

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LINWOOD BARCLAY

A NOVEL

THE LIE

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[is] a master of pace,
structure, and suspense."
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author of *Cold Storage*

MAKER

**THE
LIE
MAKER** *A NOVEL*

LINWOOD BARCLAY

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

For Neetha

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About the Publisher

One

“He could have someone out there,” the man said, pulling back the front window curtains a tentative inch. “Watching the house right now.”

He was careful not to step directly in front of the glass as he peeked outside. It was raining. Streetlights reflected in the puddles. He ran his fingers nervously through his thick, dark hair. His handsome features were undercut by the fear in his eyes.

He wasn’t used to being afraid. He was unaccustomed to the role of prey.

“He’ll have found someone else to do his dirty work,” he said. “Jesus, when are they going to get here?” He looked at his watch. “They’re ten minutes late. What the hell’s keeping them?”

He’d been directing his comments to his wife, a reedy, auburn-haired twig of a woman who looked ready to break into several pieces. She’d made several trips back and forth to the kitchen, trying to keep busy.

“Do you think they’ll want coffee?” she asked.

“They’re not going to want any goddamn coffee,” he snapped.

She took a seat on the flowered couch, crossed her right leg over her left, then her left over her right. Some movement on the stairs caught her eye, and she spotted the nine-year-old boy sitting on one of the upper steps, watching from between the railings. A tear running down his cheek.

“Go upstairs,” she told the boy.

“I want to say good—”

“Go to your room and close the door,” she said, flinging her arm, pointing up. As she brought her arm back, she wiped a tear from her cheek.

The boy sniffed and retreated from view, waited until his mother was no longer looking his way, then resumed his position. From where he sat, he could see the front door, the three suitcases sitting there, his father still

watching the street. His mother was up again, walking around the couch, going into the kitchen. He could hear the rattling of cups, silverware.

When she reappeared, her husband was still standing near the window.

“Get away from there,” she said.

He let the curtain fall and stepped away.

“It’s not too late, Rose,” he said. “The two of you can still come. They’ve prepared the documents, in case you change your mind.”

She stood behind the couch, her hands resting atop the cushions, as though using it as a barrier. Her jaw hardened and her eyes moistened.

“If you’re desperate for company, why don’t you take your father?” she said. “Maybe he’d like to start all over again with you. *He’s* all alone.”

“I can live without ever seeing him again. It’s been years. But the three of us, we belong together. Once I walk out that door, once they put me in the car, that’s it. It’s not safe, staying behind. If he can’t get to me, he’ll come after you.”

“And what would be the point of that?” she asked. “To get back at you? You’ve already washed your hands of us. And we certainly won’t be able to tell him anything. You could be in Timbuktu for all we know. They can pull out all my toenails if they want, but I won’t be able to tell them a thing. We’ll take our chances. Your new friends, they’ll keep an eye on us.”

He took a step toward her, his face pleading. “I know I fucked up, that it’s my fault, but we could start over. You, me, our son.”

“He has his friends.”

“He’ll make *new* friends!” the man said. “They’re not moving me to Mars.”

“No, more likely Butthole, Nebraska, running a bowling alley or picking up trash.”

“It’s better than being dead.”

She bit her lip. “Is it?”

“And I don’t have to take some menial, mindless job. I’ll find something . . . challenging. Meaningful.”

She rolled her eyes as he took another look at his watch. “Christ, where the hell are they? What if—”

The lights went out.

“Oh, shit,” the man said. “Shit shit shit.” He rushed to the window again, peeked out. “Looks like the whole street.”

With the streetlights out of commission, the living room was plunged into darkness.

“What’s happening?” the boy sitting on the stairs asked.

“Go to your room!” his mother shouted, unable to hide the fear in her voice. “Get under the bed!”

“It’s him,” her husband whispered. “Jesus Christ, it’s him. He’s killed the power. He’s here.” He scurried through the unlit room, rounding the corner to the front door, banging his hip on the wainscoting. He checked that the door was locked, slipped the dangling chain into place, shouting to his wife, “The back door!”

