



**REESE
WITHERSPOON**

**GONE
BEFORE**

A NOVEL

GOODBYE

HARLAN COBEN

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GRAND
CENTRAL

NEW YORK BOSTON

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To the many military doctors and nurses who have placed themselves in peril to help save every soul they could. Thank you for your courage and compassion.

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TriPoint, North Africa

I don't hear the scream.

The nurse does. So does the anesthesiologist. I am too deep in the zone, the zone I can only enter in an operating theater, when a sternum is cracked open like this, and my hands are inside the boy's chest.

This is my home, my office, my sanctuary. I am Zen here.

More screams. Gunfire. Helicopters. An explosion.

"Doctor?"

I hear the panic in her voice. But I don't move. I don't look away. My hands, the oldest medical instruments known to mankind, are inside the chest cavity, my index finger palpating the pericardium. I am totally focused on that, only that. No music is playing. That's weird in an operating room nowadays, I know, but I relish silence in this hallowed space, even when we've done heart transplants that last eight hours. It annoys my staff. They need the diversion, the entertainment, the distraction—and that's the problem for me. I want no distractions. Both my bliss and my excellence come from that singular focus.

But the sounds invade.

Rapid gunfire. Another explosion. Louder screams.

Getting closer now.

"Doctor?" The voice is shaky now, panicked. Then, because I'm clearly not listening: "Marc?"

"Nothing we can do about it," I say.

Which is hardly a comfort.

Trace and I arrived in Ghadames eight days ago. We flew into Diori Hamani airport, where we were met by a young woman Trace and I knew named Salima, if that is her real name, and a burly driver who never introduced himself or said a word to us. The four of us traveled northeast for two long days, sleeping in a safe house near Agadez and then tents under the stars in Bilma. We left the driver in northern Niger, traveling through the desert by night, until

we met another car.

Salima and Trace have eyes for one another. I'm not surprised. Trace is the pure definition of a "playah." Even surrounded by death... well, maybe that's just it.

When you're close to death, that's when you feel your most alive.

Salima kept us moving north, straddling the border between Algeria and Libya. East of Djanet, a half dozen heavily armed militants stopped us. They were all young—teens, I would guess—and tweaking from some sort of potent narcotic. They were called the Child Army. Blood was in the air. Wide-eyed, they grabbed me first, then Trace. The young militants made me kneel.

They put a gun to the back of my skull.

I would be first to die. Trace would watch. Then it would be his turn.

I closed my eyes and pictured Maggie's face and waited for someone to pull the trigger.

The Child Army didn't shoot us, obviously. Salima, who speaks at least four languages fluently, fell to her knees and talked fast. I don't know exactly what she said—Salima wouldn't tell us—but the child soldiers moved on.

More screams. More gunfire. Closer now. I try to hurry.

I didn't tell Maggie the truth about how risky this last mission was on so many levels, not because I thought she would worry but because of the promises we had made to one another—she would have insisted on coming.

That's how Maggie and I are built.

You wonder what makes a hero? There's altruism, sure. But there's also ego and recklessness and thrill-seeking.

We don't fear danger. We fear normalcy.

Trace, wearing a surgical mask, pokes his head in. "Marc?"

"How much time do we have?"

"They've burned down the north side of the camp. Dozens are already dead. Salima is moving everyone out."

I look at the nurse and the anesthesiologist. "Go," I tell them.

"You can't save him," the nurse says to me, as she pulls away. "Even if you finish in time, even if he could somehow survive the

surgery, they won't let him live."

I don't know who "they" are. I don't know the justifications, the origins, the history, the factions, the tribes, the warlords, the fanatics, the extremists, the innocents. I don't know who the good guys or the bad guys are, why these people are in this refugee camp, what side is the oppressor or what side is the oppressed. It's not that I'm not political, but for Maggie and Trace and me, it can't matter.

I continue to work on my patient, a fifteen-year-old boy named Izil. I hope everyone I treat is an innocent, but I doubt it. It just can't be our job to figure out who is on what side. Our job, not to get too grandiose, is to save their lives. They say, "Kill them all and let God sort them out." It's close to the opposite for us—save them all and let God... You get the drift.

I'm not being "both sides" here. I'm being "no sides."

"Everyone out," I say. "I want the room cleared."

"Marc," Trace says.

Our eyes meet over the surgical masks. Trace and I have known each other a long time. We did our surgical residency together. We have provided medical aid in humanitarian crises like this one across the globe. He is one of the most gifted cardiothoracic surgeons in the world.

Trace says, "I can help you close."

"I got it."

