

HARLAN
COBEN

STAY CLOSE



DUTTON

STAY CLOSE

Play Dead
Miracle Cure
Deal Breaker
Drop Shot
Fade Away
Back Spin
One False Move
The Final Detail
Darkest Fear
Tell No One
Gone for Good
No Second Chance
Just One Look
The Innocent
Promise Me
The Woods
Hold Tight
Long Lost
Caught
Live Wire
Shelter

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

This one is for

Aunt Diane and Uncle Norman Reiter

and

Aunt Ilene and Uncle Marty Kronberg,

with love and gratitude.

Well now everything dies, baby that's a fact.

But maybe everything that dies, someday comes back.

—Bruce Springsteen, “Atlantic City”

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About the Author

SOMETIMES, IN THAT SPLIT SECOND when Ray Levine snapped a picture and lost the world in the strobe from his flashbulb, he saw the blood. He knew, of course, that it was only in his mind's eye, but at times, like right now, the vision was so real he had to lower his camera and take a good hard look at the ground in front of him. That horrible moment—the moment Ray's life changed completely, transforming him from a man with a future and aspirations into this Grade-A loser you see in front of you—never visited him in his dreams or when he sat alone in the dark. The devastating visions waited until he was wide-awake, surrounded by people, busy at what some might sarcastically dub work.

The visions mercifully faded as Ray continuously snapped pictures of the bar mitzvah boy.

“Look this way, Ira,” Ray shouted from behind his lens. “Who are you wearing? Is it true Jen and Angelina are still fighting over you?”

Someone kicked Ray's shin. Someone else pushed him. Ray kept snapping pictures of Ira.

“Where is the after-party, Ira? What lucky girl is getting the first dance?”

Ira Edelstein frowned and shielded his face from the camera lens. Ray surged forward undaunted, snapping pictures from every angle. “Get out of the way!” someone shouted. Someone else pushed him. Ray tried to steady himself.

Snap, snap, snap.

“Damn paparazzi!” Ira shouted. “Can't I have a moment of peace?”

Ray rolled his eyes. He did not back off. From behind his camera lens, the vision with the blood returned. He tried to shake it off, but it would not go. Ray kept his finger pressed down on the shutter. Ira the Bar Mitzvah Boy moved in a slow-motion strobe now.

“Parasites!” Ira screamed.

Ray wondered if it was possible to sink any lower.

Another kick to the shins gave Ray his answer: Nope.

Ira's “bodyguard”—an enormous guy with a shaved head named Fester—swept Ray aside with a forearm the size of an oak. The sweep was with a bit too much gusto, nearly knocking him off his feet. Ray gave Fester a “what gives” look. Fester mouthed an apology.

Fester was Ray's boss and friend and the owner of Celeb Experience: Paparazzi for Hire—which was just what it sounded like. Ray didn't stalk celebrities hoping to get compromising shots to sell to tabloids like a real paparazzo. No, Ray was actually beneath that—Beatlemania to the Beatles—offering the “celebrity experience” to wannabes who were willing to pay. In short, clients, most with extreme self-esteem and probably erectile dysfunction issues, hired paparazzi to follow them around, snapping pictures to give them, per the brochure, the “ultimate celebrity experience with your very own exclusive paparazzi.”

Ray could sink lower, he supposed, but not without an extreme act of God.

The Edelsteins had purchased the A-List MegaPackage—two hours with three paparazzi, one bodyguard, one publicist, one boom-mike handler, all following around the “celebrity” and snapping pictures of him as though he were Charlie Sheen sneaking into a monastery. The A-List MegaPackage also came with a souvenir DVD for no extra charge, plus your face on one of those cheesy-fake gossip magazine covers with a custom-made headline.

The cost for the A-List MegaPackage?

Four grand.

To answer the obvious question: Yes, Ray hated himself.

Ira pushed past and disappeared into the ballroom. Ray lowered his camera and looked at his two fellow paparazzi. Neither one of them had the loser *L* tattooed on their forehead because, really, it would have been redundant.

Ray checked his watch. “Damn,” he said.

“What?”

“We still have fifteen minutes on the clock.”

His colleagues—both barely bright enough to write their names in the dirt with a finger—groaned. Fifteen more minutes. That meant going inside and working the introduction. Ray hated that.

The bar mitzvah was being held at the Wingfield Manor, a ridiculously gauche banquet hall that, if scaled back a tad, could have doubled as one of Saddam Hussein’s palaces. There were chandeliers and mirrors and faux ivory and ornate woodwork and lots and lots of shimmering gold paint.

The image of the blood came back to him. He blinked it away.

The event was black-tie. The men looked worn and rich. The women looked well kept and surgically enhanced. Ray pushed through the crowds, wearing jeans, a wrinkled gray blazer, and black Chuck Taylor Hi-Tops. Several guests stared at him as though he’d just defecated on their salad fork.

