



En lieux sûrs

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Linwood BARCLAY

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440 pages

Extrait

Also by Linwood Barclay PROLOGUE RICHARD Bradley had never thought of himself as a violent man, but right now he was ready to kill someone. "I can't take it anymore," he said, sitting on the side of the bed in his pajamas. "You're not going out there," said his wife, Esther. "Not again. Just let it go." Not only could they hear the music blaring from next door; they could feel it. The deep bass was pulsing through the walls of their house like a heartbeat. "It's eleven o'clock, for Christ's sake," Richard said, turning on his bedside table lamp. "And it's Wednesday. Not Friday night or Saturday night, but Wednesday." The Bradleys had lived in this modest Milford home, on this hundred-year-old street with its mature trees, for nearly thirty years. They'd seen neighbors come and go. The good, and the bad. But never had there been anything as bad as this, and it had been going on for a while. Two years back, the owner of the house next door started renting it to students attending Housatonic Community College over in Bridgeport, and since then the neighborhood had gone, as Richard Bradley liked to proclaim on a daily basis, "to hell in a handcart." Some of the students had been worse than others. This bunch, they took the cake. Loud music nearly every night. The smell of marijuana wafting in through the windows. Shattered beer bottles on the sidewalk. This used to be a nice part of town. Young couples with their first homes, some starting families. There were some older teenagers on the street, to be sure, but if any of them acted up, threw a raucous party when they were left on their own, at least you could rat them out the next day to their parents and it wouldn't happen again. At least not for a while. There were older people on the street, too, many of them retired. Like the Bradleys, who'd taught in schools in and around Milford since the 1970s before packing it in. "Is that what we worked so hard for our whole lives?" he asked Esther. "So we could live next door to a bunch of goddamn rabble-rousers?" "I'm sure they'll stop soon," she said, sitting up in bed. "They usually do at some point. We were young, too, once." She grimaced. "A long time ago." "It's like an earthquake that won't end," he said. "I don't even know what the hell kind of music that is. What is that?" He stood up, grabbed his bathrobe, which was thrown over a chair, knotted the sash in front. "You're going to give yourself a heart attack," Esther said. "You can't go over every time this happens." "I'll be back in a couple of minutes." "Oh, for God's sake," she said as he strode out of the bedroom. Esther Bradley threw back the covers, put on her own robe, slid her feet into the slippers on the floor by the bed, and went running down the stairs after her husband. By the time she caught up with him, he was on the front porch. She noticed, for the first time, that he had nothing on his feet. She tried to grab his arm to stop him but he jerked it away, and she felt a twinge of pain in her shoulder. He went down the steps, walked down to the sidewalk, turned left, and kept marching until he reached the driveway next door. He could have taken a shortcut across the grass, but it was still wet from a shower earlier in the evening. "Richard," she said pleadingly, a few steps behind him. She wasn't going to leave him alone. She figured there was less likelihood that these young men would do anything to him if they saw her standing there. Would they punch out an old man while his wife watched? He was a man on a mission, mounting the steps to the front door of the three-story Victorian home. Most of the lights were on, many of the windows open, the music blaring out for all the neighbors to hear. But it wasn't loud enough to drown out the sounds of raised voices and laughter. Richard banged on the door, his wife stationed at the bottom of the porch steps, watching anxiously. "What are you going to say?" she asked. He ignored her and banged on the door again. He was about to strike it with the heel of his fist a third time when the door swung open. A thin man, maybe twenty, just over six feet tall, dressed in jeans and a plain dark blue T-shirt and holding a can of Coors in his hand, stood there. "Hey," he said. He blinked woozily a couple of times as he sized up his visitor. Bradley's few wisps of gray hair were sticking up at all angles, his bathrobe had started to part in front, and his eyes were bugging out. "What the hell's wrong with you?" Bradley shouted. "Excuse me?" the man said, bewildered. "You're keeping up the whole damn neighborhood!" The man's mouth formed an O, as if trying to take it in. He looked beyond the man and saw Esther Bradley, holding her hands together, almost in prayer. She said, sounding almost apologetic, "The music is a bit loud." "Oh yeah, shit," he said. "You're

from next door, right?" "Jesus," Richard said, shaking his head. "I was over here last week, and the week before that! You got any brain cells left?" The young man blinked a couple more times, then turned and shouted back into the house, "Hey, turn it down. Carter! Hey, Carter! Turn it—yeah, turn it the fuck down, will ya!" Three seconds later, the music stopped, the sudden silence jarring. The young man shrugged apologetically, said, "Sorry." He extended his free hand. "My name's Brian. Or have I told you that before?" Richard Bradley ignored the hand. "You want to come in for a beer or something?" Brian asked, cheerily raising the bottle in his hand. "We've got some pizza, too." "No," Richard said. "Thank you for the offer," Esther said cheerily. "You're, like, the people in that house, right?" Brian asked, pointing. "Yes," Esther said. "Okay. Well, sorry about the noise and everything. We all had this test today and we were kind of unwinding, you know? If we get out of hand again, just come over and bang on the door and we'll try to dial it down." "That's what I've been doing," Richard said. Brian shrugged, then slipped back into the house and closed the door. Esther said, "He seems like a nice young man." Richard grunted. They returned to their house, the front door slightly ajar from when they'd run out of it in a hurry. It wasn't until they were both inside and had closed and bolted the door, that they noticed the two people sitting in the living room. A man and woman. Late thirties, early forties. Both smartly dressed in jeans—was that a crease in hers?—and lightweight jackets. Esther let out a short, startled scream when she spotted them. "Jesus!" Richard said. "How the hell did you—?" "You shouldn't leave your door open like that," said the woman, getting up from the couch. She wasn't much more than five-two, maybe five-three. Short black hair, worn in a bob. "That's not smart," she said. "Even in a nice neighborhood like this." "Call the police," Richard Bradley said to his wife. It took a moment for the command to register. But when it did, she started for the kitchen. The moment she moved, the man shot up off the couch. He was a good foot taller than the woman, stocky, and swift. He crossed the room in an instant and blocked her path. He grabbed her roughly by her bony shoulders, spun her around, and tossed her, hard, into a living room chair. She yelped. "You son of a bitch!" Richard Bradley said and charged at the man while he was turned away from him. He made a fist and pounded it into the intruder's back, just below the neck. The man spun around and swatted Richard away as if he was a child. As he stumbled back, the man glanced down, saw Richard's bare foot, and drove the heel of his shoe down onto it. Bradley shouted out in pain and collapsed toward the couch, catching the edge and falling onto the floor. "Enough," the woman said. She said to her partner, "Sweetheart, you want to turn down some of these lights? It's awfully bright in here." "Sure," he said, found the light switch, and flicked it down. "My foot," Richard whimpered. "You broke my goddamn foot." "Let me help him," Esther said. "Let me get him an ice pack." "Stay put," the man said. The woman perched her butt on the edge of the coffee table, where she could easily address Esther or look down to the floor to Richard. She said this: "I'm going to ask the two of you a question, and I'm only going to ask it once. So I want you to *listen* very carefully, and then I want you to *think* very carefully about how you answer. What I do not want you to do is answer my question with a question. That would be very, very unproductive. Do you understand?" The Bradleys glanced at each other, terrified, then looked back at the woman. Their heads bobbed up and down weakly in understanding. "That's very good," the woman said. "So, pay attention. It's a very simple question." The Bradleys waited. The woman said, "Where is it?" The words hung there for a moment, no one making a sound. After several seconds, Richard said, "Where is wh—?" Then cut himself off when he saw the look in the woman's eyes. She smiled and waved a finger at him. "Tut, tut, I warned you about that. You almost did it, didn't you?" Richard swallowed. "But—" "Can you answer the question? Again, you need to know that Eli says it's here." Richard's lips trembled. He shook his head and stammered, "I—I don't—I don't—" The woman raised a palm, silencing him, and turned her attention to Esther. "Would you like to answer the question?" Esther was careful with her phrasing. "I would appreciate it if you could be more specific. I—I have to tell you that name—Eli? I don't know anyone by that name. Whatever it is you want, if we have it, we'll give it to you." The woman sighed and turned her head to her partner, who was standing a couple of feet away. "I gave you your chance," the woman said. "I told you I'd only ask once." Just then, the house next door began to thump once again with loud music. The windows of the Bradley house began to vibrate. The woman smiled and said, "That's Drake. I like him." She glanced up at the man and said, "Shoot the husband." "No! No!"