"We'll wait."

I shake my head, but he knows.

"Leave me an ambulance," I say. "They won't shoot up an ambulance."

We both know this is no longer true, not in today's world.

We should never have come. I shouldn't have allowed it. I should have taken care of business and said goodbye and flown home.

I should be with Maggie.

I don't say goodbye to Trace. He doesn't say goodbye to me.

But this will be the last time I ever see him.

Seconds later, it's only Izil and me in the room. I hurry, stupidly thinking I can make it. I am closing the boy's chest when the doors

burst open.

Armed militants storm in. I don't know how many. They all have that crazed look in their eyes. I have seen that look before. Too many times. I saw it just a few days ago east of Djanet.

And sometimes I see it when I look in the mirror.

I close my eyes and picture Maggie's face and wait for someone to pull the trigger.

CHAPTER ONE

Baltimore

ONE YEAR LATER

Maggie McCabe shouldn't have come.

"Where are you?" Marc asks.

Maggie looks down at her husband's face on the phone screen. "I told you."

"Johns Hopkins?"

"Yes."

"You on the quad?"

"Yes."

"Where we met," he says. "Orientation week of medical school. You remember?"

"Of course I remember," Maggie says.

"I knew you were the one the moment I saw you."

"Don't make me gag."

"I'm trying to boost you up."

"It's not working."

"So what are you doing?"

Maggie flashes back to her first time on campus, all dewy-eyed and fresh-faced, as they say, full of hope and optimism and vim and vigor and all that nonsense. How naive. But then again, when your world falls apart—when you had everything and even understood and appreciated that you had everything and never took any of it for granted, not for a second, knew how lucky you were, and because you were so grateful, you somehow naively expected karma to reward you, or at least leave you be—you learn in the hardest of ways that fate is fickle, that life is chaos and no one gets out

unscathed, that you can have everything one moment and have it all snatched away so easily...

"I'm throwing myself a little pity party," she says.

"Stop. Go inside."

"I want to go home."

Marc frowns. "Don't do that."

"I'm not ready."

"Yes, you are. Please? I want you to go. Do it for me."

"Seriously?"

She looks up at the white cupola sitting atop Shriver Hall and blinks back a tear. An hour ago, she'd reluctantly put on a long-sleeve, navy blue, mid-calf-length formal dress. Not black. That would be too morbid. Navy seems like a safe bet—respectful of the occasion, but not trying to pull attention. In fact, she would rather melt into the floor than be anywhere in the vicinity of conspicuous on this particular night.

"Maggie?"

"I'm here."

"Go inside. It would mean a lot to me. And your mother."

"Wow," Maggie says.

"What?"

"You never used to be this sentimental and manipulative."

"Sure, I was," Marc says.

Her voice is soft. "Sure, you were." Then: "This sucks."

"What?"

"Nothing, never mind."

Twenty-two years ago, Maggie had graduated from these esteemed halls with every kind of honor they could bestow upon a medical student. She did her surgical residency at NewYork-Presbyterian, became a renowned reconstructive surgeon, served her country on the front lines in Afghanistan and the Middle East as a Field Surgeon 62B, married Marc, moved with him overseas to heal the underserved.

Marc's voice from the phone: "Hello?"

"They'll stare."

"Of course they'll stare," he says. "You're smoking hot."

Maggie frowns. Some things never change.

"Go," he says again.

She nods because he's right and disconnects the app. Her phone case features two M&M candy characters, the Yellow M&M guy holding flowers to the Green M&M woman. Marc had given her the phone case as a half-serious/half-gag gift. Maggie & Marc. M&M. Marc bought M&M pillowcases. He bought M&M throw pillows. Marc thought it was adorable. Maggie thought it was pure cringe, which, of course, only encouraged him.

"Maggie?"

She startles at the sound of the voice and drops her phone in her purse. She turns and sees her old classmate Larry Magid, a dermatologist. The last time she'd seen Larry was five years ago in Nepal when he'd flown over to help her and Marc with an outbreak of Hansen's disease, more commonly known as leprosy. They both ended up working out of the same hospital, even working out of the same floor, so he was intimately familiar with her current woes.

"Hey, Larry."

He squirms. "Are you here for... I mean, uh, are you going...?" He semi-gestures toward the building.

"Sure," Maggie says.

"Oh."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"They've named a scholarship in my mother's memory," she says.

"Right, I heard."

"So that's why I'm here."

"Right. Gotta go. Mickey will be waiting for me."

He hurries away as though, Maggie is tempted to shout out loud, she has leprosy. She wants to grab her phone, get Marc on again, and whine, "See what I mean?" but the phone is already in her bag and now she's a little annoyed so to hell with it.

