

**#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AND CREATOR OF THE NETFLIX DRAMA *FOOL ME ONCE***

HARLAN COBEN

**A
THRILLER**

NOBODY'S FOOL

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PROLOGUE

Did it all go wrong the moment I saw you?

I was a mere twenty-one years old, just a baby now that I look back on it, freshly graduated from Bowdoin College and gamely beginning the backpack-through-Europe ritual so common amongst my ilk. It was midnight. The nightclub's music pounded and pulsed. I was nursing my first bottle of Victoria Málaga, the cheapest cerveza they served (hey, I was on a budget) at a nightclub on the Costa del Sol of Spain. I fully expected this to be a typical club night for me—lots of hope, fear of missing out, quiet disappointment (read: striking out)—when I spotted you on the dance floor.

The DJ was blasting “Can’t Get You out of My Head” by Kylie Minogue, which, man oh man, would end up being the most on-the-nose tune imaginable. Still. Today. A quarter of a century later. You met my eye, held it even, but I didn’t really believe that you were looking at me. Not just because you were out of my league. You were, of course. Out of my league, that is. No, the reason I didn’t think you were looking at me was because I was surrounded by the Bowdoin lacrosse bros—Mikey, Holden, Sky, Shack, and, of course, team captain Quinn—all of whom were rugged and handsome and oozed good health like those pictures you’d see of young Kennedys playing football in Hyannis Port. I figured you were looking at one of them—maybe Captain Quinn, with his hair that was “wavy” to the tenth power and a physique that could only be produced by the optimal blend of weights, wax, and steroids.

As if to prove the point, I did a performative, nearly cartoonish look to my left, then to my right. When I risked turning my gaze back in your direction, you somehow resisted doing an eye roll and instead, in a show of mercy, gave me a small, knowing nod. You again met my eye or maybe you were like one of those old oil paintings I saw two days ago in the Prado where the eyes seemed to follow you no matter where you stood. I wish I could say that everyone else in the Discoteca Palmeras faded away except for the two of us, like in some cheesy movie where the music’s volume would

drop and then they'd zoom in to close-ups of you and me, but that didn't happen.

The dance floor was crammed with young partygoers. Someone bumped into you. Then someone else. Other undulating bodies swarmed between us.

You vanished from view—as if the crowd had swallowed you whole.

I stood up. The Lax Bros at my table didn't notice. I was more of a mascot than a friend, comic relief, the weird little guy who drew the ultra-popular Captain Quinn as a roommate freshman year. Most of the bros thought I was Indian, often calling me Apu and mimicking some kind of South Asian accent, which was annoying because I was born and raised in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, and sounded like it. The Lax Bros hadn't been my first choice of European travel mates, but my best friends Charles and Omar had both already started jobs, one at Bank of America in Manhattan, the other doing genetic research at Mass General. I'd been accepted to Columbia's medical school and would start in the fall—though in truth, it was pretty cool, flattering even, to be traveling with the Lax Bros, even if it was at Quinn's urging.

I swam more than walked onto the dance floor, fighting through the sweat-drenched bodies like they were incoming waves. The DJ switched songs to "Murder on the Dancefloor" by Sophie Ellis-Bextor, which again in hindsight seems perhaps apropos or maybe ironic, but I've been confused about the actual meaning of the word *ironic* ever since Alanis Morissette sang that song and even now, a quarter century after that night, I don't want to get it wrong.

It took me a full minute of shoving through flesh before I found you in the center of the dance floor. You had your eyes closed, both hands in the air, and you moved slowly, languidly, silkily, and I still don't know what the name of that dance move was, but I was mesmerized. Raising your arms over your head made your top ride up so that your tan midriff was visible. For a moment I just stood there and stared. You looked so lost, so at peace that I almost just let you be.

Imagine if I had.

But alas, my courage was uncharacteristically up. Nursing that one beer emboldened me enough to step forward and tap you on the shoulder.

You startled and opened your eyes.

“Wanna dance?” I asked.

Look at me, just going for it. I don’t think in my life I had ever been that forward. A beautiful woman dancing alone, and I had the simple gall to approach.

You made a face and shouted: “What?”

Yes, it was that loud on the dance floor. I leaned in closer. “Do you want to dance?” I yelled, trying to get my mouth close to your ear but angling off a little so I didn’t puncture your ear drum.

You made a different face and shouted: “I’m already dancing.”

This would have been the part where I—and to be fair, most guys—would normally slink away. Why didn’t I? Why did I see something in your eyes that told me to give it one more shot?

“I mean with me,” I shouted.

