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# **Behind Her Eyes**

Written by Sara Pinborough

Published by HarperCollins

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'A dark, electrifying page-turner  
with a corker of an ending'

HARLAN COBEN



BEHIND  
HER  
EYES

SARAH PINBOROUGH

# Behind Her Eyes

Sarah Pinborough



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London SE1 9GF

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

Published by  
HarperCollinsPublishers 2017

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A catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9780008131968

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Set in Giovanni by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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*Three can keep a secret if two are dead.*  
Benjamin Franklin

# PART ONE



1

THEN

Pinch myself and say I AM AWAKE once an hour.

Look at my hands. Count my fingers.

Look at clock (or watch), look away, look back.

Stay calm and focused.

Think of a door.

3

## LATER

It was nearly light when it was finally done. A streaky grey wash across the canvas of sky. Dry leaves and mud clung to his jeans, and his weak body ached as his sweat cooled in the damp, chill air. A thing had been done that could not be undone. A terrible necessary act. An ending and a beginning now knotted up for ever. He expected the hues of the world to change to reflect that, but the earth and heavens remained the same muted shades, and there was no tremble of anger from the trees. No weeping whisper of wind. No siren wailed in the distance. The woods were just the woods, and the dirt was just the dirt. He let out a long breath and it felt surprisingly good. Clean. A new dawn. A new day.

He walked in silence towards the remains of the house in the distance. He didn't look back.

### 3

## NOW

### ADELE

There's still mud under my fingernails when David finally comes home. I can feel it stinging against my raw skin, deep under the beds. My stomach twists, wringing fresh nerves out as the front door shuts, and for a moment we just look at each other from opposite ends of the long corridor of our new Victorian house, a tract of perfectly polished wood between us, before he turns, swaying slightly, towards the sitting room. I take a deep breath and join him, flinching at each of the hard beats of my heels against the floorboards. I must not be afraid. I need to repair this. *We* need to repair this.

'I've cooked dinner,' I say, trying not to sound too needy. 'Only a stroganoff. It can keep until tomorrow if you've already eaten.'

He's facing away from me, staring at our bookshelves that the unpackers have filled from the boxes. I try not to think about how long he's been gone. I've cleaned up the broken glass, swept and scrubbed the floor, and dealt with the garden. All evidence of earlier rage has been removed. I rinsed my mouth out after every glass of wine I drank in his absence

*Behind Her Eyes*

so he won't smell it on me. He doesn't like me to drink. Only ever a glass or two in company. Never alone. But tonight I couldn't help it.

Even if I haven't entirely got the dirt out from under my nails, I've showered and changed into a powder blue dress and matching heels, and put make-up on. No trace of tears and fighting. I want us to wash it all away. This is our fresh start. Our new beginning. It has to be.

'I'm not hungry.' He turns to face me then, and I can see a quiet loathing in his eyes, and I bite back a sudden urge to cry. I think this emptiness is worse than his anger. Everything I've worked so hard to build really is crumbling. I don't care that he's drunk again. I only want him to love me like he used to. He doesn't even notice the effort I've made since he stormed out. How busy I've been. How I look. How I've *tried*.

'I'm going to bed,' he says. He doesn't look me in the eye, and I know that he means the spare room. Two days into our fresh start, and he won't be sleeping with me. I feel the cracks between us widen once more. Soon we won't be able to reach each other across them. He walks carefully around me and I want to touch his arm but am too afraid of how he will react. He seems disgusted by me. Or perhaps it's his disgust at himself radiating in my direction.

'I love you,' I say, softly. I hate myself for it, and he doesn't answer but unsteadily clammers the stairs as if I'm not there. I hear his footsteps recede and then a door closing.

After a moment of staring at the space where he no longer is, listening to my patchwork heart breaking, I go back to the kitchen and turn the oven off. I won't keep it for tomorrow. It would taste sour on the memory of today. Dinner's ruined. We're ruined. I sometimes wonder if he wants to kill me and be done with it all. Get rid of the albatross around his neck. Perhaps some part of me wants to kill him too.

