* doesn't have quite the same punch. The lungs were the problem. The lack thereof. They'd popped like balloons, which isn't super-conducive to living; even so, he'd managed to survive long enough to get to the hospital, but not much longer. And when there was no one left to keep alive, the town officials and police officers were left to figure out *why*—but the investigation only led to more uncertainty. The front of the car had practically melted, and there was no way to tell if the accident had been caused by faulty brakes or steering or whatever, so the best they could come up with was that maybe he had fallen asleep, or been texting, or suicidal, or maybe there was a deer or a person, or maybe he simply wasn't paying attention.

And I'm sure, to the outside observer, any of those possibilities might have seemed realistic. But the outside observer didn't know Dad.

I'm exaggerating about how he looked. He looked fine. Enough to be recognizable, and underneath the pale foundation and pink lip tint, there was still the time-locked stubble and the square jaw and the pulled-taffy limbs. But the sight of his chest was jarring. A mountain range, all slopes and concavities where the newspaper balled up underneath his shirt had flattened. Then something occurred to me.

“Why the hell is he wearing his glasses?”

Mom turned to me, the outside of her cheek puckering as she

gnawed the inside. She was all red: red lips, red blush, reddish hair wound into a bun. Rushing red blood. Practically taunting him. “Language, please.”

“Why the *heck* is he wearing he glasses?”

She sighed. “It’s a symbolic thing, Sydney.” I knew it was a symbolic thing. I just sometimes liked to fill the air with stuff that didn’t actually matter to distract from my more pressing thoughts: at that moment, the corpse of my dad being lowered from the ceiling on a swing, singing a soulful rendition of “Rainbow Connection” with Miss Piggy.

Mom looked me up and down. She was just as stoic as I was; she wouldn’t cry here either. “Straighten your skirt, honey. You’re all crooked.”

I didn’t know where I was crooked, but I believed her—she knew more about skirts than me—so I did some miscellaneous smoothing until she seemed satisfied. I wasn’t sure why she cared. (“Well, yes, the service was lovely, but that girl’s lower half was a bit off-center, don’t you think?”)

“I’m going to fix myself up before everyone gets here,” she said. “Do you want to come?” She wasn’t asking me to come so much as she was suggesting I should.

“I don’t need to fix myself up.”

Mom was about to protest but seemed to be informed by Dad’s ghost that she should drop it. She walked off alone, the ugly carpet dulling the tap of her stilettos.

Crawford Funeral Home was completely bleak—not that I was expecting anything else. Because of the light, I think. It was a sickly yellow, leaking on to stiff-looking armchairs and fake potted plants

and paintings of places more beautiful. The paintings were the only indication that a world existed outside that place; there were windows, but they were the approximate size and shape of keyholes, and something about the awful baroque pattern on the walls made it seem as if they were slowly closing in on you. I wasn't claustrophobic often, but in here, each breath felt itchy and earned. That might've been the intention, though—to make you feel like you were the one about to be buried.

But Rick Crawford seemed right at home. He was the undertaker, well-groomed and stout, and spoke with a drawl. The Crawfords had owned the place for generations, and the guy looked like he hadn't been born, but had crawled out of a vat of formaldehyde. I wondered if he grew into the death business or the death business grew into him. Anyway, it couldn't have been an easy job. Especially not here, since I was sure he would have recognized at least half the people he had to drag onto the slab every morning. Sort of like Dad. Dad was the only therapist in Pleasant Hills, and I bet, collectively, he and Rick Crawford knew most of the place's dirty secrets, living and dead.

Our family was small—Dad's parents had died young, and Mom wasn't close to hers—so the people who started to trickle in were only faintly familiar. Old family friends. (*Your hair's so long now, wow, strawberry blond, you have your mom's freckles, wow, junior year already? Wow, wow, wow.*) Teachers I'd had who felt some sense of obligation to me. Bible-thumpers. Tongue-chewers. The women Mom knew from the gym, from her Tupperware parties, who said things like *It was his time* over and over again. And there were a lot of strangers—patients—who thanked us for everything Dad had done for them. I knew none

of them, which meant Dad had succeeded; he'd always made a point of keeping me away from that part of his life, from the cars pulling up before school and after school and on Sundays, from the murmurs and more-than-murmurs from behind the office door, from the weights fastened one by one to the heavy, rolling skin underneath his eyes.

