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Fear the Worst

Written by Linwood Barclay

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Fear the Worst

LINWOOD BARCLAY



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PROLOGUE

The morning of the day I lost her, my daughter asked me to scramble her some eggs.

'Want bacon with it?' I shouted up to the second floor where she was still getting ready for work.

'No,' Sydney called down from the bathroom.

'Toast?' I asked.

'No,' she said. I heard a clapping noise. The hair straightener. That noise usually signaled she was nearing the end of her morning routine.

'Cheese in the eggs?'

'No,' she said. Then, 'A little?'

I went back into the kitchen, opened the fridge and took out eggs, a block of cheddar and orange juice. I put a filter into the coffee maker, spooned in some coffee, poured in four cups of water and hit the button.

Syd's mother Susanne, my ex, who'd recently moved in with her boyfriend Bob on the other side of the river in Stratford, would probably say I was spoiling her, that our daughter was old enough at seventeen to be able to make her own breakfast. But it was such a treat to have her stay with me for the summer I didn't mind pampering her. Last year I'd found her a job at the Honda dealership where I work, just this side of that same river here in Milford. While there were moments when we wanted to kill each other, overall it had been a pretty good experience sharing digs. This year, however, Sydney had opted not to work at the dealership. Living with

me was enough. Having me keep an eye on her while she worked was something else again.

'Have you noticed,' she'd asked me last year, 'that every guy around here I talk to, even for a minute, you tell me something bad about him?'

'It's good to be forewarned,' I'd said.

'What about Dwayne, in Service?' she'd said. 'His *rag* was too oily?'

'Sign of bad character,' I'd said.

'And Andy?'

'You're joking,' I'd said. 'Way too old. Mid-twenties.'

So this year she'd found a different job, but still here in Milford, so she could live with me from June through Labor Day. She'd got herself hired at the Just Inn Time, a hotel that catered to business travelers only looking to stay a night or two. Milford's a nice place, but it's not exactly a tourist destination. The hotel had been a Days Inn or a Holiday Inn or a Comfort Inn in a previous life, but whichever conglomerate had owned it, they'd bailed, and an independent had come in.

I wasn't surprised when Sydney told me they'd put her on the front desk. 'You're bright, charming, courteous—'

'I'm also one of the few there who speaks English,' she'd countered, putting her proud father in his place.

It was like pulling teeth, getting her to talk about the new job. 'It's just work,' she'd say. Three days into it I heard her arguing on the phone with her friend Patty Swain saying she was going to look for something else, even if she was making good money, what with there being no income tax.

'This is off the books?' I said when she got off the phone. 'You're getting paid under the table?'

Sydney said, 'You always listen to my phone calls?'

So I backed off. Let her solve her own problems.

I waited until I heard her coming down the stairs before I poured the two beaten eggs, a few shavings of grated cheddar mixed in, into the buttered frying pan. It had occurred to me to do something I hadn't done for Sydney since she was a little girl. I took half of the eggshell I'd just cracked and, using a soft pencil from the cutlery drawer, drew a face on it. A toothy grin, a half circle for a nose, and two menacing-looking eyes. I drew a line from the mouth to the backside of the shell, where I printed, 'Smile, damn it.'

She shuffled into the kitchen like a condemned prisoner and plopped into her chair, looking down into her own lap, hair hanging down over her eyes, arms lifeless at her sides. She had a pair of oversized sunglasses I didn't recognize perched on her head.

The eggs firmed up in seconds. I slipped them onto a plate and set them before her.

'Your Highness,' I said, talking over the sounds of the *Today* show coming from the small television that hung beneath the cabinet.

Sydney rose her head slowly, looking first at the plate, but then her eyes caught the little Humpty-Dumpty character staring at her.

'Oh my God,' she said, bringing up a hand and turning the salt shaker so she could read what was on the egg's backside. 'Smile *yourself*,' she said, but there was something bordering on playful in her voice.

'New shades?' I asked.

Absently, like she'd forgotten she'd just put them there, she touched one of the arms, made a minor adjustment.

'Yeah,' she said.

I noticed the word 'Versace' printed in very tiny letters on the glasses. 'Very nice,' I said.

Syd nodded tiredly.

'Out late?' I asked.

'Not *that* late,' she said.

