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The Secrets Women Keep

Written by Fanny Blake

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The SECRETS WOMEN KEEP



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September



I

The dark outline of the doorway framed a section of the sun-drenched garden beyond, the brilliance of the outdoor colours such a contrast to the house's shady interior. From where she was standing, Rose could see the vivid splashes of roses, geraniums and bougainvillea, the silver green of the olive trees in the distance, the startling blue of the sky. But she was enjoying being indoors. Even here she could feel the heat, despite having pulled the shutters to against the sun, aware of how much the temperature outside had risen since breakfast time.

Eve and Terry had announced they'd be arriving at Pisa around midday, then driving down, so a simple late lunch would be perfect. Rose pulled the strings of her apron around her so that they tied in front of her stomach, not quite the washboard of years ago, but could be worse given two children and a healthy appetite. Choosing a couple of onions and some garlic from the hanging mesh basket and the plumpest tomatoes from the dish, she laid them by the small bunches of oregano and thyme that she'd snipped from the garden. As she began to chop, she hummed an indecipherable tune under her breath. Just another day in paradise.

'What's for lunch?' Daniel had snuck up behind her, putting his arms around her and planting a kiss on the back of her neck.

Smiling, Rose turned to him, her face lifted to his. 'Wait and see.'

'Spoilsport!' But he put a hand to her cheek then kissed her again, this time on the lips. Slow and caring. She leaned into him, her eyes closing.

When they finally separated, Rose glanced at the station clock over the oven. 'Look at the time! I've got to get on.' She removed his hands from the curve of her back. 'I'll never be ready otherwise.'

Turning down the corners of his mouth in exaggerated disappointment, Daniel picked up the beach towel from the back of the chair where he'd left it. 'If there's really nothing I can do, I'm off for a swim.'

She stretched up to kiss his cheek. 'Don't worry. It's all under control. Just be ready for when they get here.'

He strolled out of the house and down the slope, eventually disappearing through the gate to the pool. Only then did Rose return her attention to lunch.

Pottering about the kitchen was one of her great pleasures, especially here in Casa Rosa, the renovated farmhouse that they had bought so many years ago. Back then it was a dilapidated shell, but they'd been seduced by its hillside position. They tracked down the local farmer, then endured the time-consuming process of unearthing the family members who owned the house, securing agreements one by one until finally it was theirs. She smiled. Daniel had been a more patient man then. These days, he would never tolerate the wait. Slowly, together, they had brought the place back to life, bringing the family here every summer for more years than she could remember; all good memories.

Rose thought of her daughters with a fond sigh. Anna, the elder, should be arriving later that afternoon, no doubt in a typical whirlwind of plans and problems. As for Jess . . . there was a question mark hanging over her visit after the recent clash with her father. Out of sheer pique, she had announced that she wouldn't come this year after all. She would be staying at home with Adam and their toddler, Dylan.

'Dylan! Ridiculous name! We're not Welsh!' Rose remembered Daniel's immediate verdict when their grandson was named after Bob Dylan, a musical giant in Adam's eyes. Whatever Adam liked, guaranteed Daniel wouldn't.

She comforted herself with the knowledge that Jess and Daniel always made up in the end. She couldn't bear to think that their younger daughter would miss the traditional fortnight-long family holiday; a sacrosanct annual event still, even now the girls were grown up and had their own lives. Apart from Christmas, this was

the one time when they all got together and relaxed. Rose refused to contemplate any alternative to her usual family gathering. She'd made up Jess and Adam's bed anyway, with a small mattress on the floor for Dylan beside it. The child's stool that Daniel had made for Jess's fourth birthday and that Rose had painted with characters from *Alice in Wonderland* was waiting there too. She eased the problem from her mind. She would tackle Daniel about it later, when the moment was right. For now, she pictured her young grandson, anticipating the intense pleasure of seeing him again.