She ran blindly from the living room into the kitchen. Seconds later, she called out: “It’s locked!”

And then, as suddenly as they’d gone off, the lights came back on. The man froze, listening. All he could hear was the sound of the rain outside.

His wife stepped silently back into the living room. She whispered, “It’s the storm. It’s just the storm.”

He looked through the diamond-shaped window in the door, saw that the streetlights were back on, too.

“Maybe,” he said uncertainly.

He turned, looked at his wife, his eyes pleading, but no words came.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head slowly. “I’ve nothing left to give.” She looked toward the stairs, saw the boy sitting there.

Outside, sounds. Car doors opening and closing.

The man pulled back the curtain. “Finally.” The woman went to the window to see for herself. A long, black sedan sat at the curb, lights on, windshield wipers flapping back and forth. A woman opened the front passenger door and got out, glanced up for half a second at the light rain coming down. The driver stayed behind the wheel. A second, identical car pulled up behind the first. Two men in black suits got out, took up watchful positions. If they were aware of the rain, they didn’t show it.

Backup.

The woman who’d emerged from the first car walked toward the front door. She was clearly the agent in charge. The man turned back the dead bolt, undid the chain, and opened the door before she had a chance to ring the bell, swinging it wide, eyeing her accusingly.

“You’re late,” he said. “The power just went out. It could have been him.”

The woman stepped past him and into the front hall, glanced down at the three suitcases sitting there.

“Is this everything?” she asked.

“You said that was all I could take,” he said. “Why are you late?”

The woman, stone faced, ignored the question. “Sir, you need to get in the car, quickly.”

His face cracked. “Why? What’s going on?”

The woman hesitated, then said, “Our pickup plans may be compromised.”

“Jesus Christ,” the man said. Without thinking, he put his hand to the back of his neck, as though warding off an invisible dart.

“It may be nothing. But we’ve taken precautions. We have cars at each end of the street, blocking it off. That said, you need to get moving.”

The agent looked at the wife. “Ma’am? Any change of heart?”

She did a slow head shake.

The agent spotted the boy at the top of the stairs, then said to his mother, “We’ll have someone watching the house for the foreseeable future. They know there’s nothing to be gained by intimidating or threatening you. They think things can’t get worse for them, but they can.”

The woman said nothing.

“It’s time,” the agent said, standing clear of the open door.

The man turned to pick up his bags and saw that his son, dressed in pale-blue pajamas, had reached the bottom of the stairs and was standing there mournfully. The boy’s cheeks were wet with tears and his arms hung limply at his sides.

“Hey,” the father said, ignoring the bags and kneeling down in front of the boy.

“Sir,” the agent said, “we need to move.”

“Just . . . a minute,” he said over his shoulder, then turned back to the boy and gripped him by the shoulders. “So, you’re going to be okay, you know?”

The boy sniffed.

“I need you to be strong for your mom. You’re the new man of the house, you realize that, right?” He forced a smile. “I know you can do it. Because you’re tough.”

The boy said something, his voice no more than a whisper.

“What’s that?”

“I want to come with you,” the boy said.

“You can’t, sport. Your mom doesn’t want to come, and if that’s the way it has to be, you’re better off with her.”

“When will you come back?” the boy asked.

The man felt something swell in his throat. “Just know that I’ll be thinking about you, all the time, every minute of every day. That’s a promise.” He smiled ruefully, brought his voice down to a whisper.

“Maybe I’ll check in on you from time to time.”

The boy sniffed, looked his father in the eye and asked, “Why can’t you

just tell them you're sorry?"

He smiled. "I wish it was that simple." Still on one knee, he said, "Let me give you a little going-away gift. Something to remember me by." He reached around into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. A simple billfold made of brown leather. He opened it up briefly, exposing a couple of bills. A ten and a five.

"There's a few bucks in there," he said. "Enough for some comics or ice cream or something."

He took his son's hand and placed the wallet in it. The boy studied it, like it was some strange, unidentifiable artifact.

"What about your driver's license?" the boy asked.

"They'll get me a new one of those. New Social Security card, too, probably even a library card. Along with my new name, whatever it turns out to be."

