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HARLAN COBEN

THE

STRANGER

ALSO BY HARLAN COBEN

Play Dead
Miracle Cure
Deal Breaker
Drop Shot
Fade Away
Back Spin
One False Move
The Final Detail
Darkest Fear
Tell No One
Gone for Good
No Second Chance
Just One Look
The Innocent
Promise Me
The Woods
Hold Tight
Long Lost
Caught
Live Wire
Shelter
Stay Close
Seconds Away
Six Years
Missing You
Found

HARLAN
COBEN
THE STRANGER

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Acknowledgments
About the Author

*In loving memory of my cousin
Stephen Reiter*

*And in celebration of his children,
David, Samantha, and Jason*

*Oh my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger.
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.
There is one who remembers the way to your door:
Life you may evade, but Death you shall not.*

—T. S. Eliot

Chapter 1

The stranger didn't shatter Adam's world all at once.

That was what Adam Price would tell himself later, but that was a lie. Adam somehow knew right away, right from the very first sentence, that the life he had known as a content suburban married father of two was forever gone. It was a simple sentence on the face of it, but there was something in the tone, something knowing and even caring, that let Adam know that nothing would ever be the same.

"You didn't have to stay with her," the stranger said.

They were in the American Legion Hall in Cedarfield, New Jersey. Cedarfield was a town loaded up with wealthy hedge fund managers and bankers and other financial masters-of-the-universe types. They liked to drink beer in the American Legion Hall because it was comfortable slumming, a way to pretend that they were salt-of-the-earth good ol' boys, like something in a Dodge Ram commercial, when they were anything but.

Adam stood by the sticky bar. There was a dartboard behind him. Neon signs advertised Miller Lite, but Adam had a bottle of Budweiser in his right hand. He turned to the man, who had just sidled up to him, and even though Adam already knew the answer, he asked the man, "Are you talking to me?"

The guy was younger than most of the fathers, thinner, almost gaunt, with big, piercing blue eyes. His arms were white and reedy with a hint of a tattoo showing beneath one of the short sleeves. He was wearing a baseball cap. He wasn't quite a hipster, but there was something of a wonk attitude coming off him, like some guy who ran a tech department and never saw the sun.

The piercing blue eyes held Adam's with an earnestness that made him want to turn away. "She told you she was pregnant, right?"

Adam felt his grip on the bottle tighten.

"That's why you stayed. Corinne told you she was pregnant."

It was right then that Adam felt some kind of switch go off in his chest,

as if someone had tripped the red digital timer on some movie bomb and now it had started to tick down. Tick, tick, tick, tick.

“Do I know you?” Adam asked.

“She told you she was pregnant,” the stranger continued. “Corinne, I mean. She told you she was pregnant and then she lost the baby.”

The American Legion Hall was loaded up with town dads sporting those white baseball T-shirts with the three-quarter sleeves and either baggy cargo shorts or perfectly no-assed Dad jeans. Lots of them wore baseball caps. Tonight was the fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade boys’ lacrosse draft and A-team selections. If you ever wanted to witness type As behaving as such in their natural habitat, Adam thought, watch when parents get involved in their own offsprings’ team selections. The Discovery Channel should film this.

“You felt obligated to stay, am I right?” the man asked.

“I don’t know who the hell—”

“She lied, Adam.” The younger man spoke with such conviction, not just as though he knew for certain but that, at the end of the day, he had Adam’s best interest at heart. “Corinne made it all up. She was never pregnant.”

The words kept landing like punches, dazing Adam, sapping his resistance, leaving him shaken and confused and ready to take a standing eight count. He wanted to fight back, grab the guy by the shirt, toss him across the room for insulting his wife like this. But he didn’t for two reasons.

One, there was the whole dazed-like-taking-punches, sapped-resistance thing.

Two, something about the way the man spoke, something about the guy’s confident tone, the damn conviction in his voice, made Adam start thinking it might be smartest to listen.

“Who are you?” Adam asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah, it does.”

“I’m the stranger,” he said. “The stranger with important knowledge. She lied to you, Adam. Corinne. She was never pregnant. It was all a ruse to get you back.”

Adam shook his head. He swam through, tried to stay rational and calm. “I saw the pregnancy test.”

“Fake.”

“I saw the sonogram.”

“Again fake.” He held up a hand before Adam could say more. “And yes, so was the stomach. Or should I say stomachs. Once Corinne started to show, you never saw her naked, right? What did she do, claim some kind of late-night sickness so you wouldn’t have sex? That’s what happens most times. So when the miscarriage occurs, you can kinda look back on the whole thing and realize the pregnancy was difficult right from the start.”