Reaching for the tin can that sat on the chipped tile at the back of the worktop, she poured a ribbon of olive oil into the frying pan, and turned up the gas. A moment later she tipped in the onions and garlic, stirring them as they sizzled, the smell taking over the kitchen. She was tossing in the chopped tomatoes when her iPhone buzzed, announcing a text. That would probably be Eve to say they'd been delayed. Her hands wet with tomato juice, Rose wiped them on the skirt of her apron, then reached for the phone, which was hidden between the bowls of fruit and vegetables on the table. Sticky with heat, she pushed her fringe off her face with the back of her arm and read the message displayed on the screen.

She frowned, and read it again. This certainly wasn't Eve.

Miss you. Love you. Come back soon. S

In fact, nobody she knew would write to her like this.

A misdial, no doubt. She replaced the phone on the long oak kitchen table, nudging it until it lay between the two earthenware bowls, one with its cargo of beef tomatoes, aubergines and courgettes, the other crowded with the figs she'd picked from the tree that morning and a few misshapen pears and apples from yesterday's market. She turned down the heat under the tomato sauce, leaving it to simmer while she tidied and wiped the work surface, putting what she could into the dishwasher, washing up the rest. She removed her apron and hung it on the back of the door, all the while imagining the person the message was for and wondering what the repercussions might be when they didn't receive it. She pushed her rolled sleeves above her elbows. Perhaps she should

change this shirt for something cooler before the others arrived. But the message nagged at her, drawing her back to the table. She picked up the mobile again and turned it over in her hand.

On its shiny black back were the familiar scratch and the gold star sticker that distinguished it from hers. This was Daniel's phone. With a thudding heart, she realised the message was for him.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she looked again. The words ricocheted round her brain as she struggled to catch her breath. She turned the fruit bowl slightly, replaced the phone. If it weren't for the regular tick of the clock, she would have believed time had stopped dead.

She rushed to the sink, retching over the coffee mugs that she'd left there after they'd sat together just half an hour earlier, discussing what the following week would bring. She reran their conversation. Had there been any awkwardness, anything unusual, any clue at all that something was wrong between them? Nothing that she remembered. Not then, not during the last few weeks. She ran the cold tap and splashed her burning face and neck.

Drying her face with the dish towel, she realised the absurdity of her reaction. Daniel have an affair? He couldn't. He wouldn't. The message must be from a colleague. Of course. There must be a problem at one of the hotels that only he could solve. How quick she'd been to leap to conclusions. They trusted one another implicitly. Didn't they? She hesitated. But *Love you*. Who would say that to him?

She reached for the phone again.

The words were still there: *Miss. Love. Come back*. Whoever had written them must have realised that someone other than Daniel might see them. So there had to be an innocent explanation. But if not a colleague, then who? She rubbed her thumb along the length of her middle finger, studying her square, capable hands, her neatly rounded fingernails. Perhaps the message was a joke of some kind. The initial S: sign-off and single clue to the sender's identity that simultaneously preserved their anonymity. She must have misinterpreted the desire she first read into the text. Every bit of her

refused to accept that her husband would betray her. And yet . . . Wasn't this the sort of thing that happened in marriages? Wronged wife finds giveaway receipt, note, text. Frantic, she ran through the possible explanations again. A colleague? A joker? A wrong number? Another woman? Her breath caught as the last one hooked itself into her mind . . .

The monastery bell tolled the hour. Eve and Terry would be here at any minute. She should sort this out first, just to put her mind at rest. A band of tension tightened around her head, as her puzzlement gave way to panic. She sat with her head in her hands. What if?

Outside, a dog barked, then a splash as Daniel dived into the pool for his obligatory one hundred body-conditioning lengths.

Women loved Daniel. Rose had always known that. He only had to enter a room and heads turned. His energy and charisma made him friends easily. If he had enemies, she didn't know them. If he had lovers . . . She didn't believe he had. She had always been there for him, always would be. As he had been for her.