Esther screamed. “Jesus!” Richard shouted. “Just tell us what—” Before the retired teacher could finish the sentence, the man had reached into his jacket for a gun, pointed it downward, and pulled the trigger. Esther opened her mouth to scream again, but no sound came out. Little more than a high-pitched squeak, as though someone had stepped on a mouse. The woman said to her, “I guess you really don’t know.” She nodded at her associate, and he fired a second shot. Warily, she said to him, “Doesn’t mean it’s not here. We’ve got a long night ahead of us, sweetheart, unless it’s in the cookie jar.” “We should be so lucky,” he said. ONETERRYI don’t know where I got the idea that once you’ve come through a very dark time, after you’ve confronted the worst possible demons and defeated them, that everything’s going to be just fine. Doesn’t work that way. Not that life wasn’t better for us, at least for a while. Seven years ago, things were pretty bad around here. Bad as they can get. People died. My wife and daughter and I came close to being among them. But when it was over, and we were whole, and still had each other, well, we did like the song says. We picked ourselves up, dusted ourselves off, and started all over again. More or less. But the scars remained. We went through our own version of post-traumatic stress. My wife, Cynthia, certainly did. She’d lost all the members of her family when she was fourteen—I really mean *lost*; her parents and her brother vanished into thin air one night—and Cynthia had to wait twenty-five years to learn their fate. When it was all over, there were no joyful reunions. There was more. Cynthia’s aunt paid the ultimate price in her bid to shine the light on a decades-old secret. And then there was Vince Fleming, a career criminal who was also just a kid when Cynthia’s family vanished, who’d been with her that night. Twenty-five years later, against his own nature, he helped us find out what really happened. Like they say, no good deed goes unpunished. He got shot and nearly died for his trouble. You might have heard about it. It was all over the news. They were even going to make a movie about it at one point, but that fell through, which, if you ask me, was for the best. We thought we’d be able to close the book on that chapter of our lives. Questions were answered; mysteries were solved. The bad people died, or went to prison. Case closed, as they say. But it’s like a horrible tsunami. You think it’s over, but debris is washing ashore half a world away years later. For Cynthia, the trauma never ended. Every day, she feared history repeating itself with the family she had now. Me. And our daughter, Grace. The trouble was, the steps she took to make sure it wouldn’t led us into that area known as the law of unintended consequence: the actions you take to achieve one thing often produce the exact opposite result. Cynthia’s efforts to keep our fourteen-year-old daughter, Grace, safe from the big, bad world were pushing the child to experience it as quickly as she could. I kept hoping we’d eventually work our way through the darkness and come out the other side. But it didn’t look as though it was going to happen anytime soon. • • • GRACE and her mother had shouting matches on a pretty much daily basis. They were all variations on a theme. Grace ignored curfew. Grace didn’t call when she got to where she was going. Grace said she was going to one friend’s house but ended up going to another and didn’t update her mother. Grace wanted to go to a concert in New York but wouldn’t be able to get home until two in the morning. Mom said no. I tried to be a peacemaker in these disputes, usually with little success. I’d tell Cynthia privately that I understood her motives, that I didn’t want anything bad to happen to Grace, either, but that if our daughter was never allowed any freedom, she’d never learn to cope in the world on her own. These fights generally ended with someone storming out of a room. A door being slammed. Grace telling Cynthia she hated her, then knocking over a chair as she left the kitchen. “God, she’s just like me,” Cynthia would often say. “I was a horror show at that age. I just don’t want her making the same mistakes I made.” Cynthia, even now, thirty-two years later, carried a lot of guilt from the night her mother and father and older brother, Todd, disappeared. Part of her still believed that if she hadn’t been out with a boy named Vince, without her parents’ permission or knowledge, and if she hadn’t gotten drunk and passed out once she’d fallen into her own bed, she might have known what was happening and, somehow, saved those closest to her. Even though the facts didn’t bear that out, Cynthia believed she’d been punished for her misbehavior. She didn’t want Grace ever having to blame herself for something so tragic. That meant instilling in Grace the importance of resisting peer pressure, of never allowing yourself to be put into a difficult situation, of listening to that little voice in your head when it says, *This is wrong and I’ve got to get the hell out of here*. Or as Grace might say, “Blah blah blah.” I wasn’t much help when I told Cynthia almost every kid went through a period like this.