"You won't be Dad anymore?"

The man looked as though he might crumble. He took a moment.

"I'll always be Dad," he said. He folded the child's fingers around the wallet. "You hold on tight to it, just in case. You never know, maybe one day I'll come back for it."

"Sir." The agent was getting antsy.

"Gotta run," the man said, pulling the boy into his arms and giving him a squeeze. "I love you, sport." He held the boy in his arms for a good ten seconds before standing. He tousled the boy's hair, gave him a thumbs-up, and turned to face the agent.

His voice breaking, he said, "Let's do this."

His wife remained by the window and made no move to give him a farewell embrace. She mouthed "Goodbye."

"Okay, then," he said, grabbing one bag with each hand, which left one on the floor. He looked at the agent, as though expecting a hand. When she didn't move, he managed to tuck the third under his arm.

"So, anyway," he said to no one in particular, and stepped out into the rain. The agent followed, and the wife closed the door.

She looked at her son. "Off you go. I'll come up and see you in a minute." She went into the kitchen, where she could be heard opening and closing the fridge, followed by the sound of ice cubes being dropped into a glass.

Instead of heading for the stairs, he went to the front door, quietly opened it, and ran out into the rain. He caught up to his father just as he was about to get into the back seat of the lead car.

"Wait!" he cried.

He threw his arms around his father. The man knelt and went to wipe tears from the boy's cheeks, but they were indistinguishable from the raindrops.

"Son, I have to—"

"You have to tell me," the boy said. "You have to tell me why you can't tell them you're sorry."

"Sorry isn't good enough sometimes," his father said.

"What did you do?"

The father hesitated. The agent had settled into the front passenger seat to avoid the rain, but powered down her window to listen.

"You'll find out eventually," he said. "Your dad's not a good person. Your dad killed people, son. That's what I did. I killed people. Sorry just doesn't cut it."

He gave the boy a final hug, got in the car, and closed the door. The boy watched him through the glass and stood there in the rain until the car had reached the end of the street and turned the corner.

Two Jack

I should have been more excited, first day at a new job.

It wasn't as if I didn't care. I was glad to have found something. I told myself it was temporary. Didn't mention that in the interview, of course. No prospective employer wants to think you're viewing a position with them as a stopgap, although I think the guy who interviewed me, Terry, probably suspected it.

Like when he asked me, point blank, "So, Mr. Givins, why on earth would you want to work for us?"

It was a good question.

Terry Crawford was the managing editor for a stable of trade magazines: *Contractor Life* (aimed at the construction industry), *RV Life* (for recreational vehicle manufacturers and enthusiasts), *Plumbing Life* (no explanation necessary), and so on. When I had observed, in the interview, the recurring theme in his magazines' titles, he had grinned and said, "We're high on life here."

He'd added, "Doesn't strike me that this would be the kind of place where you'd want to put your skills to work. Not that you aren't qualified. Getting two books written up in the *New York Times*? That's pretty impressive."

So he had done a bit of internet sleuthing. The books had been written under a pseudonym, but I'd been revealed as the author in one of those reviews. Someone at the publishing house must have leaked it at some point, although it created little buzz in the literary world. Good reviews in the *Times* had not led to a spot on the paper's bestseller lists. My first book, *Avoidably Inevitable*, had sunk like a stone. My second, *A Life Discontinued*, also garnered some praise, but the sales were only

marginally better than the first book. My third, *Lost and Unfounded*, had yet to find a home despite the efforts of my literary agent, Harry Breedlove. I'd told him just before I interviewed with Terry that if he couldn't sell that book I was putting the full-time novelist thing aside indefinitely.

I could live with that if I had to. I'd only been out of the conventional workforce a couple of years. I'd spent a few at a medium-sized daily Massachusetts newspaper, writing as well as working on the desk, editing stories, writing headlines, assigning reporters. I liked that world, and was lucky to have worked in it, given that I had no journalistic background. I'd arrived at the right time, when the paper was short staffed and the editor wasn't fussy.