There was an eighteen-piece band plus a “facilitator” who was supposed to encourage guest frolicking of all sorts. Think bad TV-game-show host. Think Muppets’ Guy Smiley. The facilitator grabbed the microphone and said, “Ladies and gentlemen,” in a voice reminiscent of a boxing ring announcer, “please welcome, for the first time since receiving the Torah and becoming a man, give it up for the one, the only... Ira Edelstein!”

Ira appeared with two... Ray wasn’t sure what the right terminology was but perhaps the best phrase would be “upscale strippers.” The two hot chicks escorted little Ira into the room by the cleavage. Ray got the camera ready and pushed forward, shaking his head. The kid was thirteen. If women who looked like that were ever that close to him when he was thirteen, he’d have an erection for a week.

Ah youth.

The applause was rapturous. Ira gave the crowd a royal wave.

“Ira!” Ray called out. “Are these your new goddesses? Is it true you may be adding a third to your harem?”

“Please,” Ira said with a practiced whine, “I’m entitled to my privacy!”

Ray managed not to vomit. “But your public wants to know.”

Fester the Sunglassed Bodyguard put a large mitt on Ray, allowing Ira to brush past him. Ray snapped, making sure the flash worked its magic. The band exploded—when did weddings and bar mitzvahs start playing music at a rock-stadium decibel?—into the new celebration anthem “Club Can’t Handle Me.” Ira dirty-danced with the two hired helpers. Then his thirteen-year-old friends joined in, crowding the dance floor, jumping straight up and down like pogo sticks. Ray “fought” through Fester, snapped some more pictures, checked his watch.

One more minute on the clock.

“Paparazzi scum!”

Another kick to the shins from some little cretin.

“Ow, damn it, that hurt!”

The cretin scurried away. Note to self, Ray thought: Start wearing shin guards. He looked over at Fester as though begging for mercy. Fester let him off the hook with a head gesture to follow him toward the corner. The corner was too loud so they slipped through the doors.

Fester pointed back into the ballroom with his enormous thumb. “Kid did a great job on his haftorah portion, don’t you think?”

Ray just stared at him.

“I got a job for you tomorrow,” Fester said.

“Groovy. What is it?”

Fester looked off.

Ray didn’t like that. “Uh-oh.”

“It’s George Queller.”

“Dear God.”

“Yes. And he wants the usual.”

Ray sighed. George Queller tried to impress first dates by overwhelming and ultimately terrifying them. He would hire Celeb Experience to swarm him and his date—for example, last month it was a woman named Nancy—as they entered a small romantic bistro. Once the date was safely inside, she would be presented with—no, this was for real—a custom-made menu that would read, “George and Nancy’s First Date of Many, Many” with the address, month, day, and year printed beneath. When they left the restaurant, the paparazzi for hire would be there, snapping away and shouting at how George had turned down a weekend in Turks and Caicos with Jessica Alba for the lovely and now-terror-stricken Nancy.

George considered these romantic maneuvers a prelude to happy-ever-after. Nancy and her ilk considered these romantic maneuvers a prelude to a ball gag and secluded storage unit.

There had never been a second date for George.

Fester finally took off his sunglasses. “I want you to work lead on the job.”

“Lead paparazzo,” Ray said. “I better call my mother, so she can brag to her mahjong group.”

Fester chuckled. “I love you, you know that.”

“Are we done here?”

“We are.”

Ray packed away his camera carefully, separating the lens from the body, and threw the case over his shoulder. He limped toward the door, not from the kicks but the hunk of shrapnel in his hip—the shrapnel that started his downward slide. No, that was too simple. The shrapnel was an excuse. At one time in his miserable life, Ray had fairly limitless potential. He’d graduated from Columbia University’s School of Journalism with what one professor called “almost supernatural talent”—now being wasted—in the area of photojournalism. But in the end, that life didn’t work out for him. Some people are drawn to trouble. Some people, no matter how easy the path they are given on the walk of life, will find a way to mess it all up.

Ray Levine was one of those people.

It was dark out. Ray debated whether he should just head home and go to bed or hit a bar so seedy was called Tetanus. Tough call when you have so many options.

He thought about the dead body again.

The visions came fast and furious now. That was understandable, he supposed. Today was the anniversary of the day it all ended, when any hope of happy-ever-after died like... Well, the obvious

metaphor here would involve the visions in his head, wouldn't it?

He frowned. Hey, Ray, melodramatic much?

He had hoped that today's inane job would take his mind off it. It hadn't. He remembered his own bar mitzvah, the moment on the pulpit when his father bent down and whispered in his ear. He remembered how his father had smelled of Old Spice, how his father's hand cupped Ray's head so gently, how his father with tears in his eyes simply said, "I love you so much."

Ray pushed the thought away. Less painful to think about the dead body.