'Midnight's late,' I said.

She knew there was no point denying when she got in. I never got to sleep until I heard her come into our house on Hill Street and lock the door behind her. I guessed she'd been out with Patty Swain, who was also seventeen, but gave off a vibe that she was a little more experienced than Syd with the kinds of things that kept fathers up at night. I'd have been naïve to think Patty Swain didn't already know about drinking, sex and drugs.

But Syd wasn't exactly an angel. I'd caught her with pot once, and there was that time, a couple years back, when she was fifteen, when she came home from the Abercrombie and Fitch store in Stamford with a new T-shirt, and couldn't explain to her mother why she had no receipt. Big fireworks over that one.

Maybe that's why the sunglasses were niggling at me.

'What did those set you back?' I asked.

'Not that much,' she said.

'How's Patty?' I asked, not so much to find out how she was as to confirm Syd had been with her. They'd been friends only a year or so, but they'd spent so much time together since then it was as if their friendship went back to kindergarten. I liked Patty – she had a directness that was refreshing – but there were times I wished Syd hung out with her a little less.

'She's cool,' Syd said.

On the TV, Matt Lauer was warning about possibly radioactive granite counter-tops. Every day, something new to worry about.

Syd dug into her eggs. 'Mmm,' she said. She glanced up at the TV. 'Bob,' she said.

I looked. One of the ad spots from the local affiliate. A tall, balding man with broad smile and perfect teeth standing in front of a sea of cars, arms outstretched, like Moses parting the Red Sea.

'Run, don't walk, into Bob's Motors! Don't have a trade? That's OK! Don't have a downpayment! That's OK! Don't have a driver's license? OK, that's a problem! But if you're looking for a car, and you're looking for a good deal, get on down to one of our three loca—'

I hit the mute button.

'He is a bit of a douche,' Syd said of the man her mother, my ex, lived with. 'But those commercials turn him into Superdouche. What are we having tonight?' Breakfast was never complete without a discussion of what we might be eating at the end of the day. 'How about D.A.D?'

Family code for 'dial a dinner.'

Before I could answer, she said, 'Pizza?'

'I think I'll make something,' I said. Syd made no attempt to hide her disappointment.

Since last summer, when Syd and I were both working at the same place and she was riding in with me, Susanne and I had agreed to get her a car for nipping around Milford and Stratford. I took in a seven-year-old Civic with low miles on a trade and snatched it up for a couple thou before it hit our used car lot. It had a bit of rust around the fender wells, but was otherwise roadworthy.

'No spoiler?' Syd cracked when it was presented to her.

'Shut up,' I said and handed her the keys.

Only once since she'd gotten this new job had I dropped her off at work. The Civic was in for a rusted-out tailpipe. So I drove her up Route 1, what I still thought of as the Boston Post Road, the Just Inn Time looming in the distance, a bleak, gray, featureless block on the horizon, looking like an apartment complex in some Soviet satellite country.

I was prepared to drive her to the door, but she had me drop her off at the sidewalk, near a bus stop. 'I'll be here the end of the day,' she said.

Bob's commercial over, I put the sound back on. Al Roker was outside mingling with the Rockefeller Center crowd, most of them waving signs offering birthday greetings to relatives back home.

I looked at my daughter, eating her breakfast. Part of being a father, at least for me, is being perpetually proud. I took in what a beautiful young woman Syd was turning into. Blond hair down to her shoulders, a long graceful neck, porcelain skin, strong facial features. Her mother's roots go back to Norway, which accounts for her Nordic air.

As if sensing my eyes on her, she said, 'You think I could be a model?'

'A model?' I glanced over.

'Don't sound so shocked,' she said.

'I'm not,' I said defensively. 'I just never heard you talk about it before.'

'I never really thought about it. It's Bob's idea.'

I felt my face go hot. Bob encouraging Syd to model? He was in his early forties, like me. Now he had my wife and – more often than I liked – my daughter living under

his roof, in his fancy five-bedroom house with pool and three-car garage, and he's pushing her to model? What the fuck kind of modeling? Pinup stuff? Webcam porn to order? Was he offering to take the shots himself?

'*Bob* said this?' I asked.

'He says I'd be a natural. That I should be in one of his commercials.'

