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Opening Extract from...

No Safe House

Written by Linwood Barclay

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LINWOOD BARCLAY

NO SAFE HOUSE



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PROLOGUE

RICHARD Bradley had never thought of himself as a violent man, but right now he was ready to kill someone.

"I can't take it anymore," he said, sitting on the side of the bed in his pajamas.

"You're not going out there," said his wife, Esther. "Not again. Just let it go."

Not only could they hear the music blaring from next door; they could feel it. The deep bass was pulsing through the walls of their house like a heartbeat.

"It's eleven o'clock, for Christ's sake," Richard said, turning on his bedside table lamp. "And it's Wednesday. Not Friday night or Saturday night, but Wednesday."

The Bradleys had lived in this modest Milford home, on this hundred-year-old street with its mature trees, for nearly thirty years. They'd seen neighbors come and go. The good, and the bad. But never had there been anything as bad as this, and it had been going on for a while. Two years back, the owner of the house next door started renting it to students attending

Housatonic Community College over in Bridgeport, and since then the neighborhood had gone, as Richard Bradley liked to proclaim on a daily basis, "to hell in a handcart."

Some of the students had been worse than others. This bunch, they took the cake. Loud music nearly every night. The smell of marijuana wafting in through the windows. Shattered beer bottles on the sidewalk.

This used to be a nice part of town. Young couples with their first homes, some starting families. There were some older teenagers on the street, to be sure, but if any of them acted up, threw a raucous party when they were left on their own, at least you could rat them out the next day to their parents and it wouldn't happen again. At least not for a while. There were older people on the street, too, many of them retired. Like the Bradleys, who'd taught in schools in and around Milford since the 1970s before packing it in.

"Is that what we worked so hard for our whole lives?" he asked Esther. "So we could live next door to a bunch of goddamn rabble-rousers?"

"I'm sure they'll stop soon," she said, sitting up in bed. "They usually do at some point. We were young, too, once." She grimaced. "A long time ago."

"It's like an earthquake that won't end," he said. "I don't even know what the hell kind of music that is. What is that?"

He stood up, grabbed his bathrobe, which was thrown over a chair, knotted the sash in front.

"You're going to give yourself a heart attack," Esther said. "You can't go over every time this happens."

"I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

"Oh, for God's sake," she said as he strode out of the bedroom. Esther Bradley threw back the covers, put on her own robe, slid her feet into the slippers on the floor by the bed, and went running down the stairs after her husband.

By the time she caught up with him, he was on the front porch. She noticed, for the first time, that he had nothing on his feet. She tried to grab his arm to stop him but he jerked it away, and she felt a twinge of pain in her shoulder. He went down the steps, walked down to the sidewalk, turned left, and kept marching until he reached the driveway next door. He could have taken a shortcut across the grass, but it was still wet from a shower earlier in the evening.

"Richard," she said pleadingly, a few steps behind him. She wasn't going to leave him alone. She figured there was less likelihood that these young men would do anything to him if they saw her standing there. Would they punch out an old man while his wife watched?

He was a man on a mission, mounting the steps to the front door of the three-story Victorian home. Most of the lights were on, many of the windows open, the music blaring out for all the neighbors to hear. But it wasn't loud enough to drown out the sounds of raised voices and laughter.

Richard banged on the door, his wife stationed at the bottom of the porch steps, watching anxiously.

"What are you going to say?" she asked.

He ignored her and banged on the door again. He was about to strike it with the heel of his fist a third time when the door swung open. A thin man, maybe twenty, just over six feet tall, dressed in jeans and a plain dark blue T-shirt and holding a can of Coors in his hand, stood there.

"Hey," he said. He blinked woozily a couple of times as he sized up his visitor. Bradley's few wisps of gray hair were sticking up at all angles, his bathrobe had started to part in front, and his eyes were bugging out.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Bradley shouted.

"Excuse me?" the man said, bewildered.

"You're keeping up the whole damn neighborhood!"

The man's mouth formed an O, as if trying to take it in. He looked beyond the man and saw Esther Bradley, holding her hands together, almost in prayer.

She said, sounding almost apologetic, "The music is a bit loud."

"Oh yeah, shit," he said. "You're from next door, right?"

"Jesus," Richard said, shaking his head. "I was over here last week, and the week before that! You got any brain cells left?"

The young man blinked a couple more times, then turned and shouted back into the house, "Hey, turn it down. Carter! Hey, Carter! Turn it—yeah, turn it the fuck down, will ya!"

Three seconds later, the music stopped, the sudden silence jarring.

The young man shrugged apologetically, said, "Sorry." He extended his free hand. "My name's Brian. Or have I told you that before?"

Richard Bradley ignored the hand.