Maggie hesitantly trudges up the same steps she'd enthusiastically marched up to get her diploma two decades ago. The banner pinned above the door reads:

SCHOLARSHIP RECOGNITION EVENT
WELCOME BACK, JOHNS HOPKINS ALUMS!

The hall is buzzing. The music, a string quartet of current students, plays Mozart's String Quartet No. 19 in C Major. Her hands at her sides, Maggie can't help half consciously moving her fingers along with the music, as though there's a violin in her hand. There are something like five hundred people—physicians and scholarship winners—milling about the esteemed hall. You know it's a medical event because too many men are wearing bow ties. That's a big look with doctors, mostly because regular ties hang loosely and get in the way during exams. Her father, an army surgeon who also saw combat as a Field Surgeon 62B—in his case, in Vietnam—always wore bright flowery ones. He claimed it let his patients see him as a bit goofy and thus comfortingly human.

When Maggie finally enters the grand hall, the room doesn't stop or go silent or any of that, but there is definitely some hesitation in the air.

She stands there for a few long seconds, feeling beyond awkward, as though her hands were suddenly too big. Her face flushes. Why had she come? She looks for a friendly or at least familiar face, but the only one she sees is from the poster on an easel up on the dais.

Mom.

God, her mother had been beautiful.

The photo they'd blown up had been taken for the school directory five years ago, Mom's last year teaching here. This was right before the diagnosis, something she hid from her two daughters for the next three years, until she finally called Maggie at their new clinic in Ghana and said, "I'm going to tell you something if you promise you won't come home when I do. Your work is too important." So Maggie promised and Mom told her and they both cried but Maggie kept her promise until her sister Sharon called and said, "It's almost time." Then Maggie kissed Marc goodbye at Dubai International, told him to finish up and come home soon, and flew

home to sit vigil with Sharon for her mother's final days.

Maggie locks eyes with her poster-mother because right now it is the only friendly face in the room. She holds her head high as she walks toward the dais. She hopes that it's narcissism on her part, but conversations seem to halt or at least quiet as she passes. Murmurs ensue, or again maybe that's just in her head. Still she does not look away, does not let herself use her peripheral vision. Her eyes stay on her mother's, but she feels the stares now.

A familiar figure steps in her way and says, "Surprised you'd show your face."

It's Steve Schipner, aka Sleazy Steve, another reconstructive surgeon like herself and yet hopefully nothing like herself. He has over a million followers on an Instagram account where he displays "before and after" photos and calls himself the Boob Whisperer. She and Steve graduated in the same class and did a surgical rotation together at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia University under the tutelage of Dr. Evan Barlow. Steve is that guy who can't say good morning without making it sound like a sleazy double entendre, ergo the nickname. He lives in Dubai now and specializes in, to quote his profile bio, "ambitious influencers looking to enhance their social media hits, their lives—and their cup size."

"Yeah, well, I'm full of surprises," Maggie says.

He looks around, notices the hostile stares. "At least I'm happy to see you."

"Thanks, Steve."

"You seen Barlow?"

"Have you?" she asks.

"Nope."

"I doubt he'll be here."

"I heard he was showing up," he says. "I want to talk to him about a sweet partnership deal and..." He stops, turns, gives her the full-wattage smile. "Oh, guess where I'm working now."

She doesn't want to, but it would be worse not to play along. "I heard Dubai."

"Yes, but *where* in Dubai?"

"I don't know, Steve. Where?"

He leans in and whispers. "Apollo Longevity."

Maggie tries to keep her face blank. It takes some effort.

Steve continues: "Isn't that where you and Marc used to—?"

"I'm not involved anymore."

Maggie tries to process this. Apollo Longevity is still active. Even now. Even after all that's happened.

That's not a good thing.

Steve looks her up and down, his gaze crawling all over her like earthworms after a rainstorm. "You look good, Mags." He arches one eyebrow, before he adds, "*Real* good. *So* good."

Maggie makes a noncommittal noise like "Uh-huh."

"*So* toned, *so* fit," Steve continues, doing a bicep curl to illustrate the point. "What do you do, free weights? Pilates?" Another eyebrow arch. "Sweaty, hot yoga?"

She shakes her head. "Do these lines ever work, Steve?"

"All the time, Mags. You know why?"

"You don't have to tell me," Maggie says, "but I bet you will."

He leans in toward her ear. "Because I'm a rich, successful forty-seven-year-old surgeon now. I can pull much younger tail than you."