I'm tempted to have another glass of forbidden wine, but

I resist. I'm tearful enough already and I can't face another fight. Perhaps in the morning we'll be fine again. I'll replace the bottle and he'll never know I've been drinking at all.

I gaze out into the garden before finally flicking the outside lights off and facing my reflection in the window. I'm a beautiful woman. I look after myself. Why can't he still love me? Why can't our life have been as I'd hoped, as I'd wanted, after everything I've done for him? We have plenty of money. He has the career he dreamed of. I have only ever tried to be the perfect wife and give him the perfect life. Why can't he let the past go?

I allow myself a few minutes' more self-pity as I wipe down and polish the granite surfaces, and then I take a deep breath and pull myself together. I need to sleep. To properly sleep. I'll take a pill and knock myself out. Tomorrow will be different. It has to be. I'll forgive him. I always do.

I love my husband. I have since the moment I set eyes on him, and I will never fall out of love with him. I won't give that up. I can't.

## LOUISE

*No names, okay? No jobs. No dull life talk. Let's talk about real things.*

'You really said that?'

'Yes. Well, no,' I say. 'He did.'

My face burns. It sounded romantic at four thirty in the afternoon two days ago with the first illicit afternoon Negroni, but now it's like something from a cheap tragi-romcom. Thirty-four-year-old woman walks into a bar and is sweet-talked by the man of her dreams who turns out to be her new boss. Oh God, I want to die from the awfulness of it all. What a mess.

'Of course *he* did.' Sophie laughs and immediately tries to stop herself. '*No dull life talk*. Like, oh, I don't know, the small fact I'm married.' She sees my face. 'Sorry. I know it's not technically funny, but it sort of is. And I know you're out of practice with the whole men thing, but how could you not have known from *that* he was married? The new boss bit I'll let you off with. That is simply bloody bad luck.'

'It's *really* not funny,' I say, but I smile. 'Anyway, married men are your forte, not mine.'

'True.'

I knew Sophie would make me feel better. We are funny

together. We laugh. She's an actress by trade – although we never discuss how she hasn't worked outside of two TV corpses in years – and, despite her affairs, has been married to a music exec for ever. We met at our NCT classes, and although our lives are very different, we bonded. Seven years on and we're still drinking wine.

'But now you're like me,' she says, with a cheery wink. 'Sleeping with a married man. I feel less bad about myself already.'

'I *didn't* sleep with him. And I didn't know he was married.' That last part isn't quite true. By the end of the night, I'd had a pretty good idea. The urgent press of his body against mine as we kissed, our heads spinning from gin. The sudden break away. The guilt in his eyes. The apology. *I can't do this*. All the tells were there.

'Okay, Snow White. I'm just excited that you nearly got laid. How long's it been now?'

'I *really* don't want to think about that. Depressing me further won't help with my current predicament,' I say, before drinking more of my wine. I need another cigarette. Adam is tucked up and fast asleep and won't move until breakfast and school. I can relax. He doesn't have nightmares. He doesn't sleepwalk. Thank God for small mercies.

'And this is all Michaela's fault anyway,' I continue. 'If she'd cancelled *before* I got there, none of this would have happened.'

Sophie's got a point though. It's been a long time since I've even flirted with a man, let alone got drunk and kissed one. Her life is different. Always surrounded by new and interesting people. Creative types who live more freely, drink until late, and live like teenagers. Being a single mum in London eking out a living as a psychiatrist's part-time secretary doesn't exactly give me a huge number of opportunities to throw caution to the wind and go out every night in the hope of

meeting anyone, let alone 'Mr Right', and I can't face Tinder or Match or any of those other sites. I've kind of got used to being on my own. Putting all that on hold for a while. A while that is turning into an inadvertent lifestyle choice.

'This will cheer you up.' She pulls a joint out of the top pocket of her red corduroy jacket. 'Trust me, you'll find everything funnier once we're baked.' She sees the reluctance on my face and grins. 'Come on, Lou. It's a special occasion. You've excelled yourself. Snogged your new married boss. This is genius. I should get someone to write the film. I could play you.'