"You want to come in for a beer or something?" Brian asked, cheerily raising the bottle in his hand. "We've got some pizza, too."

"No," Richard said.

"Thank you for the offer," Esther said cheerily.

"You're, like, the people in that house, right?" Brian asked, pointing.

"Yes," Esther said.

"Okay. Well, sorry about the noise and everything. We all had this test today and we were kind of unwinding, you know? If we get out of hand again, just come over and bang on the door and we'll try to dial it down."

"That's what I've been doing," Richard said.

Brian shrugged, then slipped back into the house and closed the door.

Esther said, "He seems like a nice young man."

Richard grunted.

They returned to their house, the front door slightly ajar from when they'd run out of it in a hurry. It wasn't until they were both inside and had closed and bolted the door, that they noticed the two people sitting in the living room.

A man and woman. Late thirties, early forties. Both smartly dressed in jeans—was that a crease in hers?—and lightweight jackets.

Esther let out a short, startled scream when she spotted them.

"Jesus!" Richard said. "How the hell did you—?"

"You shouldn't leave your door open like that," said the woman, getting up from the couch. She wasn't much more than five-two, maybe five-three. Short black hair, worn in a bob. "That's not smart," she said. "Even in a nice neighborhood like this."

"Call the police," Richard Bradley said to his wife.

It took a moment for the command to register. But when it did, she started for the kitchen. The moment she moved, the man shot up off the couch. He was a good foot taller than the woman, stocky, and swift. He crossed the room in an instant and blocked her path.

He grabbed her roughly by her bony shoulders, spun her around, and tossed her, hard, into a living room chair.

She yelped.

"You son of a bitch!" Richard Bradley said and charged at the man while he was turned away from him. He made a fist and pounded it into the intruder's back, just below the neck. The man spun around and swatted Richard away as if he was a child. As he stumbled back, the man glanced down, saw Richard's bare foot, and drove the heel of his shoe down onto it.

Bradley shouted out in pain and collapsed toward the couch, catching the edge and falling onto the floor.

"Enough," the woman said. She said to her partner, "Sweetheart, you want to turn down some of these lights? It's awfully bright in here."

"Sure," he said, found the light switch, and flicked it down.

"My foot," Richard whimpered. "You broke my goddamn foot."

"Let me help him," Esther said. "Let me get him an ice pack."

"Stay put," the man said.

The woman perched her butt on the edge of the coffee table, where she could easily address Esther or look down to the floor to Richard.

She said this:

"I'm going to ask the two of you a question, and I'm only going to ask it once. So I want you to *listen* very carefully, and then I want you to *think* very carefully about how you answer. What I do not want you to do is answer my question with a question. That would be very, very unproductive. Do you understand?"

The Bradleys glanced at each other, terrified, then looked back at the woman. Their heads bobbed up and down weakly in understanding.

"That's very good," the woman said. "So, pay attention. It's a very simple question."

The Bradleys waited.

The woman said, "Where is it?"

The words hung there for a moment, no one making a sound.

After several seconds, Richard said, "Where is wh—?"

Then cut himself off when he saw the look in the woman's eyes.

She smiled and waved a finger at him. "Tut, tut, I warned you about that. You almost did it, didn't you?"

Richard swallowed. "But—"

"Can you answer the question? Again, you need to know that Eli says it's here."

Richard's lips trembled. He shook his head and stammered, "I—I don't—I don't—"

The woman raised a palm, silencing him, and turned her attention to Esther. "Would you like to answer the question?"

Esther was careful with her phrasing. “I would appreciate it if you could be more specific. I—I have to tell you that name—Eli? I don’t know anyone by that name. Whatever it is you want, if we have it, we’ll give it to you.”

The woman sighed and turned her head to her partner, who was standing a couple of feet away.

“I gave you your chance,” the woman said. “I told you I’d only ask once.” Just then, the house next door began to thump once again with loud music. The windows of the Bradley house began to vibrate. The woman smiled and said, “That’s Drake. I like him.” She glanced up at the man and said, “Shoot the husband.”

“No! No!” Esther screamed.

“Jesus!” Richard shouted. “Just tell us what—”

Before the retired teacher could finish the sentence, the man had reached into his jacket for a gun, pointed it downward, and pulled the trigger.

Esther opened her mouth to scream again, but no sound came out. Little more than a high-pitched squeak, as though someone had stepped on a mouse.

The woman said to her, “I guess you really don’t know.” She nodded at her associate, and he fired a second shot.

Wearily, she said to him, “Doesn’t mean it’s not here. We’ve got a long night ahead of us, sweetheart, unless it’s in the cookie jar.”

“We should be so lucky,” he said.

