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Opening Extract from...

Never Saw it Coming

Written by Linwood Barclay

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Never Saw it Coming

LINWOOD BARCLAY



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ONE

"This is ridiculous," Marcia Taggart said. "You're telling me this woman here, just by holding something of Justin's, she's going to be able to figure out where he is? Are you kidding me? She's going to forge some kind of some psychic *link* with him by fondling one of his childhood action figures or wrapping her arms around his pillow? What kind of fool do you take me for?"

"Marcia, for the love of God," said her husband, Dwayne. "If you're not going to call the police, you need to do *something*. For all you know, your boy's in a ditch somewhere. We have to find him."

"You know as well as I do that's probably *exactly* what's happened," Marcia snapped at him. "He's gotten drunk, or high, or he's shacked up with some slut somewhere, or most likely all of the above. If I go running to the police every time he does something like that, we'll need a bigger driveway for all the patrol cars that'll be sitting here all the time."

Keisha Ceylon sat and listened, and watched. Let them have their argument. She could wait.

Dwayne said, "It's been three days. The boy's never been gone this long before."

"That's the problem," Marcia said, pointing an accusing finger at her husband. "You think of him as a boy. He's not a *boy* any more. He's twenty-two and it's time he learned to stand on his own two feet, not waiting around for handouts from his mother. Why do you think I've cut him off? So he'll learn to be responsible, that's why."

Quietly, Dwayne said to her, "I'm not saying you're wrong about any of this. I know what he's put you through. I know it's been hard, raising him on your own after Oscar passed away. I know Justin needs to get his act together. He's a scheming little pain in the ass."

Marcia shot him a look that said, *I can call him that, but you're not his father, so watch it.*

"Sorry," he said, receiving her unspoken message loud and clear. "But I'm not saying anything you haven't said yourself. He can be a handful. But Marcia, just because he's irresponsible doesn't mean he couldn't be in some real trouble." He pointed to the window. A light snow was falling. "It's freezing out there. Suppose you're right. Suppose he did get drunk, or high, and ended up passing out in a snow bank. He could have frozen to death out there. Is that what you want for your own—"

"Of course not!" she shouted. Her lower lip quivered, her eyes glistened.

Here we go, Keisha thought.

"Oh my God," Marcia Taggart said, putting her hands over her face, walking over to the couch and sitting down. She kept her face covered, not wanting her husband, or Keisha, to see her lose control. She plucked a tissue from the box sitting on the coffee table and quickly dabbed her eyes, blew her nose, then sat up very straight. Composed now. Positively regal.

"Well," she said. "So."

Dwayne walked around behind the couch, standing at his wife's back, and rested his hands uneasily on her shoulders. Like he was trying to be comforting, but they were too cold to the touch.

"Even if I accept what you're saying," she said, turning and talking to the hand on her left shoulder to indicate she meant these words for her husband and not their visitor, "why on earth would we turn to this woman for help?"

Still talking like she wasn't there. Keisha knew the type. Before she got into this line of work, when she was cleaning houses for a living—something she still did when money ran short—she'd had clients who treated her like she was a piece of furniture. They'd leave her notes about what they wanted done—"dust TOPS of ceiling fans, wipe stainless-steel sinks dry"—even though she was standing there and they could have told her to her face.

"You won't let me call the police," Dwayne reminded Marcia.

"We've been through this," she snapped. "I just—you know what he's like, what the boy is capable of." She sighed. "Suppose he's fine, but the reason we haven't heard from him is, I don't know, maybe he stole someone's car. Or shoplifted again. Sending the police out to look for him means they'll probably end up charging him with something once they find him. Is that what you want?"

It was Dwayne's turn to sigh. He nodded with false sympathy. "We've called all his friends, we've been to all the places we thought he might be. We're running out of options."

"But *her*?" Marcia tipped her head toward Keisha. "Wouldn't we at least be better off with a private detective?"

Dwayne came around the couch and sat down next to her.

"We've been through that, too, Marcia. When I suggested hiring a private eye, you just about bit my head off, because they ask lots of questions like the police would. That's how they work. They have to find the facts, they have to dig them up, they have to talk to lots of people, and that's how everyone gets to know your business, Marcia, and I know how you want to protect Justin, to be discreet about his . . . errors in judgment. But Ms Ceylon here, she doesn't work that way. She *senses* things. She might be able to find out where Justin is without having to stir things up, without having to talk to anyone." He looked at Keisha. "Isn't that right?"

She nodded. "That is the way I work." It was the first time she'd spoken in twenty minutes.

Marcia Taggart shook her head. "But honestly, Dwayne, the woman—really, every New Age psychobabble thing that comes along, you buy into it. This woman—"

"My name," Keisha said, interrupting for the first time, "is Keisha. Keisha Ceylon. I usually answer to Keisha, but if you'd like to keep referring to me as 'this woman', then I suppose that's your prerogative."

