

Harlan

COBEN

Bestselling author of TELL NO ONE and GONE FOR GOOD



NO SECOND CHANCE

'Suspense at its finest'

JEFFERY DEAVER

NO SECOND CHANCE



BCA 

This edition published 2003
by BCA
by arrangement with Orion Books
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group

Hardback CN 114036
Paperback CN 114127

Second reprint 2003

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Printed and bound in Germany by
GGP Media, Pössneck

**NO SECOND
CHANCE**

Books by Harlan Coben

DEAL BREAKER

DROP SHOT

FADE AWAY

BACK SPIN

ONE FALSE MOVE

THE FINAL DETAIL

DARKEST FEAR

TELL NO ONE

GONE FOR GOOD

chapter 1

When the first bullet hit my chest, I thought of my daughter.

At least, that is what I want to believe. I lost consciousness pretty fast. And, if you want to get technical about it, I don't even remember being shot. I know that I lost a lot of blood. I know that a second bullet skimmed the top of my head, though I was probably already out by then. I know that my heart stopped. But I still like to think that as I lay dying, I thought of Tara.

FYI: I saw no bright light or tunnel. Or if I did, I don't remember that either.

Tara, my daughter, is only six months old. She was lying in her crib. I wonder if the gunfire frightened her. It must have. She probably began to cry. I wonder if the familiar albeit grating sound of her cries somehow sliced through my haze, if on some level I actually heard her. But again I have no memory of it.

What I do remember, however, was the moment Tara was born. I remember Monica—that's Tara's mother—bearing down for one last push. I remember the head appearing. I was the first to see my daughter. We all know about life's forks in the road. We all know about opening one door and closing another, life cycles, the changes in seasons. But the moment your child is born . . . it's beyond surreal. You have walked through a *Star Trek*-like portal, a full-fledged reality transformer. Everything is different. You are different, a simple element hit with a startling catalyst and metamorphosed into one far more complex. Your world is gone; it shrinks down to the dimensions of—in this case, anyway—a six-pound fifteen-ounce mass.

Fatherhood confuses me. Yes, I know that with only six months on

the job, I am an amateur. My best friend, Lenny, has four kids. A girl and three boys. His oldest, Marianne, is ten, his youngest just turned one. With his face permanently set on happily harried and the floor of his SUV permanently stained with congealed fast food, Lenny reminds me that I know nothing yet. I agree. But when I get seriously lost or afraid in the realm of raising a child, I look at the helpless bundle in the crib and she looks up at me and I wonder what I would not do to protect her. I would lay down my life in a second. And truth be told, if push came to shove, I would lay down yours too.

So I like to think that as the two bullets pierced my body, as I collapsed onto the linoleum of my kitchen floor with a half-eaten granola bar clutched in my hand, as I lay immobile in a spreading puddle of my own blood, and yes, even as my heart stopped beating, that I still tried to do something to protect my daughter.

I came to in the dark.

I had no idea where I was at first, but then I heard the beeping coming from my right. A familiar sound. I did not move. I merely listened to the beeps. My brain felt as if it'd been marinated in molasses. The first impulse to break through was a primitive one: thirst. I craved water. I had never known a throat could feel so dry. I tried to call out, but my tongue had been dry-caked to the bottom of my mouth.

A figure entered the room. When I tried to sit up, hot pain ripped like a knife down my neck. My head fell back. And again, there was darkness.

When I awoke again, it was daytime. Harsh streaks of sunlight slashed through the venetian blinds. I blinked through them. Part of me wanted to raise my hand and block the rays, but exhaustion would not let the command travel. My throat was still impossibly parched.

I heard a movement and suddenly there was someone standing over me. I looked up and saw a nurse. The perspective, so different from the one I was used to, threw me. Nothing felt right. I was supposed to be the one standing looking down, not the other way around. A white hat—one of those small, harshly triangular numbers—sat like a bird's nest on the nurse's head. I've spent a great deal of my life working in a wide variety of hospitals, but I'm not sure I've ever seen a hat like that outside of TV or the movies. The nurse was heavyset and black.

"Dr. Seidman?"

Her voice was warm maple syrup. I managed a very slight nod.

The nurse must have read minds because she already had a cup of water in her hand. She put the straw between my lips and I sucked greedily.

"Slow down," she said gently.

