

Secret Lives



Gayle Farmer

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*This book is dedicated with love to my husband,
Jeff Farmer,
thank you for always believing in me*

*With deep gratitude and special appreciation to
my friends
My editing team who always lifted me up*

*Fred West, Doris Petrick
Rita Salter, Kym Jade and
and Sissy Scarpelli*

Thank you all!

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Chapter 1

The door slammed, echoes reverberating down the hallway. A moment later, the Jaguar's engine turned over, followed by the sound of squealing tires as the car tore down the driveway. The clock struck the hour, the mechanical click of its chimes grinding in measured beats. Then there was silence.

Terry Wagner opened her eyes, unable to focus. She stared at the wall as she fought to regain consciousness, body racked with pain, head throbbing. She blinked several times, trying to clear the haze from her mind. *It's almost dark.*

She tried to rise, and a dart of pain pulsed through her side. One leg, bent under her at a strange angle, felt numb and she could not move it. Panting, she rolled over on her back and eased her hand under her knee. She waited for strength to return, for the throbbing in her head to subside, then slid her other hand under her knee as well, and pulled it gently to a cocked position. She repeated the action with the other leg. Now at least, she could breathe without the stabbing in her side. The tips of her fingers probed the ragged, bloody lump on the back of her head, repulsed at feeling the gelatinous covering on her skull.

The kitchen was now dark except for the glow from the fireplace. Wondering how long she had been out, she grabbed the side of the chair and pulled herself to a sitting position. When she raised her arm, an intense, stabbing pain surged through her body, and she almost passed out again. Something snagged the fibers of her sweater, sending stinging darts up her side. When she touched them, she realized they were slivers of wood embedded in her back from today's weapon of choice, the fireplace starters.

Determined to get up, she made another effort, and using her elbows, pulled herself into the chair by the hearth. The tea in her cup was cold, but when she could finally reach it, she drank it to the dregs.

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How does this keep happening to me? What am I going to do?

She had been asking herself those questions for more than two years now, even though she knew the answers. In a word, nothing—there was nothing she could do. She was a rat trapped in a cage and there was no escape.

Twice she reached for the phone, only to draw her hand back in shame. Tears dripped from her eyes. She felt the splinters jab her side again and knew she could not pull them out. Humiliation complete, she picked up the phone and dialed.

Ella Russell drove into the lane too fast, skidding on damp leaves. The car swerved and straightened, headlights flashing across the blacktop. She tightened her grip on the wheel as another gust of wind buffeted the car.

Remembering the phone call, she shook her head, scared and mad at the same time. *How many nights have I done this and how many more will there be? We have to kill that bastard before he kills her.*

She hid the Fiat in the inky darkness between the tall Victorian house and its shroud of ancient oak trees. She hopped out of the car, struggling to keep her coat wrapped around her slender frame. Ducking, she ran for the porch. Thunder rumbled its approach, the glow of lightning faded in the moonless sky. Fear drove her up the steps, but the door opened before she could knock.

“You okay?” Ella slipped inside, barely able to see the figure before her. “Well, you’re walking, so I guess that’s an answer.”

“Come with me,” Terry said, taking her arm.

“And you can still talk. That’s good.”

Walking at a snail’s pace, they headed down the hall in stony silence, skirting a large armoire and delicate Queen Anne chair. High ceilings disappeared in the darkness, accentuating the feeling of isolation. Ella’s eyes adjusted as she entered the kitchen and glanced around. The only light came from the small bulb above the stove.

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“Why is it so damn dark in here?” Ella glanced at her twin, then stared out the window as a fresh squall of rain fell on the house. The wind increased its wailing and puffs of dust swirled on the cold hearth.

“I just feel dark, I guess. Not feeling perky, that’s for sure. I’ll make a fire and burn the weapons.” With slow, measured movements, Terry dropped a small pile of kindling into the fireplace. She clicked the automatic gas starter, waited a moment, and added several small logs.

Ella stared at her, becoming increasingly annoyed now that her initial fears had abated. Stretching cold fingers to the welcome heat, she shivered and glanced around the familiar kitchen.

“Where’s Bob?” she asked as she accepted the steaming cup from her sister’s hands, her eyes wide in question, watching, waiting, sick of waiting, tired of saying and hearing the same damn things all over again.

“He left hours ago. I don’t know where he went.” Terry stirred her tea, lips pursed tight. She frowned. “I’m so scared, El. I don’t know what to do. I wish he’d drop dead. Shit, I wish I’d drop dead. Anything is better than this.”

“If anything is gonna change, you have to do it and it’s long overdue. We have to figure out how to kill him.” Ella cocked her head, watching the expressions flitting across Terry’s face and grimaced. “I can’t take it another minute. What the hell did he do *this* time?”

“I’ve got something, wood slivers I think, stuck in my back and I can’t get them out. Can you do it for me? There’s tweezers in the kit.” Terry turned her back, leaned forward onto the table, and pulled up her mauve sweater.

Livid streaks of blue and green mingled with deep abrasions that still oozed droplets of blood. The crisscross stripes made her back look like a checkerboard and the swelling on her ribs had turned a livid yellowish-purple. Several slivers surrounded the wound and smears of blood stained the inside of her sweater.