Marcia turned her eyes on her. "I don't believe you can do what you claim to do."

"You would be in the majority," Keisha agreed.

"It's utter nonsense," Marcia said.

"Well, then," Keisha said, standing, "I suppose I should be on my way." She offered up her most sincere smile. "I wish you every success in finding your son."

As she started for the door, Dwayne stood in her path. "Now wait, hang on just a second. Marcia, the woman—Ms Ceylon—went to all the trouble of coming here. I think the least we could do is hear her out."

Marcia snorted. "At what cost?"

Keisha turned to look at the woman, didn't hesitate. "My fee is five thousand dollars." She managed to say it without flinching. It was more than her usual rate, but from what she'd been told, the Taggarts could afford it.

Marcia threw her hands into the air. "Well, there you go, Dwayne. I think we know exactly where this woman's coming from."

"But *only* if I find your son," Keisha added. "If I'm unable to lead you to him, then you pay me absolutely nothing."

That made the room go quiet for several seconds.

"Well, that seems more than fair to me," Dwayne said. "Doesn't that seem fair to you, honey? I mean, come on. Even if you thought this woman was some kind of fraud, how can you lose here?"

Marcia Taggart was thinking and, Keisha guessed, swallowing her pride. Enough to say, "Sit down . . . Ms Ceylon."

Keisha sat back down.

"Just how do you go about this? We turn off the lights, get out a ouija board and start speaking in tongues?"

"No," Keisha said. "Just bring me some of Justin's things. Small, personal items. Things that mattered to him. A sample of his handwriting would be useful, too."

"I can do that," Dwayne said, and left the room hurriedly.

There was an awkward silence between the women. Marcia broke it with, "My husband believes his late mother communicates with him." She accompanied the comment with a roll of the eyes. Telling Keisha she was entertaining this nonsense only to satisfy her husband.

Keisha said nothing.

"He says she gets in touch with him in his dreams, that she calls him from the beyond." The woman made another one of

her snorting sounds. "Knowing what a penny-pinching bitch she was, they're probably *collect* calls."

Keisha didn't laugh. She said, "I know you feel a lot of anger toward your son, but I also sense that you love him very much."

"Oh, you sense that, do you?"

"Yes, I do. And I know you're actually very worried about him."

"Because of these psychic powers you have?" Marcia asked sarcastically.

"No," Keisha said. "Because I'm a mother. I have a son, too."

Marcia's face softened ever so slightly.

"Matthew. He's ten. And believe me, there are days . . . But no matter what he does, no matter what kind of trouble he gets into at school, I love him. There's nothing he could do that would ever change that. There might be times when I want to wring his neck, but I'd still love him as I was doing it." Keisha smiled. "I'm joking, of course. About wringing his neck."

"No, you don't have to apologize," Marcia said. "Justin, I swear . . . you just want to slap some sense into them."

"I know."

"He's been a handful from the time he could walk, but once he hit his teens, it just got worse. Drinking, drugs, skipping school. I stopped giving him money because I knew he'd just blow it on drugs. But the thing is, this is the part that's so heartbreaking, he's such a *smart* boy."

"I'll bet he is," Keisha said.

"I mean, anything he puts his mind to, he can do it. Computers, he's a whiz with those. He can add up a column of numbers in his head. You say to him, what's four hundred and twenty times six hundred and three, and just like that, he can tell you the answer. He's probably some kind of genius, but instead of using his brain to accomplish something, he's always

trying to figure out how to work the system, get some money out of his mother, or"—and she nodded in the direction her husband had gone —"Dwayne. I know he gives Justin money behind my back. He's got a soft spot for him, thinks I'm too tough on him. I think he was so taken with the idea of becoming a father, even a stepfather, that it's blinded him to Justin's faults. The thing is, he's . . . there's something not quite right about Justin. Sometimes he—and this is an awful thing to say, but sometimes he actually kind of scares me. Not physically, but what goes on in that head of his. I just wish . . ."

And then, without warning, tears welled out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "Oh, God, I hope nothing's happened to him."

Keisha got out of her chair and sat on the couch next to Marcia Taggart. "It's going to be okay," she said.

"I hope these will do," Dwayne said, coming back into the living room with several items in his hands.

"Put them there," Keisha said, indicating the coffee table, where she had already laid out two of her business cards.

Dwayne set them down gently. An iPod, a paperback copy of the novel *American Psycho*, a cancelled check, a plastic collectible figure of a grotesquely well-endowed woman in superhero garb.

Keisha handled them dubiously. "I'm not sure about—would you have an article of clothing? Something Justin wears regularly? Something that suggests his personality?"

Marcia said, "Get one of his hats." She looked at Keisha. Her eyes were suddenly very weary. "Would a hat work?"