The valets had wanted to charge him—no professional courtesy, he guessed—so Ray had found a spot three blocks down on a side street. He made the turn, and there it was—his piece-o-crap, twelve-year-old Honda Civic with a missing bumper and duct tape holding together a side window. Ray rubbed his chin. Unshaven. Unshaven, forty years old, piece-o-crap car, a basement apartment that if heavily renovated might qualify as a crap hole, no prospects, drank too much. He would feel sorry for himself, but that would involve, well, caring.

Ray was just taking out his car key when the heavy blow landed on the back of his head.

What the...?

He dropped to one knee. The world went dark. The tingle ran up his scalp. Ray felt disoriented. He tried to shake his head, tried to clear it.

Another blow landed near his temple.

Something inside his head exploded in a flash of bright light. Ray collapsed to the ground, his body splayed out. He may have lost consciousness—he wasn't sure—but suddenly he felt a pulling in his right shoulder. For a moment he just lay limp, not able or wanting to resist. His head reeled in agony. The primitive part of his brain, the base animal section, had gone into survivor mode. Escape more punishment, it said. Crawl into a ball and cover up.

Another hard tug nearly tore his shoulder out. The tug lessened and began to slip away, and with it a realization made Ray's eyes snap open.

Someone was stealing his camera.

The camera was a classic Leica with a recently updated digital-send feature. He felt his arm lift in the air, the strap running up it. In a second, no more, the camera would be gone.

Ray didn't have much. The camera was the only possession he truly cherished. It was his livelihood sure, but it was also the only link to old Ray, to that life he had known before the blood, and he'd be damned if he'd give that up without a fight.

Too late.

The strap was off his arm now. He wondered whether he'd have another opportunity, whether the mugger would go for the fourteen bucks in his wallet and give Ray a chance. Couldn't wait to find out.

With his head still swimming and his knees wobbling, Ray shouted, "No!" and tried to launch himself at his attacker. He hit something—legs maybe—and tried to wrap his arms around them. He didn't get much of a grip, but the impact was enough.

The attacker fell down. So did Ray, landing on his stomach. Ray heard the clacking of something falling and hoped like hell that he hadn't just shattered his own camera. He tried to blink his eyes open, managed to get them into slits, and saw the camera case a few feet away. He tried to scramble toward it, but as he did, he saw two things that made his blood freeze.

The first was a baseball bat on the pavement.

The second—and more to the point—was a gloved hand picking it up.

Ray tried to look up, but it was useless. He flashed back to the summer camp his father ran when he was a kid. Dad—the campers all called him Uncle Barry—used to lead a relay race where you hold a basketball directly over your head and spin as fast as you can, staring up at the ball, and then, dizzy beyond words, you had to dribble the length of the court and put the ball in the basket. The problem was, you got so dizzy from the spinning that you'd fall one way while the ball would go the other way. That was how he felt now, as though he were tumbling to the left, while the rest of the world teetered to the right.

The camera thief lifted the baseball bat and started toward him.

“Help!” Ray shouted.

No one appeared.

Panic seized Ray—followed quickly by a primitive survival instinctive reaction. Flee. He tried to stand, but, nope, that was simply not happening yet. Ray was already a weakened mess. One more shot, one more hard blow with that baseball bat...

“Help!”

The attacker took two steps toward him. Ray had no choice. Still on his stomach he scrambled away like a wounded crab. Oh, sure, that would work. That would be fast enough to keep away from the damn bat. The asswipe with the baseball bat was practically over him. He had no chance.

Ray's shoulder hit something, and he realized that it was his car.

Above him he saw the bat coming up in the air. He was a second, maybe two, away from having his skull crushed. Only one chance and so he took it.

Ray turned his head so his right cheek was against the pavement, flattened his body as much as possible, and slid under his car. “Help!” he shouted again. Then to his attacker: “Just take the camera and go!”

The attacker did just that. Ray heard the footsteps disappear down the alley. Friggin' terrific. He tried to slide himself out from under the car. His head protested, but he managed. He sat on the street now, his back against the passenger door of his car. He sat there for a while. Impossible to say how long. He may have even passed out.

When he felt that he was able, Ray cursed the world, slid into his car, and started it up.

Odd, he thought. The anniversary of all that blood—and he nearly has a ton of his own spilled. He almost smiled at the coincidence. He pulled out as the smile started sliding off his face.

A coincidence. Yep, just a coincidence. Not even a big one, when you thought about it. The night of blood had been seventeen years ago—hardly a silver anniversary or anything like that. Ray had been robbed before. Last year a drunk Ray had been rolled after leaving a strip club at two A.M. The moron had stolen his wallet and gotten away with a full seven dollars and a CVS discount card.

Still.

He found a spot on the street in front of the row house Ray called home. He rented the apartment in the basement. The house was owned by Amir Baloch, a Pakistani immigrant who lived there with his wife and four rather loud kids.

Suppose for a second, just a split second, that it wasn't a coincidence.

