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Seconds Away

Written by Harlan Coben

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HARLAN COBEN

SECONDS AWAY

A Mickey Bolitar Novel



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CHAPTER 1

There are moments in your life that change everything.

I don't mean little things like, say, what cereal turns out to be your favorite or whether you get into any AP classes or what girl you fall in love with or where you wind up living for the next twenty years. I mean total change. One second your world is one thing, the next—snap!—it is completely altered. All the rules, all the things you accepted about reality, are turned around.

Like, up becomes down. Left becomes right.

Death becomes life.

I stared at the photograph, realizing that we are always just seconds away from life-snapping change. What I was seeing with my own two eyes made no sense, so I blinked a few times and looked again—as if I expected the image to change. It didn't.

The picture was an old black-and-white. Doing a little quick math in my head, I realized that it had to have been taken nearly seventy years ago.

"This can't be," I said.

I wasn't talking to myself, just in case you think I'm nuts. (Which you will think soon enough.) I was talking to the Bat Lady. She stood a few feet away from me in her white gown and said nothing. Her long gray hair looked as though it were moving even when it was standing still. Her skin was wrinkled and crinkly, like old paper someone had folded and unfolded too many times.

Even if you don't know *this* Bat Lady, you know *a* Bat Lady. She's the creepy old lady who lives in the creepy old house down the block. Every town has one. You hear tales in the school yard about all the horrible things she'll do to you if she ever catches you. As a little kid, you stay far away. As a bigger kid—in my case, a sophomore in high school—well, you still stay far away because, even though you know it's nonsense and you're too old for that kind of thing, the house still scares you just enough.

Yet here I was, in her inner lair, staring at a photograph that I knew couldn't be what I thought it was.

"Who is this guy?" I asked her.

Her voice creaked like the old floorboards beneath our feet. "The Butcher of Lodz," she whispered.

The man in the picture wore a Waffen-SS uniform from World War II. He was, in short, a sadistic Nazi who, according

to the Bat Lady, murdered many, including her own father.

"And this picture was taken when?" I asked.

The Bat Lady seemed puzzled by the question. "I'm not sure. Probably around 1942 or 1943."

I looked at the man in the photograph again. My head spun. Nothing made sense. I tried to ground myself in what I knew for certain: My name, I knew, was Mickey Bolitar. Good start. I'm the son of Brad (deceased) and Kitty (in rehab) Bolitar, and now I'm the ward of my uncle Myron Bolitar (whom I tolerate). I go to Kasselton High School, the new kid trying to fit in, and based on this photograph, I am either delusional or completely insane.

"What's wrong, Mickey?" Bat Lady asked me.

"What's wrong?" I repeated. "You're kidding, right?"

"I don't understand."

"This"—I pointed to the photograph—"is the Butcher of Lodz?"

"Yes."

"And you think he died at the end of World War Two?"

"That's what I was told," she said. "Mickey? Do you know something?"

I flashed back to the first time I had seen the Bat Lady. I had been walking to my new school when she suddenly appeared in the doorway of this decrepit house. I almost screamed out loud. She raised a ghostly hand toward me and said five words that struck me in the chest like a body blow:

Mickey—I had no idea how she knew my name—*your father isn't dead*.

That was what had started me down this crazy road that now led to . . . to this picture.

I looked up from the photograph. "Why did you tell me that?"

"Tell you what?"

"That my father isn't dead. Why did you say that to me?"

She was silent.

"Because I was there," I said, my voice trembling. "I saw him die with my own two eyes. Why would you say something like that?"

"Tell me," she said in that creaky old voice. "Tell me what you remember."

"Are you for real?"

The old woman silently rolled up her sleeve and showed me the tattoo that marked her as a survivor of the Auschwitz death camp.

"I told you how my father died," she said. "Now it's your turn. Tell me what happened."

A chill ran down my spine. I looked around the dark room. A vinyl record spun on an old turntable, scratching out a song called "Time Stands Still" by HorsePower. My mom had been a HorsePower fan. She had even partied with the group back in her celebrity days, before I came along and washed all her dreams away. On the Bat Lady's mantel was that cursed picture, the one of the five hippies from the

sixties wearing tie-dyed T-shirts with that butterfly on the chest.

"Tell me," Bat Lady said again.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. It was so hard to go back there—and yet it seemed as though I did it every night.

"We were driving to San Diego, just my dad and me. The radio was on. We were laughing." That's what I remember best from, well, before. The way he laughed.

"Okay," she said. "Then what happened?"

"An SUV crossed the divider and crashed head on into us. Boom, like that." I stopped for a moment. I could almost feel it, the horrible jarring, the strain against the seat belt, the whiplash into sudden darkness. "The car flipped over. When I woke up, I was trapped. Some firefighters were trying to free me."

"And your father?"

I looked at her. "You knew my father, didn't you? My uncle told me that my father visited this house when he was a kid."

She ignored the question. "Your father," she repeated. "What happened to him in the accident?"