Even if Grace did make mistakes, it didn't follow that the consequences would have to be as grave as what Cynthia had endured. Grace, God help us, was a teenager. In another six years, if Cyn and I hadn't killed ourselves by then, we'd see Grace mature into a sensible young woman. But it was hard to believe that day would ever come. Like that night when Grace was thirteen and hanging out at the Post Mall with her friends at the same time Cynthia happened to be there looking for shoes. Cynthia spotted our girl outside of Macy's sharing a cigarette. Cynthia confronted her in full view of her classmates and ordered her to the car. Cynthia was so rattled and busy tearing a strip off Grace that she ran a stop sign. Nearly got broadsided by a dump truck. "We could have been killed," Cynthia told me. "I was out of control, Terry. I totally lost it." It was after that incident that she decided, for the first time, to take a break from us. Just a week. For our sake—or more specifically, for Grace's—as much as her own. A time-out, Cynthia called it. She bounced the idea off Naomi Kinzler, the therapist Cynthia had been seeing for years, and she saw the merit in it. "Remove yourself from the conflict situation," Kinzler said. "You're not running away; you're not abandoning your responsibilities. But you're going to take some time to reflect, to regroup. You can give yourself permission to do that. This gives Grace time to think, too. She may not like what you're doing, but she might come to understand it. You suffered a terrible wound when you lost your family, and it's a wound that will never completely heal. Even if your daughter can't appreciate that now, I believe someday she will." Cynthia got a place at the Hilton Garden Inn, over behind the mall. She was going to stay at the budget-minded Just Inn Time to save money, but I said no way. Not only was it a dump, but there'd been a white-slave operation running out of it a few years back. She was only gone a week, but it felt like a year. What surprised me was how much Grace missed her mother. "She doesn't love us anymore," Grace said one night over microwaved lasagna. "That's not true," I said. "Okay, she doesn't love *me* anymore." "The reason your mother's taking a break is because she loves you so much. She knows she went too far, that she overreacted, and she needs some time to get her head together." "Tell her to speed it up." When Cynthia returned, things were better for a month, maybe even six weeks. But the peace treaty started to crumble. Minor incursions at first, maybe a shot across the bow. Then all-out warfare. When they had one of their battles, feelings would be hurt and it'd take several days for our normal life—whatever that was—to resume. I'd attempt mediation, but these things had to run their course. Cynthia would communicate anything important she had to tell Grace through notes, signed *L. Mom*, just the way her own mother used to do when she was pissed with her daughter and couldn't bring herself to write *Love*. But eventually the notes would be signed *Love, Mom*, and a thaw in relations would begin. Grace would find some pretext to ask her mother for guidance. Does this top work with these pants? Can you help with this homework assignment? A tentative dialogue would be opened. Things would be good. And then they'd be bad. The other day, they were really bad. Grace wanted to go with two of her girlfriends to New Haven to a huge used-clothing bazaar that was running midweek. They could only go at night, because they had school through the day. Like that concert in New York, it would mean a late return home on the train. I offered to drive them up, kill some time, and then bring them back, but Grace would have none of it. She and her friends weren't five. They wanted to do this on their own. "There's no way," Cynthia said, standing at the stove making dinner. Breaded pork cutlets and wild rice, as I remember. "Terry, tell me you're with me on this. There's no way she's doing that." Before I could weigh in, Grace said, "Are you kidding? I'm not going to fucking Budapest. It's New Haven." This was a relatively new wrinkle. The use of foul language. I don't suppose we had anyone to blame but ourselves. It was not uncommon for Cynthia or me to drop the f-bomb when we were angry or frustrated. If we had one of those swear jars where you drop in a quarter every time you used a bad word, we could have used the money to take a trip to Rome every year. Just the same, I called Grace on it. "Don't you ever speak to your mother that way," I said sternly. Cynthia clearly felt a reprimand was inadequate. "You're grounded for two weeks," she said. Grace, stunned, came back with: "How long are you going to take it out on *me* that *you* couldn't save your family? I wasn't even born, okay? It's not my fault." A verbal knife to the heart with that one. I could see, in Grace's face, instant regret, and something more than that. Fear. She'd crossed a line, and she knew it. Maybe, if she'd had a chance, she'd have withdrawn the comment, offered an apology, but Cynthia's hand came up so quickly, she never had a chance. She slapped our daughter across the face. A smack loud enough I felt it in

my own cheek. "Cyn!" I shouted. But as I yelled, Grace stumbled to the side, put out her hand instinctively to brace her fall in case she lost her footing. Her hand hit the side of the pot that was cooking the rice. Knocked it to one side. Grace's hand dropped, landed on the burner. The scream. Jesus, the scream. "Oh God!" Cynthia said. "Oh my God!" She grabbed Grace's arm, spun her around to the sink, and turned on the cold tap, kept a constant stream of water running over her burned hand. The back of it had hit the hot pan and the side had connected with the burner. Maybe a millisecond of contact in each case, but enough to sear the flesh. Tears were streaming down Grace's face. I wrapped my arms tightly around her while Cynthia kept running cold water on her hand. We took her to Milford Hospital. "You can tell them the truth," Cynthia told Grace. "You can tell them what I did. I deserve to be punished. If they call the police, they call the police. I'm not going to make you tell them something that isn't true." Grace told the doctor she was boiling water to cook some macaroni, iPod buds in her ears, listening to Adele's "Rolling in the Deep," dancing like an idiot, when she flung her arm out and hit the handle on the pot, knocking it off the stove. We brought Grace home, her hand well bandaged. The next day, Cynthia moved out for the second time. She hasn't come back yet.

TWO "REGGIE, Reggie, come in, come in." "Hi, Unk." "Did you find her?" "Jeez, let me get my coat off." "I'm sorry. I just—" "I didn't. I didn't find . . . her. Not yet. No money, either." "But I thought—You said you found the house and—" "It didn't work out. It was a false lead. Eli lied to us, Unk. And it's not like we can go back and ask him again." "Oh. But you said—" "I know what I said. I'm telling you, we struck out." "I'm sorry. I guess I got my hopes up. You seemed so sure last time I talked to you. I'm just disappointed is all. There's coffee there if you want it." "Thanks." "I still appreciate everything you're doing for me." "It's okay, Unk." "I mean it. I know you get tired of my saying it, but I do. You're all I got. You're like the kid I never had, Reggie." "Not a kid anymore." "No, no—you're all grown. You grew up fast, and early." "Didn't have much choice. Coffee's good." "I'm just sorry I wasn't there for you sooner." "I've never blamed you. You know that. We don't have to keep going over this. You see me obsessing about this? Huh? And *I'm* the one it all happened to. So if I can move on, you should be able to, too." "It's hard for me." "You live in the past. That's your problem, Unk. God, that's what all this latest shit has been about. You have a hard time getting over things." "I . . . I was just hoping you'd found her." "I'm not giving up." "But I can see it in your face. You think this is all stupid. You think it doesn't matter." "I didn't say that. Not the last part. Look, I get why this is important to you, why she matters so much. And you're important to me. You're one of only two people I give a shit about, Unk." "You know what I can't figure out about you?" "What's that?" "You understand people, you get how they think and how they feel, you've got a real insight into them, yet you've got no . . . what's the word?" "Love?" "No, that's not what I was going to say." "Empathy?" "Yeah, I guess that's it." "Because I love you, Unk. Very much. But empathy? I suppose. I understand what makes people tick. I know what they're feeling. I need to know what they're feeling. I need to know when they're afraid. I very much need to feel that they *are* afraid, but I don't feel bad for them. Otherwise, I couldn't get things done." "Yeah, well, I'd be better off if I was more like you. I guess it was empathy I felt for that damned Eli. He seemed like a lost kid—hell, he was no kid. He was twenty-one or -two. Something like that. I thought I was doing right by him, Reggie. I really did. And then the son of a bitch stabs me in the back." "I believe he approached the other interested party." "Shit, no." "It's okay. Just an initial contact. He was holding back details until there was a face-to-face, which, of course, won't be happening now. I think he told us the truth about what was done with her, but lied about where. And the teachers' house was a nonstarter. Also, I'm starting to wonder about whether any of the people know. Whether they've given consent." "I don't understand." "That's okay. But what I was going to tell you is, I'm going to need more people, and it's going to take a lot more up-front money." "Eli took all I'd set aside, Reggie." "That's okay. I can put up money of my own. The tax refund thing's going well. I've got reserves. And when this is over, I'll not only get back my investment, and your money, but plenty of other money, too. There's a silver lining to all this, as it turns out." "I still don't understand." "That's okay. You don't have to. You just let me do what I do best." "I just can't believe . . . after all these years, I finally win her back, and then I lose her again. Eli had no right, you know. He had no right to take her from me." "Trust me, Unk. We'll get her back." THREE TERRY JUST because Cynthia was no longer living with Grace and me didn't mean we were strangers to each other. We