A booming voice from the other side of the hall called out, “Okay, guys, grab a fresh beer and let’s get this show on the road.”

The voice belonged to Tripp Evans, the president of the lacrosse league, a former Madison Avenue ad exec and a pretty good guy. The other dads started to grab aluminum chairs, the kind you use for your kid’s school concert, from a rack and placed them in a circle around the room. Tripp Evans looked over at Adam, spotted the undoubtedly pale expression on his face, and frowned his concern. Adam shook him off and turned back to the stranger.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Think of me as your savior. Or like the friend who just released you from prison.”

“You’re full of crap.”

All conversation had pretty much ended. The voices were hushed now, the sounds of scraping chairs echoing in the still hall. The fathers were getting their game faces on for the draft. Adam hated this. He wasn’t even supposed to be here—Corinne was. She was the treasurer of the lacrosse board, but her school had changed the scheduling of her teachers’ conference in Atlantic City, and even though this was the biggest day of the year for Cedarfield lacrosse—indeed the main reason Corinne had become so active—Adam had been forced to step in for her.

“You should be thanking me,” the man said.

“What are you talking about?”

For the first time, the man smiled. It was, Adam couldn’t help but notice, a kind smile, the smile of a healer, of a man who just wants to do the right thing.

“You’re free,” the stranger said.

“You’re a liar.”

“You know better, don’t you, Adam?”

From across the room, Tripp Evans called, “Adam?”

He turned toward them. Everyone was seated now except Adam and the stranger.

“I have to go now,” the stranger whispered. “But if you really need proof, check your Visa card. Look for a charge to Novelty Funsy.”

“Wait—”

“One more thing.” The man leaned in close. “If I were you, I’d probably run DNA tests on your two boys.”

Tick, tick, tick . . . ka-boom. “What?”

“I have no evidence on that, but when a woman is willing to lie about something like this, well, it’s a pretty good bet it isn’t her first time.”

And then, with Adam dazed anew by this final accusation, the stranger hurried out the door.

Chapter 2

When Adam managed to get his legs back, he ran after the stranger.
Too late.

The stranger was sliding into the passenger seat of a gray Honda Accord. The car pulled out. Adam ran to get a closer look, maybe see the license plate, but he could tell only that it was from his home state of New Jersey. As the car made the turn toward the exit, he noticed something else.

There was a woman driving the car.

She was young, with long blond hair. When the streetlight hit her face, he could see that she was looking at him. Their eyes met for a brief moment. There was a look of concern on her face, of pity.

For him.

The car roared away. Someone called his name. Adam turned around and headed back inside.

• • •

They started with house team drafts.

Adam tried to pay attention, but it was like all sound was traveling through the auditory equivalent of a blurry shower door. Corinne had made Adam's job simple. She had ranked every boy who had tried out for the sixth-grade team, so he could simply select based on who was left. The real key—the real reason he was here—was to ensure that Ryan, their sixth grader, made the all-star travel team. Their older son, Thomas, who was now a sophomore in high school, had been shut out from the all-stars when he was Ryan's age because, at least Corinne thought and Adam tended to agree, his parents weren't involved enough. Too many of the fathers were here tonight not so much out of love of the game as to protect their own kids' interests.

Including Adam. Pathetic, but there you go.

Adam tried to push past what he just heard—who the hell was that guy anyway?—but that wasn't happening. His vision blurred as he stared down at Corinne's "scouting reports." His wife was so orderly, almost anal, listing the boys in order from best to worst. When one of the boys was drafted, Adam numbly crossed out his name. He studied his wife's perfect cursive, practically the template for those sample letter examples your third-grade teacher pinned atop the blackboard. That was Corinne. She was that girl who came into class, complained that she was going to fail, finished the test first, and got an A. She was smart, driven, beautiful, and . . .

A liar?

"Let's break it down to the travel teams, fellas," Tripp said.

The sound of scraping chairs again echoed through the hall. Still in a fog, Adam joined the circle of four men who would round out the A and B travel teams. This was where it really counted. The house league stayed in town. The best players made A and B and got to travel to play in tournaments across the state.

Novelty Funsy. Why did that name ring a bell?