She makes a face. "Did you just say 'younger tail'?"

"You're not too good for me," he says. Then he adds in a cruel whisper, "Not anymore."

With that, Steve oozes away.

Steve's trail of ooze leads to a cluster of their old classmates in the right-hand corner. She knows them all, but when she looks over, they all huddle up and do their best to pretend they don't see her. Part of Maggie is furious and wants to confront them, but a bigger part—a more honest part—wonders whether she'd be part of that eye-avoidance huddle had another classmate been this shamed instead of her.

Screw it.

Maggie heads straight into the heart of the huddle and says, "Hey, everyone."

Silence.

She looks from face to face. No one meets her eye.

"Stephanie," Maggie says to an old friend who is staring at her

champagne as though it holds a secret, "how's Olivia?"

Olivia is Stephanie's daughter.

"Oh, she's, uh, she's doing well."

"Did my recommendation letter help?"

Maggie knows that it did. She'd written the letter a year ago, when her name opened rather than slammed doors, and she knew of course that Olivia had gotten in, but right now Maggie is not in the mood to let anyone off the hook.

"Stephanie?"

Before Stephanie can answer, another classmate, Bonnie Tillman, takes Maggie's elbow. "Can we talk privately for a moment, Maggie?"

Bonnie is an ophthalmologist in Washington, DC, and still (and forever) their class president. Her helmet of hair is firmly shellacked into place. She forces up a smile. It's a big effort to hold it. They say it takes seventeen muscles to smile and forty-three to frown. In Bonnie's case, it's clearly the opposite.

They move through a set of old glass doors onto a terrace.

"We all feel bad about your recent troubles," Bonnie begins in a voice that couldn't be more condescending without some kind of surgical help, "but it doesn't excuse what you did."

Maggie says nothing.

"This event," Bonnie continues, "is for esteemed physicians."

"It's for graduates."

"You know better."

Silence.

"Your medical license was revoked," Bonnie continues.

"Suspended," Maggie corrects. "Pending a review."

"Oh, so you're innocent?"

Maggie says nothing.

"You should leave."

"I don't think I will."

"It's unfair to your mother's memory."

"Excuse me?"

"You don't own her memory, Maggie. Not on this campus. She meant a lot to many of us students. Your being here? It's a blemish on her memory."

"I was asked to present the scholarship," Maggie says.

"That was before."

"No one rescinded the invitation."

"No one thought it was necessary."

"So who's doing it?"

Bonnie straightens her spine.

"Wait, you?"

"The administration thought it best."

"But my mother always thought you were a stuck-up tight-ass bitch, Bonnie."

Bonnie's eyes widen as though she'd been slapped. "Well!"

Maggie says nothing. Bonnie recovers.

"Either way," Bonnie says, "you should leave. Your being here sullies the reputation of our class."

Bonnie spins to leave. Maggie closes her eyes, opens them, stares out.

"Bonnie?"

Bonnie stops and turns back to Maggie.

"My mother never said that. I'm sorry. That wasn't fair. She always spoke well of you. You're a good choice to do this."

Bonnie swallows. "I'll do my best. I promise you that."

She leaves Maggie alone on the terrace. From inside, someone starts clinking their champagne flute with a fork to get people's attention. The crowd quiets. Someone asks people to gather around so they can begin. Maggie stays out on the terrace.

Bonnie is right. She shouldn't be here.

She stares out at the foliage. From behind her, someone closes the glass doors so that she no longer hears what's going on in the room. That's okay. She is tempted to reach into her purse and contact Marc again, but that's an awful crutch and just makes her feel worse.

"Hello, Maggie."

The man wears a bespoke tailored suit of cobalt blue with a tie so perfectly knotted that one assumes he had divine help. His hair is gray, parted perfectly on the left. Maggie knows that he's in his early seventies—he'd been a classmate of her mother's and she'd been

invited to his seventieth birthday party a few years back, but she'd been overseas and couldn't attend.

"Hello, Doctor Barlow."

"You haven't been my student for a long time, Maggie. Can't you call me by my first name?"

"I don't think I can, no."

Evan Barlow smiles. He has a good smile. He looks, to quote a sleazy classmate, so toned, so fit. She almost asks him if he does sweaty hot yoga. Evan Barlow heads up the Barlow Cosmetic Center, perhaps the most prestigious and discreet cosmetic surgery firm in the country. When celebrities want the work done so that no one knows, they trust Evan Barlow.

They stand now side by side, staring out at the quad. "Do you know this is my first time back on campus since I graduated?" he says.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"So why are you back?"