Hard to pick which would be more demeaning. *Penthouse*, or hawking Bob's used cars.

'What? You think he's wrong?'

'He's out of line,' I said.

'He's not a perv or anything,' she said. 'A douche, yes, but a perv, no. Mom and Evan even kind of agreed with him.'

'Evan?'

Now I was really getting steamed. Evan was Bob's nineteen-year-old son. He had been living most of the time with his mother, one of Bob's two ex-wives, but now she was off to Europe for three months, so Evan had moved in with his dad, which meant he was now sleeping down the hall from Syd, who, by the way, liked her new bedroom very much and had pointed out several times that it was twice the size of the one she had in my house.

We'd had a bigger house, once.

The idea of some horny teenage boy living under the same roof with Syd had pissed me off from the get-go. I was surprised Susanne was going along with it, but once you moved out of your own house and into someone else's, you lost a bit of leverage. What could she do? Make her boyfriend kick his own son out?

'Yeah, Evan,' Sydney said. 'He was just commenting, is all.'

'He shouldn't even be living there.'

'Jesus, Dad, do we have to get into this again?'

'A boy, a nineteen-year-old boy, unless he's your actual brother, shouldn't be living with you.'

I thought I saw her cheeks flush. 'It's not a big deal.'

'Your mother's cool with this? Bob and his boy telling you to be the next Cindy Crawford?'

'Cindy who?'

'Crawford,' I said. 'She was – never mind. Your mom's OK with this?'

'She's not having a shit fit like you,' Syd said, shooting me a look. 'And besides, Evan's helping her since the thing.'

The thing. Susanne's parasailing accident in Long Island Sound. Came down too fast, did something to her hip, twisted her knee out of shape. Bob, behind the wheel of his boat, dragged her a hundred yards before he knew something was wrong, the dumb fuck. Susanne didn't have to worry about parasailing accidents when she was with me. I didn't have a boat.

'You never said what you paid for the shades,' I said.

Sydney sighed. 'It wasn't that much.' She was looking at several unopened envelopes by the phone. 'You should really open your bills, Dad. They've been there like three days.'

'Don't you worry about the bills. I can pay the bills.'

'Mom says it's not that you don't have the money to pay them, you just aren't very organized, so then you're late—'

'The sunglasses. Where'd you get them?'

'Jesus, what's the deal about a pair of sunglasses?'

'I'm just curious, is all,' I said. 'Get them at the mall?'

'Yeah, I got them at the mall. Fifty per cent off.'

'Did you save your receipt? In case they break or something?'

Her eyes bore into me. 'Why don't you just ask me to show you the receipt?'

'Why would I do that?'

'Because you think I stole them.'

'I never said that.'

'It was two years ago, Dad. I don't believe you.' She pushed her eggs away, unfinished.

'You come down here in Versace sunglasses, you think I'm not going to ask questions?'

She got up and stomped back upstairs.

'Shit,' I said under my breath. Nicely played.

I had to finish getting ready to go to work myself, and heard her run down the stairs while I was in my bedroom. I caught her coming out of the kitchen with a bottled water as I came down to say goodbye to her as she headed out to the Civic.

'Being with you for the summer is going to suck if you're going to be like this all the time,' she said. 'And it's not my fault I'm living with Evan. It's not like he's raping me every five minutes.'

I winced. 'I know, it's just—'

'I gotta go,' she said, walking away and getting into her car. She had her eyes fixed on the road as she drove away, and didn't see me wave.

In the kitchen was the receipt for the sunglasses, right next to the eggshell character she'd flattened with her fist.

I got into my CR-V and headed to Riverside Honda. We were just this side of the bridge that crosses over into Stratford, where the Housatonic empties into the sound.

It was a slow morning, not enough people dropping in for my turn to come up in the rotation, but shortly after noon a retired couple in their late sixties dropped by to look at a base model four-door Accord.

They were hemming and hawing over price – we were seven hundred dollars apart. I excused myself, said I was going to take their latest offer to the sales manager, but instead went into Service and scarfed a chocolate donut from a box at the coffee stand, then went back and told them I could only save them another hundred, but we were going to have a custom pinstriper on site over the next couple of days, and if they took the deal, I could get the Accord custom-pinstriped for free. The guy's eyes lit up, and they went for it. Later, I got a ten-buck pinstriping kit from parts and attached it to the order.