The grade's head coach was named Bob Baime, but Adam always thought of him as Gaston, the animated character from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* movie. Bob was a big puff pastry of a man with the kind of bright smile you find only on the dim. He was loud and proud and stupid and mean, and whenever he strutted by, chest out, arms swaying, it was as though he was accompanied by a sound track singing, "*No one's slick/fights/shoots like Gaston . . .*"

Push it away, Adam told himself. *The stranger was just playing with you. . . .*

Picking the teams should take seconds. Each kid was scored between one and ten in various categories—stick handling, speed, strength, passing, stuff like that. The numbers were totaled and an average was determined. In theory, you should just go down the list, put the top eighteen boys on A, the next eighteen boys on B, and the rest don't make it. Simple. But first, everyone had to be assured that their own sons were on the teams that they were coaching.

Okay, fine, done.

Then you start down those rankings. Things were moving along swiftly until they got down to the very last pick for the B team.

"Jimmy Hoch should be on it," Gaston pronounced. Bob Baime rarely

just spoke. He mostly made pronouncements.

One of his mousy assistant coaches—Adam didn't know his name—said, "But Jack and Logan are both ranked ahead of him."

"Yes, true," Gaston pronounced. "But I know this boy. Jimmy Hoch. He's a better player than those two. He just had a bad tryout." He coughed into his fist before continuing. "Jimmy's also had a tough year. His parents got divorced. We should give him a break and put him on the team. So if no one has a problem with that . . ."

He started to write down Jimmy's name.

Adam heard himself say, "I do."

All eyes turned toward him.

Gaston pointed his dimpled chin toward Adam. "Sorry?"

"I have a problem with it," Adam said. "Jack and Logan have higher scores. Who has the higher score of the two?"

"Logan," one of the assistants said.

Adam skimmed down the list and saw the scores. "Right, okay, so Logan should be on the team. He's the kid with the better evaluation and higher ranking."

The assistants didn't gasp out loud, but they might as well have. Gaston was unused to being questioned. He leaned forward, baring his big teeth. "No offense, but you're just here to sit in for your wife."

He said the word *wife* with a little attitude, as though having to sit in for one meant you weren't a real man.

"You're not even an assistant coach," Gaston continued.

"True," Adam said. "But I can read numbers, Bob. Logan's overall score was a six-point-seven. Jimmy only has a score of six-point-four. Even with today's new math, six-point-seven is greater than six-point-four. I can show you with a graph if that would help."

Gaston was not digging the sarcasm. "But as I just explained, there are extenuating circumstances."

"The divorce?"

"Exactly."

Adam looked to the assistant coaches. The assistant coaches suddenly found something fascinating on the ground in front of them. "Well, then, do you know what Jack's or Logan's home situations are?"

"I know their parents are together."

"So that's now our deciding factor?" Adam asked. "You have a really good marriage, don't you, Ga—" He had almost called him Gaston.

“Bob?”

“What?”

“You and Melanie. You guys are the happiest couple I know, right?”

Melanie was small and blond and perky and blinked as though someone had just slapped her across the face. Gaston liked to touch her ass a lot in public, not so much to show affection, or even lust, as to illustrate that she was his property. He leaned back now and tried to weigh his words carefully. “We have a good marriage, yes, but—”

“Well, that should deduct at least half a point off your own son’s score, right? So that knocks Bob Junior down to, let me see here, a six-point-three. The B team. I mean, if we are going to raise Jimmy’s score because his parents are having problems, shouldn’t we also lower your son’s because you guys are so gosh-darn perfect?”

One of the other assistant coaches said, “Adam, are you okay?”

Adam snapped his head toward the voice. “Fine.”

Gaston started flexing his fists.

“Corinne made it all up. She was never pregnant.”

Adam met the bigger man’s eye and held it. *Bring it, big boy*, Adam thought. Bring it tonight of all nights. Gaston was the kind of big and muscular guy you knew was all show. Over Gaston’s shoulder, Adam could see that Tripp Evans was looking on, surprise on his face.

“This isn’t a courtroom,” Gaston said, flashing his teeth. “You’re out of line.”

Adam hadn’t seen the inside of a courtroom in four months, but he didn’t bother to correct him. He lifted the sheets in the air. “The evaluations are here for a reason, Bob.”

“And so are we,” Gaston said, running his hand through his black mane. “As coaches. As guys who’ve watched these kids for years. We make the final call. I, as a head coach, make the final call. Jimmy has a good attitude. That matters too. We aren’t computers. We use all the tools at our disposal to select the most deserving kids.” He spread his giant hands, trying to win Adam back into the fold. “And come on, we are talking about the last kid on the B team. It’s not really that big a deal.”

“I bet it’s a big deal to Logan.”

“I’m the head coach. The final call is mine.”