But now they were all here, staring me in the face, and any one of them could have done it.



Olivia and I were best friends—mostly because we were supposed to be. We had barely anything in common besides the fact that fate had dictated we were to live on the same cul-de-sac, but she let me talk about movies, and I let her talk about everything else. She was the high school's head theatre tech, a social butterfly, had lots of friends. Me, not so much. Either way, we'd made an unspoken agreement to see out the rest of our years in formal education together; I don't think either of us had anticipated the agreement would include funeral attendance, but she was here, and although I wouldn't tell her, I was grateful.

"Oh, God," she said when she noticed I was staring. She looked pretty; her dark hair hung in unnatural curls and her cheekbones shimmered even in the dull light. She had single eyelids, and the glittery purple liner she wore kind of looked like it was part of the anatomy of her eye, swirling upward and narrowing to a point. The shape reminded me of a robin. Pretty. Not really funeral pretty. "I knew I shouldn't have come like this. I wanted to get ready first thing this morning, so, you know, I could stay as long as you needed without having to rush back or

anything, but Miles's mom wanted us to be ready for pictures at four. Which is so early, right? That's early. And I tried to say it was too early, but they already made the dinner reservations, and I realize that seems not important compared to—

"Hey." I envisioned us standing there until we began to decompose, Olivia still talking while chunks of flesh fell from her skull. I patted her on the cheek. "Don't worry about it. Deep breaths."

Olivia squished her mouth into an *O* and sucked, backward whistle, and it looked stupid as hell, so I laughed, but someone I didn't know shot me a glance and I folded in on myself. Lowered my voice. "I don't want to meet and greet anymore." Mom was talking to someone, which meant I could make my escape. "Let's go hide."

We managed to sneak away to an inconspicuous hallway near the entrance. I slumped against the wallpaper as Olivia wrung her wrist in her other hand, searching for something to say—unusual for her. "Do you want to, like, talk?" she asked. "I read that it's good to talk. You're supposed to express yourself because if you don't, you'll end up spontaneously combusting. Not really, but, you know. Metaphorically. With emotions."

"I appreciate the fact that you did research, but, no. Not right now." I shut my eyes, rested the back of my head against the wall, wished to be anywhere else. "Regular programming. Just...talk."

"All right. Oh! We missed you last night."

It took me a second to remember: the game. Right. It was the homecoming game, and a *very big deal*, and she'd invited me along, but to be completely honest, school spirit was at the bottom of my priorities list, besides eating food and behaving like a normal human being.

“How was it?” I asked, even though I wasn’t particularly interested. Anything to keep her talking.

“Yeah, good. We won, obviously. Hooray, go Panthers, go football, so on, so forth. But honestly, it was probably for the best you didn’t go, because it was freezing, firstly, and it went on forever. Like, overtime. I thought I was gonna have to get some toes amputated. Oh, and they did the homecoming court stuff. Heath Alderman and June Copeland won king and queen, obviously.” Olivia had a tendency to insist upon the obviousness of nonobvious things, but she wasn’t exaggerating this time; Heath Alderman and June Copeland might have actually been bred to be homecoming royalty, like some sort of champion line of miniature schnauzers. “I have no idea how June did it,” Olivia continued, “but she was standing out in the field in this beautiful dress that had no sleeves. *Zero* sleeves. The wind chill was, like, minus three, but she didn’t even have a single freaking goose bump. Oh, and speaking of homecoming things, are you *sure* you’re okay with me going tonight? For real. I don’t have to. Miles will get over it. We can stay in”—she nudged me with her elbow—“watch a movie or something. Even one of your weird ones.”

Honestly, I didn’t want her to go. It was nice to have access to *sound*, some sort of stimulation, but I would have felt guilty asking her to stay. “Don’t worry,” I said. “Bring me back, uh, a cupcake that looks like a fish, or something. That’s the theme, right?”

“Oh, all right, let me tell you about the *theme*.” Apparently, it was a whole thing that student council was split between Roaring Twenties (event coordinator extraordinaire Olivia’s idea) and Under the Sea (not Olivia’s idea; also, apparently, a horrible idea), and they

ended up going with Under the Sea, and Olivia went on an admittedly well-constructed tirade about how democracy doesn't work because most people are too stupid to pick the right answer. Fine. Maybe we did have something in common.

