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**Opening Extract from...**

# Caught

Written by Harlan Coben

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# Prologue

I knew opening that red door would destroy my life.

Yes, that sounds melodramatic and full of foreboding and I'm not big on either, and true, there was nothing menacing about the red door. In fact, the door was beyond ordinary, wood and four-paneled, the kind of door you see standing guard in front of three out of every four suburban homes, with faded paint and a knocker at chest level no one ever used and a faux brass knob.

But as I walked toward it, a distant streetlight barely illuminating my way, the dark opening yawning like a mouth ready to gobble me whole, the feeling of doom was unshakable. Each step forward took great effort, as if I were walking not along a somewhat crackled walk but through still-wet cement. My body displayed all the classic symptoms of impending menace: Chill down my spine? Check. Hairs standing up on my arms? Yep. Prickle at the base of the neck? Present. Tingle in the scalp? Right there.

The house was dark, not a single light on. Chynna warned me that would be the case. The dwelling somehow seemed a little too cookie-cutter, a little too nondescript. That bothered me for some reason. This house was also isolated at the tippy end of the cul-de-sac, hunkering down in the darkness as though fending off intruders.

I didn't like it.

I didn't like anything about this, but this is what I do. When Chynna called I had just finished coaching the inner-city fourth-grade Newark Biddy Basketball team. My team, all kids who, like me, were products of foster care (we call ourselves the NoRents, which is short for No Parents – gallows humor), had managed to blow a six-point lead with two minutes left. On the court, as in life, the NoRents aren't great under pressure.

Chynna called as I was gathering my young hoopsters for my postgame pep talk, which usually consisted of giving my charges some life-altering insight like 'Good effort,' 'We'll get them next time,' or 'Don't forget we have a game next Thursday,' always ending with 'Hands in' and then we yell, 'Defense,' choosing to chant that word, I suppose, because we play none.

'Dan?'

'Who is this?'

'It's Chynna. Please come.'

Her voice trembled, so I dismissed my team, jumped in my car, and now I was here. I hadn't even had time to shower. The smell of gym sweat mixed now with the smell of fear sweat. I slowed my pace.

What was wrong with me?

I probably should have showered, for one thing. I'm not good without a shower. Never have been. But Chynna had been adamant. Now, she had begged. Before anyone got home. So here I was, my gray T-shirt darkened with perspiration and clinging to my chest, heading to that door.

Like most youngsters I work with, Chynna was seriously troubled, and maybe that was what was setting off the warning bells. I hadn't liked her voice on the phone, hadn't really warmed to this whole setup. Taking

a deep breath, I glanced behind me. In the distance, I could see some signs of life on this suburban night – house lights, a flickering television or maybe computer monitor, an open garage door – but in this cul-de-sac, there was nothing, not a sound or movement, just a hush in the dark.

My cell phone vibrated, nearly making me jump out of my skin. I figured that it was Chynna, but no, it was Jenna, my ex-wife. I hit answer and said, 'Hey.'

'Can I ask a favor?' she asked.

'I'm a little busy right now.'

'I just need someone to babysit tomorrow night. You can bring Shelly if you want.'

'Shelly and I are, uh, having trouble,' I said.

'Again? But she's great for you.'

'I have trouble holding on to great women.'

'Don't I know it.'

Jenna, my lovely ex, has been remarried for eight years. Her new husband is a well-respected surgeon named Noel Wheeler. Noel does volunteer work for me at the teen center. I like Noel and he likes me. He has a daughter by a previous marriage, and he and Jenna have a six-year-old girl named Kari. I'm Kari's godfather, and both kids call me Uncle Dan. I'm the family go-to babysitter.

I know this all sounds very civilized and Pollyanna, and I suppose it is. In my case, it could be simply a matter of necessity. I have no one else – no parents, no siblings – ergo, the closest thing I have to family is my ex-wife. The kids I work with, the ones I advocate for and try to help and defend, are my life, and in the end I'm not sure I do the slightest bit of good.

Jenna said, 'Earth to Dan?'

'I'll be there,' I said to her.

'Six thirty. You're the best.'

Jenna made a smooching noise into the mouthpiece and hung up. I looked at the phone for a moment, remembered our own wedding day. It was a mistake for me to get married. It is a mistake for me to get too close to people, and yet I can't help it. Someone cue the violins so I can wax philosophical about how it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all. I don't think that applies to me. It is in humans' DNA to repeat the same mistakes, even after we know better. So here I am, the poor orphan who scraped his way up to the top of his class at an elite Ivy League school but never really scraped off who he was. Corny, but I want someone in my life. Alas, that is not my destiny. I am a loner who isn't meant to be alone.

'*We are evolution's garbage, Dan. . . .*'

My favorite foster 'dad' taught me that. He was a college professor who loved to get into philosophical debates.