But the timing wasn't entirely fortuitous. The industry, fighting a losing battle with the internet for readers and advertisers, was already in decline, and in the short time since I'd left, had contracted even further. Even before I left the *Worcester Tribune*, it had gone through two rounds of layoffs. The pandemic had made things even worse. Reporters had been working from home for so long, several papers dispensed with their newsrooms altogether and sold the buildings. The publishers were so encouraged by how much money that saved them that they started to look for more ways to make a profit, so they slashed their reporting staffs. It was like trying to save money at a restaurant by firing the cooks.

Anyway, getting a job at a paper again was out of the question, so here I was looking to work for a publisher of trade magazines. But I didn't feel I could tell Terry he was my last hope, even if he was. I was running out of money.

"The books are kind of a side thing," I said. "I'm looking for something steady."

"Gotta keep the paycheck coming in, right?" Terry said. "Married? Got kids?"

"No," I said after a second's hesitation. "Not married. No kids."

"You'd oversee production of five magazines," he said. "Each comes out six times a year."

"Sounds manageable," I said. "I can turn things around in a hurry. I'm pretty meticulous about getting things right."

Terry smiled. "Well, that's great, although to be honest, it's not that big a deal since I don't even know how many of our subscribers read these things, unless it's an actual story about them. The way we work it is, with a lot of our publications, we assign stories based on who buys ads."

The dreaded "advertorial." Content based on what someone was willing

to pay. So much for objective journalism. I wasn't going to let that worry me today.

Terry's operation was based in Everett, one of Boston's suburban so-called cities, just across the line from Charlestown. I already had an apartment there, so there wouldn't be much of a commute. I'd moved closer to the city not long after I'd left the Worcester paper to have more of a cultural life—movies, theater, music—as well as to be nearer to Lana Wilshire.

Well, almost nearer. Lana was no suburban girl. She lived in the heart of the city, in a fancy condo that overlooked the harbor and, on the other side of the bay, Logan Airport. She was one of the *Boston Star* newspaper's senior reporters, and we'd met a few years earlier when she was covering a winter plane crash near Rutland, northwest of Worcester. I was on that story, too, and while we were waiting for a press briefing I offered to share a warm car with her while her photographer was elsewhere with the vehicle they'd driven up in. An hour and a half later we had each other's phone numbers and email addresses and had arranged to meet for dinner the next weekend in Boston.

We'd seen each other off and on for a few months. The relationship went quiet for a while, and then we picked things up again. Things had been semi-serious for the better part of a year. Neither of us had proposed any kind of major step, but it was in the back of my mind.

I'd just parked my car to go in for my first day on the new job when she sent me a text, which I only noticed when I took my phone out to check the time. I'd muted my phone the night before and forgotten to flip it back on that morning. I'd missed a call from the place I was about to walk into.

Lana had texted: Got your Funk & Wagnalls?

An inside joke, referencing a long-extinct American dictionary and encyclopedia publisher. I grinned, and thought about composing some witty retort before I headed into the building, but settled on:

Talk soon.

Once the phone was tucked into my pocket and before I went into the building, I did something I'd done out of habit for as long as I could remember. I did a visual sweep of my surroundings. Scanned the parking lot and the street in both directions. It was second nature to me, and I did it without really thinking about it.

I didn't know where my office was supposed to be, so I went straight to Terry's.

He was behind his desk when I rapped on the jamb of his open door. “Jack Givins, reporting for duty.”

It was far from glamorous, his office. This wasn't *The New Yorker* or *Vanity Fair*, although, for all I know, they're a mess, too. His desk was littered with papers and folders, all crowded around a desktop and a laptop. Gray filing cabinets lined the walls, and half a dozen calendars from companies his magazines had done stories on decorated the walls, hanging from pushpins, not one of them turned to the right month. It was the kind of office that, forty years ago, someone would have plastered with centerfolds from *Playboy*, but even *Contractor Life* had moved on from those days.

Terry was a small guy, maybe five-four. Slight, with a receding hairline. His thick-rimmed glasses were his dominant facial feature.

“Oh, hey, Jack,” Terry said. “Tried to call you.” He didn't look well. Like he'd had a bad chili dog the night before and it was just now catching up with him. “Have a seat.”