I was going to ask where I was, but that seemed pretty obvious. I opened my mouth to find out what had happened, but again she was one step ahead of me.

"I'll go get the doctor," she said, heading for the door. "You just relax now."

I croaked, "My family . . ."

"I'll be right back. Try not to worry."

I let my eyes wander about the room. My vision had that medicated, shower-curtain haze. Still, there were enough stimuli getting through to make certain deductions. I was in a typical hospital room. That much was obvious. There was a drip bag and IV pump on my left, the tube snaking down to my arm. The fluorescent bulbs buzzed almost, but not quite, imperceptibly. A small TV on a swinging arm jutted out from the upper right-hand corner.

A few feet past the foot of the bed, there was a large glass window. I squinted but could not see through it. Still, I was probably being monitored. That meant I was in an ICU. That meant that whatever was wrong with me was something pretty bad.

The top of my skull itched, and I could feel a pull at my hair. Banded, I bet. I tried to check myself out, but my head really did not want to cooperate. Dull pain quietly boomed inside me, though I couldn't tell from where it originated. My limbs felt heavy, my chest encased in lead.

"Dr. Seidman?"

I flicked my eyes toward the door. A tiny woman in surgical scrubs complete with the shower cap stepped into the room. The top of the mask was untied and dangled down her neck. I am thirty-four years old. She looked about the same.

"I'm Dr. Heller," she said, stepping closer. "Ruth Heller." Giving me her first name. Professional courtesy, no doubt. Ruth Heller gave me a probing stare. I tried to focus. My brain was still sluggish, but I could

feel it sputtering to life. "You are at St. Elizabeth Hospital," she said in a properly grave voice.

The door behind her opened and a man stepped inside. It was hard to see him clearly through the shower-curtain haze, but I don't think I knew him. The man crossed his arms and leaned against the wall with practiced casualness. Not a doctor, I thought. You work with them long enough, you can tell.

Dr. Heller gave the man a cursory glance and then she turned her full attention back to me.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You were shot," she said. Then added: "Twice."

She let that hang for a moment. I glanced toward the man against the wall. He hadn't moved. I opened my mouth to say something, but Ruth Heller pressed on. "One bullet grazed the top of your head. The bullet literally scraped off your scalp, which, as you probably know, is incredibly rich with blood."

Yes, I knew. Serious scalp wounds bled like beheadings. Okay, I thought, that explained the itch on top of my head. When Ruth Heller hesitated, I prompted her. "And the second bullet?"

Heller let out a breath. "That one was a bit more complicated."

I waited.

"The bullet entered your chest and nicked the pericardial sac. That caused a large supply of blood to leak into the space between your heart and the sac. The EMTs had trouble locating your vital signs. We had to crack your chest—"

"Doc?" the leaning man interrupted—and for a moment, I thought he was talking to me. Ruth Heller stopped, clearly annoyed. The man peeled himself off the wall. "Can you do the details later? Time is of the essence here."

She gave him a scowl, but there wasn't much behind it. "I'll stay here and observe," she said to the man, "if that's not a problem."

Dr. Heller faded back and now the man loomed over me. His head was too big for his shoulders so that you feared his neck would collapse from the weight of it. His hair was crew cut all around, except in the front, where it hung down in a Caesar line above his eyes. A soul patch, an ugly smear of growth, sat on his chin like a burrowing insect. All in all, he looked like a member of a boy band gone to serious seed. He

smiled down at me, but there was no warmth behind it. "I'm Detective Bob Regan of the Kasselton Police Department," he said. "I know you're confused right now."

"My family—" I began.

"I'll get to that," he interrupted. "But right now, I need to ask you some questions, okay? Before we get into the details of what happened."

He waited for a response. I tried my best to clear the cobwebs and said, "Okay."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

I scanned my memory banks. I remembered waking up that morning, getting dressed. I remembered looking in on Tara. I remembered turning the knob on her black-n-white mobile, a gift from a colleague who insisted it would help stimulate a baby's brain or something. The mobile hadn't moved or bleated out its tinny song. The batteries were dead. I'd made a mental note to put in new ones. I headed downstairs after that.

"Eating a granola bar," I said.

Regan nodded as if he'd expected this answer. "You were in the kitchen?"

"Yes. By the sink."

"And then?"

I tried harder, but nothing came. I shook my head. "I woke up once before. At night. I was here, I think."