ONE

TERRY

I don't know where I got the idea that once you've come through a very dark time, after you've confronted the worst possible demons and defeated them, that everything's going to be just fine.

Doesn't work that way.

Not that life wasn't better for us, at least for a while. Seven years ago, things were pretty bad around here. Bad as they can get. People died. My wife and daughter and I came close to being among them. But when it was over, and we were whole, and still had each other, well, we did like the song says. We picked ourselves up, dusted ourselves off, and started all over again.

More or less.

But the scars remained. We went through our own version of post-traumatic stress. My wife, Cynthia, certainly did. She'd lost all the members of her family when she was fourteen—I really mean *lost*; her parents and her brother vanished into thin air one night—and Cynthia had to wait twenty-five years to learn their fate. When it was all over, there were no joyful reunions.

There was more. Cynthia's aunt paid the ultimate price in her bid to shine the light on a decades-old secret. And then there was Vince Fleming, a career criminal who was also just a kid when Cynthia's family vanished, who'd been with her that night. Twenty-five years later, against his own nature, he helped us find out what really happened. Like they say, no good deed goes unpunished. He got shot and nearly died for his trouble.

You might have heard about it. It was all over the news. They were even going to make a movie about it at one point, but that fell through, which, if you ask me, was for the best.

We thought we'd be able to close the book on that chapter of our lives. Questions were answered; mysteries were solved. The bad people died, or went to prison.

Case closed, as they say.

But it's like a horrible tsunami. You think it's over, but debris is washing ashore half a world away years later.

For Cynthia, the trauma never ended. Every day, she feared history repeating itself with the family she had now. Me. And our daughter, Grace. The trouble was, the steps she took to make sure it wouldn't led us into that area known as the law of unintended consequence: the actions you take to achieve one thing often produce the exact opposite result.

Cynthia's efforts to keep our fourteen-year-old daughter, Grace, safe from the big, bad world were pushing the child to experience it as quickly as she could.

I kept hoping we'd eventually work our way through the darkness and come out the other side. But it didn't look as though it was going to happen anytime soon.

GRACE and her mother had shouting matches on a pretty much daily basis.

They were all variations on a theme.

Grace ignored curfew. Grace didn't call when she got to

where she was going. Grace said she was going to one friend's house but ended up going to another and didn't update her mother. Grace wanted to go to a concert in New York but wouldn't be able to get home until two in the morning. Mom said no.

I tried to be a peacemaker in these disputes, usually with little success. I'd tell Cynthia privately that I understood her motives, that I didn't want anything bad to happen to Grace, either, but that if our daughter was never allowed any freedom, she'd never learn to cope in the world on her own.

These fights generally ended with someone storming out of a room. A door being slammed. Grace telling Cynthia she hated her, then knocking over a chair as she left the kitchen.

"God, she's just like me," Cynthia would often say. "I was a horror show at that age. I just don't want her making the same mistakes I made."

Cynthia, even now, thirty-two years later, carried a lot of guilt from the night her mother and father and older brother, Todd, disappeared. Part of her still believed that if she hadn't been out with a boy named Vince, without her parents' permission or knowledge, and if she hadn't gotten drunk and passed out once she'd fallen into her own bed, she might have known what was happening and, somehow, saved those closest to her.

Even though the facts didn't bear that out, Cynthia believed she'd been punished for her misbehavior.

She didn't want Grace ever having to blame herself for something so tragic. That meant instilling in Grace the importance of resisting peer pressure, of never allowing yourself to be put into a difficult situation, of listening to that little voice in your head when it says, *This is wrong and I've got to get the hell out of here*.

Or as Grace might say, "Blah blah blah."

I wasn't much help when I told Cynthia almost every kid went through a period like this. Even if Grace did make mistakes,

it didn't follow that the consequences would have to be as grave as what Cynthia had endured. Grace, God help us, was a teenager. In another six years, if Cyn and I hadn't killed ourselves by then, we'd see Grace mature into a sensible young woman.

But it was hard to believe that day would ever come.

Like that night when Grace was thirteen and hanging out at the Post Mall with her friends at the same time Cynthia happened to be there looking for shoes. Cynthia spotted our girl outside of Macy's sharing a cigarette. Cynthia confronted her in full view of her classmates and ordered her to the car. Cynthia was so rattled and busy tearing a strip off Grace that she ran a stop sign.

Nearly got broadsided by a dump truck.

"We could have been killed," Cynthia told me. "I was out of control, Terry. I totally lost it."

It was after that incident that she decided, for the first time, to take a break from us. Just a week. For our sake—or more specifically, for Grace's—as much as her own. A time-out, Cynthia called it. She bounced the idea off Naomi Kinzler, the therapist Cynthia had been seeing for years, and she saw the merit in it.