spoke daily, sometimes met for lunch. Her first week away, the three of us went out to Bistro Basque, over on River Street, for dinner. The girls both had the salmon and I went with the chicken stuffed with spinach and mushrooms. We were all on our best behavior. Not a word about our visit to the hospital, even though Cynthia couldn't keep her eyes off Grace's bandaged hand. The unreality of the meal was exceeded only by the end of the evening, when Grace and I dropped Cynthia off at her place and we drove home alone. She really lucked into the apartment. Cynthia had a friend at work who was leaving the last week of June for a trip to Brazil and not planning to return until August, or maybe even September. Cynthia remembered her saying she'd tried to sublet the place for the summer, get someone who could take over the rent while she was away. She'd found no takers. A day before her friend was to fly out, Cynthia said she'd take the apartment. The friend cleared it with the landlord, an old guy named Barney, and then it was a go. I hadn't expected her to be gone until Labor Day, but as each day passed, and Cynthia showed no inclination to return, I was starting to wonder. At times I lay awake at night, half the bed empty next to me, wondering whether Cynthia would look for another place if this dragged on until early September when her friend returned. About a week and a half after she'd left, I dropped by her place around five, figuring by then she'd be home from her job with the Milford Department of Public Health, where she was involved in everything from restaurant inspections to promoting good nutrition in the schools. I was right. I saw her car first, parked between a sporty-looking Cadillac and an old blue pickup I recognized as Barney's. He was cutting the grass down the side of the house, limping with each step, almost as if one leg was shorter than the other. Cynthia was sitting on the front porch, feet propped up on the railing, nursing a beer, when I pulled up out front of the house. It was, I had to admit, a pretty nice place, an old colonial house on North Street, just south of the Boston Post Road. It no doubt belonged to some prominent Milford family years ago before Barney bought it and converted it into four apartments. Two on the ground floor and two upstairs. Before I could say hello to my wife, Barney spotted me and killed his mower. "Hey, how ya doin'?" he called out. Barney viewed Cynthia and me as minor celebrities, although ours was not the kind of fame anyone would want, and he seemed to enjoy brushing up against us. "I'm good," I said. "Don't let me keep you from your work there." "I got two more houses to do after this one," he said, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. Barney owned at least a dozen homes that he'd turned into rental units between New Haven and Bridgeport, although, from what he'd told me in previous conversations, I'd learned this was one of the nicer ones and he spent more time on its upkeep. I wondered whether he was planning to put it on the market before long. "Your missus is right up there on the porch," he said. "I see her," I said. "You look like you could use a cool drink." "I'm good. Hope things are working out." "Excuse me?" I said. "Between you and the wife." He gave me a wink, then turned and went back to his mower. Cynthia rested her beer on the railing and stood out of her chair as I came up the porch steps. "Hey," she said. I was expecting her to offer me a cold one, and when she didn't I wondered whether I'd come at a bad time. Worry washed over her face. "Everything okay?" "Everything's fine," I said. "Grace is okay?" she asked. "I told you, everything's fine." Reassured, she sat back down and put her feet back up on the railing. I noticed that her phone was facedown on the arm of the wooden chair, holding down a health department flyer headlined, "Does Your Home Have Mold?" "May I sit?" She tipped her head toward the chair next to her. I pointed to the flyer. "Problems with your new place? You show that to Barney and he'll flip out." Cynthia glanced down at the flyer, shook her head. "It's a new awareness campaign we're doing. I've been talking about household mold so much lately I'm having nightmares where I'm being chased by fungus." "Like that movie," I said. "*The Blob*." "Was that fungus?" "Fungus from outer space." She rested her head on the back of the chair, kept her feet perched on the railing. She sighed. "I never did this at home. Just decompressed at the end of the day." "That's probably because we don't have a porch with a railing," I said. "I'll build you one if you want." That prompted a chuckle. "You?" Construction was not one of the manly arts at which I excelled. "Well, I could have someone build it. What I lack in hammering skills I make up for in writing checks." "I just—at home, there's always something I have to do, right then. But here, when I get home from work, I sit here and watch the cars go by. That's it. It gives me time to think. You know?" "I guess." "I mean, you've got the summer to chill out." She had me there. As a teacher, I had July and August to recharge my batteries. Cynthia had been working for the city only long