Ray slid out of his car. His head still pounded. It would be worse tomorrow. He took the steps down past the garbage cans to the basement door and jammed the key into the lock. He racked his aching brain, trying to imagine any connection—the slightest, smallest, frailest, most obscure link—between that tragic night seventeen years ago and being jumped tonight.

Nothing.

Tonight was a robbery, plain and simple. You whack a guy over the head with a baseball bat, you snatch his camera, you run. Except, well, wouldn't you steal his wallet too—unless maybe it was the same guy who rolled Ray near that strip joint and knew that he'd only had seven dollars? Heck, maybe that was the coincidence. Forget the timing and the anniversary. Maybe the attacker was the same guy who robbed Ray one year ago.

Oh boy, he was making no sense. Where the hell was that Vicodin?

He flipped on the television and headed into the bathroom. When he opened the medicine chest, a dozen bottles and whatnot fell into the sink. He fished into the pile and found the bottle with the Vicodin. At least he hoped that they were Vicodin. He'd bought them off the black market from a guy who claimed to smuggle them in from Canada. For all Ray knew, they were Flintstone vitamins.

The local news was on, showing some local fire, asking neighbors what they thought about the fire because, really, that always got you some wonderful insight. Ray's cell phone rang. He saw Fester's number pop up on the caller ID.

"What's up?" Ray said, collapsing on the couch.

"You sound horrible."

"I got mugged soon as I left Ira's bar mitzvah."

"For real?"

"Yep. Got hit over the head with a baseball bat."

"They steal anything?"

"My camera."

"Wait, so you lost today's pictures?"

"No, no, don't worry," Ray said. "I'm fine, really."

"On the inside I'm dying of worry. I'm asking about the pictures to cover my pain."

"I have them," Ray said.

"How?"

His head hurt too much to explain, plus the Vicodin was knocking him to la-la land. "Don't worry about it. They're safe."

A few years ago, when Ray did a stint as a "real" paparazzo, he'd gotten some wonderfully compromising photographs of a certain high-profile gay actor stepping out on his boyfriend with—gasp—a woman. The actor's bodyguard forcibly took the camera from Ray and destroyed the SD card. Since then, Ray had put a send feature on his camera—something similar to what most people have on their camera phones—that automatically e-mailed the pictures off his SD card every ten minutes.

"That's why I'm calling," Fester said. "I need them fast. Pick out five of them and e-mail them to me tonight. Ira's dad wants our new bar mitzvah paperweight cube right away."

On the TV news, the camera panned over to the "meteorologist," a curvy babe in a tight red sweater. Ratings bait. Ray's eyes started to close as the hott finished up with the satellite photograph and sent it back to the over-coiffed anchorman.

"Ray?"

"Five pics for a paperweight cube."

"Right."

"A cube has six sides," Ray said.

"Whoa, get a load of the math genius. The sixth side is for the name, date, and a Star of David."

“Got it.”

“I need them ASAP.”

“Okay.”

“Then everything is copasetic,” Fester said. “Except, well, without a camera, you can’t do George Queller tomorrow. Don’t worry. I’ll find somebody else.”

“Now I’ll sleep better.”

“You’re a funny guy, Ray. Get me the pics. Then get some rest.”

“I’m welling up from your concern, Fester.”

Both men hung up. Ray fell back onto the couch. The drug was working in a wonderful way. He almost smiled. On the TV, the anchorman strapped on his gravest voice and said, “Local man Carlton Flynn has gone missing. His car was found abandoned with the door open near the pier...”

Ray opened one eye and peeked out. A man-cum-boy with frosted tips in his spiky dark hair and a hoop earring was on the screen now. The guy was making kissy lips at the camera, the caption under him reading “Vanished,” when it probably should have read “Douchebag.” Ray frowned, a stray, vague concern passing through his head, but he couldn’t process it right now. His entire body craved sleep, but if he didn’t send in those five photographs, Fester would call again and who needed that? With great effort, Ray managed to get back to his feet. He stumbled to the kitchen table, booted up his laptop, and made sure that the pictures had indeed made it to his computer.

They had.

Something niggled at the back of his head, but Ray couldn’t say what. Maybe something irrelevant was bothering him. Maybe he was remembering something really important. Or maybe, most likely, the blow from the baseball bat had produced little skull fragments that were now literally scratching his brain.

The bar mitzvah pictures came up in reverse order—last picture taken was first. Ray quickly scanned through the thumbs, choosing one dance shot, one family shot, one Torah shot, one with the rabbi, one with Ira’s grandmother kissing his cheek.

That was five. He attached them to Fester’s e-mail address and clicked send. Done.

Ray felt so tired that he wasn’t sure he could get up from the chair and make his way to the bed. He debated just putting his head down on the kitchen table and napping when he remembered the other photographs on that SD card, the ones he’d taken earlier in the day, before the bar mitzvah.

An overwhelming feeling of sadness flooded into his chest.