She poured herself a glass of water and drank quickly. Whatever she was going through, nothing must spoil their family holiday. Trying to gather her fragmenting thoughts, she filled the large pasta pan and put it on the hob, ready for later. Then she picked up the knife and stabbed it into the last tomato, catching the point of the blade in the board, and drew it down through the skin. There had to be an innocent explanation. All she had to do was ask.

She slid the tomatoes into the frying pan, then switched off the gas. Picking up the phone again, she walked outside, every step an effort. A green and black lizard skittered out of her path into the shadow of the pot of pink geraniums. The intense summer heat enveloped her like a blanket, but did nothing to warm her or to slow her racing thoughts. Pausing on the vine-sheltered terrace to put on her straw hat, she looked past the spreading walnut tree that shaded the table where they'd have lunch, through the olive trees and down to the pool, where the sounds of Daniel swimming a determined crawl rose to meet her. A couple of orange butterflies danced past as she made her way over the grass, feeling its spring

against her instep until she reached the path descending to the pool. She watched as Daniel flip-turned at the far end, his iron-grey hair disappearing under the water in a surge of bubbles. He looked in his element, cutting cleanly through the water, the sun glinting on the ripples and throwing faint shadows through the blueness around him. Her eyes stung with tears.

She crossed the paving and stood right on the edge of the shallow end for a second before moving on to the top step, the chill of the water jolting her into the moment. She flicked at a fly that landed on her shoulder. Only another couple of strokes and Daniel was beside her. She stepped out of the water back on to the side. He grasped the edge of the pool and looked up, shaking his head, tipping it one way then the other, tapping his lower ear each time, then removed his goggles and dropped them on the ground by her feet. He squinted into the sun as he looked up at her.

'Everything all right?'

Even his smile hurt her. She noticed a splash of tomato on the hem of her pink linen shorts and scratched at it, distracted.

The neighbours' hunting dogs, caged under an oak tree by the track, began barking again.

'Perfectly.' She heard the catch in her voice but he appeared not to notice. 'You've got a text.'

He looked surprised.

The pulse in her throat beat faster as she held out the mobile, the sun glancing off its face.

'Really? I'm not expecting anything. I'm sure whoever it is can wait. You didn't have to come out.' He hoisted himself up to sit on the edge of the pool. She registered his slight paunch, which he controlled with determined exercise, his chest covered with grey curls. Water ran down his face and plastered his hair to his head until he rubbed it with one hand so it stuck up on end. Even so, she couldn't help thinking that there was still something absurdly Greek god-like about him. And tanned, he looked his best. There was no doubt, her husband was still . . . well, better than lukewarm for a man of his age. Perhaps she wasn't the only one who thought

so. Her stomach turned. She studied his face for signs of guilt, but there was nothing there.

'Well, you never know. Perhaps it's more important than you think.' She laid the phone next to his towel, briefly touched that it wouldn't occur to him that she might have looked at it, shocked by the fact that she had. 'Eve and Terry will be here soon and I thought you'd want to be ready for them.'

He groaned. 'It's so perfect when we're here on our own.'

Yes, it had been. Until ten minutes ago.

Just ask him, her inner voice insisted. Ask him.

But as much as she wanted his quick reassurance that the message meant nothing, she was terrified of being told the opposite. She remained silent, steadying herself. Confronting him now, moments before the others arrived, was a bad idea. As she ran her finger along the chain around her neck, catching it on the delicate gold heart that he'd bought her on their anniversary, she said, 'You know you love it when there are people staying. And Anna should be here by this evening.'

The thought of their daughter brought another smile to his face. 'Wonder what hare-brained scheme she'll have dreamed up this time.'

Rose looked skywards, shaking her head in mock despair. She couldn't speak.

Daniel laughed and ran a finger up her calf. 'Come on, she's not that bad.'

She froze at his touch, then stepped to the side, resisting a sudden urge to kick him. How did he have the power to make her feel like this? 'I hoped that she was settling down at last. Doing those horticultural courses.'