"Remove yourself from the conflict situation," Kinzler said. "You're not running away; you're not abandoning your responsibilities. But you're going to take some time to reflect, to regroup. You can give yourself permission to do that. This gives Grace time to think, too. She may not like what you're doing, but she might come to understand it. You suffered a terrible wound when you lost your family, and it's a wound that will never completely heal. Even if your daughter can't appreciate that now, I believe someday she will."

Cynthia got a place at the Hilton Garden Inn, over behind the mall. She was going to stay at the budget-minded Just Inn Time to save money, but I said no way. Not only was it a dump, but there'd been a white-slave operation running out of it a few years back.

She was only gone a week, but it felt like a year. What surprised me was how much Grace missed her mother.

"She doesn't love us anymore," Grace said one night over microwaved lasagna.

"That's not true," I said.

"Okay, she doesn't love *me* anymore."

"The reason your mother's taking a break is because she loves you so much. She knows she went too far, that she overreacted, and she needs some time to get her head together."

"Tell her to speed it up."

When Cynthia returned, things were better for a month, maybe even six weeks. But the peace treaty started to crumble. Minor incursions at first, maybe a shot across the bow.

Then all-out warfare.

When they had one of their battles, feelings would be hurt and it'd take several days for our normal life—whatever that was—to resume. I'd attempt mediation, but these things had to run their course. Cynthia would communicate anything important she had to tell Grace through notes, signed *L. Mom*, just the way her own mother used to do when she was pissed with her daughter and couldn't bring herself to write *Love.*

But eventually the notes would be signed *Love, Mom*, and a thaw in relations would begin. Grace would find some pretext to ask her mother for guidance. Does this top work with these pants? Can you help with this homework assignment? A tentative dialogue would be opened.

Things would be good.

And then they'd be bad.

The other day, they were really bad.

Grace wanted to go with two of her girlfriends to New Haven to a huge used-clothing bazaar that was running midweek. They could only go at night, because they had school through the day. Like that concert in New York, it would mean a late return home

on the train. I offered to drive them up, kill some time, and then bring them back, but Grace would have none of it. She and her friends weren't five. They wanted to do this on their own.

"There's no way," Cynthia said, standing at the stove making dinner. Breaded pork cutlets and wild rice, as I remember. "Terry, tell me you're with me on this. There's no way she's doing that."

Before I could weigh in, Grace said, "Are you kidding? I'm not going to fucking Budapest. It's New Haven."

This was a relatively new wrinkle. The use of foul language. I don't suppose we had anyone to blame but ourselves. It was not uncommon for Cynthia or me to drop the f-bomb when we were angry or frustrated. If we had one of those swear jars where you drop in a quarter every time you used a bad word, we could have used the money to take a trip to Rome every year.

Just the same, I called Grace on it.

"Don't you ever speak to your mother that way," I said sternly.

Cynthia clearly felt a reprimand was inadequate. "You're grounded for two weeks," she said.

Grace, stunned, came back with: "How long are you going to take it out on *me* that *you* couldn't save your family? I wasn't even born, okay? It's not my fault."

A verbal knife to the heart with that one.

I could see, in Grace's face, instant regret, and something more than that. Fear. She'd crossed a line, and she knew it. Maybe, if she'd had a chance, she'd have withdrawn the comment, offered an apology, but Cynthia's hand came up so quickly, she never had a chance.

She slapped our daughter across the face. A smack loud enough I felt it in my own cheek.

"Cyn!" I shouted.

But as I yelled, Grace stumbled to the side, put out her hand instinctively to brace her fall in case she lost her footing.

Her hand hit the side of the pot that was cooking the rice. Knocked it to one side. Grace's hand dropped, landed on the burner.

The scream. Jesus, the scream.

"Oh God!" Cynthia said. "Oh my God!"

She grabbed Grace's arm, spun her around to the sink, and turned on the cold tap, kept a constant stream of water running over her burned hand. The back of it had hit the hot pan and the side had connected with the burner. Maybe a millisecond of contact in each case, but enough to sear the flesh.

Tears were streaming down Grace's face. I wrapped my arms tightly around her while Cynthia kept running cold water on her hand.

We took her to Milford Hospital.

"You can tell them the truth," Cynthia told Grace. "You can tell them what I did. I deserve to be punished. If they call the police, they call the police. I'm not going to make you tell them something that isn't true."

Grace told the doctor she was boiling water to cook some macaroni, iPod buds in her ears, listening to Adele's "Rolling in the Deep," dancing like an idiot, when she flung her arm out and hit the handle on the pot, knocking it off the stove.

We brought Grace home, her hand well bandaged.

The next day, Cynthia moved out for the second time.

She hasn't come back yet.