In the afternoon, a man interested in replacing his decade-old Odyssey van with a new one wanted to know how much his trade was worth. You never answered that question without asking a few of your own.

'Are you the original owner?' I asked. He was. 'Have you maintained the car?' He said he'd done most of the recommended services. 'Has the vehicle ever been in an accident?'

'Oh yeah,' he volunteered. 'Three years ago I rear-ended a guy, they had to replace everything up front.'

I explained that an accident translated into a much lower trade-in value. His counter-argument was that all the parts in the front of the car were newer, so if anything, the car should be worth more. He wasn't happy with the number I gave him, and left.

Twice I called my ex-wife in Stratford where she worked at one of the car lots Bob owned, and twice I

left messages, both asking how thrilled she was with Bob's plan to immortalize our daughter on a bathroom calendar at the local Goodyear tire store.

After the second call, my head cleared some, and I realized this wasn't just about Sydney. It was about Susanne, about Bob, about how much better her life was with him, about how much I'd screwed things up.

I'd been selling cars since I was twenty, and I was good at it, but Susanne thought I was capable of more. You shouldn't be working for somebody else, she said. You should be your own man. You should have your own dealership. We could change our lives. Send Syd to the best schools. Make a better future for ourselves.

My dad had passed away when I was nineteen, and left my mother pretty well fixed. A few years later, when she died of a heart attack, I used the inheritance to show Susanne I could be the man she wanted me to be. I started up my own dealership.

And fucked the whole thing up.

I was never a big picture guy. Sales, working one-to-one, that was my thing. But when I had to run the whole show, I kept sneaking back onto the floor to deal with customers. I wasn't cut out to manage, so I let others make decisions for me. Bad ones, as it turned out. Let them steal from me, too.

Eventually, I lost it all.

And not just the business, not just our big house that overlooked the sound. I lost my family.

Susanne blamed me for taking my eye off the ball. I blamed her for pushing me into something I wasn't cut out for.

Syd, somehow, blamed herself. She figured that, if we loved her enough, we'd stay together no matter what.

The fact that we didn't had nothing to do with how much we loved Syd, but she wasn't buying it.

In Bob, Susanne found what was missing in me. Bob was always reaching for the next rung. Bob figured if he could sell cars, he could start up a dealership, and if he could start up one dealership, why not two, or three?

I never bought Susanne a Corvette when I was going out with her, like Bob did. At least there was some satisfaction when it blew a piston, and she ended up getting rid of it because she hated driving a stick.

On this particular day, I went home, somewhat reluctantly, at six. When you're on commission, you don't want to walk out of an open showroom. You know, the moment you leave, someone'll come in, checkbook in hand, asking for you. But you couldn't live there. You had to go home some time.

I'd been planning to make spaghetti, but figured, what the hell, I'd order pizza, just like Syd wanted. It'd be a kind of peace offering, a way to make up for the sunglasses thing.

By seven, she had not shown up, or called to let me know she'd be late.

Maybe someone had gone home sick, and she'd had to stay on the front desk for an extra shift. Ordinarily, if she wasn't going to make it home in time for dinner, she'd call. But I could see her skipping that courtesy today, after what had happened at breakfast.

Still, by eight, when I hadn't heard from her, I started to worry.

I was standing in the kitchen, watching CNN, getting updated on some earthquake in Asia but not really paying attention, wondering where the hell she was.

Sometimes she got together with Patty or one of her

other friends after work, went over to the Post Mall to eat in the food court.

I called her cell. It rang several times before going to message. 'Give me a call, sweetheart,' I said. 'I figured, we'd have pizza after all. Let me know what you want on it.'

I gave it another ten minutes before deciding to find a number for the hotel. I was about to make the call when the phone rang. I grabbed the receiver before I'd checked the ID. 'Hey,' I said. 'You in for pizza or what?'

'Just hold the anchovies.' It wasn't Syd. It was Susanne.

'Oh,' I said. 'Hey.'

'You've got your shorts in a knot.'

I took a breath. 'What I don't get is why you don't. Bob and Evan giving Syd the eyeball? Thinking she should model?'