Eventually, Rick called out from the main room that the ceremony was starting. Olivia went back to her parents, *plural*, and I sat with Mom in the front row, which was reserved for us. Phew. I was worried we'd be stuck in the cheap seats. I said this to Mom, who told me under her breath to stop it.

"Er, hello, everyone, thank you for coming," Rick began, standing at the podium, clearing his throat in between words. The casket was closed now, so I had to find something else to think about: the way the saliva in Rick's mouth went stringy as he talked would do. "My name is Rick Crawford, I'm a civil celebrant, and it's truly a privilege to welcome you all to this celebration of Benjamin Whitaker's forty-six years of life. He was, er, first and foremost, a husband to Rebecca and a father to Sydney." He gestured to Mom and me. I felt like I should wave. "But he was also a hero to many in our community, and it is with great sadness that we see him off here today." Rick was a nice-enough guy, but as he went on for a bit about the fragility of life and the human experience, it was obvious every other poor wretch had been given the same nonspecific speech. It was canned. Scripted. Insert cause of death, familial relations, and religious affiliations here.

And then it was me at the microphone. Plucked out of the ether, like this was someone else's funeral I'd accidentally stumbled into, but they were looking at me all blank-faced and brow-furrowed, so I had to say something. "My—"

The microphone screeched. I stepped back while the collective face of the audience curled into a wince. Apologized. “Uh, Dad is—well, was. Was.” They stared. Mom ground her teeth. I apologized again. This was awful. “Um, so... Dad really cared about people. About everyone, really. His whole job was listening and empathizing, and that’s, you know. That’s something.”

Mercifully, a few heads nodded, as if I had said something very important. I knew I hadn’t. I had nothing to say. But that wasn’t true. I did—but not to these people. If it’d been me alone talking into a void, oh, I would’ve had all kinds of things to say. I would have told the void the one when I’m six, and Dad and I are hiking at the River Styx, the place where I learned to love the world as much as he did, and we’re on the secluded path that runs parallel to the stream, and I go to explore by the swampy pools along the riverbank—looking for tadpoles, or something—and my feet have already disappeared up to my ankles by the time I realize I’m sinking. But Dad hauls me out by my arms, the mud sucking and popping beneath me like I’m a loose tooth. We wash our feet in the stream, watch the mud get swept away with the current, and Dad says he didn’t think anyone has ever been so calm in quicksand. I could have told the one when I’m eight and he lets me watch episodes of *The Twilight Zone* with him after Mom goes to sleep; when I’m eleven and we ride the bumper cars at the county carnival over and over even though he has a bad back; when I’m fourteen and he holds me after the girl breaks my heart; when I’m seventeen and he’s sitting in a box to my right and everyone is expecting something of me, and I can’t stand it, I really can’t, because he shouldn’t be dead.

He shouldn't be dead.

I fiddled with the microphone stand, my fingers slipping. “But why doesn’t anybody know what happened? The...the car people. The coroner. Whatever. This sort of thing can’t just happen.”

At this point, the audience was still on my side—besides Mom, whose spine had got noticeably straighter. They were waiting for me to throw in the twist, the *but*, to share some glorious epiphany about how that was simply the way the world is, that sometimes we don’t have all the answers, that life is unfair.

“Dad did care about people. But, I don’t know. Maybe people didn’t extend that same care to him.”

Mom mouthed my name.

“He was told people’s most personal stuff on a daily basis. Secrets upon secrets. Dark stuff. And maybe...”

At first, I thought maybe I’d been in a highly suggestive state and was experiencing grief-induced hallucinations, because I could have sworn that, near the back of the room, was the homecoming queen.

June Copeland stood with the posture of someone trying not to be noticed, but hunched shoulders don’t hide much when you stand six feet in heels and look like her. She had these curls that cascaded down her back and around her shoulders, a foamy waterfall of ringlets so dark that the darkness seemed to fold in on itself like a black hole. In some places, the spirals were uniform, but around the top they burst forth like a halo, cumulus, cotton candy.