Ray had gone back to that damn park and snapped pictures. Dumb, but he did it every year. He couldn’t say why. Or maybe he could and that just made it worse. The camera lens gave him distance, gave him perspective, made him feel somehow safe. Maybe that was what it was. Maybe, somehow, seeing that horrible place through that oddly comforting angle would somehow change what could, of course, never be changed.

Ray looked at the pictures he’d taken earlier in the day on his computer monitor—and now he remembered something else.

A guy with frosted tips and a hoop earring.

Two minutes later, he found what he was looking for. His entire body went cold as the realization hit him.

The attacker hadn’t been after the camera. He’d been after a picture.

This picture.

MEGAN PIERCE WAS LIVING THE ultimate soccer-mom fantasy and hating it.

She closed the Sub-Zero fridge and looked at her two children through the bay windows off the breakfast nook. The windows offered up “essential morning light.” That was how the architect had put it. The newly renovated kitchen also had a Viking stove, Miele appliances, a marble island in the middle, and excellent flow to the family-cum-theater room with the big-screen TV, recliners with cup holders, and enough sound speakers to stage a Who concert.

Out in the backyard, Kaylie, her fifteen-year-old daughter, was picking on her younger brother, Jordan. Megan sighed and opened the window. “Cut it out, Kaylie.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I’m standing right here watching you.”

Kaylie put her hands on her hips. Fifteen years old—that troubling adolescent cusp between adult and childhood, the body and hormones just starting to come to a boil. Megan remembered it well. “What did you see?” Kaylie asked in a challenge.

“I saw you picking on your brother.”

“You’re inside. You couldn’t hear anything. For all you know, I said, ‘I love you so much, Jordan.’”

“She did not!” Jordan shouted.

“I know she didn’t,” Megan said.

“She called me a loser and said I had no friends!”

Megan sighed. “Kaylie...”

“I did not!”

Megan just frowned at her.

“It’s his word against mine,” Kaylie protested. “Why do you always take his side?”

Every kid, Megan thought, is a frustrated lawyer, finding loopholes, demanding impossible levels of proof, attacking even the most minute of minutia.

“You have practice tonight,” Megan told Kaylie.

Kaylie’s head dropped to her shoulder, her entire body slumping. “Do I have to go?”

“You made a commitment to this team, young lady.”

Even as Megan said it—even as she had said similar words a zillion times before—she still couldn’t believe the words were coming from her own mouth.

“But I don’t want to go,” Kaylie whined. “I’m so tired. And I’m supposed to go out with Ginger later, remember, to...”

Kaylie may have said more, but Megan turned away, not really interested. In the TV room, her husband, Dave, was sprawled out in gray sweats. Dave was watching the latest fallen movie actor bragging in some tasteless interview about the many women he’d bagged and the years of scoring at strip clubs. The actor was manic and wide-eyed and clearly on something that required a physician with a loose prescription pad.

From his spot on the couch, Dave shook his head in disgust. “What is this world coming to?” Dave said, gesturing at the screen. “Can you believe this jerk? What a tool.”

Megan nodded, suppressing a smile. Years ago she had known that tool quite well. Biblically even ~~The Tool was actually a pretty nice guy who tipped well, enjoyed threesomes, and cried like a baby when he drank too much.~~

A long time ago.

Dave turned and smiled at her with everything he had. “Hey, babe.”

“Hey.”

Dave still did that, smiled at her as though seeing her anew, for the first time, and she knew again that she was lucky, that she should be grateful. This was Megan’s life now. That old life—the one nobody in this happy suburban wonderland of cul-de-sacs and good schools and brick McMansions knew about—had been killed off and buried in a shallow ditch.

“You want me to drive Kaylie to soccer?” Dave asked.

“I can do it.”

“You’re sure?”

Megan nodded. Not even Dave knew the truth about the woman who had shared his bed for the past sixteen years. Dave didn’t even know that Megan’s real name was, strangely enough, Maygin. Same pronunciation but computers and IDs only know spelling. She would have asked her mother why the weird spelling, but her mother had died before Megan could talk. She had never known her father or even who he was. She’d been orphaned young, grew up hard, ended up stripping in Vegas and then Atlantic City, took it a step further, loved it. Yes, loved it. It was fun and exciting and electrifying. There was always something going on, always a sense of danger and possibility and passion.

“Mom?”

It was Jordan. “Yes, honey.”

“Mrs. Freedman says you didn’t sign the permission slip for the class trip.”

“I’ll send her an e-mail.”

“She said it was due on Friday.”

“Don’t worry about it, honey, okay?”

It took Jordan another moment or two but eventually he was placated.

Megan knew that she should be grateful. Girls die young in her old life. Every emotion, every second in that world, is almost too intense—life raised to the tenth power—and that doesn’t jibe with longevity. You get burned out. You get strung out. There is a heady quality to that kind of action. There is also an inherent danger. When it finally spun out of control, when Megan’s very life was suddenly in jeopardy, she had not only found a way to escape but to start over completely anew, reborn if you will, with a loving husband, beautiful children, a home with four bedrooms, and a pool the yard.