"You know what happened."

"Tell me."

I could see him in my mind's eye. "Dad was lying on his back. His eyes were closed. Blood was pooling around his head."

My heart began to tumble.

Bat Lady reached a bony hand toward me. "It's okay."

"No," I snapped, anger entering my voice now, "it's not okay. It isn't even close to okay. Because, see, there was a paramedic working on my dad. He had sandy hair and green eyes, and eventually this paramedic looked up at me, and when our eyes met, he shook his head. Just once. And I knew. His expression said it all. It was over. My dad was dead. The last thing I saw was my father on a gurney, and that paramedic with the sandy-blond hair and green eyes wheeling him away."

Bat Lady said nothing.

"And this"—I held up the old black-and-white photograph, my voice choking, the tears coming faster now—"this isn't a photograph of some old Nazi. It's a photograph of that paramedic."

Bat Lady's face, already the whitest shade of pale, seemed to grow even paler. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I. Your Butcher of Lodz? He was the paramedic who wheeled away my dad."

Her response surprised me. "I'm tired, Mickey. You must go now."

"You're kidding me, right? Who is this guy? Why did he take my father?"

Her hand fluttered up toward her mouth. "Sometimes, we want something to be so badly, we make it so. Do you understand?"

"I don't *want* this to be a picture of the paramedic. It just is."

She shook her head, her waist-length hair flying in the breeze. "Memory is so unreliable. You will learn that as you get older."

"Are you saying I'm wrong?"

"If the Butcher had somehow lived, he'd be nearly ninety years old. That's old for a paramedic."

"Whoa, I didn't say he was ninety. He's the same age as this guy."

Bat Lady just looked at me as though the crazy shoe was on the other foot now. I realized how it all sounded now—like the ravings of a lunatic. The song ended and another began. She took a step back, her ripped white gown dragging across the old wood floor. Her gaze hardened on me.

"What?" I said.

"It is time for you to leave. And you may not see me for a while."

"I don't get it."

"You've made a mistake," she said to me.

Tears started forming in the corners of my eyes. "You think I could ever forget that face? The way he looked at me before he wheeled away my father?"

Her voice had steel in it now. "Get out, Mickey."

"I'm not going—"

"Get out!"

CHAPTER 2

An hour later I sat in my backyard—or really, my uncle Myron's backyard—and filled in Ema. As always, Ema was dressed entirely in a shade of black that matched her hair. She wore black eye makeup. There was a silver skull-and-crossbones ring on her middle finger and more earrings than I could count.

Ema's natural disposition leaned toward the sullen side, but right now she stared at me as though I had suddenly sprouted a third arm.

"You just left?" Ema said.

"What was I supposed to do?" I countered. "Beat the information out of an old woman?"

"I don't know. But how could you just leave?"

"She went upstairs. What was I going to do, follow her?

Suppose—I don't know—suppose she started undressing or something."

"Ugh," Ema said, "that's just gross."

"See?"

Ema wasn't even fifteen but she sported a fair amount of tattoos. She was maybe five-four and what most in our society would call on the large side. When we met only a few weeks ago, she sat by herself for lunch at the outcast table. She claimed to prefer it.

Ema stared at the old black-and-white photograph. "Mickey?"

"Yeah?"

"You can't really believe that this is the same guy."

"I know it sounds crazy, but . . ." I stopped.

Ema had this way about her. Her outward shell, the one she showed pretty much the entire world, was defensive and surly. Ema was not what one would call conventionally beautiful, but when she looked at me like she did now with her big brown eyes, with all the concentration and caring emanating from her face, there was something almost celestial about her.

"Go on," she said.

"The accident," I began. "It was the worst moment of my life, times ten. My father . . ." The memories flooded me. I was an only child. The three of us lived overseas for pretty much my entire life, blissfully trekking through the most obscure

corners of the world. I thought that we were carefree nomads, international bohemians who worked for various charities. I didn't realize how much more there was to it.

"It's okay," Ema said.

But it was hard to reveal more. When you travel that much, you don't get to make many (or really, any) friends. It was one of the reasons I wanted so much to settle down, why my father ultimately quit his job and moved us to California and signed me up for a real school and, well, died. So you see, what happened after we returned to the United States—my father's death, my mother's downward spiral—was my fault. No matter how you wanted to slice it, it was on me.

"If you don't want to tell me . . . ," Ema began.

"No, I do."

Again she gave me the big eyes, the ones that seemed so focused, so understanding and kind.

"The accident," I said. "It took away everything. It killed my dad. It shattered my mom."

I didn't bother going into what it had done to me—how I knew that I would never get over it. That wasn't relevant here. I was trying to figure out how to transition this back to the paramedic and the man in the photograph.

My words came slower now. "When you experience something like that, when something happens so suddenly and destroys everything in your life . . . you remember everything about it. Every single detail. Does that make sense?"

"Sure."

"So that paramedic? He was the first one to let me know that my dad was gone. You don't forget what that guy looks like. You just don't."