She met my gaze and gave me the saddest little smile I’d ever seen. Her cheeks rose as she did; they were a warm brown, the color of clay, like every terra-cotta pot in the world had gotten together and

discussed all the reds and the browns until they arrived at the most harmonious combination, then bathed her in the result. But the smile disappeared as quickly as it had arrived, and I didn't know what to do besides stare.

Mom's hand on my bicep drew me away. "Come on, sweetie." I wasn't sure how long I'd been standing there. Maybe a second. Maybe an eternity. I let her drag me off the platform, watched my feet as I stepped down, but when I looked back toward the entrance, there was only the black hem of June's dress swaying through the closing door.

I sat. Folded my hands. Collected myself.

As the moment dissolved, I became increasingly aware of the eyes aimed at the back of my skull, like worms boring through the marrow. I didn't dare turn to meet them. I felt ridiculous. Thoroughly embarrassed. What had I done? What had I even been trying to say? If I had been watching myself from where June was standing, I decided, I would have thought something was seriously wrong with me.

Clearly everyone else agreed, because they took Dad to the cemetery without any requests for further autopsies or an impromptu search for clues. They had the decency to wait for me, at least; I opted to travel via bike instead of car behind the procession. And while they lowered him down with the awful creaking straps, I imagined him waking up inside the coffin, clawing at the polished mahogany until his fingernails wore away, and I wanted desperately for them to open it, just to check, just to see. The website had said Pleasant Hills Cemetery was eighteen rolling acres, and I had no idea where these walls were coming from, closing in, crushing, *crushing*, and I sucked air into my throat like it might be for the last time.

But that was it. They dropped him in, and that was it.

We lingered for a while longer. Olivia was noticeably gentler with me as she said goodbye, and Mom talked to people who thought I couldn't hear them. Hushed: *Sydney seems like she's taking it badly.* Oblivious: *I think Sydney should see a therapist.* Of course. There would be books in Dad's office that accused me of *projection*, of being so averse to the reality of the situation that I had made up some fanciful hypotheses about all the things that could have happened that didn't include the word "accident."

And when I pedaled away behind Mom, her trunk full of bouquets that would wilt and food we wouldn't eat, I swore I saw June Copeland at the curve where the hill met the horizon, her black dress playing between the stones.

That night, I replayed the funeral in my head once, twice, again. Again.

Dad laid out on the slab. Dad underground.

It all felt so strange. If someone had told me it hadn't actually happened, I probably would have believed them. When I tried to summon up the memory of it, it felt flimsy, like I couldn't actually hold on to it, like my brain knew it was something too deleterious to keep.

But June Copeland. She was there.

What the *hell* had she been doing? National Honor Society president. The likely salutatorian to Heath's likely valedictorian. I had

never even spoken to her. Just admired from afar. Which makes me sound creepy, but we all did it. We were almost expected to. They were paraded around as Pleasant Hills' golden children, as some sort of goal for us, the commoners, to aspire to. Made even more impressive by the fact that June had only moved to Pleasant Hills freshman year from somewhere in California. Originally an outsider, she'd assimilated so successfully that she hadn't only become an insider, but now ruled over them herself. Actually, Heath *was* the school president—maybe June was there as some sort of fucked-up First Lady? But why had she...looked at me like that? Half like I was pathetic, half like I was pitiable, as if I'd been an ant she'd accidentally stepped on but at least respected enough to flick off her shoe.

But maybe it was more than that. The strangers, quiet, with their heads down—maybe it was a thank-you.

Most importantly, though: Why did I care?

That's when I got the text.

Hi Sydney.

My nerves stood to attention. There was no name. There wasn't even a number; it was only listed as *restricted*. And it was nearly three in the morning. Who was texting me at three in the morning?

I typed back with heavy fingers.

Me: Uh hello

Me: Sorry

Me: Who is this?

The ellipses that meant the person was typing appeared below my texts almost instantly. Like the sender had been sitting there. Waiting for my response.

You really think someone killed him?

It was an odd sensation. I still hadn't processed what exactly was going on—generally, but also in that exact moment—and it was as though my blood wanted to run cold but wasn't sure of it, and had instead opted for lukewarm.

You really think someone killed him?

I didn't know what to say. Wasn't even sure I should say anything.

So I didn't. I turned my phone off, rolled over in bed, willed myself to sleep until the light outside turned pink.