Somehow, almost by accident really, Megan Pierce had stumbled from the depths of what some might call a seedy cesspool into the ultimate American dream. She had, in order to save herself, played it straight and almost talked herself into believing that this was the best possible world. And why not? For her entire life, in movies and on television, Megan, like the rest of us, had been inundated with images claiming that her old life was wrong, immoral, wouldn’t last—while this family life, the house and picket fence, was enviable, appropriate, celestial.

But here was the truth: Megan missed her old life. She was not supposed to. She was supposed to be grateful and thrilled that she of all people, with the destructive route she’d taken, had ended up with what every little girl dreams of. But the truth was, a truth it had taken her years to admit to herself, sl

still longed for those dark rooms; the lustful, hungry stares from strangers; the pounding, pulsating music; the crazy lights; the adrenaline spikes.

And now?

Dave flipping stations: “So you don’t mind driving? Because the game is on.”

Kaylie looking through her gym bag: “Mom, where’s my uniform? Did you wash it like I asked?”

Jordan opening the Sub-Zero: “Can you make me a grilled cheese in the panini maker? And not with that whole grain bread.”

She loved them. She did. But there were times, like today, when she realized that after a youth of skating along slippery surfaces she had now settled into a domestic rut of dazzling sameness, each day forced to perform the same show with the same players as the day before, just each player one day older. Megan wondered why it had to be this way, why we are forced to choose one life. Why do we insist that there can only be one “us,” one life that makes us up in our entirety? Why can’t we have more than one identity? And why do we have to destroy one life in order to create another? We claim to long for the “well rounded,” the Renaissance man or woman inside all of us, yet our only variety is cosmetic. In reality we do all we can to smother that spirit out, to make us conform, to define us as one thing and one thing only.

Dave flipped back to the fallen movie star. “This guy,” Dave said with a shake of head. But just hearing that famous manic voice brought Megan back—his hand twined in her thong, his face pressed against her back, scruffy and wet from tears.

“You’re the only one who understands me, Cassie....”

Yes, she missed it. Was that really so horrible?

She didn’t think so, but it kept haunting her. Had she made a mistake? These memories, the life of Cassie because no one uses a real name in that world, had been kept locked up in a small back room in her head all these years. And then, a few days ago, she had unbolted the door and let it open just a crack. She had quickly slammed it closed and locked it back up. But just that crack, just letting Cassie have a quick gaze into the world between Maygin and Megan—why was she so sure that there would be repercussions?

Dave rolled off the couch and headed for the bathroom, the newspaper tucked under his armpit. Megan warmed up the panini maker and searched for the white bread. As she opened the drawer, the phone rang, giving off an electronic chirp. Kaylie stood next to the phone, ignoring it, texting.

“You want to answer that?” Megan asked.

“It’s not for me.”

Kaylie could pull out and answer her own mobile phone with a speed that would have intimidated Wyatt Earp, but the home phone, with a number unknown to the Kasselton teenage community, held absolutely no interest to her.

“Pick it up, please.”

“What’s the point? I’d just have to hand it to you.”

Jordan, who at the tender age of eleven always wanted to keep the peace, grabbed it. “Hello?”

He listened for a moment and then said, “You have the wrong number.” And then Jordan added something that chilled Megan: “There’s no one here named Cassie.”

Making up some excuse about the delivery people always getting her name wrong—and knowing that her children were so wonderfully self-involved that they wouldn’t question it anyway—Megan took the phone from her son and vanished into the other room.

She put the receiver to her ear, and a voice she hadn't heard in seventeen years said, "I'm sorry to call you like this, but I think we need to meet."

MEGAN DROPPED OFF KAYLIE AT SOCCER PRACTICE.

She was, considering the bombshell call, fairly calm and serene. She put the car in park and turned to her daughter, dewy-eyed.

Kaylie said, "What?"

"Nothing. What time does practice end?"

"I don't know. I might go out with Gabi and Chuckie afterward."

Might meaning will. "Where?"

Shrug. "Town."

The nice vague teenage answer. "Where in town?"

"I don't know, Mom," she said, allowing a little annoyance in. Kaylie wanted to move this along, but she didn't want to piss off her mother and not be allowed to go. "We're just going to hang out, okay?"

"Did you do all your homework?"

Megan hated herself the moment she asked the question. Such a Mom moment. She put her hand up and said to her daughter, "Forget that. Just go. Have fun."

Kaylie looked at her mother as though a small arm had suddenly sprouted out of her forehead. The she shrugged, got out of the car, and ran off. Megan watched. Always. It didn't matter that she was old enough to enter a field by herself. Megan had to watch until she was sure that her daughter was safe.