The room was starting to break up. Guys were leaving. Adam opened his mouth to say more, but what was the point? He wouldn’t win this argument, and what was he making it for anyway? He didn’t even know

who the hell Logan was. It was a distraction from the mess the stranger had left behind. Nothing more. He knew that. He got up from the chair.

“Where are you going?” Gaston asked, chin stuck out long enough to invite a punch.

“Ryan is on the A team, right?”

“Right.”

That was why Adam was there—to advocate, if need be, for his son. Done. The rest was flotsam. “Have a good night, guys.”

Adam made his way back to the bar. He nodded at Len Gilman, the police chief in town, who liked to work behind the bar because it kept down the DUIs. Len nodded back and slid Adam a bottle of Bud. Adam twisted off the cap with a little too much gusto. Tripp Evans sidled up to him. Len slid him a Bud too. Tripp held it up and clinked bottles with Adam. The two men drank in silence while the meeting broke up. Guys called out their good-byes. Gaston rose dramatically—he was big on dramatically—and shot a glare at Adam. Adam lifted the bottle toward him in a “cheers” response. Gaston stormed out.

“Making friends?” Tripp asked.

“I’m a people person,” Adam said.

“You know he’s the VP of the board, right?”

“I must remember to genuflect next time I see him,” Adam said.

“I’m president.”

“In that case, I better get some kneepads.”

Tripp nodded, liking that line. “Bob’s going through a lot right now.”

“Bob’s an ass waffle.”

“Well, yes. Do you know why I stay on as president?”

“Helps you score chicks?”

“Yes, that. And because if I resign, Bob’s next in line.”

“Shiver.” Adam started to put down his beer. “I better go.”

“He’s out of work.”

“Who?”

“Bob. Lost his job over a year ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Adam said. “But that’s no excuse.”

“I didn’t say it was. I just wanted you to know.”

“Got it.”

“So,” Tripp Evans continued, “Bob has this headhunter helping him find a job—a big-time, very important headhunter.”

Adam put down the beer. “And?”

“So this big-time headhunter is trying to find Bob a new job.”

“So you said.”

“So the headhunter’s name is Jim Hoch.”

Adam stopped. “As in Jimmy Hoch’s father?”

Tripp said nothing.

“That’s why he wants the kid on the team?”

“What, you think Bob cares that the parents are divorced?”

Adam just shook his head. “And you’re okay with it?”

Tripp shrugged. “Nothing here is pure. You get a parent involved in their own kids’ sports, well, you know it’s like a mother lion around a cub. Sometimes they pick a kid because he lives next door. Sometimes they pick a kid because he’s got a hot mom who dresses provocatively at the games. . . .”

“You know that from personal experience?”

“Guilty. And sometimes they pick a kid because his daddy can help them get a job. Seems a better reason than most.”

“Man, you’re so cynical for an ad exec.”

Tripp smiled. “Yeah, I know. But it’s like we always talk about. How far would you go to protect your family? You’d never hurt anyone; I’d never hurt anyone. But if someone threatens your family, if it means saving your child . . .”

“We’d kill?”

“Look around you, my friend.” Tripp spread his arms. “This town, these schools, these programs, these kids, these families—I sometimes sit back and can’t believe how lucky we all are. We’re living the dream, you know.”

Adam did know. Sort of. He had gone from underpaid public defender to overpaid eminent domain attorney in order to pay for the dream. He wondered whether it was worth it. “And if Logan has to pay the price?”

“Since when is life fair? Look, I had these clients from a major car company. Yeah, you know the name. And yeah, you read in the paper recently how they covered up a problem with their steering columns. A lot of people got hurt or killed. These car guys, they’re really nice. Normal. So how do they let it happen? How do they work out some cost-benefit crap and let people die?”

Adam could see where he was going with this, but the ride was always a good one with Tripp. “Because they’re corrupt bastards?”

Tripp frowned. “You know that isn’t true. They’re like tobacco

company employees. Are they all evil too? Or how about all the pious folks who covered up church scandals or, I don't know, pollute the rivers? Are they all just corrupt bastards, Adam?"

Tripp was like this—a suburban-dad philosopher. "You tell me."

"It's perspective, Adam." Tripp smiled at him. He took off his cap, smoothed down the receding wisps of hair, put it back on his head. "We humans can't see straight. We are always biased. We always protect our own interests."

"One thing I notice about all those examples . . .," Adam said.

"What?"

"Money."

"It's the root of all evil, my friend."

Adam thought about the stranger. He thought about his two sons at home right now, probably doing homework or playing a video game. He thought about his wife at some teachers' conference down in Atlantic City.

"Not all evil," he said.