enough to get a couple of weeks off every year. “So my holiday is an hour at the end of every day, where I sit here and do nothing.” “Good,” I said. “If this is working for you, then I’m happy.” She turned and looked at me. “No, you’re not.” “I just want what’s good for you.” “I don’t know anymore what’s good for me. I sit here thinking I’ve removed myself from the source of my anxiety, all the fighting and nonsense at home with Grace, and then I realize I’m the source of my anxiety and I can’t get away from myself.” “There’s a Garrison Keillor story,” I said, “about the old couple who can’t get along, wondering whether to take a vacation, and the man says, ‘Why pay good money to be miserable someplace else when I can be perfectly miserable at home.’” She frowned. “You think we’re an old couple?” “That wasn’t the point of the story.” “I won’t stay here forever,” Cynthia said, having to raise her voice some as Barney shifted his mowing activity to the front yard. The smell of freshly cut grass wafted our way. “I’m taking it a day at a time.” As much as I wanted her to come home, I wasn’t going to beg her. She had to do it when she was good and ready. “What have you told Teresa?” Cynthia asked. Teresa Moretti, the woman who came in to clean our place once a week. Four or five years ago, when Cynthia and I found ourselves so busy we couldn’t seem to get to the most basic household chores, we’d asked around about a cleaning lady and found Teresa. Even though I was off for the summer and possessed the requisite skills to tidy a house, Cynthia thought it was unfair to Teresa to lay her off for July and August. “She needs that money,” Cynthia’d said at the time. Normally, I wouldn’t even see Teresa. I’d be at school. But six days ago I was there when she let herself in with the key we provided her. She didn’t miss a trick. After noticing that Cynthia’s makeup and other items were not in evidence, that her robe was not thrown over the chair in our bedroom, she’d asked if Cynthia was away. Now on the porch with my wife, I said, “I told her you were enjoying a little time on your own. Thought that would do it, but then she wanted to know where you’d gone, whether I’d be joining you, was Grace going, how long would we be gone . . .” “She’s just worried we’re going to cut her back to every other week or once a month.” I nodded. “She comes tomorrow. I’ll put her mind at ease.” Cynthia tipped the bottle up to her lips. “Did you know those teachers?” she asked. Those two retired schoolteachers who had been killed in their home a few days ago, not more than a mile from here. From what I’d read and seen on the TV news, the cops were baffled. Rona Wedmore, the police detective we’d been involved with seven years ago, was the lead investigator and had as much as said they couldn’t come up with a motive and there were no suspects. At least none the local police would talk about. The idea that a couple of retired folks, with no known connections to any criminal activity whatsoever, could be slaughtered in their own home had led to a sense of unease in Milford. Some—particularly the news shows—were calling this the “Summer of Fear” in this community. “We never crossed paths,” I told Cynthia. “We didn’t teach in the same schools.” “It’s a horrible thing,” she said. “Senseless.” “There’s always a reason,” I said. “Maybe not one that makes much sense, but a reason nonetheless.” There were beads of sweat on Cynthia’s beer bottle. “Hot one today,” I said. “Wonder if it’s going to be nice this weekend. Maybe we could all do something together.” I went to reach for her phone so I could open the weather app, check the forecast, the sort of thing I did at home all the time if my phone wasn’t nearby. But before I could grab it, Cynthia moved the phone to the other arm of the chair, beyond my reach. “I heard it’s going to be nice,” she said. “Why don’t we talk on Saturday.” Barney went down the other side with the gas mower. “He said he hopes we work things out,” I said. Cynthia closed her eyes for two seconds and sighed. “I swear, I really haven’t said a thing. But he puts things together, sees you coming over but not staying. Likes to offer advice. Seize the day, that kind of thing.” “What’s his story?” “I don’t know. Mid-sixties, never married, lives alone. Likes to tell everyone how his leg got busted up in a car accident back in the seventies, hasn’t walked right since. He’s kind of sad, actually. He’s okay. I listen to him talk, try not to hurt his feelings. I might have a plugged toilet one night and need him to come over.” “Does he live here?” Cynthia shook her head. “No. There’s a young guy across the hall from me—there’s a hell of a story there I’ll tell you sometime. And on the first floor, there’s Winnifred—swear to God, *Winnifred*—who works for the library, and across the hall from her another sad sack named Orland. Older than Barney, lives alone, hardly anyone ever comes to see him.” She forced a grin. “It’s the House of the Damned, I tell you. They’re all here living alone. They’ve got no one.” “You do,” I said. Cynthia looked away. “I didn’t mean it that—” There was a sudden noise from the house. Someone coming down a flight of stairs, fast. The door

swung open and a man, late twenties to early thirties, slim, dark hair, stepped out. He spotted Cynthia before noticing me. “Hey, good-lookin’,” he said. “What’s shakin’?” “Hi, Nate,” Cynthia said, an awkward smile on her face. “I’d like you to meet someone.” “Oh, hey,” he said, his eyes landing on me. “Another friend dropping by?” “This is Terry. My husband. Terry, this is Nathaniel. My across-the-hall neighbor.” Her eyebrows popped up briefly as she looked at me. This was the guy there was a hell of a story about. His face quickly flushed, and it took him maybe a tenth of a second to decide to extend a hand. “Good to meet you. Heard a lot about you.” I glanced at Cynthia, but she wasn’t looking at me. “Where you off to?” Cynthia asked. “You don’t walk dogs this late in the day, do you? Isn’t everyone home by now?” “Just going out for something to eat,” Nathaniel said. “You have dogs?” I asked. He smiled sheepishly. “Not here, and they’re not mine. That’s what I do. I’ve got a dog-walking business. Go from house to house through the day, take my clients’ mutts out for a stroll while their owners are at work.” He shrugged. “I’ve had a small career change. But I’m sure Cyn—I’m sure your wife has told you all about that.” I looked at Cynthia again, expectantly this time. “I haven’t,” Cynthia said. “Don’t let us hold you up.” “Again, nice to meet you,” he said to me, then trotted down the stairs, got behind the wheel of the Caddy, and took off on North Street. “A dog walker with a Cadillac?” I said. “Long story. Short version goes like this. Hit it big in the phone app business, market went south for a while, lost it all, had a nervous breakdown, now walks dogs for people every day while he gets his life back together.” I nodded. This house seemed to be a place where people came to regroup. “Well,” I said. Neither of us spoke for the better part of a minute. Cynthia watched the street the entire time. Finally, she said, “I’m ashamed.” “It was an accident,” I said. “It was just a crazy accident. You never meant for that to happen.” “I do everything I can to protect her and I’m the one who ends up sending her to the hospital.” I didn’t know what to say. “You probably need to get home and make Grace dinner,” Cynthia said. “Give her a hug for me.” She paused. “Tell her I love her.” “She knows,” I said, getting up. “But I’ll do it.” She walked me to the car. The smell of freshly mown grass wafted up my nostrils. “If there was anything going on, if Grace were in trouble, you’d let me know,” Cynthia said. “Right?” “Of course.” “You don’t have to tiptoe around me. I can take it.” “Everything’s fine.” I grinned. “Mostly she watches me to keep me out of trouble. I try to throw any wild parties, she nips that right in the bud.” Cynthia rested her palm on my chest. “I’m coming back. I just need a little more time.” “I know.” “You just keep an eye on her. This thing, about those teachers being killed, it’s got my mind going all kinds of places it shouldn’t.” I forced a smile. “Maybe it’s some former student, years later, getting even with teachers who gave him a hard time for not doing his homework. I better watch my back.” “Don’t even joke.” I lost the smile. I realized I hadn’t been funny. “I’m sorry. We’re okay. We are. We’ll be better when you come back, but we’re getting by. And I’m watching her like a hawk.” “You better.” I got in my Ford Escape, keyed the ignition. Driving home, I couldn’t get out of my head two things Nathaniel had said. *Hey, good-lookin’* was the first. And the second was: *Another friend dropping by?* FOUR “WANNA have some *real* fun?” the boy asked. That worried Grace. Maybe not a lot, but a little. She had a pretty good idea what Stuart was getting at. They’d already been having some fun—just above-the-waist stuff—parked out back of the Walmart in his dad’s old Buick. This car, it was an aircraft carrier. Massive hood and trunk, and inside, well, you hardly had to get into the backseat. The front—which went all the way across, no console or shifter in the middle—was the size of a park bench but way, way softer. The car was from the seventies, and when it went around corners, she felt as if she was in a huge boat way out past the sound, out in the Atlantic or something, getting carried away by the waves. Grace was okay with what they’d done so far—she’d let him touch her in a couple of places—but she wasn’t sure she wanted to take things any further. Not yet, anyway. She was still just fourteen, after all. And even though she knew, with absolute certainty, that that meant she was *not* a kid anymore, she had to admit that Stuart, being sixteen, might know slightly more about the whole sex thing. It wasn’t even so much that she was scared about doing it for the first time. What scared her was looking like a total amateur. Everyone knew, or thought they knew, that Stuart had already been with plenty of girls. What if she ended up doing it all wrong? Ended up looking like a total idiot? So she decided to play things cautiously. “I don’t know,” she said, pulling away from him, leaning against the passenger door. “This has been, like, good, you know? But I’m not sure about taking things, like, to the next level.” Stuart laughed. “Shit, I’m not talking about that. Although, if you’re