The right side of your mouth curled up in a small smile that I can still feel in my veins. “Yeah, I got that. I was joking.”

“Good one,” I said, which I don’t know if you took as truth or sarcasm, but for the record, it was sarcasm.

We started to dance. You are a total natural. Relaxed, sensual, magnetic. You have that ability to completely let go, to somehow look both spontaneous and choreographed. I do my best dance move, which basically involves moving too consciously side to side, aiming not so much to look like a good dancer as to pass, to blend in and go unnoticed—to not look like a total fool. My dance moves were an attempt to not embarrass myself, which of course makes me look extra self-conscious—or maybe that’s me being self-conscious.

You didn’t seem to mind.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Anna. Yours?”

“Kierce.” Then for some reason, I added, “Sami Kierce.” God, how dumb I sounded. Like I thought I was James Bond.

You gestured toward the Lax Bros with your chin. “You don’t look like you belong with them.”

“You mean because I’m not tall and handsome?”

That small smile again. “I like your face, Sami Kierce.”

“Thank you, Anna.”

“It has character.”

“Is that a euphemism for ‘homely’?”

“I’m dancing with you, not them.”

“To be fair, they didn’t ask you.”

“True,” you said. Then that smile again. “But I’m also not leaving here tonight with them.”

My eyes must have bulged, because you laughed a beautiful laugh and took my hand and we kept dancing and I started to relax and let go too and yes, two hours later, I left the nightclub with you while the Lax Bros pumped their fists and hooted and hollered and chanted “Kierce, Kierce, Kierce” in drunken unison.

We held hands. We walked the Fuengirola beach. You kissed me in the moonlight, and I can still smell the salt of the Mediterranean. You took me back to your place in a modest high-rise; I asked if you had roommates. You didn’t reply. I asked how long you’d been in Fuengirola. You didn’t reply.

I had never had a one-night stand. Or picked up a girl at a nightclub. Or, more aptly, had a girl pick me up. I wasn’t a virgin. I’d dated Sharyn Rosenberg during our junior year at Bowdoin and we did it plenty of times, but still I was nervous. I tried to channel Captain Quinn. That dude had confidence to burn. Our freshman year, Quinn would always score and come home super late or early the next morning. When I asked Quinn once why he never brought a girl back to our room, he said, “I don’t want any part of her staying on me, you know what I’m saying?” and then he would hit the shower for a full half hour.

Captain Quinn had—probably still has—serious intimacy issues.

That first night, you and I cuddled on a couch and made out for a while and then you fell asleep or maybe you passed out, I still don't know. We had all our clothes on. I thought about leaving, but that seemed wrong, maybe rude, so I closed my eyes and tried to make myself comfortable and pretended to fall asleep too.

When you woke up in the morning, you smiled at me and said, "I'm happy you're still here."

"Me too," I replied.

Then you took my hand and led me to the shower and let's leave it at that.

Two days later, the Lax Bros left for Sevilla. I met them at the train station in Málaga to say goodbye. Captain Quinn put his giant hands on my smaller shoulders and looked way down at me and said, "If you finish tapping dat in the next three days, meet us in Sevilla. Day four and five, we will be in Barcelona. Day six we cross the border into Southern France."

Quinn kept going on like this before I reminded him that I was the one who booked our itinerary and knew where they would be and when. He gave me a quick yet ferocious hug. The other Lax Bros gave me fist pounds. I waited and watched them board the train.

Here's an odd sidenote, Anna: I never saw any of the Lax Bros again.

Holden called me once because I was a cop at the time—I'm not anymore—and his son had gotten arrested in a bar fight. But I never saw Holden. Or Mikey. Or Sky. Or Shack. Or even Captain Quinn.

I never saw any of them.

But I will always wonder what my life would have been like if I had just stuck to the itinerary and gone with them to Sevilla.

I wonder what your life might have been like too.

Maybe it would have changed everything for you too. I don't know.

I'm stalling, Anna.

We weren't in love, I don't think. It was a vacation fling. It's not like my heart was ever broken by you. I wish. That I could have gotten over. I've had my heart broken before and since. A few years later, I would even suffer a far more devastating loss than this, but at least with Nicole there was closure.

You need closure, Anna.

But with you...

Still stalling.

It was our fifth day together. We agreed I should give up my bed at the hostel and move in with you. My heart soared. We spent our nights in various dance clubs. We drank. We took lots of drugs, I guess. I don't know what. I wasn't much of a party guy, but if you wanted to party, then I was game. Why not? Live a little, right? You had a "source"—a slightly older Dutch guy dubbed Buzz, who had purple spiked hair and a nose ring and a lot of rope bracelets. You always handled the buys. That's how you wanted it. You and Buzz would meet up on that corner behind the El Puerto Hotel. I remember you two whispering, and sometimes it seemed to grow animated. I figured you were negotiating before you slipped Buzz cash and he slipped you whatever.