“Everything okay?” I asked.

A nervous laugh. He glanced at his desktop monitor, then the laptop, not looking for anything in particular. Killing time. “The thing is, there have been some developments.”

“Developments,” I said.

“I've been thinking, and I don't believe this is a good fit for you. I mean, it's great for us, because you've got the skills, you know, but with your background, I think we'd be holding you back.”

“Shit, Terry, you firing me before I've even started?”

He kept trying to avoid eye contact. “I mean, if you were to be honest with me, you'd only be taking this job until something better came along.”

“If I gave you that impression,” I said, “then I apologize. It was never my intention. The truth is, Terry, I need this job.”

His face went grim. “Then that makes this even harder. We were doing a review, and we've lost a lot of subscriptions postpandemic. That wouldn't be so bad, but that corresponded with a significant drop in advertising. Everyone's pulling back. Take *Screener Life*, for example. That one's gone off a cliff.”

That was their magazine for projectionists and movie theater owners. It made sense that that one would take a hit, given that film lovers had been fearful, for a couple of years, of going to a movie and catching something from the somebody sitting next to them.

“Only one we got making any money is *RV Life*. During the pandemic, so many people were hesitant to fly or leave the country, they went out and

bought Winnebagos. And with the way gas prices are, that one's probably gonna be on life support soon. Anyway, what I'm getting around to saying is, I've got no money in the budget for your position anymore."

I sat there, numb. Surprised, for sure, but also, at some level, relieved. I hadn't been lying when I told him I needed this job. I had under five grand in my checking and savings. I wasn't looking forward to writing and editing stories about drywall and advances in water-saving toilet technology and peel-and-stick tile, but life is full of compromises, of making decisions we don't want to make.

"Sorry," he said.

I stood.

"Okay, then," I said. I was holding a quick debate in my head about whether I wanted to make this difficult for him. "I'm not sure this is legal, Terry."

"Yeah, well, I looked into that, Jack, and in this state, unless you're fired because of your gender or race or a disability, or you're pregnant, an employer can pretty much fire anyone for any reason and there's nothing you can do about it, even on the first day." He tried to lighten the mood in the room. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

I headed for the door.

"Funny thing," Terry said, and I stopped and slowly turned. "I guess you figured out I googled you, which is how I found out about those two books you wrote. And some stuff came up about when you worked at that paper up in Worcester. But there's not much online from before that."

"Is there a question?" I asked.

"Were you, like, living off the grid or something?"

"Maybe I was just minding my own business," I said. "You might want to give it a try."

I left. I was just getting into the car when I got another text from Lana:

Where should we go to celebrate tonight?

Three

The dog was at the door, whining and scratching.

“Jesus Christ, didn’t we just go out?” asked Willard Bentley. Only moments earlier, he’d settled into the overstuffed leather chair in his study with his evening brandy, about to resume reading *A Tale of Two Cities*. Bentley had promised himself that when he retired, he would take his wife, Audrey, on a round-the-world trip, and finally get to reading some of the classics he’d always intended to conquer but never managed to. For the trip, he’d bought one of those devices you could download books into so he wouldn’t have to lug a bunch of heavy tomes from country to country.

But that trip never happened. The flights had all been arranged, the hotels booked, new luggage purchased. They were going to stay a week in each location, starting in London, then on to Paris, then Mumbai, followed by Hong Kong, Sydney, Christchurch, Hawaii, and then back home to Boston.

A week before their planned departure, Audrey got sick. Audrey did not get better. Around the time they would have been in Hong Kong, she was gone.

There was a period of mourning, of course, during which Willard found he could not focus on the printed word. It wasn’t just Dickens he couldn’t tackle. It was his daily newspaper. He could barely take in the headlines.

One day, his daughter and son-in-law showed up with a surprise by the name of Oliver, a feisty terrier pup who took no time at all to win Willard over, despite the man’s protests that he wasn’t up to looking after a dog. But it was Oliver who got him up and moving several times a day, going about the neighborhood to do his business.