thinking you're ready, I've come equipped." He started to reach down into the front pocket of his jeans. Grace slapped his hand playfully. "Then what are you talking about?" "It's something totally cool. I swear, you'll wet your pants." Grace could guess. Maybe some pot, or X. What the hell? She could give something like that a try. It was actually a little less scary than letting him get into her pants. "So what is it? I've tried a few things. Not just pot." A lie, but one had to keep up appearances. "Nothing like that," Stuart said. "You ever driven a Porsche?" That took her by surprise. "I've never driven anything, you idiot. I won't have a license for two more years." "I mean, you ever *ridden* in a Porsche?" "Like, is that the sports car?" "Jesus, you don't know what a Porsche is?" "Yeah, I know. Okay. Why you asking me if I ever had a ride in a Porsche?" "Have you?" "No," Grace said. "At least, I don't think I ever have. But I don't exactly pay a lot of attention to what kind of car I'm getting into. Maybe I was in one and didn't know it." "I think," the boy said, "if you'd been in a Porsche, you'd kinda know. It's not like an average car. It's all low and swoopy and shit and fast as fuck." "Okay, so no." Stuart was kind of hot looking, and one of the cool kids, although not exactly in a good way. He had that don't-give-a-shit thing going on, which had some appeal to a girl who was sick to death of having to make safe choices. But after being out with him three times, she was starting to think there wasn't a whole lot going on inside that head of his. Grace hadn't told her father she was seeing Stuart, because he knew exactly who the boy was. She could recall her dad bringing up his name more than once, back when Stuart was in her dad's English class two years earlier. He'd be marking papers in the evening at the kitchen table and say something about this Stuart kid being thick as a plank, which her dad didn't do very often because he said it wasn't professional. He said it wasn't right to comment on the work of students his daughter might know, but once in a while, if the kid was dumb enough, he slipped. Grace remembered a joke her dad had made. For a long time, right up until this year, she'd thought she might like to be an astronaut, someone who went up to the International Space Station. Her dad had said maybe Stuart could be an astronaut, too, because all he did in class was take up space. Tonight, Grace had to wonder whether maybe her father had this boy nailed. One time, Stuart had asked her what she wanted to do when she finished school, and when she'd told him, he'd said, "Seriously? They only send guys up into space." "Hello?" she'd shot back. "Sally Ride? Svetlana Savitskaya? Roberta Bondar?" "You can't just make up names," he'd said. Oh well. It wasn't like she had to marry him. She just wanted to have some . . . fun. She wanted to take a few . . . risks. And wasn't that just what he'd asked if she'd like to do? "I have definitely never ridden in a Porsche." Stuart grinned. "Want to?" She shrugged. "Yeah, sure. Why not?" A cell phone started buzzing. "That's you," Stuart said. Grace dug her phone out of her purse, glanced at the screen. "Oh, jeez." "Who is it?" "My dad. I'm kind of supposed to be home by now." It was nearing ten. Adopting a deep baritone voice, Stuart said, "You get home right now, young lady, and do your homework." "Stop it." Even if her dad was a huge pain in the ass at times, she didn't like other people mocking him. She hated it, at school, when she'd hear other kids running her dad down. It was no picnic, going to the same school where your dad taught. All these extra expectations to be a good kid, have above-average marks. After all, they'd say, she's a teacher's daughter. Talk about a cross to bear. Not that her marks were bad. She did pretty well, especially in science, although sometimes she'd write a couple of wrong answers just so she wouldn't get a hundred percent and have the boys call her Amy Farrah Fowler, the nerdy scientist girl on that TV show. "You gonna talk to him or not?" Stuart asked as Grace's phone continued to buzz. She stared at it, tried to will it to stop, which it finally did after a dozen rings. But seconds later, a text. "Shit," she said. "He wants me to call home." "He's got you on a tight leash. Your mom a control freak, too?" *If she were home*, Grace thought. If she hadn't bailed on them two weeks ago, after the thing with the pot of boiling water. She'd gotten the bandage off only three days ago. She ignored his question and turned things back to the topic at hand. "Okay, so did your dad buy you a Porsche?" "God, no. You think he'd be driving around in a shitbox tank like this if he had?" "Then what?" "I know where I can find one and take it for a spin." "What are you talking about?" "I can get my hands on one in, like, ten minutes, one that we can borrow." "What, like at a car dealership?" Grace asked. "Aren't they all going to be closed?" Who'd let you take a test drive this time of night? Stuart shook his head. "No, at somebody's house." "Who do you know who's got a Porsche?" She grinned. "And how dumb would they have to be to let you borrow it?" "No, it's not like that. It's at a house that's empty this

week. It was on the list.”“What list?”“A list, okay? That my dad’s got. They try to keep it up-to-date, when people are on vacation, that kind of thing. I check out places where people are away, see what kind of wheels they got. One time I took out a Mercedes, just for, like, twenty minutes, and no one ever knew. Not a scratch on it. Put it back in the garage just the way it was.”“Who keeps a list like that?” Grace asked. “What’s your dad do? Does he do, like, security stuff, too?” The thing was, she had an inkling of what this boy’s father did and would have been surprised to learn it had anything to do with making people feel safer in their homes.“Yeah,” he said offhandedly. “That’s what he is. Security.”Grace kept thinking about the call and the text from her father. When she’d left the house, she’d told him she was going to a movie with another girl from her class. Her mom was going to drive. It was a seven o’clock show that was supposed to get out around nine, and she’d get a lift home after. What would her dad do if he found out she’d lied? Because as lies went, this was a doozy. Grace wasn’t with that girl, and they weren’t at the movies. Stuart—not her friend’s mother—was going to drop her off a block from home. Her father would never have let her go out with a boy who was old enough to drive. And certainly not this boy, this onetime pain-in-the-ass know-nothing student in her father’s class. With, as Grace suspected her father knew, a kind of questionable home background.“What you’re talking about sounds like stealing,” she said. Stuart shook his head. “No way. Stealing is when you take a car and keep it, or sell it to someone who packs it up in a big cargo container and ships it over to some guy in Arabia or something. But we’re only going to *borrow* it. Won’t even try to see what it can do, because the last thing you want when you’re borrowing somebody’s car is get a speeding ticket, you know?” Grace waited a long time before she said, “I guess it would be fun.” He started up the land yacht and headed west.