"I think so. In the meantime, let me have a look at these."

Marcia picked up the cancelled check from the things Dwayne had delivered to Keisha and scowled. After a shake of her head, she folded it in half and held it in her fist. With her

other hand she picked up the female action figure and studied it as though it were some obscure artifact from an alien civilization.

"Justin collects these things," she said. "I just want to throw them all into the garbage. What's a man in his twenties doing with toys like these? He must have five hundred of them. I don't even know who this is supposed to be. Wonder Woman or—"

"Shh," Keisha said gently, and closed her eyes. She handled the toy, then opened her eyes and picked up the iPod.

"He listens to this a lot," Keisha said.

"He does."

"I can feel . . . when he carries this, it's often in his shirt pocket, right next to his heart," she said.

"Well, I guess that's where lots of people carry them," Marcia said, looking skeptical again. "When you touch his earbuds, are you going to say he wore them right close to his brain?"

Keisha smiled ruefully at the woman. "I thought we were starting to get along."

"All I'm saying is, that was a pretty obvious observation about the iPod."

Keisha closed her eyes again and ran her fingers along the cool surface of the device. "I'm seeing . . . his eyes are closed."

Marcia said, "What do you mean, closed? Like, sleeping? You see him sleeping? Lying down?"

"I don't know. I'm just seeing him . . . I'm sure this doesn't mean anything."

"No, what is it?" Marcia asked. Pretty interested for someone so cynical.

"I don't know whether he's sleeping, or if it's something else."

"Like what? Are you saying he's—are you saying he's not alive?"

"No, I'm not saying that. I'm sure he's alive. But his eyes are closed, and I'm wondering if he might be unconscious."

"But you really don't know," Marcia said impatiently. "Don't get me all upset if you don't know what it—"

"Here's one of his hats," Dwayne said, coming back into the room. It was a basic ball cap, blue with a green visor, and a Hartford Whalers logo on the front.

Marcia opened her fist and displayed the check for her husband. "What's this?"

"Justin endorsed it. His signature's on the back," Dwayne said defensively. "Keisha said she needed a sample of his handwriting. I didn't know what else to get. Kids today, they do all their writing on the computer."

"You wrote him a check for two hundred dollars behind my back?"

"Marcia, really, this isn't the time."

"Let me see that," Keisha said, and took the check from the woman's hand. She flipped it over and ran her index finger back and forth across Justin Wilcox's signature. Wilcox was the last name of Marcia Taggart's first husband, Justin's father. "Can I have this?"

Marcia snatched it back, and tore away all the sections of the check surrounding the endorsement, including the part on the front with the account number, then returned the shred of paper bearing the signature to Keisha. "I don't see any sense in giving you all my husband's banking information."

"Oh for the love of God," Dwayne said. "Why not insult the woman while she's trying to help us."

"It's all right," Keisha said with unoffended patience as she tucked the slip of paper into the pocket of her jacket.

Marcia, plowing through her opportunity to apologize, said, "You were seeing Justin with his eyes closed. What's that supposed to mean?"

Instead of answering, Keisha took the hat from Dwayne, stood up and started to walk around the room very slowly.

"What are you doing?" Marcia asked, but Keisha, who seemed to have slipped into some kind of trance, did not respond.

"Just let her do her job," Dwayne said.

Keisha was saying something under her breath, mumbling. Marcia said, "What did you say?"

She held up a hand and continued wandering. Then she stopped abruptly, turned and looked at Marcia. "What does scarf, or scarfy, or something like that mean to you? Does that word make any sense?"

Marcia's mouth opened. "What? That doesn't mean anything. I have no idea what you're talking about."

Keisha made a show of mental struggle. "Could it be 'scar free?' Is that possible? I'm seeing some kind of office. With empty filing cabinets. But 'scar free,' that must be wrong. Does Justin have any scars? Let me see his picture again."

Dwayne had shown her a picture of his stepson moments after she'd arrived, a framed high school graduation shot. A thin boy, with a long, angular face. Dwayne was about to grab it off the mantel and show it to her again when Marcia said, "Oh my God. You said 'scar free?' Is that what you said? That does mean something."

Keisha stopped kneading the hat in her hands. "What?"

"It was a clinic," she said quietly.

"A clinic?"

"They did laser treatments, that kind of thing."

"What could that have to do with your son, Ms Taggart?"

Marcia had become flustered. "They rented from—I have some properties. Investment properties, business space I rent out. I rented office space to the Scar Free Clinic, out past the Post Mall."

Keisha said, "Well, I must have this wrong. Your son could hardly be hiding out in a clinic."

"No, but they went out of business. The office space is empty."

Dwayne's eyes lit up. He gave Keisha an approving look. "That's why you just saw the empty filing cabinets."

"Could Justin have got a key to that place?" Keisha asked.