'Good,' I say. 'I'll need the money when I'm fired.' I can't fight Sophie, and I don't want to, and soon we're sitting out on the small balcony of my tiny flat, wine, crisps, and cigarettes at our feet, passing the weed between us, giggling.

Unlike Sophie, who somehow remains half-teenager, getting high is not in any way part of my normal routine – there isn't the time or the money when you're on your own – but laughter beats crying any time, and I suck in a lungful of sweet, forbidden smoke.

'It could only happen to you,' she says. 'You hid?'

I nod, smiling at the comedy of the memory imagined through someone else's eyes. 'I couldn't think of anything else to do. I dived into the toilet and stayed there. When I came out, he'd gone. He doesn't start until tomorrow. He was getting the full tour from Dr Sykes.'

'With his wife.'

'Yep, with his wife.' I remember how good they looked together in that brief, awful moment of realisation. A beautiful couple.

'How long did you stay in the toilet for?'

'Twenty minutes.'

'Oh, Lou.'

There's a pause, and then we both have the giggles, wine

and weed buzzing our heads, and for a little while we can't stop.

'I wish I could have seen your face,' Sophie says.

'Yeah, well, I'm not looking forward to seeing *his* face when he sees my face.'

Sophie shrugs. 'He's the married one. It's his shame. He can't say anything to you.'

She absolves me of my guilt, but I can still feel it clinging, along with the shock. The gut punch of the woman I'd glimpsed by his side before I dashed into hiding. His beautiful wife. Elegant. Dark-haired and olive-skinned in an Angelina Jolie way. That kind of mystery about her. Exceptionally slim. The opposite of me. The snapshot of her is burned into my brain. I couldn't imagine her ever panicking and hiding in a toilet from *anyone*. It stung in a way it shouldn't have, not after one drunken afternoon, and not only because my confidence has reached rock bottom.

The thing is, I'd liked him - *really* liked him. I can't tell Sophie about that. How I hadn't talked to anyone like that in a long time. How happy I'd felt to be flirting with someone who was flirting back, and how I'd forgotten how great that excitement of something potentially *new* was. My life is, as a rule, a blur of endless routine. I get Adam up and take him to school. If I'm working and want to start early, he goes to breakfast club. If I'm not working, I may spend an hour or so browsing charity shops for designer cast-offs that will fit the clinic's subtly expensive look. Then it's just cooking, cleaning, shopping, until Adam comes home, and then it's homework, tea, bath, story, bed for him and wine and bad sleep for me. When he goes to his dad's for a weekend I'm too tired to do anything much other than lie in and then watch crap TV. The idea that this could be my life until Adam's at least fifteen or so quietly terrifies me, so I don't think about it. But then meeting the *man-in-the-bar* made me remember

how good it was to *feel* something. As a woman. It made me feel alive. I'd even thought about going back to that bar and seeing if he'd turned up to find me. But, of course, life isn't a romcom. And he's married. And I've been an idiot. I'm not bitter, merely sad. I can't tell Sophie any of these things because then she'd feel sorry for me, and I don't want that, and it's just easier to find it all funny. It *is* funny. And it's not like I sit at home bemoaning my singledom every night, as if no one could ever be complete without a man. In the main, I'm pretty happy. I'm a grown-up. I could have it way worse. This was one mistake. I have to deal with it.

I scoop up a handful of Doritos and Sophie does the same. 'Curves are the new thin,' we say in unison, before cramming the crisps into our mouths and nearly choking as we laugh again. I think about me hiding in the toilet from him, full of panic and disbelief. It *is* funny. Everything is funny. It might be less funny tomorrow morning when I have to face the music, but for now I can laugh. If you can't laugh at your own fuck-ups, what can you laugh at?

'Why do you do it?' I say later, when the bottle of wine is empty between us and the evening is drawing to a close. 'Have affairs? Aren't you happy with Jay?'