Ten minutes later, Megan found a parking spot behind the Starbucks. She checked her watch. Fifteen minutes until the meet.

She grabbed a latte and found a table in the back. At the table to her left, a potpourri of new moms—sleep deprived, stained clothes, deliriously happy, all with baby in tow—were yapping away. They talked about the best new strollers and which Pack 'n Play folded up easiest and how long to breast-feed. They debated cedar playgrounds with tire mulch and what age to stop with the pacifier and the safest car seats and the back baby sling versus the front baby sling versus the side baby sling. One bragged about how her son, Toddy, was "so sensitive to the needs of other children, even though he's only eighteen months old."

Megan smiled, wishing that she could be them again. She had loved the new-mommy stage, but like so many other stages of life, you look back at it now and wonder when they fixed your lobotomy. She knew what will come next with these mothers—picking the right preschool as though it were a life 'n death decision, waiting in the pickup line, positioning their kids for the elite playdates, Little Gym classes, karate lessons, lacrosse practice, French immersion courses, constant carpools. The happy turns to harried, and the harried becomes routine. The once-understanding husband slowly gets grumpier because you still don't want as much sex as before the baby. You as a couple, the you who used to sneak off to do the dirty in every available spot, barely glance at each other when naked anymore. You think it doesn't matter—that it's natural and inevitable—but you drift. You love each other, in some ways more than ever, but you drift and you either don't fight it or don't really see it. You become caretakers of the children, your world shrinking down to the size and boundaries of your offspring, and it all becomes so polite and close-knit and warm—and maddening and smothering and numbing.

“Well, well, well.”

The familiar voice made Megan automatically smile. The voice still had the sexy rasp of whiskey, cigarettes, and late nights, where every utterance had a hint of a laugh and a dollop of a double entendre.

“Hi, Lorraine.”

Lorraine gave her a crooked smile. Her hair was a bad blond dye job and too big. Lorraine was big and fleshy and curvy and made sure that you saw it. Her clothes looked two sizes too small, and yet that worked for her. After all these years, Lorraine still made an impression. Even the mommies stopped to stare with just the proper amount of distaste. Lorraine shot them a look that told them she knew what they thought and where they could stick that thought. The mommies turned away.

“You look good, kid,” Lorraine said.

She sat, making a production of it. It had been, yes, seventeen years. Lorraine had been a hostess/manager/cocktail waitress/bartender. Lorraine had lived the life, and she lived it hard and without any apologies.

“I’ve missed you,” Megan said.

“Yeah, I could tell from all the postcards.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

Lorraine waved her off, as if annoyed by the sentiment. She fumbled into her purse and pulled out a cigarette. The nearby mommies gasped as though she’d pulled out a firearm. “Man, I should light this thing just to watch them flee.”

Megan leaned forward. “If you don’t mind my asking, how did you find me?”

The crooked smile returned. “Come on, honey. I’ve always known. I got eyes everywhere, you know that.”

Megan wanted to ask more, but something in Lorraine’s tone told her to let it be.

“Look at you,” Lorraine said. “Married, kids, big house. Lots of white Cadillac Escalades in the lot. One of them yours?”

“No. I’m the black GMC Acadia.”

Lorraine nodded as though that answer meant something. “I’m happy you found something here, though, to be honest? I always thought you’d be a lifer, you know? Like me.”

Lorraine let out a small chuckle and shook her head.

“I know,” Megan said. “I kinda surprised myself.”

“Of course, not all the girls who end up back on the straight and narrow choose it.” Lorraine looked off as though the comment was a throwaway. Both women knew that it was not. “We had some laughs, didn’t we?”

“We did.”

“I still do,” she said. “This”—she eye-gestured toward the mommies—“I mean, I admire it. I really do. But I don’t know. It’s not me.” She shrugged. “Maybe I’m too selfish. It’s like I got ADD or something. I need something to stimulate me.”

“Kids can stimulate, believe me.”

“Yeah?” she said, clearly not buying it. “Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

Megan wasn’t sure how to continue. “So you still work at La Crème?”

“Yep. Bartending mostly.”

“So why the sudden call?”

Lorraine fiddled with the unlit cigarette. The moms went back to their inane chatter, though with less enthusiasm. They constantly sneaked glances at Lorraine, as if she were some virus introduced into their suburban life-form with a mission to destroy it.

“Like I said, I’ve always known where you were. But I would never say anything. You know that, right?”

“I do.”

“And I didn’t want to bug you now either. You escaped, last thing I wanted to do was drag you back in.”

“But?”

Lorraine met her eye. “Someone spotted you. Or I should say, Cassie.”

Megan shifted in the chair.

“You’ve been coming to La Crème, haven’t you?”

Megan said nothing.

“Hey, I get it. Believe me. If I hung out with these sunshines all day”—Lorraine pointed with her thumb at the maternal gaggle—“I’d sacrifice farm animals for a night out now and again.”