*'Think about it, Dan. Throughout mankind, the strongest and brightest did what? They fought in wars. That only stopped this past century. Before that, we sent our absolute best to fight on the front lines. So who stayed home and reproduced while our finest died on distant battlefields? The lame, the sick, the weak, the crooked, the cowardly – in short, the least of us. That's what we are the genetic by-product of, Dan – millenniums of weeding out the premium and keeping the flotsam. That's why we are all garbage – the dung from centuries of bad breeding.'*

I forwent the knocker and rapped on the door lightly with my knuckles. The door creaked open a crack. I hadn't realized that it was ajar.

I didn't like that either. A lot I didn't like here.

As a kid, I watched a lot of horror movies, which was strange because I hated them. I hated things jumping out at me. And I really couldn't stand movie gore. But I would still watch them and revel in the predictably moronic behavior of the heroines, and right now those scenes were replaying in my head, the ones where said moronic heroine knocks on a door and it opens a little and you scream, 'Run, you scantily clad bimbo!' and she wouldn't and you couldn't understand it and two minutes later, the killer would be scooping out her skull and munching on her brain.

I should go right now.

In fact, I will. But then I flashed back to Chynna's call, to the words she'd said, the trembling in her voice. I sighed, leaned my face toward the opening, peered into the foyer.

Darkness.

Enough with the cloak and dagger.

'Chynna?'

My voice echoed. I expected silence. That would be the next step, right? No reply. I slipped the door open a little, took a tentative step forward. . . .

'Dan? I'm in the back. Come in.'

The voice was muffled, distant. Again I didn't like this, but there was no way I was backing out now. Backing out had cost me too much throughout my life. My hesitation was gone. I knew what had to be done now.

I opened the door, stepped inside, and closed the door behind me.

Others in my position would have brought a gun or some kind of weapon. I had thought about it. But that just doesn't work for me. No time to worry about that now. No one was home. Chynna had told me that. And

if they were, well, I would handle that when the moment came.

'Chynna?'

'Go to the den, I'll be there in a second.'

The voice sounded . . . off. I saw a light at the end of the hall and moved toward it. There was a noise now. I stopped and listened. Sounded like water running. A shower maybe.

'Chynna?'

'Just changing. Out in a second.'

I moved into the low-lit den. I saw one of those dimmer-switch knobs and debated turning it up, but in the end I chose to leave it alone. My eyes adjusted pretty quickly. The room had cheesy wood paneling that looked as if it were made from something far closer to vinyl than anything in the timber family. There were two portraits of sad clowns with huge flowers on their lapels, the kind of painting you might pick up at a particularly tacky motel's garage sale. There was a giant open bottle of no-name vodka on the bar.

I thought I heard somebody whisper.

'Chynna?' I called out.

No answer. I stood, listened for more whispering. Nothing.

I started toward the back, toward where I heard the shower running.

'I'll be right out,' I heard the voice say. I pulled up, felt a chill. Because now I was closer to the voice. I could hear it better. And here was the thing I found particularly strange about it:

It didn't sound at all like Chynna.

Three things tugged at me. One, panic. This wasn't Chynna. Get out of the house. Two, curiosity. If it wasn't Chynna, who the hell was it and what was going on?

Three, panic again. It had been Chynna on the phone – so what had happened to her?

I couldn't just run out now.

I took one step toward where I'd come in, and that was when it all happened. A spotlight snapped on in my face, blinding me. I stumbled back, hand coming up to my face.

'Dan Mercer?'

I blinked. Female voice. Professional. Deep tone. Sounded oddly familiar.

'Who's there?'

Suddenly there were other people in the room. A man with a camera. Another with what looked like a boom mike. And the female with the familiar voice, a stunning woman with chestnut brown hair and a business suit.

'Wendy Tynes, *NTC News*. Why are you here, Dan?'

I opened my mouth, nothing came out. I recognized the woman from that TV newsmagazine . . .

'Why have you been conversing online in a sexual manner with a thirteen-year-old girl, Dan? We have your communications with her.'

. . . the one that sets up and catches pedophiles on camera for all the world to see.

'Are you here to have sex with a thirteen-year-old girl?'

The truth of what was going on there hit me, freezing my bones. Other people flooded the room. Producers maybe. Another cameraman. Two cops. The cameras came in closer. The lights got brighter. Beads of sweat popped up on my brow. I started to stammer, started to deny.

But it was over.

Two days later, the show aired. The world saw.

And the life of Dan Mercer, just as I somehow knew it would be when I approached that door, was destroyed.

When Marcia McWaid first saw her daughter's empty bed, panic did not set in. That would come later.

She had woken up at six AM, early for Saturday morning, feeling pretty terrific. Ted, her husband of twenty years, slept in the bed next to her. He lay on his stomach, his arm around her waist. Ted liked to sleep with a shirt on and no pants. None. Nude from the waist down. 'Gives my man down there room to roam,' he would say with a smirk. And Marcia, imitating her daughters' teenage singsong tone, would say, 'T-M-I' – Too Much Information.

Marcia slipped out of his grip and padded down to the kitchen. She made herself a cup of coffee with the new Keurig pod machine. Ted loved gadgets – boys and their toys – but this one actually got some use. You take the pod, you stick it in the machine – presto, coffee. No video screens, no touch pad, no wireless connectivity. Marcia loved it.