'Of course I am,' Sophie says. 'I love him. It's not like I'm out doing it *all* the time.'

This is probably true. She's an actress; she exaggerates for the sake of a story sometimes.

'But why do it at all?' Strangely, it's not something we've really talked about that much. She knows I'm uncomfortable with it, not because she does it – that's her business – but because I know and like Jay. He's good for her. Without him, she'd be screwed. As it were.

'I have a higher sex drive than he does,' she says, eventually. 'And sex isn't what marriage is about anyway. It's about being with your best friend. Jay's my best friend. But we've been

together fifteen years. Lust can't maintain itself. I mean, we still do it, sometimes, but it's not like it was. And having a child changes things. You spend so many years seeing each other as parents rather than lovers, it's hard to get that passion back.'

I think of my own short-lived marriage. The lust didn't die with us. But that didn't stop him leaving after four years to be with someone else when our son was barely two years old. Maybe she has a point. I don't think I ever saw my ex, Ian, as my best friend.

'It just seems a bit sad to me.' And it does.

'That's because you believe in true love and happy ever after in a fairy tale way. That's not how life is.'

'Do you think he's ever cheated on you?' I ask.

'He's definitely had his flirtations,' she says. 'There was a singer he worked with a long time ago. I think maybe they had a thing for a while. But whatever it was, it didn't affect us. Not really.'

She makes it sound so reasonable. All I can think of is the pain of betrayal I felt when Ian left. How what he did affected how I saw myself. How worthless I felt in those early days. How ugly. The short-lived romance he left me for didn't last either, but that didn't make me feel better.

'I don't think I'll ever understand it,' I say.

'Everyone has secrets, Lou,' she says. 'Everyone should be allowed their secrets. You can never know everything about a person. You'd go mad trying to.'

I wonder, after she's left and I'm cleaning up the debris of our evening, if maybe Jay was the one who cheated first. Maybe that's Sophie's secret at the heart of her hotel-room trysts. Maybe it's all done to make herself feel better or to quietly get even. Who knows? I'm probably over-thinking it. Over-thinking is my speciality. Each to their own, I remind myself. She seems happy and that's good enough for me.

It's only a little past ten thirty, but I'm exhausted, and I peer in at Adam for a minute, a soothing comfort to be found in watching his peaceful sleep, curled up tiny on his side under his *Star Wars* duvet, Paddington tucked under one arm, and then close the door and leave him to it.

It's dark when I wake up in the bathroom, standing in front of the mirror, and before I've really registered where I am, I feel the sharp throb in my shin where I've walked into the small laundry basket in the corner. My heart races, and sweat clings to my hairline. As reality settles around me, the night terror shatters, leaving only fragments in my head. I know what it was though. Always the same dream.

A vast building, like an old hospital or orphanage. Abandoned. Adam is trapped somewhere inside it, and I know, I *just know*, that if I can't get to him, then he's going to die. He's calling out for me, afraid. Something bad is coming for him. I'm running through corridors trying to reach him, and from the walls and ceilings the shadows stretch, as if they're part of some terrible evil alive in the building, and wrap themselves around me, trapping me. All I can hear is Adam crying as I try to escape the dark, sticky strands determined to keep me from him, to choke me and drag me into the endless darkness. It's a horrible dream. It clings to me like the shadows do in the nightmare itself. The details may change slightly from night to night, but the narrative is always the same. However many times I have it, I'll never get used to it.

The night terrors didn't start when Adam was born – I've always had them, but before him I would be fighting for my own survival. Looking back, that was better, even if I didn't know it at the time. They're the bane of my life. They kill my chances of a decent night's sleep when being a single mum tires me out enough.

*Behind Her Eyes*

This time I've walked more than I've done in a while. Normally I wake up, confused, standing either by my own bed or Adam's, often in the middle of a nonsensical, terrified sentence. It happens so often it doesn't even bother him if he wakes up any more. But then he's got his father's practicality. Thankfully, he's my sense of humour.