"Nothing else?"

I reached out again but to no avail. "No, nothing."

Regan flipped out a pad. "Like the doc here told you, you were shot twice. You have no recollection of seeing a gun or hearing a shot or anything like that?"

"No."

"That's understandable, I guess. You were in a bad way, Marc. The EMTs thought you were a goner."

My throat felt dry again. "Where are Tara and Monica?"

"Stay with me, Marc." Regan was staring down at the pad, not at me. I felt the dread begin to press down on my chest. "Did you hear a window break?"

I felt groggy. I tried to read the label on the drip bag to see what they were numbing me with. No go. Pain medication, at the very least.

Probably morphine in the IV pump. I tried to fight through the effects. "No," I said.

"You're sure? We found a broken window near the rear of the house. It may have been how the perpetrator gained entry."

"I don't remember a window breaking," I said. "Do you know who—"

Regan cut me off. "Not yet, no. That's why I'm here asking these questions. To find out who did this." He looked up from his pad. "Do you have any enemies?"

Did he really just ask me that? I tried to sit up, tried to gain some sort of angle on him, but there was no way that was going to happen. I did not like being the patient, on the wrong end of the bed, if you will. They say doctors make the worst patients. This sudden role reversal is probably why.

"I want to know about my wife and daughter."

"I understand that," Regan said, and something in his tone ran a cold finger across my heart. "But you can't afford the distraction, Marc. Not right yet. You want to be helpful, right? Then you need to stay with me here." He went back to the pad. "Now, what about enemies?"

Arguing with him any further seemed futile or even harmful, so I grudgingly acquiesced. "Someone who would shoot me?"

"Yes."

"No, no one."

"And your wife?" His eyes settled hard on me. A favorite image of Monica—her face lighting up when we first saw Raymondkill Falls, the way she threw her arms around me in mock fear as the water crashed around us—rose like an apparition. "Did she have enemies?"

I looked at him. "Monica?"

Ruth Heller stepped forward. "I think that might be enough for now."

"What happened to Monica?" I asked.

Dr. Heller met up with Detective Regan, standing shoulder to shoulder. Both looked at me. Heller started to protest again, but I stopped her.

"Don't give me this protect-the-patient crap," I tried to shout, fear and fury battling against whatever had put my brain in this fuzz. "Tell me what happened to my wife."

"She's dead," Detective Regan said. Just like that. Dead. My wife. Monica. It was as if I hadn't heard him. The word couldn't reach me.

"When the police broke into your home, you had both been shot. They were able to save you. But it was too late for your wife. I'm sorry."

There was another quick flash now—Monica at Martha's Vineyard, on the beach, tan bathing suit, that black hair whipping across those cheekbones, giving me the razor-sharp smile. I blinked it away. "And Tara?"

"Your daughter," Regan began with a quick throat-clear. He looked at his pad again, but I don't think he planned on writing anything down. "She was home that morning, correct? I mean, at the time of the incident?"

"Yes, of course. Where is she?"

Regan closed the pad with a snap. "She was not at the scene when we arrived."

My lungs turned to stone. "I don't understand."

"We originally hoped that maybe she was in the care of a family member or friend. A baby-sitter even, but . . ." His voice faded.

"Are you telling me you don't know where Tara is?"

There was no hesitation this time. "Yes, that's correct."

It felt as if a giant hand were pushing down on my chest. I squeezed my eyes shut and fell back. "How long?" I asked.

"Has she been missing?"

"Yes."

Dr. Heller started speaking too quickly. "You have to understand. You were very seriously injured. We were not optimistic you would survive. You were on a respirator. A lung collapsed. You also contracted sepsis. You're a doctor, so I know I don't have to explain to you how serious that is. We tried to slow down the meds, help you wake up—"

"How long?" I asked again.

She and Regan exchanged another glance, and then Heller said something that ripped the air out of me all over again. "You've been out for twelve days."

chapter 2

“We’re doing all we can,” Regan said in a voice that sounded too rehearsed, as if he’d been standing over my bed while I was unconscious, working on his delivery. “As I told you, we were not sure we had a missing child at first. We lost valuable time there, but we’ve recovered now. Tara’s photo has been sent out to every police station, airport, tollbooth plaza, bus and train station—anything like that within a hundred-mile radius. We’ve run background profiles on similar abduction cases, see if we can find a pattern or a suspect.”