What did I know? I was young and clueless.

Then we would party. We would go back to your place, usually around three in the morning. We made love. We passed out more than fell asleep. We woke up at noon at the earliest. We rolled out of bed and onto the beach.

Rinse, repeat.

I don't remember that last night well.

Isn't that odd? I know we'd gone back to the nightclub where we first met, the Discoteca Palmeras, but I can't remember leaving or walking up that hill to your high-rise—why did you stay at an apartment in Fuengirola anyway? why weren't you staying at a hotel or a hostel like everyone else our age? why didn't you have any roommates or friends or seem to know anybody other than this Buzz guy? why didn't I push to know more?—but what I do remember is the hot Spanish sun waking me up the next day.

I was in your bed. I remember groaning when the sunlight hit my face, realizing that if the rays were hitting from this angle it had to be at least noon and we had yet again forgotten to close the shade.

I made a face and blinked and lifted my hand to block my eyes.

Except my hand felt wet. Coated in something wet and sticky.

And there was something in my hand.

I slowly lifted it in front of my face.

A knife.

I was holding a knife.

It was wet with blood.

I turned toward your side of the bed.

That was when I screamed.

There are scientists who believe that no sound ever dies, that it grows softer, fades, decays to the point where we can't detect it with our ears anymore, but that it's there, somehow, and if we could ever be silent or still enough, we would be able to hear that sound for all eternity.

That was how this scream felt.

And sometimes, even now, in the quiet of the night, I can still hear the echo of that scream.

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-Two Years Later

I stand behind the tree and snap photos of license plates with a long-lens camera. The lot is full, so I go in order from the most expensive car—I can't believe there's a Bentley parked by this toilet—and move on down the list.

I don't know how long I have before my subject—a wealthy man named Peyton Booth—comes out. Five minutes, maybe ten. But here's why I take the photos. I send them to my shadow partner at the DMV. Said partner will then look up all the license plates and get the corresponding emails. She'll email the pics and threaten exposure if they don't transfer money into this untraceable Cash App account. Only \$500. No reason to be greedy. If they don't respond—and ninety percent don't—it goes nowhere, but we make enough to make it worthwhile.

Yeah, times are tough.

I'm positioned across the park and dressed like what we used to call a vagrant or hobo or homeless. I forget the proper euphemism they use nowadays, so I ask Debbie.

"Unhoused," Debbie tells me.

"Really?"

"Unsheltered' too. They both suck."

"Which do you prefer?"

"Goddess."

Debbie the Goddess says she's twenty-three, but she looks younger. She spends a lot of her days standing in front of various, uh, "gentlemen's clubs"—talk about a euphemism—with tears in her eyes and yells "Daddy, why?" at every guy that walks in or out. She started doing it for kicks—she loves the way some guys turn white and freeze—but now a few of the regulars say hi and maybe throw her a twenty.

"I do it as an exercise in capitalism and ethics," she tells me.

"How's that?"

"The capitalism part is obvious."

Debbie has good teeth. That's rarely the case out here. Her hair is washed. She's sleeveless and her arms are clean.

"You make money," I say. Then: "And the ethics?"

Her lower lip quivers. "Sometimes a guy hears me and runs off. Like I knocked some sense into him. Like I reminded him who he should be. And maybe, just maybe, if some girl had yelled that at my daddy, if some girl like me did something, anything, to stop my daddy from going into a place like that..."

Her voice fades away. She looks down and blinks her eyes and keeps the lip quivering.

I study her face for a second and then I say, "Boo friggin' hoo."

The blinking and quivering stop as if her face is a shaken Etch A Sketch. "What?"

"You think I'm buying the Daddy Issues cliché?" I shake my head. "I expect better from you."

Debbie laughs and punches my arm. "Damn, Kierce, you must have been an awesome cop."

I shrug. I was. I don't know how Debbie ended up on the streets. I don't ask and she doesn't volunteer, and that seems to suit us both.

I check my watch.

"Showtime?" Debbie asks.

"Has to be."

"You remember the code?"

I do. If she yells "Daddy, why?" that means wrong guy. If she yells "But Daddy, I'm carrying your child," that means my man Peyton just exited. Debbie came up with the code. I'm giving her fifty dollars for the job, but if I land what White Shoe needs, I'll up that to a hundred.