I put the light on, look into the mirror, and groan. Dark circles drag the skin under my eyes down, and I know foundation isn't going to cover them. Not in full daylight. Oh good. I remind myself that it doesn't matter what *the-man-from-the-bar* aka *oh-crap-he's-my-new-married-boss* thinks of me. Hopefully, he'll be feeling embarrassed enough to ignore me all day. My stomach still clenches though, and my head thumps from too much wine and too many cigarettes. *Woman up*, I tell myself. *It'll all be forgotten in a day or so. Just go in and do your job.*

It's only four in the morning, and I drink some water, then turn the light out and creep back to my own bed hoping at least to doze until the alarm goes off at six. I refuse to think about the way his mouth felt on mine and how good it was, if only briefly, to have that surge of desire. To feel that connection with someone. I stare at the wall and contemplate counting sheep, and then I realise that under my nerves I'm also excited to see him again. I grit my teeth and curse myself as an idiot. I am *not* that woman.

## ADELE

I wave him off with a smile as he leaves for his first proper day at the clinic, and the elderly lady next door looks on approvingly as she takes her small, equally frail dog out for his walk. We always appear such a perfect couple, David and I. I like that.

Still, I let out a sigh of relief when I close the door and have the house to myself, even though that exhalation feels like a small betrayal. I love having David here with me, but we're not yet back on whatever even ground we've created for ourselves, and the atmosphere is full of everything unsaid. Thankfully, the new house is big enough that he can hide in his study and we can pretend everything is fine as we cautiously move around each other.

I *do*, however, feel slightly better than I did when he came home drunk. We didn't discuss it the next morning, of course; discussion is not something we do these days. Instead, I left him to his papers and went to sign us both up at the local health club, which is suitably expensive, and then walked around our new chic area, absorbing it all. I like to lock locations in place. To be able to *see* them. It makes me feel more comfortable. It helps me relax.

I walked for nearly two hours, mentally logging shops and

bars and restaurants until I had them safely stored in my head, their images summonable at will, and then I bought some bread from the local artisan bakery, and some olives, sliced ham, hummus, and sun-dried tomatoes from the deli – all of which were decadently expensive and drained my housekeeping cash – and made us an indoor picnic for lunch, even though it was warm enough to sit outside. I don't think he wants to go into the garden yet.

Yesterday we went to the clinic, and I charmed the senior partner Dr Sykes, and the various other doctors and nurses we met. People respond to beauty. It sounds vain, but it's true. David once told me that jurors were far more likely to believe good-looking people in the dock than average or ugly ones. It's only the luck of skin and bones, but I've learned that it does have a magic. You don't even have to say very much, but simply listen and smile, and people bend over backwards for you. I have enjoyed being beautiful. To say anything else would be a lie. I work hard to keep myself beautiful for David. Everything I do is for him.

David's new office is the second largest in the building from what I could see, the sort I would expect him to have if he'd ever take up a position in Harley Street. The carpet is cream and plush, the large desk is suitably ostentatious, and outside is a very luxurious reception area. The blonde and attractive – if you like that sort of thing – woman behind *that* desk scurried away before we could be introduced, which annoyed me – but Dr Sykes barely seemed to notice as he talked at me and blushed when I laughed at his terrible half-jokes. I think I did very well given how much my heart was aching. David must have been pleased too, because he softened a little after that.

We are having dinner at Dr Sykes' house tonight as an informal welcome. I already have my dress picked out and know how I will do my hair. I fully intend to make David

*Adele*

proud of me. I can be the good wife. The new partner's wife. Despite my present worries. I feel calmer than I have since we moved.

I look up at the clock whose tick cuts through the vast silence in the house. It's still only eight a.m. He's probably just getting to the office now. He won't make his first call home until eleven thirty. I have time. I go up to our bedroom and lie on top of the covers. I'm not going to sleep. But I do close my eyes. I think about the clinic. David's office. That plush cream carpet. The polished mahogany of his desk. The tiny scratch on the corner. The two slim couches. Firm seats. The details. I take a deep breath.