FIVE DETECTIVE Rona Wedmore was about to collapse into bed when she got the call that they’d found a body. Lamont was already under the covers, and asleep, but began to stir when he sensed his wife was putting her clothes back on. “Babe?” he said, turning over in bed. She never got tired of hearing him talk, even a single word like that. Didn’t matter what he said, not after she’d been through that period when he didn’t speak a word. Traumatized after coming back from Iraq, the things he’d seen, he’d gone kind of catatonic on her. Not speaking for months, until that night three years ago when she got shot in the shoulder and he showed up at the emergency room and said to her, “You okay?” It was nearly worth taking a bullet to hear those two words. No, actually, it *was* worth it. “I gotta go out,” she said. “Sorry I woke you.” “S’okay,” he said, the side of his face still pressed into the pillow. He knew better than to ask how long she was going to be. She’d be gone as long as she had to be gone. She locked up the house, got in her car, and, as she drove to the scene, thought this was just what Milford needed. Another murder. As if people here weren’t already on edge. Wedmore hoped it was something simple, like some guy getting stabbed in a bar fight. People dying in bar fights did not spread fear through a community. One idiot kills another idiot at a bar and most people shrug and think, What do you expect when a couple of yahoos have too much to drink? Sitting in the safety of their homes, the good people of Milford didn’t feel threatened by a crime like that. But the Bradley double homicide, that was a horse of a different color, as Wedmore’s late father liked to say. Two retired seniors shot in their living room? For no apparent reason? That freaked people out. Damned if Wedmore could get a handle on it. Neither Richard nor Esther Bradley had had any kind of criminal record. There wasn’t so much as a single unpaid parking ticket registered against either of them. They had a married daughter in Cleveland, who checked out just as clean, too. There was no marijuana grow op in the basement, no meth lab in an old Airstream out back. Yes, earlier in the evening Richard Bradley had stormed over to the house next door to tell some students to keep the noise down. At first, the kids were the only suspects Wedmore had. But the more she checked into them, the more convinced she became that they had nothing to do with killing the Bradleys. So who the hell did it, then? And why? The daughter had flown in from Cleveland, and when she wasn’t going to pieces about losing her parents, she’d helped Wedmore go through the house in an attempt to determine whether anything was missing. As far as the daughter could tell, nothing had been stolen, and besides, her parents didn’t have anything all that valuable anyway. And the killer, or killers, hadn’t even bothered to take cash or credit cards out of Richard Bradley’s wallet or Esther Bradley’s purse. Which tended to rule out drug addicts looking for a way to pay for their next fix. So maybe it was a thrill kill. But there was nothing ritualistic about the murders. No writing of “Helter Skelter” in the

victims' blood on the living room walls. Rona wondered whether the fact that they had both been teachers was a factor. One possible scenario: Some kid one of them had flunked years earlier believed that Richard or Esther had ruined his life. He'd come back for revenge. It seemed a bit out there to Wedmore, but in the absence of any other theory, she found herself reaching. And overreaching. But revenge killings were not generally so tidy. Richard and Esther Bradley had each been killed with a single bullet to the head. A cool and efficient double hit. No fingerprints left behind. People who killed for revenge tended to overdo it. Twenty stab wounds instead of three. Six bullets instead of one. So, okay. If it was a professional hit, why? Who the hell would put out a contract on two retired teachers? It was driving Detective Rona Wedmore crazy. Maybe another murder, if not what Milford needed, was exactly what she needed. Something to clear her head of the Bradley case. Focus elsewhere. That sometimes worked for her. It might mean that when she went back to the double homicide, she'd notice something she hadn't seen before. It wasn't, as it turned out, a bar that Wedmore had been summoned to, but Silver Sands State Park, forty-seven acres of sandy beaches, dunes, marshes, wetlands, and forest on the sound. She went south on Viscount, past the seniors apartment building on the right until the street ended, then turned left onto the roadway that paralleled the beach and the boardwalk. She took it right to the end, where three Milford police cars with rooftop lights twirling were parked. A uniformed male officer spotted her unmarked car and approached. "Detective Wedmore?" he asked as she got out of the car. "Yeah. What's up, Charlie?" "Same old. Wife and me just had a kid." "Hey, no kidding? Congrats. Boy, girl? Something else?" "A girl. Calling her Tabitha." "So, what've we got here?" "Dead male. White, early twenties. Looks like he took a couple in the back. Maybe he was running away." "Witnesses?" Officer Charlie shook his head. "Not even sure it happened here. Think he might have been dumped." Wedmore was pulling on a pair of gloves. "Lead the way." She followed the cop down along the boardwalk. It had taken quite a beating during Hurricane Sandy, just like everything else along here, but had now been pretty much repaired. "Over here." Charlie pointed into the tall grasses to the left of the boardwalk, away from the sound. There were several other cops there already. Some lights had been set up on stands. Wedmore made her way through the waist-high grass. She caught a whiff of decomposition, but there was a breeze coming in off the water, so she didn't feel the need to rub some Vicks beneath her nose. "Who found him?" she asked of anyone who would answer while she got a penlight out of her jacket pocket. A uniformed woman said, "Couple kids, making out, wandered this way. They ran out, called us, waited around on the boardwalk till we got here." "You let them go?" "We got names, all that. Their parents came and got them." The body was facedown. The man was probably two hundred pounds, short blond hair, oversized blue T-shirt and khaki shorts with half a dozen pockets. White socks and running shoes. Wedmore knelt down, caught a glimpse of something in a lower pocket. She fished out a wallet, opened it up, shined her penlight on a driver's license visible behind clear plastic. "Eli Richmond Goemann," she said. Wedmore studied the two bullet holes in the back of the blood-soaked shirt. "Roll him over." A couple of officers did the dirty work. "Hardly any blood," she said. "He didn't bleed out here. So yeah—where's Charlie? Anyway, what he said, that he was moved here, that seems likely. Joy been called?" The forensic examiner. Someone said, "Yes." Wedmore took a look through the wallet. Sixty-eight bucks in cash. Credit card receipts from bars, liquor stores. That'd give her a place to start. She took another look at the Connecticut driver's license. The man was born in March 1992, so that made him twenty-two. "Hello," she said. "What?" said someone. Wedmore kept staring at the license. At Eli Goemann's address. "Son of a bitch," she said. She knew the street. She'd been there recently. Eli's former address was just two numbers off from the house where Richard and Esther Bradley had been murdered. Wedmore was pretty sure that was the house where the students lived. SIX "YOU look all freaked-out," Stuart said to Grace on their way to the house where they were going to find a Porsche. "But believe me, it's going to be fine. There's, like, no risk at all." "How are you going to start it? Like on TV, you touch some wires together under the steering wheel?" "Shit, no, that's totally unrealistic. Like, the guy, he gets under there, finds the wires, and in two seconds he's got the car going. Doesn't happen. And even if you could get it to start, how are you supposed to unlock the steering column, right? You need a key for that. In the movies, yeah, *maybe* you could get the car running, but you could only drive it in a straight line. I hate stupid stuff like that in movies." "So you've got the key?" "Not