'Our Anna? Dream on, old thing.' He angled his face to the sun, eyes shut, propping himself up on his arms.

'Less of the old.' Her response was automatic. 'At least I act my age.' Wishing she hadn't said that, she tried to swallow the lump in her throat as she prepared to back-pedal.

'What's that supposed to mean?' But his eyes remained shut, and if anything, he sounded amused.

'Nothing.' She corralled the words that were crowding on to the tip of her tongue and dug her nails into her palm, the pain focusing her. Self-control: that was the key. She had to hold on to herself, delaying the conversation until the two of them had some uninterrupted time together. Until there was an admission of guilt, nothing had changed. 'I'm going back to do lunch. At least one of us should be ready for them.'

Daniel got to his feet. 'Looks like it's too late for that.' He wrapped the red towel around his waist and they both turned towards the house at the sound of a car bumping over the uneven drive.

'Time and again I've told Marco to shut the bloody gate. Doesn't he ever listen? What's the point of having security if we don't use it?'

Languages were not Daniel's strong suit, but he insisted on speaking them loudly even when English would have been better understood. Marco had once lived in Cricklewood for three years and still talked as if it was the centre of the universe. Now loyal gardener, pool boy and general odd-job man to a number of English-owned houses in the area, his English was fluent, but Daniel persisted in dragging out his very rusty A-level Italian at every conversation. Everyone who heard him was impressed in equal measure by his efforts and his cloth ear. Rose was used to having to explain for him later.

As she followed him up the garden, she watched the way he held himself, confident, easy and unconcerned. Despite her efforts to control it, anxiety was knotting itself tight in her stomach, making her almost oblivious to anything else. All she wanted to do was lie down and pull a sheet over her head, shutting out the world while she tried to digest the awful nagging suspicions that wouldn't leave her alone. But she couldn't. She had to go through the motions of normal behaviour, however desperate she felt. They rounded the corner of the house as a small black car reversed into the space beside theirs. An arm emerged from the window to wave a greeting, sun glinting off a gold bangle. The car had barely stopped when the passenger door was flung open and Eve burst out of it.

'At last! I thought we'd never get here. Terry wouldn't rent anything faster or bigger than this. But you know what he's like about saving the planet!' She embraced Rose warmly, and Rose responded, inhaling her friend's familiar floral scent. The cavalry had arrived.

Eve turned to Daniel. 'Come here, you gorgeous man.'

As she hugged him, Rose watched for a second, amused to see how unprepared Eve seemed for the simplicity of villa life. There was no compromise in her wardrobe. A fashion guru would never be disappointed walking through her door. 'If I'm run over by a bus tomorrow, at least they'll know I had taste,' she once said to the accompaniment of her friends' laughter. 'Teaming and toning' was her watchword, demonstrated in her tan sandals, cream Capri pants, voluminous swirly top in various shades of brown and coral, and gold jewellery. Rose wished that she herself had changed into something more chic than shorts and shirt. She ran a hand through her cropped hair, tucking it behind her ear, aware how dull it must look beside Eve's expensive streaks. But those hours in a hairdresser's chair weren't for her.

'Rose. You're looking great,' said Eve. Daniel's arm lay loosely round her shoulder.

Terry stood in front of Rose, arms held wide, expectant. Unusually unshaven, his face looked thinner, emphasising the narrowness of his nose and the set of his ears. She was immediately ashamed of her uncharitable thought that her brother was not at his best in shorts. He'd never quite grown out of the lanky stage that had disqualified him from the sports pitch at an early age, despite his enthusiasm for it. Perhaps it was just that she was more used to seeing him in a suit and tie: the uniform of accountancy. She smiled her welcome before being caught up in an awkward embrace, her face rasped by his stubble. Even as brother and sister they didn't do closeness well. She extricated herself as swiftly as she could and took a step back. She ordered herself to make an effort.

'Good to see you both,' she said. 'Shall we take your luggage in

now?' Terry had already lifted the boot of the car and was hauling out a single small case.