We sat there another minute in silence. I looked at the basketball rim. Uncle Myron had gotten a new one when he knew that I'd be living with him. We both found solace in it, in basketball, in the slow dribble, in the fadeaway jumper, in the way the ball goes swish through the hoop. Basketball is the one thing I have in common with the uncle I'm forced to live with and I can't quite forgive.

I can't forgive him. And, I guess, I can't forgive me either.

Maybe that was something else Uncle Myron and I had in common.

"Don't bite my head off, okay?" Ema said.

"Okay."

"I understand everything you said. You know that. And, well, this past week has been absolutely loony. I know that too. But can we just look at this rationally for a second?"

"No," I said.

"Huh?"

"I know how this looks rationally. It looks like I should be locked in a padded room."

Ema smiled. "Well, yeah, there's that. But just so we cover all the bases, let's go through it step by step, okay? Just to make sure I have this straight."

I nodded grudgingly.

"One"—she held up a finger with pinot noir nail polish—"you're walking to school last week and you go past the creepy Bat Lady's house and even though you don't know her, have never seen her before, she tells you that your father is alive."

"Right."

"Spooky, right? I mean, how did she even know who you were or that your father was killed—and what would possess her to say such a thing?"

"I have no idea," I said.

"Neither do I. So let's move to two." Ema held up a second finger, the one with the skull ring and canary-yellow polish. "A week later, after we go through hell and back, Bat Lady tells you that her real name is Lizzy Sobek, the famous Holocaust heroine no one has seen since the end of World War Two. Then she hands you a photograph of this old Nazi who killed her father. And you think it's the same guy who took your dad away on a stretcher." Ema spread her hands. "That about sum it up?"

"Pretty much."

"Okay, good, we're getting somewhere now."

"We are?"

She shushed me with a hand gesture. "Let's skip for a moment the fact that somehow the guy hasn't aged a day in seventy years."

"Okay."

"Here's the other thing: You always describe the paramedic as having sandy-blond hair and green eyes."

"Right."

"That's what you remember best about him, right? The green eyes. I think you said they had yellow circles around the pupils or something."

"Right, so?"

"But, Mickey?" Ema tilted her head. Her voice was gentler now. "This photograph is in black and white."

I said nothing.

"You can't see any colors. How could you tell, for example, that his eyes are green? You can't, can you?"

"I guess not," I heard myself say.

"So let's put it plainly," Ema said. "What scenario is more likely? That the Butcher of Lodz has a passing resemblance to a paramedic and you imagined more—or that a ninety-year-old Nazi is now a young paramedic working in California?"

She had a point, of course. I knew that I wasn't thinking straight. In the past week I'd been beaten up and nearly killed. I had seen a man shot in the head, and I was forced to stand by helplessly while Ema had come within seconds of having her throat slashed.

And that wasn't even mentioning the really stunning part.

Ema stood, brushed herself off, and started to walk away. "Time for me to go."

"Where?"

"I'll see you tomorrow."

She did this all the time—just disappeared like this. "Let me walk you," I said.

Ema put her hands on her hips and frowned at me.

"It's getting late. It might not be safe."

"You're kidding me, right? What am I, four years old?"

But that wasn't it. For some reason, Ema wouldn't show me where she lived. She always just vanished into the woods. We had quickly become close, yes, maybe the closest friends either of us had ever had, but we both still had our secrets.

Ema stopped when she reached the end of the yard. "Mickey?"

"What?"

"About the photograph."

"Yes?"

She took her time before she said, "I don't think you're crazy."

I waited for her to say more. She didn't.

"So what then?" I asked. "If I'm not crazy, what am I? Falsely hopeful?"

Ema considered that. "Probably. But there is another side to this whole thing."

"What's that?"

"Maybe I'm crazy too," she said, "but I believe you."

I stood and walked toward her. I'm six-four, so I towered over her. We made, I'm sure, an odd pair.

She looked up at me and said, "I don't know how or why,

and, yeah, I know all the arguments against it. But I believe you."

I was so grateful, I wanted to cry.

"The question is, what are we going to do about it?" Ema asked.

I arched an eyebrow. "We?"

"Sure."

"Not this time, Ema. I've put you in enough danger."

She frowned again. "Could you be more patronizing?"

"I have to handle this on my own."

"No, Mickey, you don't. Whatever this is, whatever is going on here with you and the Bat Lady, I'm part of it."

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I settled for, "Let's sleep on it and talk in the morning, okay?"

She turned and started back through the yard. "You know what's funny?"

"What?"

"This all started with a crazy old lady telling you that your father was still alive. But now, well, I'm not so sure she's crazy."

Ema disappeared into the night. I picked up the basketball, lost in the—and, yes, I know how this will sound—Zen-like quality of shooting. After all that had happened, I longed for a little peace and quiet.

But I wouldn't get it.

I thought that it was bad then, but soon I would learn just how bad it could get.