Megan looked down at her coffee as though it might hold an answer. She had indeed returned to La Crème, but only once. Two weeks ago, near the anniversary of her escape, she had gone to Atlantic City for a mundane training seminar and trade show. With the kids getting older, Megan had decided to try to find a job in residential real estate. The past few years had been all about finding the next thing—there had been the private trainer and yoga classes and ceramics and finally a memoir-writing group, which in Megan’s case had of course been fiction. Each of the activities was a desperate attempt to find the elusive “fulfillment” that those who have everything crave. In reality, they were looking up when perhaps they should have been looking down, searching for enlightened spirituality when all along Megan knew that the answer probably lay with the more base and primitive.

If she were asked, Megan would claim that she didn’t plan it. It was spur of the moment, no big deal, but on her second night down staying at the Tropicana, a scant two blocks from La Crème, she donned her clingiest outfit and visited the club.

“You saw me?” Megan asked.

“No. And I guess you didn’t seek me out.”

There was hurt in Lorraine’s voice. Megan had seen her old friend behind the bar and kept her distance. The club was big and dark. People liked to get lost in places like that. It was easy not to be seen.

“I didn’t mean…” Megan stopped. “So who then?”

“I don’t know. But it’s true?”

“It was only one time,” Megan said.

Lorraine said nothing.

“I don’t understand. What’s the problem?”

“Why did you come back?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not to me,” Lorraine said. “But a cop found out. Same one who’s been looking for you all these years. He’s never given up.”

“And now you think he’ll find me?”

“Yeah,” Lorraine said. “I think there’s a pretty good chance he’ll find you.”

“So this visit is a warning?”

“Something like that.”

“What else is it?”

“I don’t know what happened that night,” Lorraine said. “And I don’t want to know. I’m happy. I like my life. I do what I please with whom I please. I don’t get into other people’s stuff, you know what I’m saying?”

“Yes.”

“And I may be wrong. I mean, you know how the club is. Bad lighting. And it’s been, what, seventeen years? So I could have been mistaken. It was only for a second, but for all I know it was the same night you were there. But what with you back and now someone else gone missing...”

“What are you talking about, Lorraine? What did you see?”

Lorraine looked up and swallowed. “Stewart,” she said, fiddling with the unlit cigarette. “I think I saw Stewart Green.”

WITH A HEAVY SIGH, Detective Broome approached the doomed house and rang the bell. Sarah opened the door and with nary a glance said, “Come on in.” Broome wiped his feet, feeling sheepish. He took off the old trench coat and draped it over his arm. Nothing inside the house had changed in all these years. The dated recessed lighting, the white leather couch, the old recliner in the corner—all the same. Even the photographs on the fireplace mantel hadn’t been switched out. For a long time, at least five years, Sarah had left her husband’s slippers by that old recliner. They were gone now, but the chair remained. Broome wondered if anybody ever sat in it.

It was as though the house refused to move on, as though the walls and ceilings were grieving and waiting. Or maybe that was projecting. People need answers. They need closure. Hope, Broome knew, could be a wonderful thing. But hope could crush you anew every single day. Hope could be the cruelest thing in the world.

“You missed the anniversary,” Sarah said.

Broome nodded, not ready to tell her why yet. “How are the kids?”

“Good.”

Sarah’s children were practically grown now. Susie was a junior at Bucknell. Brandon was a high school senior. They had been little more than babies when their father vanished, ripped from this tidy household, never to be seen by any of his loved ones again. Broome had never solved the case. He had never let it go either. You shouldn’t get personally involved. He knew that. But he had. He had gone to Susie’s dance recitals. He had helped teach Brandon how to throw a baseball. He had even, twelve years ago and to his great shame, had too much to drink with Sarah and, well, stayed the whole night.

“How’s the new job?” Broome asked her.

“Good.”

“Is your sister coming in soon?”

Sarah sighed. “Yep.”

Sarah was still an attractive woman. There were crow’s-feet by the eyes, and the lines around her mouth had deepened over the years. Aging works well on some women. Sarah was one of them.

She was also a cancer survivor, twenty-plus years now. She had told Broome this the first time they met, sitting in this very room, when he had come here to investigate the disappearance. The diagnosis had been made, Sarah explained to him, when she was pregnant with Susie. If it wasn’t for her husband, Sarah insisted, she would have never survived. She wanted Broome to understand that. When the prognosis was bad, when the chemo made Sarah vomit continuously, when she lost her hair and her looks, when her body started to decay, when no one else, including Sarah, had any hope—that word again—he and he alone had stuck by her.

Which proved yet again that there was no explaining the complexities and hypocrisies of human nature.

He stayed up with her. He held her forehead late at night. He fetched her medicines and kissed her cheek and held her shivering body and made her feel loved.

She had looked Broome in the eye and told him all this because she wanted him to stay with the case, to not dismiss her husband as a runaway, to get personally involved, to find her soul mate

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