Debbie heads down the path to a spot where she can see the club door. I can't see it from my perch. Debbie saw Peyton Booth's pic on my phone, so she knows what he looks like. You probably guessed this, but Peyton is getting divorced. My job here is simple.

Catch him cheating.

This is what I've been reduced to since getting chucked off the force for messing up big-time. Worse, even though I'm working for a high-end, whitest-of-white-shoe Manhattan law firm, I am not getting paid. This is a barter arrangement. I'm being sued by the family of a high school kid named PJ Dawson. According to the lawsuit, I perilously pursued PJ onto the rooftop of a three-story building. Because of my negligence, young PJ slipped and fell off the roof, plummeting those three stories and sustaining critical injuries. The White Shoe law firm (actual name is Whit Shaw but everyone calls them White Shoe) is representing me in exchange for my working jobs like this off the books.

America is grand.

Peyton is head of a major conservatively based conglomerate and reportedly, because we are all hypocrites, a big-time playah with da ladies. According to his wife's statement to her attorney, her soon-to-be ex has a weakness for "bottled blonde skanks with giant fake cans." The wife had been convinced that Peyton was messing around with his neighbor, but I checked it out thoroughly and yes, the neighbor matches this description, but no, he isn't messing around with her.

Peyton made sure to leave his Lexus in a remote corner of the lot, far from prying eyes. That's why I'm set up on this hill, in the one spot where I can position my camera and record any action that might take place. If I set up closer, I would be spotted. If I set up farther away, I would get nada. The only way to make this work is to be here and to know when my man Peyton leaves.

The parking lot is also cleverly set up so that it shares its spaces with an old-school convenience store called Get Some and a florist called—get this—Rose to the Occasion, thus giving the clientele who are visiting the "gentlemen's club" proper cover. Point is, if I capture Peyton leaving here or parked here, it won't be a big deal in court. But if I can capture him with a dancer (again with the euphemisms—don't we all miss the days when you could just say what you mean?), that would be huge.

"Daddy, why...?" Debbie calls out.

I have the camera on a tripod. I check the aim. Yep, right through the windshield of the car. I'm still looking down the barrel of the lens when I hear a voice behind me.

"Where's Debbie?"

A quick glance tells me it's an unhoused (or unsheltered) guy.

"She's working," I say.

"My name is Raymond."

"Hey, Raymond."

"Debbie usually brings me a sandwich."

"Give her a few, okay, Raymond?"

"She knows I hate mayo."

"Got it."

"Debbie tell you how jet planes stay in the air?"

"No."

"Want me to?"

"Do I have a choice, Raymond?"

"Witches," he says.

"Witches," I repeat.

"Flying witches, to be more precise. Three of them per plane. One holds the right wing, one holds the left wing, the third witch, she's in the back, holding up the tail."

"I've been on planes," I say. "Even sat by the wing a few times. I've never seen a witch."

I don't know why I say this, but I sometimes speak and act without considering all the consequences. That might explain why I've gone from catching murderers and hardened criminals to quasi-Peeping-Tom-ing near Rose to the Occasion.

Raymond frowns. "They're invisible, fool."

"Invisible flying witches?"

"Of course," he said, as though disgusted with my stupidity. "What, you think gigantic metal tubes can just stay up in the air by themselves? I mean, come on. You just believe everything the government tells you?"

“Fair point, Raymond.”

“Your average Airbus weighs at least 150,000 pounds. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“And we’re supposed to believe something that heavy can stay up in the air all the way across an ocean?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Take the blinders off, man. The Man has been gaslighting you. Ever hear of gravity? The physics don’t work.”

“Ergo, the witches,” I say.

“Right. Witches, man. And it’s all one big joke on mankind.”

I can’t help myself. “What do you mean, Raymond?”

He scowls. “Ain’t it obvious?”

“Not to me.”

“One day,” Raymond says, rubbing his hands together and licking his lips, “when we rubes are least expecting it, all the witches, all at the same time, they’re all going to let go.”

“Of the planes?”

He nods in satisfaction. “That’s right. All the witches will just let go of the planes at the same time. Cackling. Like witches do, you know. Cackling and watching the planes, all of them, plummet back to earth.”

He looks at me.

“Dark,” I say.

“Mark my words. Get right with the Lord now before that day.”

Down on the street below, I hear Debbie shout, “But Daddy, I’m carrying your child.”

Bingo.

“Can we talk about this later, Raymond?”

“Tell Debbie I’m waiting on that sandwich. And no mayo.”

“I’ll do that.”

I look through the camera lens and see Peyton in full business suit. My heart sinks when I see he’s alone. He gets in the driver’s side. I wait, hoping