'You've got it all wrong, Tim,' Susanne said. 'They were just being nice.'

'Did you know when you moved in there with Sydney that Bob was taking his son in? That OK with you?'

'They're like brother and sister,' she said.

'Give me a break. I remember being nineteen and—' The line beeped. 'Look, I gotta go. Later, OK?'

Susanne managed a 'Yeah' before hanging up. I went to the other line, said, 'Hello?'

'Mr Blake?' said a woman who was not my daughter.

'Yes?'

'Timothy Blake?'

'Yes?'

'I'm with Fairfield Windows and Doors and we're going to be in your area later this—'

I hung up. I found a number for the Just Inn Time, dialed it. I let it ring twenty times before hanging up.

I grabbed my jacket and keys, and drove across town to the hotel, pulled right up under the apron by the front door and went inside for the first time since Syd had started here a couple of weeks ago. Before heading in I scanned the lot for her Civic. I'd seen it the odd time I'd driven by since she'd started, but it wasn't there tonight. Maybe she'd parked out back.

The glass doors parted before me as I strode into the lobby. As I approached the desk I hoped I would see Syd, but there was a man there instead. A young guy, late twenties maybe, dirty-blond hair, his face cratered by the ravages of acne a decade earlier. 'May I help you?' he asked. His nametag read 'Owen'.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I was just looking for Syd?'

'I'm sorry. What's his last name?'

'It's a she. Sydney. She's my daughter.'

'Do you know what room she's staying in?'

'No, no,' I said, shaking my head. 'She works here. Right here on the desk, actually. I was expecting her home for dinner, just thought I'd swing by and see if she was going to be working a double or something.'

'I see,' said Owen.

'Her name's Sydney Blake,' I said. 'You must know her.'

Owen shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

'Are you new here?' I asked.

'No. Well, yeah.' He grinned. 'Six months. I guess that's new.'

'Sydney Blake,' I repeated. 'She's been working here two weeks. Seventeen, blond hair.'

Owen shook his head.

'Maybe they've got her working someplace else this week,' I suggested. 'Do you have an employee roster or a schedule or something that would tell you where I could find her? Or maybe I could just leave a message?'

'Could you wait just a moment?' Owen asked. 'I'll get the duty manager.'

Owen slipped through a door behind the front desk, returning a moment later with a lean, good-looking dark-haired man in his early forties. His nametag read 'Carter', and when he spoke I pegged him as from the South, although what state I couldn't guess.

'Can I help you?' he asked.

'I'm looking for my daughter,' I said. 'She works here.'

'What's her name?'

'Sydney Blake,' I said. 'Syd.'

'Sydney Blake?' he said. 'Don't recognize that name, at all.'

I shook my head. 'She's only been here a couple of weeks. She's just working here for the summer.'

Carter was shaking his head, too. 'I'm sorry.'

I felt my heart beating more quickly. 'Check your employee list,' I urged him.

'I don't need to be checking any list,' he said. 'I know who works here and who doesn't, and there's nobody here by that handle.'

'Hang on,' I said. I dug out my wallet, fished around in a crevice behind my credit cards, and found a three-year-old high school photo of Sydney. I handed it across the desk.

'It's not real recent,' I said. 'But that's her.'

They took turns studying the picture. Owen's eyebrows popped up briefly, impressed, I guessed, by Sydney's good looks. Carter handed it back to me.

'I'm real sorry, Mister—'

'Blake. Tim Blake.'

'She might be working at the Howard Johnson's up the road a bit.' He tipped his head to the right.

'No,' I said. 'This is where she said she works.' My mind was racing. 'Is there a day manager?'

'That'd be Veronica.'

'Call her. Call Veronica.'

With great reluctance, Carter placed the call, apologized to the woman on the other end of the line who answered, and handed me the receiver.

I explained my situation to Veronica.

'Maybe she told you the wrong hotel,' Veronica said, echoing Carter.

'No,' I said firmly.

Veronica asked for my number and promised to call me if she heard anything. And then she hung up.

On the way home, I went through two red lights and nearly hit a guy in a Toyota Yaris. I had my cell in my hand, phoning Syd's cell and then home, then her cell again.

When I got back to the house, it was empty.

Syd did not come home that night.

Or the next night.

Or the night after that.