“Holy shit, man.” Remorse swept her as she remembered her earlier callous words and indifferent behavior. “Oh, God.” Ella drew a sharp breath and reached out an involuntary hand. Tears filled her eyes and her voice quivered. “Oh, Terry, honey, I’m so

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sorry. I...oh, I don't know if I can get 'em all, and if I can't, you have to go to the hospital. They'll get infected if you don't."

"Please just try."

Gritting her teeth, Ella walked to the powder room and removed the large medical emergency kit from the closet. She placed it on the table and opened the lid, noticing her shaking fingers. Her heart thumped and her throat hurt so bad she couldn't talk.

She began removing the splinters one by one, her lip bobbing, throat in spasms. *I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch with my bare, frickin' hands.*

"Miserable freak. He'll kill you one day; you know that, don't you? Next time, this could be your face." Ella continued to clean the various wounds, most of which were not serious. The gash on her side, however, where the splinters had been, now oozed pus. "We need to keep our eye on this one. If there's a splinter of wood left in the wound, it'll become infected. You really should go to a hospital, y'know, at least get a tetanus shot." She applied a large bandage to the wound and then leaned back from the table. "You need to tell someone."

Terry pulled the sweater down and turned toward her sister. Tears glazed her eyes. "Yeah, right. That's just what I need to do. He'll kill me if I tell, you know that."

Ella took her hand and squeezed it. "He's winding up, can't you feel it? That's twice this week. He's escalating and the blows are more brutal, more vicious each time. We have to do something and it better be soon." She paused, swallowing her tears. "When did he do that, this afternoon? Freakin' bastard. You know he'll destroy your face if..."

Ella jerked the barrette from her head, digging at her scalp. "You need to get away from him, now, before it's too late. What the hell are you waiting for, a broken neck?" She leaned across the table, hands outstretched. "How many times have we had this conversation, Terry, huh? How many freakin' times has he done this? Can you even give a guess? Shit, it's gettin' old. I can't stand it if he...you've got to get out of here."

Firelight flickered on the identical faces. Their pale skin, burgundy-red hair, and similar body types made them bookends.

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Another gust of wind hit the house, shaking the windows in their sashes, and startling the women.

Ella glanced at the cupboard above the stove. "I could use a shot of brandy in this. How about you?" Without waiting for an answer, she walked to the cupboard, bringing back the bottle and two small snifters. "Hell with the tea."

She poured them both a drink then threw two more logs into the fireplace. The brandy scorched its way down her throat, landing in her upset stomach with a fiery bang. Scowling, she put the half-empty glass on the table and nodded. "Drink up, you'll feel better."

Terry swallowed the brandy and shuddered. "What can I do? He's getting worse every day."

"Damn it, I just told you. We have to kill him." Her irritation grew as Terry's eyes widened. "Look, I've thought this over and there's no other way. Either that or you have to leave him; you know what he'll do then." She stared at Terry, her scalp crawling as she waited for a reply. If something didn't change, and soon, Bob would kill her. Even now, every time the phone rang she held her breath, fearing it was the cops or the hospital. "Say something, for God's sake."

"You're right, okay? He's going to kill me." Unable to go on, she put her head in her hands and cried.

"You can't be serious? About killing him?" Terry's eyes widened. "My God, you are."

"Damn right, I am." Ella clenched her hands, nails digging into her palms. "He'll kill you if we don't. Can't you see that?"

An arrogant, A-type personality with serious control issues and an ugly temper, Bob Wagner was scary. His good looks and outstanding success in the courtroom only increased his inflated sense of superiority. Terry was a trophy, a sign of his worth, like his Jaguar, his yacht, or the art he collected. A divorce was out of the question. Bob would never tolerate that kind of scandal. His ego, his self-esteem would never allow anyone to look at him as a failure.

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If she went to the police or filed a complaint of spousal abuse, he would kill her. No restraining order would stop him, and the underworld connections he had nurtured over the years would make her escape impossible.

Terry shook her head. "You're out of your mind, you know. How the hell are we supposed to kill him? We'll never get away with it. I don't want to spend the rest of my life in prison for murder, do you?"

"You've been in prison for years now, and you haven't committed any crime. It's you or Bob. Can't you see you're in real danger here? A maniac is terrorizing you...one with unlimited access to you. Is that any way to live? I won't stand by and let him do it."

A thick layer of ash lay atop the dying embers, glowing red and orange in the shimmering heat.

Ella rose from her chair, face intense. "It's almost midnight. I need to get back to close the restaurant." She slipped into her raincoat and reached for Terry's hand. "Are you going to be okay with this? I think it will work if we just keep our heads."

As she started to reply, they heard the front door open. Staring at each other, they nodded. Ella tiptoed across the kitchen and slipped out the back door. Terry stacked the cups and one glass in the dishwasher, added several logs to the dying fire, and sat at the table.

Heavy steps ascended the stairs and then silence.