“Twelve days,” I repeated.

“We have a trace on your various phones—home, business, cell—”

“Why?”

“In case someone calls in a ransom demand,” he said.

“Have there been any calls?”

“Not yet, no.”

My head dropped back to the pillow. Twelve days. I’d been lying in this bed for twelve days while my baby girl was . . . I pushed the thought away.

Regan scratched at his beard. “Do you remember what Tara was wearing that morning?”

I did. I had developed something of a morning routine—wake up early, tiptoe toward Tara’s crib, stare down. A baby is not all joy. I know that. I know that there are moments of mind-numbing boredom. I know that there are nights when her screams work on my nerve endings like a cheese grater. I don’t want to glorify life with an infant. But I liked my new morning routine. Looking down at Tara’s tiny form fortified me somehow. More than that, this act was, I guess, a form of rap-

ture. Some people find rapture in a house of worship. Me—and yeah, I know how corny this sounds—I found rapture in that crib.

“A pink one-piece with black penguins,” I said. “Monica got it at Baby Gap.”

He jotted it down. “And Monica?”

“What about her?”

His face was back in the pad. “What was she wearing?”

“Jeans,” I said, remembering the way they slid over Monica’s hips, “and a red blouse.”

Regan jotted some more.

I said, “Are there—I mean, do you have any leads?”

“We’re still investigating all avenues.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Regan just looked at me. There was too much weight in that stare.

My daughter. Out there. Alone. For twelve days. I thought of her eyes, the warm light only a parent sees, and I said something stupid. “She’s alive.”

Regan tilted his head like a puppy hearing a new sound.

“Don’t give up,” I said.

“We won’t.” He continued with the curious look.

“It’s just that . . . are you a parent, Detective Regan?”

“Two girls,” he said.

“It’s stupid, but I’d know.” The same way I knew the world would never be the same when Tara was born. “I’d know,” I said again.

He did not reply. I realized that what I was saying—especially coming from a man who scoffs at notions of ESP or the supernatural—was ridiculous. I knew that this “sense” merely came from want. You want to believe so badly that your brain rearranges what it sees. But I clung to it anyway. Right or wrong, it felt like a lifeline.

“We’ll need some more information from you,” Regan said. “About you, your wife, friends, finances—”

“Later.” It was Dr. Heller again. She moved forward as if to block me from his gaze. Her voice was firm. “He needs to rest.”

“No, now,” I said to her, upping the firm-o-meter a notch past hers. “We need to find my daughter.”

Monica had been buried at the Portman family plot on her father’s estate. I missed her funeral, of course. I don’t know how I felt about

that, but then again, my feelings for my wife, in those stark moments when I was honest with myself, have always been muddled. Monica had that beauty of privilege, what with the too-fine cheekbones, straight silk-black hair, and that country-club lockjaw that both annoyed and aroused. Our marriage was an old-fashioned one—shotgun. Okay, that's an exaggeration. Monica was pregnant. I was fence-sitting. The upcoming arrival tilted me into the matrimonial pasture.

I heard the funeral details from Carson Portman, Monica's uncle and the only member of her family who kept in touch with us. Monica had loved him dearly. Carson sat at my hospital bedside with his hands folded in his lap. He looked very much like your favorite college professor—the thick-lensed spectacles, the nearly shedding tweed coat, and the overgrown shock of Albert Einstein-meets-Don King hair. But his brown eyes glistened as he told me in his sad baritone that Edgar, Monica's father, had made sure that my wife's funeral was a “small, tasteful affair.”

Of that, I had no doubt. The small part, at least.

Over the next few days I had my share of visitors at the hospital. My mother—everyone called her Honey—exploded into my room every morning as if fuel propelled. She wore Reebok sneakers of pure white. Her sweatsuit was blue with gold trim, as if she coached the St. Louis Rams. Her hair, though neatly coifed, had the brittle of too many colorings, and there was the whiff of a last cigarette about her. Mom's makeup did little to disguise the anguish of losing her only grandchild. She had amazing energy, staying by my bedside day after day and managing to exude a steady stream of hysteria. This was good. It was as though she was, in part, being hysterical for me, and thus, in a strange way, her eruptions kept me calm.