"I suppose it's possible," Marcia said. "Just a minute."

She got off the couch and hurriedly left the room. Dwayne said, "She's got an office in the house where she keeps keys to her various rental properties. Do you think he could be there? Is that what you're getting? Is that the vision you're seeing?"

"Please," Keisha cautioned. "Don't get your hopes up. I get these little flashes, I see things, but this might not be the thing that—"

"They're gone!" Marcia screamed from another part of the house. "The keys are gone!"

"There's something else," Keisha said. "I keep seeing him with his eyes closed." She paused. "Maybe he's just sleeping."

The three of them went over in Dwayne's Range Rover. Marcia, rattled, sat in the passenger seat, squeezing her hands together. Dwayne hit the wipers to keep the windshield cleared of snow.

"Why's he sleeping?" Marcia kept asking. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know," Keisha said quietly from the backseat. "But I think we should hurry."

"Can't you go any faster?" Marcia said.

"The roads are slippery!" Dwayne said.

"It's four-wheel drive, for Christ's sake!"

The former offices of Scar Free were on the second floor of a four-story office building. The three of them ran into the lobby, and after waiting ten seconds for the elevator to show up, Marcia lost patience. She took off down a nearby hall, pushed open a door marked "Stairs" and scurried up the single flight.

As they exited onto the second floor, they faced a door to an accounting firm. "This way," Marcia said, turning left, running to the end of the hall and stopping at a frosted-glass door with "Scar Free Clinic" painted on it in black letters. Someone had Magic Markered "CLOSED" on a sheet of paper and taped it to the glass.

"I have no key, I have no key," Marcia said. "How am I supposed to get in?"

Dwayne tried the door, in the unlikely event it was unlocked. No luck. He puffed up his chest and said to the women, "Stand back."

Keisha said, "I could be wrong. He may not even be in there."

But Dwayne wasn't hearing her. He reared back, brought up his leg, and kicked in the glass with his heel. It crashed to the floor with the sound of a hundred cymbals. Seconds later, the accounting office door whipped open and a short, heavyset man in a white shirt and skinny black tie looked on with alarm.

"What the hell is—Marcia?"

"It's okay, Frank," she said.

She reached in through the broken door to turn the deadbolt. The door swept back some broken glass as she swung it into the room. Their shoes crunched on the shards as they entered.

"Justin?" Marcia called out.

There was no answer.

The place was as Keisha had so briefly described it. Empty. Shelves cleared, filing cabinets half open, nothing inside them. No generic landscape pictures or diplomas or anything else on the walls.

But on the floor, several discarded fast-food containers. A pizza box, a Big Mac container still smeared with special sauce. Several empty beer cans.

"Someone's been here," Dwayne said. "Someone's been *living* here."

There was a spacious foyer, then a short corridor that serviced four examining rooms. Marcia was moving that way, opening one door, then another, Dwayne and Keisha running to keep up with her.

When she opened the last door, she screamed. "Oh God!"

A second later, Keisha and Dwayne found her on her knees next to Justin, who was lying on the floor, dressed in a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt, feet bare. His shoes and socks were scattered alongside him, and a winter coat was rolled up and tucked under his head as a pillow.

The young man's eyes were closed.

An orangey opaque pill container lay on its side a foot away from his head. Dwayne bent over at the waist, one leg raised behind him, and snatched it off the floor.

"Marcia," he said. "Aren't these the sleeping pills you were on a year ago?"

"Justin!" she said. "Wake up!"

"It's full of pills," he said. "It doesn't look like he's taken any."

Justin stirred. "What, what's going on?"

Marcia pulled him into her arms. "Are you okay? Are you all right?"

Groggily, he said, "I'm okay. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Mom. I'm so sorry."

Now Dwayne had seen something else on the floor. A sheet of paper, with something scribbled on it. He grabbed it, saw what was written on it, handed it to Keisha without saying a word.

It read: "I know I've been a huge pain, Mom. Maybe your life will be better now."

"My word," Keisha whispered. Dwayne shook his head, looked at the pill container in his hand.

"God, if we'd been a few minutes later . . ." he whispered back.

"Justin, listen to me," Marcia said. "Have you taken anything? Have you taken any pills?"

"No, no, I just . . . I just had some beers, that's all. I was going to take them later, maybe. I don't know. I don't know what I was going to do. I'm sorry if I scared you."

Marcia clung to him and began to sob as he patted her head. Before Dwayne knelt down next to his wife and wrapped his arms around her and his stepson, he said to Keisha, "I'll see that you get your money this afternoon."

Keisha Ceylon smiled modestly.

Justin weakly put his own arms around his mother and stepfather. His face was buried in his mother's neck, his eyes closed. But then they opened, and fixed on Keisha.

Justin winked at her.

And Keisha winked back.