yet.” He patted her thigh with his right hand. “Okay, it’s just up the street here, but we’ll walk up half a block.” She hadn’t paid much attention to where they were going. But they were on a dead-end street now, in a nice part of town. Well-manicured lawns, mature trees, houses set back from the curb. Big driveways. “Come on,” Stuart said as she got out of the car slowly. They were a few steps away when the boy stopped suddenly. “Wait here a sec. Forgot something.” He went back to the Buick, opened the passenger door, put one knee on the seat, and leaned forward, as if rummaging around in the glove box for something. Whatever he found, he tucked it into the front waistband of his jeans and pulled his jacket over it. “What did you get?” Grace asked when he rejoined her. “Flashlight,” he said. He was reading house numbers. He stopped out front of a two-story Colonial. “This is it. Come on. We can’t stand around staring at it. People notice.” Except there was no one around. He grabbed her hand and pulled her up the drive. There was one light on over the front door, another at the side of the house, but he was pretty sure no one from any neighboring houses could see them. “Whose place is this?” she asked. “Somebody named Cummings or something. What a name. Someone says, Who are you?, you say, I’m Cumming. And they say, Oh, you that happy to see me?” He snorted. “Let’s double-check the garage first, make sure it’s there, that we haven’t come here for nothing.” He tightened his grip on her wrist. A garage big enough for two cars was around back, attached to the house. Four rectangular windows ran horizontally along the door at eye level. “I just want to make sure,” he said. He reached into his jacket for his cell phone, used the app that turned it into a light, and put it up to a window. “I thought you went back for a flashlight,” Grace said. “Jackpot,” he said, staring into the garage. “Can you see that? Look in there.” She looked. “I see a car.” Two, actually. A plain white four-door sedan and a low two-door sporty number in red. “That’s not a car,” the boy said. “That’s a 911. A goddamn Carrera. Now we just have to get inside and get the keys.” For the first time, Grace was starting to think this was a really, really bad idea. Her stomach started to float. “I don’t think so. I don’t like this.” “I told you, it’s okay. They’re away. We get in without tripping the alarm. Word is, they’ve got a dog—they’ve got it boarded or something for the week—but it means they won’t have motion detectors inside. Stupid pets set them off all the time.” She wrenched her wrist from his grip. “No. No way.” He whirled around. “What are ya gonna do? Walk home? Do you even know where we are? You gonna sit on the curb till I get back? Come on. I wasn’t able to get the key or find the pass code with my dad’s stuff, but that’s okay—we’ll get in through a basement window.” Grace’s phone dinged. Another text from her father. “Your old man again?” She nodded, then put the phone away as he turned away from her and knelt by a basement window. “The sensor should be in the corner here,” he said. He kicked in the glass. Grace jumped, put both hands to her mouth. “Just sounds loud because you’re standing there. No one’ll hear that. And there’s carpet on the basement floor.” Shards of glass lined the edge of the frame like sharks’ teeth. “I could fit through here, but I’d bleed to death after.” He reached into the pocket of his jeans and came out with a credit card that had a couple of short pieces of duct tape stuck to it, and then something shiny about the size of a matchbook. He looked back at the girl, unfolded the shiny item, and grinned. “Tin foil. We just slip that over the contact and hold it in place . . .” He had his hand inside the window, working on the upper right corner. “. . . and now, when we open the window, the alarm does . . . not . . . go . . . off.” His arm still snaked into the house, he cranked open the window, creating a larger opening, without any shards to catch him on the way in. “I gotta be honest—that’s the part that always scares me. I was ready to run if I had to.” He dropped his legs in first, supporting himself with his elbows, then dropped about a foot. “Piece of cake,” he said. “Come on.” She felt chilled, even though the summer night air hadn’t dipped below seventy. She tilted her head back, scanned the heavens. Despite the light pollution, she could make out stars. She remembered the telescope she used to have when she was a little girl. How she used to study the stars from her bedroom window, searching for asteroids, worried one of them would strike and wipe out her and her parents. The whole planet, too. But once you’d lost your whole family, the rest of the world seemed incidental. *Lost families*. Something of a theme in her household. And now her family was less than whole, what with her mom living in an apartment in an old house on the other side of Milford. Grace thought she’d have moved back by now, but nope. Was she trying to make a point, staying away this long? Was all this talk that she needed some time to “get her head together” the truth, or just some bullshit story to cover up the fact that she just didn’t love Grace and didn’t

want to be in the same house with her? Not that things weren't a little more calm these days, with just her dad at home. Her mom was so uptight, so worried some calamity would befall her daughter. Freaking out all the time. Wanting to know where she was every second of the day. Who she was seeing. Making her phone home every couple of hours. Wasn't that all supposed to be over? *Years ago?* After her mom had finally found out the truth about what had happened to her when *she* was a teenager? *Well, I'm fourteen now,* Grace thought. How long was this going to go on? Would her mom want her to wear one of those ankle bracelets when she went to college so she could monitor her every move? Grace sometimes thought her mother had her so convinced something awful would happen to her that she just wanted to get it over with. Bring it on. The anticipation was always worse than the event. Was that, Grace wondered, why she was with this boy now, about to do something very stupid? Because it would create some kind of crisis, force her mother to come home? *That's nuts. Like I want my mom to find out about this.* "Hey!" Stuart whispered, his head framed in the window. "You coming or what?" She got on her knees, back to the window, and worked her legs through. The boy grabbed hold of her and eased her down gently. "Don't turn on any lights," he said. "Like that's the first thing I'm gonna do," she said. They were in a basement rec room. Leather couch, two recliners, big flat-screen TV bolted to the wall. They crossed the carpet, glass crunching underfoot, and found their way to the stairs. From what she could see, it was a nice house. Modern furniture and decorations, plenty of leather and aluminum and glass. Not like her house. Her parents bought used, sometimes went to Ikea in New Haven. "Aren't the people gonna know someone was here when they find the window broken?" Grace asked. "So what? Won't matter then." He still had his phone in flashlight mode, guiding them through the house. "People usually keep their car keys somewhere near the front door, like in a drawer or a dish or something." They'd reached the front hall, where a long, narrow table with four drawers was pushed up against the wall. "Yeah," he said. "This'll be the spot. I can guarantee it." He pulled open the first one, held the illuminated phone over it. "Just gloves and shit here." When he pulled on the handle of the second drawer, it stuck, and he bumped himself with his hand as it broke free. Something heavy hit the marble floor. "What was that?" Grace asked. "I just dropped something." "What the—is that a *gun*?" "No, it's a tuna fish sandwich. The hell you think it is?" "You keep a fucking gun in your car?" "It's not my car, and it's not my gun. It's my dad's. Hold it for me while I do this." "I'm not holding—" "Just fucking do it!" Stuart said, shoving the gun at her. "You're starting to be a total pain in the ass—you know that?" "What are you gonna do? Shoot somebody?" "No, but if somebody tries to mess with us, they'll think twice when they see this." She still resisted as he pushed the gun on her, but she could tell he was getting angry. Would he hurt her if she didn't hold it? Punch her in the face? How would she explain that when she got home? A bloody nose, a black eye? "Okay," Grace said. The gun was heavy and warm and foreign in her hand. She couldn't remember ever holding one before. It felt as if it weighed fifty pounds, pulling her arm toward the floor.

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