Despite the room's nearly supernova heat—and my constant protestations—Mom would put an extra blanket over me when I was asleep. I woke up one time—my body drenched in sweat, naturally—to hear my mother telling the black nurse with the formal hat about my previous stay at St. Elizabeth's when I was only seven.

“He had salmonella,” Honey stated in a conspiratorial whisper that was only slightly louder than a bullhorn. “You never smelled diarrhea like that. It was just pouring out of him. His stench practically seeped into the wallpaper.”

“He ain't all roses now either,” the nurse replied.

The two women shared a laugh.

On Day Two of my recovery, Mom was standing over my bed when I awoke.

“Remember this?” she said.

She was holding a stuffed Oscar the Grouch someone had given me during that salmonella stay. The green had faded to a light mint. She looked at the nurse. “This is Marc’s Oscar,” she explained.

“Mom,” I said.

She turned her attention back to me. The mascara was a little too heavy today, crinkling into the wrinkle lines. “Oscar kept you company back then, remember? He helped you get better.”

I rolled and then closed my eyes. A memory came to me. I had gotten the salmonella from raw eggs. My father used to add them into milkshakes for the protein. I remember the way pure terror had gripped me when I’d first learned that I would have to stay in the hospital overnight. My father, who had recently ruptured his Achilles tendon playing tennis, was in a cast and constant pain. But he saw my fear and as always, he made the sacrifice. He worked all that day at the plant and spent all night in a chair by my hospital bed. I stayed at St. Elizabeth’s for ten days. My father slept in that chair every night of them.

Mom suddenly turned away, and I could see she was remembering the same thing. The nurse quickly excused herself. I put a hand on my mother’s back. She didn’t move, but I could feel her shudder. She stared down at the faded Oscar in her hands. I slowly took it from her.

“Thank you,” I said.

Mom wiped her eyes. Dad, I knew, would not come to the hospital this time, and while I am sure my mother had told him what had happened, there was no way to know if he even understood. My father had had his first stroke when he was forty-one years old—one year after staying those nights with me at the hospital. I was eight at the time.

I also have a younger sister, Stacy, who is either a “substance abuser” (for the more politically correct) or “crack-head” (for the more accurate). I sometimes look at old pictures from before my dad’s stroke, the ones with the young, confident family of four and the shaggy dog and the well-groomed lawn and the basketball hoop and the coal-overloaded, lighter fluid-saturated barbecue. I look for hints of the future in my sister’s front-teeth-missing smile, her shadow self perhaps, a sense of foreboding. But I see none. We still have the house, but it’s like a sagging

movie prop. Dad is still alive, but when he fell, everything shattered Humpty-Dumpty style. Especially Stacy.

Stacy had not visited or even called, but nothing she does surprises me anymore.

My mother finally turned to face me. I gripped the faded Oscar a little tighter as a thought struck me anew: It was just us again. Dad was pretty much a vegetable. Stacy was hollowed out, gone. I reached out and took Mom's hand, feeling both the warmth and the more recent thickening of her skin. We stayed like that until the door opened. The same nurse leaned into the room.

Mom straightened up and said, "Marc also played with dolls,"

"Action figures," I said, quick on the correction. "They were action figures, not dolls."

My best friend, Lenny, and his wife, Cheryl, also stopped by the hospital every day. Lenny Marcus is a big-time trial lawyer, though he also handles my small-time stuff like the time I fought a speeding ticket and the closing on our house. When he graduated and began working for the county prosecutor, friends and opponents quickly dubbed Lenny "the Bulldog" because of his aggressive courtroom behavior. Somewhere along the line, it was decided that the name was too mild for Lenny, so now they called him "Cujo." I've known Lenny since elementary school. I'm the godfather of his son Kevin. And Lenny is Tara's godfather.

I haven't slept much. I lie at night and stare at the ceiling and count the beeps and listen to the hospital night sounds and try very much not to let my mind wander to my little daughter and the endless array of possibilities. I am not always successful. The mind, I have learned, is indeed a dark, snake-infested pit.

Detective Regan visited later with a possible lead.

"Tell me about your sister," he began.

"Why?" I said too quickly. Before he could elaborate, I held up my hand to stop him. I understood. My sister was an addict. Where drugs roamed, so too did a certain criminal element. "Were we robbed?" I asked.

"We don't think so. Nothing seems to be missing, but the place was tossed."

"Tossed?"

"Someone made a mess. Any thoughts on why?"

"No."