They'd recently finished an addition on the house – one extra bedroom, one bathroom, the kitchen knocked out a bit with a glassed-in nook. The kitchen nook offered oodles of morning sun and had thus become Marcia's favorite spot in the house. She took her coffee and the newspaper and set herself on the window seat, folding her feet beneath her.

A small slice of heaven.

She let herself read the paper and sip her coffee. In a few minutes she would have to check the schedule. Ryan, her third grader, had the early Hoops Basketball game at eight AM. Ted coached. His team was winless for the second straight season.

'Why do your teams never win?' Marcia had asked him.

'I draft the kids based on two criteria.'

'That being?'

'How nice the father – and how hot the mom.'

She had slapped at him playfully, and maybe Marcia would have been somewhat concerned if she hadn't seen the moms on the sideline and knew, for certain, that he had to be joking. Ted was actually a great coach, not in terms of strategy but in terms of handling the boys. They all loved him and his lack of competitiveness so that even the untalented players, the ones who were usually discouraged and quit during the season, showed up every week. Ted even took the Bon Jovi song and turned it around: 'You give losing a good name.' The kids would laugh and cheer every basket, and when you're in third grade that's how it should be.

Marcia's fourteen-year-old daughter, Patricia, had rehearsal for the freshman play, an abridged version of the musical *Les Misérables*. She had several small parts, but that didn't seem to affect the workload. And her oldest child, Haley, the high school senior, was running a 'captain's practice' for the girls' lacrosse team. Captain's practices were unofficial, a way to sneak in early practices under the guidelines issued by high school sports. In short, no coaches, nothing official, just a casual gathering, a glorified pickup game if you will, run by the captains.

Like most suburban parents, Marcia had a love–hate relationship with sports. She knew the relative long-term irrelevancy and yet still managed to get caught up in it.

A half hour of peace to start the day. That was all she needed.

She finished the first cup, pod-made herself a second,

picked up the 'Styles' section of the paper. The house remained silent. She padded upstairs and looked over her charges. Ryan slept on his side, his face conveniently facing the door so that his mother could notice the echo of his father.

Patricia's room was next. She too was still sleeping.

'Honey?'

Patricia stirred, might have made a noise. Her room, like Ryan's, looked as if someone had strategically placed sticks of dynamite in the drawers, blowing them open; some clothes sprawled dead on the floor, others lay wounded midway, clinging to the armoire like the fallen on a barricade before the French Revolution.

'Patricia? You have rehearsal in an hour.'

'I'm up,' she groaned in a voice that indicated she was anything but. Marcia moved to the next room, Haley's, and took a quick peek.

The bed was empty.

It was also made, but that was no surprise. Unlike her siblings' abodes, this one was neat, clean, anally organized. It could be a showroom in a furniture store. There were no clothes on this floor, every drawer fully closed. The trophies – and there were many – were perfectly aligned on four shelves. Ted had put in the fourth shelf just recently, after Haley's team had won the holiday tournament in Franklin Lakes. Haley had painstakingly divided up the trophies among the four shelves, not wanting the new one to have only one. Marcia was not sure why exactly. Part of it was because Haley didn't want it to look like she was just waiting for more to come, but more of it was her general abhorrence of disorganization. She kept each trophy equidistant from the others, moving them closer together as more came in, three inches separating them, then two, then one. Haley

was about balance. She was the good girl, and while that was a wonderful thing – a girl who was ambitious, did her homework without being asked, never wanted others to think badly of her, was ridiculously competitive – there was a tightly wound aspect, a quasi-OCD quality, that worried Marcia.

Marcia wondered what time Haley had gotten home. Haley didn't have a curfew anymore because there had simply never been a need. She was responsible and a senior and never took advantage. Marcia had been tired and gone up to sleep at ten. Ted, in his constant state of 'randy,' soon followed her.

Marcia was about to move on, let it go, when something, she couldn't say what, made her decide to throw in a load of laundry. She started toward Haley's bathroom. The younger siblings, Ryan and Patricia, believed that 'hamper' was a euphemism for 'floor' or really 'anyplace but the hamper,' but Haley, of course, dutifully, religiously, and nightly put the clothes she'd worn that day into the hamper. And that was when Marcia started to feel a small rock form in her chest.

There were no clothes in the hamper.

The rock in her chest grew when Marcia checked Haley's toothbrush, then the sink and shower.

All bone-dry.

The rock grew when she called out to Ted, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. It grew when they drove to captain's practice and found out that Haley had never showed. It grew when she called Haley's friends while Ted sent out an e-mail blast – and no one knew where Haley was. It grew when they called the local police, who, despite Marcia's and Ted's protestations, believed that Haley was a runaway, a kid blowing off some steam. It grew when, forty-eight hours later, the FBI was brought

in. It grew when there was still no sign of Haley after a week.

It was as if the earth had swallowed her whole.

A month passed. Nothing. Then two. Still no word. And then finally, during the third month, word came – and the rock that had grown in Marcia's chest, the one that wouldn't let her breathe and kept her up nights, stopped growing.