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Opening Extract from...

Stay Close

Written by Harlan Coben

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HARLAN COBEN

STAY CLOSE



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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 he 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 prequel 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 it 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 neigh-

bors 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 at 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.