(Oliver was not, by the way, named for Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, but for Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the onetime Supreme Court justice who had also served two decades as a justice on the Supreme Judicial Court of

Massachusetts. Willard had always been a fan, and his daughter knew it.)

Willard credited Oliver with dragging him out of his doldrums and allowing him to resume his interests. He'd plowed through the works of Charles Dickens in the order in which they were published—actual hold-in-your-hand books now, since he wasn't going to be traveling—which meant starting with 1837's *The Pickwick Papers*. But there were eighteen works between that one and *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in 1859, and it had taken him only nine months to get through them.

It had been worth the wait. That first sentence resonated as strongly today as it had when Dickens had written it.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

No shit, Willard thought.

What a world he was living in. Technological advances beyond anyone's imagining. A wired, connected world. Ordinary citizens able to buy tickets for trips to space. Homes that could be made from 3-D printers. And yet, at the same time, widespread belief in baseless conspiracy theories. Rejection of cures to serious health threats because some brain-dead radio host railed against them. The human race ran the gamut from unparalleled genius to total idiocy.

And yet, weren't people still basically good? The ones who misbehaved got all the attention, but there were small acts of kindness happening all the time, like when his next-door neighbors, Sylvia and Martin, came by unexpectedly the other day with a bag of three croissants, still hot from the bakery. Didn't that make it the best of times?

Oliver whined again.

As much as Willard hated to have to put his book aside and take Oliver for a walk around the block, having to clean up one of his messes from the carpet was even more objectionable.

"Okay, okay," he said. He felt his hips whimper in pain as he stood. He always had to take a few steps to get his joints operating smoothly.

He went to the front hall, found a light jacket in the closet and slipped it on, then snapped the lead that was hanging from the front door onto Oliver's collar. Willard grabbed the house keys, opened the door, and, once out on the front step, locked up. Oliver strained at the leash, desperate to begin his sniffing of the neighborhood.

A young woman emerging from the Beacon Hill residence next to Willard's glanced his way and waved. It was Sylvia, a backpack slung over her shoulder.

"Evening, Judge!" she called out.

They all still called him that, even though he hadn't presided over a case

in years. He smiled and gave a half-hearted wave in return. "Hello, Sylvia," he said. "Off to the gym?"

"Gotta stay in shape to keep up with you," she said, springing down the few steps to the sidewalk. "Hey, there, Oliver! How's it going?"

Oliver was too busy sniffing a wet mark on the curb to respond. As Sylvia waved a second time and walked briskly up the street, Willard noticed that there weren't too many people out and about tonight.

That was fine. That meant he wasn't going to run into anyone he knew, wouldn't feel obliged to make small talk. Chitchat exhausted Willard. He wanted Oliver to do his business so he could get back to his reading and his brandy.

Oliver picked up the pace, trotting his way down the sidewalk, the leash taut. He had forgone sniffing every fence post and fire hydrant, and appeared to be on a mission. Maybe he had picked up some faraway scent that demanded investigating.

As they were passing a dark gap between houses, Willard heard something. A scuffle, a trash can being knocked over.

Rats, he thought. No, a raccoon, maybe. A rat couldn't make that much noise.

But then a voice. Someone whimpering. Willard couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. He stopped, listened, Oliver still straining at the lead, wanting to move forward.

It occurred to Willard at that moment that he had left the house without his cell phone. If someone was hurt, and if that person did not have a phone, Willard would have to start knocking on doors to summon assistance.

"Hello?" he said, standing at the mouth of the alley. Shadows, snatches of light. The old man squinted, trying to see into the darkness more clearly. He thought he could make out a shape, someone struggling to stand.

"Judge, is that you?"

A man's voice. And clearly, someone who recognized him. Maybe one of his neighbors.

"Yes, yes," Willard said. "Who is it?"

"I'm hurt," the man said weakly. The retired judge could see someone raising an arm to the wall, supporting himself.

Willard entered the alley, pulling Oliver along with him.

"What's wrong? Who is it? Are you injured?"

Willard took several more steps into the alley, until he was close enough to make out the face of the person who had called out to him.

"Do I—do I know you?" Willard asked as the man took his hand off the