Terry let out her breath, not realizing she had been holding it until she heard it hiss through her lips. Her heart resumed beating and her forehead flushed with sweat. She sipped her brandy, waiting. Once he found she was not upstairs, he would come looking for her.

Even though she was ready for it, the sounds of approaching footsteps made the hairs on her neck stand up. She heard him call her name, voice low, dragging out the syllables. "Ter...ree."

She drained her glass, poured another, and cleared her throat. "I'm in the kitchen."

Bob came in the door, handsome face bland as he stared at her. He nodded at the brandy on the table and he got himself a

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snifter. "Don't mind if I do." He sat in the chair opposite her, a cordial expression on his face. He took two long sips and nodded. "Did you have a nice night, sweetheart?"

She glanced at him, a sick smile on her lips. "Yes, thanks."

"What have you been doing—besides this?"

A dart of fear shot through her as she heard the sarcasm in his voice. Blue eyes bored into hers as he twirled his glass.

"I read a bit, watched some TV, nothing much."

"Did you have company?"

The soft tone did not deceive her. She knew better than to lie. "Ella came over for a while. Actually, you just missed her."

"That's good. What did she want?"

The subtle change in his voice gave her goose bumps. She felt her stomach roll again but kept her voice light, airy. Waving an indifferent hand, she shrugged. "She'd been shopping and wanted to show off her new clothes."

Anger flooded his face as he drummed his fingers. "She knows I don't like her. Why the hell does she keep coming over?"

"We're sisters, Bob. Sisters do that. We enjoy seeing each other."

He tilted back in his chair and continued to stare at her, eyes narrowed, fingertips now tented before his lips. "Did you tell her about this afternoon?" Angry eyes drilled into hers, waiting. He leaned forward suddenly, chair legs screeching on the paver tiles.

"No, I didn't mention it." Her heart stuttered, but she met his eyes with studied calm, her expression bland.

"It was your fault anyway, you know. It always is." He got to his feet and nodded at her. "I'm tired. Let's go to bed."

Terry felt her stomach turn as she looked at him. "I'll be up after a bit. I want to finish my book." She forced a smile and shrugged at the paperback on the chair by the hearth.

Another flash of anger crossed his face and for a moment, she feared he was going to grab her arm and force her to go with him. It would not be the first time. Instead, without another word, he turned and left the room.

She felt her stomach tuck, roll, and then settle with reprieve. Footsteps echoed on the stairs and finally, silence. She would be all right tonight.

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The storm continued to pound the house, throwing sheets of rain at the windows. The fire burned low and occasional bursts of flame lit the room.

Terry stared at the dying embers, wincing as her back bumped the edge of the chair. She remembered the bandage and slowly twisted her arm to reach it. She pulled, flinching again as it came free of the wound. She could not chance Bob seeing it and realizing Ella, had indeed, born witness to his abuse. She folded it several times, grimacing at the sticky, yellow dampness.

Too tired to put it off any longer, she tossed the bandage in the trash and rose. With a low moan, she headed for the steps, praying Bob would be asleep. She didn't have the strength or the courage to argue, and the thought of having sex with him made her skin crawl.

The bedroom lights were out. She slid between the sheets and hugged her edge of the bed, rigid, avoiding any possible contact with her husband. Deep, steady breathing told her he was asleep.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax. Just thinking about her conversation with Ella made her heart race. She attempted to picture the scene in her mind. Ella's plot to get him drunk, lure him to the stern-side steps of the yacht, and push him overboard, made her cringe. No doubt, the propellers would slice him to ribbons.

A simple family dinner at sea turns into a senseless tragedy when Bob wanders over to the stern to do whatever, and falls overboard. At least that was how Ella saw it.

Terry wasn't so sure. *How will we get him on the boat at night, and in December?*

Ella's idea of joining in the holiday lights boat parade around the harbor might end up being a good plan. Bob was into that kind of thing, loving to show off his toys. They probably could pull that off, but it was going to be cold; even if he went for the cruise, he would want to eat in a warm restaurant.

Okay, that might work to our advantage as well. If he gets drunk in the restaurant, there will be witnesses to his condition. Then, when they recover his body, others will testify to his drunkenness. No doubt we can count on him drinking.

So far, so good. Okay, we're back on the yacht with a drunken man; how will we do the deed? What if he passes out

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somewhere problematic, like the bow? We'll never get his body over the railing up there. We'll have to drag him clear across the yacht to the stern, leaving who knows what kind of marks on the deck in the process.

To those and other questions, Ella shrugged, saying she hadn't ironed out all the fine points yet.

Fine points? Terry shifted cautiously and stretched out her sore leg. Main point, as far as I'm concerned.

Another minor point to consider was where they needed to be to make this happen. They couldn't dump him in the harbor with holiday revelers prow to stern, circling around them. They needed to get out into the ocean where it was dark and private. Besides, Bob was a good swimmer. What if he didn't drown? She took a deep breath and shuddered.

I just need to get him on that damn yacht. Ella will figure out the rest.

She shifted her aching body, trying to get comfortable. No matter what she did, something hurt. The plan rolled through her mind repeatedly. She fell asleep remembering the look on Bob's face while he beat her.