"I think you can guess."

"Mom?"

"I loved her, you know."

"I didn't know that."

"She and your father are both gone, so I can admit it now."

"I thought you two just dated for a few weeks."

"We were in our second year. But she broke my heart."

Maggie frowns. "Haven't you been married three times?"

"Four," he says.

"And isn't your current wife like thirty years old?"

"Thirty-two," he says, spreading his hands. "See what a broken heart does to a person?"

Maggie can't help but smile. Barlow does the same.

"Your father was such a good man, a much better choice for her. So I settled for friendship. But..." He shakes his head. "You get old, you get sentimental and philosophical. I'm trying to be glib, but I'm also revealing a truth." When he smiles at her, she flashes back to surgical rounds at NewYork-Presbyterian, what a generous teacher

he'd been to her, how exhausting and exhilarating it was just to be in his presence. Evan Barlow had been a pure hit of crackling energy. You wanted to be around that.

As though reading her mind, Barlow says, "You're the best student I ever had. You know that. You're a surgeon, so you have the ego to know that what I'm saying is true."

"Correction: I *was* a surgeon."

She squeezes her eyes shut. She feels his hand on her shoulder.

His voice is so gentle. "Maggie?"

The tears push into her eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay."

"I let you down." She opens her eyes. "I let *her*"—no need to say who *her* referred to—"down."

"You didn't," he says. "Wait, okay, sorry, that's condescending. You did. I won't lie. May I speak frankly? You did mess up. Big-time. That's why I'm here."

"I'm not following."

"I don't need a scholarship ceremony to honor your mother's memory. I can do it in a much more concrete way." Barlow holds up his hand. "Wait, I'm not saying this right. Let me start again. I came tonight to see you."

"Me? Why?"

"I have a favor to ask."

When he doesn't immediately continue, Maggie says, "Go ahead."

"I'd like you to come by my office on Monday."

"This Monday?"

"Yes. Ten a.m."

"You have a Barlow Center in Baltimore now?"

"No, but maybe soon. Right now, they're in Palm Beach, Los Angeles, and New York City. I'd like you to come up to New York City. I'll arrange a private car to drive you, and I have a suite reserved at the Aman."

"I don't understand. Why do you want me to come to New York?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"I just... it's not my place."

Maggie makes a face. "Then whose place is it?"

"It's an intriguing offer. That's all I can tell you right now."

"I don't have a medical license anymore."

"I know. The offer is a tad"—Barlow looks up as though searching for a better word but finally shrugs—"unusual."

"Can't you just tell me now?"

"I can't, no."

She thinks about it. "If you don't mind me saying, Doctor Barlow, this is all a little weird."

"I know."

"More than a little weird, in fact."

"It is, I admit that. Look, I know you and Sharon are having serious financial difficulties—"

"How do you know that?"

"—but I'll write you a check right now for twenty thousand dollars. Just to show up."

He reaches into his suit pocket and pulls out a pen and...

"Is that a checkbook?" she asks.

"Yes."

"What is this, 1987? Who still carries around a checkbook?"

Barlow can't help but smile. "I wanted to be prepared."

He starts scribbling on the check.

"You don't need to do that," she says.

"No, I do. You should be compensated for your time."

"Don't," she says a little more forcibly. "I'm going to say it again: You're being weird."

"I know." He puts the checkbook back in his pocket. "Do you trust me, Maggie?"

In truth she trusts no one anymore. Well, almost no one.

"One more thing," he says.

"What?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about this."

"I have to tell my sister."

"It would be better if you didn't."

"I'm living with her. I just can't vanish to New York City."

"Sure, you can." He hands her a card. "I'll have someone text you

to arrange the car pickup."

"I'd rather take Amtrak," Maggie says.

"If that's what you prefer. There'll be a reservation under your name at the Aman hotel on Fifty-Seventh Street starting tomorrow night. We'll be in touch about the details for Monday."

Maggie takes the embossed business card, looks at it, looks at him. Dr. Evan Barlow runs one of the most successful high-end cosmetic surgery practices in the world. He is worth millions and reeks of it. She tries to read his face. It's smooth, professional, handsome, full of gravitas.

But does she also see fear?

"What's really going on, Doctor Barlow?"

"I can't say more, Maggie. Take it or leave it."

"And if I leave it?"

He shrugs. "It was nice to see you."

Barlow kisses her on the cheek and heads to the door.

"How did you know I'd be here?" she asks.

Something crosses his face, something she can't read. He gives his head a small shake and turns the knob.

"You'll find out all on Monday," Barlow says, and then he heads back inside.