'Just the one? You're usually much less restrained.'

Terry looked sheepish. 'They've lost one of them. But—'

'Not just one of them, Terry,' interrupted Eve. '*My* one!'

'They've said it'll be with us by nine o'clock tonight,' he explained, obviously in the wake of a major row. He spoke carefully. 'They're putting it on the last flight out of Stansted.'

'We'll see,' muttered Eve. 'Bloody disorganised hellhole. And in the meantime, I've nothing but what I'm standing up in.'

Rose made sympathetic noises, aware of the amount of clutter that would be airborne in their direction that night.

Eve saw her expression and slipped an arm through hers. 'You know I can't travel anywhere without my straighteners, my hairdryer and all my creams and lotions, plus a change of clothes for every occasion. Got to keep up the good fight, and I'm not giving in yet. They take up so much space, that's the problem.'

'I'll say,' said Rose. She felt some relief now that Eve was here. Perhaps she would talk to her about the text. Eve would know what she should do, would reassure her that she'd got the wrong end of the stick. 'Lost bags almost always turn up. Don't let it spoil things. You can always borrow something of mine.'

Eve snorted. 'Of yours? Kind offer, dearest sister-in-law, but one of your dresses would just about fit round my thigh.'

Rose laughed. 'Nonsense. Come in and I'll see what I can dig out.' She took the case and carried it towards the house. 'Good journey otherwise?'

'Bloody awful.' Eve was right behind her. 'I vowed last year that I'd never fly budget airline again, but you know what Terry's like if he sniffs a bargain. So it was the usual being herded on to the plane like cattle and then we had to sit on the bloody runway for an hour and a half because of heavy air traffic at Pisa. Then when we arrived we had to bank for another half an hour, flying so low we were practically scraping the tiles off the roofs. Terrifying. Haven't they heard of timetables in Italy?'

'Oh, you know what it's like here,' Rose said vaguely, as she led

the way round the main building to the outhouses. 'You're in the old stable this time. OK?'

'Provided there's mosquito netting at the windows and the horses have been moved out, anywhere's perfect.'

'I hadn't forgotten, so I've put in every deterrent I could find in the Co-op, plus some calamine just in case.' She opened the door of the old stable, now a sparely furnished but comfortable sitting room, bedroom and bathroom. 'Why don't you unpack what you've got and then come over to the terrace for a drink?' Suddenly she had an overwhelming desire to be on her own as she admitted what must be the truth to herself for the first time. Eve wouldn't be able to reassure her, because Daniel must be having an affair. That could be the only explanation.

'A drink sounds like a fine plan. I'll be two minutes.' Eve sized up the extremely narrow double bed, the only size that would fit in the space. 'No twin beds then?'

Rose shook her head, pretending not to notice Eve's small despairing sigh. Her brother and sister-in-law's sex life was not something she wanted to go into. 'Anything you want, just give me a yell.'

'Are you OK?' Eve put her hand on Rose's arm.

'Yeah, of course. Why?' To her horror, Rose felt tears pricking at her eyes.

'I don't know, you just seem a bit . . . I don't know . . . off.' She pulled Rose towards her. 'Look at me.'

'Don't be silly.' Rose turned her head away, blinking. 'I'll just go and rescue lunch, and look out some clothes for you.' She manoeuvred her way around Terry, who was blocking the doorway. She didn't look up, just in case he noticed something was wrong. 'See you in a minute,' she called, her voice as steady as she could manage.

Eve said something in reply, but Rose didn't hear what. Her head felt as if someone had poured a ton of setting cement into her skull. Her limbs were leaden as she made her way into the kitchen. Daniel. An affair. The words thumped inside her head. That text, so passionate, so needy, had driven home what until that moment

she had always been able to ignore. Other women still wanted him. And this time he must have responded. She shivered, suddenly as cold as if a sharp wind was blowing around the back of her heart. What on earth was she to do?