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HARLAN

COBEN

DON'T LET

GO



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
The Stranger
Fool Me Once
Home

**HARLAN
COBEN
DON'T LET GO**



DUTTON



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Version_1

*Pour Anne
A Ma Vie de Coer Entier*

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Author's Note

When I was growing up in suburban New Jersey, there were two common legends about my hometown.

One was that a notorious Mafia leader lived in a baronial mansion protected by an iron gate and armed guards and that there was an incinerator in the back that may have been used as a makeshift crematorium.

The second legend—the legend that inspired this book—was that adjacent to his property and near an elementary school, behind barbed-wire fencing and official **NO TRESPASSING** signs, there stood a Nike missile control center with nuclear capabilities.

Years later, I learned that both legends were true.

Daisy wore a clingy black dress with a neckline so deep it could tutor philosophy.

She spotted the mark sitting at the end of the bar, wearing a pinstripe gray suit. Hmm. The guy was old enough to be her dad. That might make it more difficult for her to make her play, but then again, it might not. You never knew with the old guys. Some of them, especially the recent divorcés, were all too ready to preen and prove they still had it, even if they'd never had it in the first place.

Especially if they'd never had it in the first place.

As Daisy sauntered across the room, she could feel the eyes of the male patrons crawling down her bare legs like earthworms. When she reached the end of the bar, she made a mild production of lowering herself onto the stool next to him.

The mark peered into the glass of whiskey in front of him as though he were a gypsy with a crystal ball. She waited for him to turn toward her. He didn't. Daisy studied his profile for a moment. His beard was heavy and gray. His nose was bulbous and putty-like, almost as though it were a Hollywood silicone special effect. His hair was long, straggly, mop-like.

Second marriage, Daisy figured. Second divorce in all probability.

Dale Miller—that was the mark's name—picked up his whiskey gently. He cradled it in both hands as though it were an injured bird.

"Hi," Daisy said with a much-practiced hair toss.

Miller's head turned toward her. He looked her straight in the eyes. She waited for his gaze to dip down the neckline—heck, even women did it with this dress—but it stayed on hers.

"Hello," he replied. Then he turned back to his whiskey.

Daisy usually let the mark hit on her. That was her go-to technique. She said hi like this, she smiled, the guy asked whether he could buy her

a drink. You know the deal. But Miller didn't look to be in the mood to flirt. He took a deep swallow from his whiskey glass, then another.

That was good. The heavy drinking. That would make this easier.

"Is there something I can do for you?" he asked her.

Burly, Daisy thought. That was the word to describe him. Even in that pinstripe suit, Miller had that burly-biker-Vietnam-vet thing going on, his voice a low rasp. He was the kind of older guy Daisy found oddly sexy, though that was probably her legendary daddy issues rearing their insecure heads. Daisy liked men who made her feel safe.

It had been too long since she'd known one.

Time to try another angle, Daisy thought.

"Do you mind if I just sit here with you?" Daisy leaned a little closer, working the cleavage a bit, and whispered, "There's this guy . . ."

"Is he bothering you?"

Sweet. He didn't say it all macho poseur, like so many of the d-bags she had met along the way. Dale Miller said it calmly, matter-of-factly, chivalrously, even—like a man who wanted to protect her.

"No, no . . . not really."

He started looking around the bar. "Which one is he?"

Daisy put a hand on his arm.

"It's not a big deal. Really. I just . . . I feel safe here with you, okay?"

Miller met her eyes again. The bulbous nose didn't go with the face, but you almost didn't notice it with those piercing blue eyes. "Of course," he said, but in a cautious voice. "Can I buy you a drink?"

That was pretty much all the opening Daisy needed. She was good with conversation, and men—married, single, getting divorced, whatever—never minded opening up to her. It took Dale Miller a little more time than usual—drink 4, if her count was correct—but eventually he got to the impending divorce from Clara, his, yup, second wife, who was eighteen years his junior. ("Should've known, right? I'm such a fool.") A drink later, he told her about the two kids, Ryan and Simone, the custody battle, his job in finance.

She had to open up too. That was how this worked. Prime the pump. She had a story at the ready for just such occasions—a completely fictional one, of course—but something about the way Miller carried himself made her add shades of candor. Still, she would never tell him the truth. No one knew that, except Rex. And even Rex didn't know it all.

He drank whiskey. She drank vodka. She tried to imbibe at a slower pace. Twice she took her full glass to the bathroom, dumped it into the sink, filled it with water. Still, Daisy was feeling a little buzzed when the text came in from Rex.

R?

R for “Ready.”

“Everything okay?” Miller asked her.

“Sure. Just a friend.”

She texted back a Y for “Yes” and turned back to him. This was the part where she would normally suggest that they go someplace quieter. Most men jumped at the chance—men were nothing if not predictable on that score—but she wasn’t sure that the direct route would work with Dale Miller. It wasn’t that he didn’t seem interested. He just seemed to be somehow—she wasn’t sure how to put it—above it.

“Can I ask you something?” she began.

Miller smiled. “You’ve been asking me things all night.”

There was a slight slur in his voice. Good.

“Do you have a car?” she asked.

“I do. Why?”

She glanced about the bar. “Could I, uh, ask you for a ride home? I don’t live far.”

“Sure, no problem.” Then: “I may need a little time to sober up—”

Daisy hopped off the stool. “Oh, that’s okay. I’ll walk, then.”

Miller sat upright. “Wait, what?”

“I kinda need to get home now, but if you can’t drive—”

“No, no,” he said, managing to stand. “I’ll take you now.”

“If it’s trouble . . .”

“No trouble, Daisy.”

Bingo. As they started for the door, Daisy quickly texted Rex:

OOW

Code for “On Our Way.”

Some might call it a con or a swindle, but Rex insisted that it was “righteous” money. Daisy wasn’t sure about righteous, but she didn’t feel a lot of guilt about it either. The plan was simple in execution, if not

motive. A man and a woman are getting divorced. The custody battle turns nasty. Both sides get desperate. The wife—technically speaking, the husband could use their services too, though so far it had always been the wife—hired Rex to help her win this bloodiest of battles. How did he do it?

Nail the husband on a DUI.

What better way to show the man is an unfit parent?

So that was how it worked. Daisy's job was twofold: Make sure the mark was legally drunk, and then get him behind the wheel. Rex, who was a cop, pulled them over and arrested the mark for driving under the influence, and boom, their client gets a big boost in the court proceedings. Right then, Rex was waiting in a squad car two blocks away. He always found an abandoned spot very close to whatever bar the mark would be drinking in that evening. The fewer witnesses, the better. They didn't want questions.

Pull the guy over, arrest him, move on.

They both stumbled out the door and into the lot.

"This way," Miller said. "I parked over here."

The lot's surface was made up of loose pebbles. Miller kicked them up as he led her to a gray Toyota Corolla. He hit the key fob. The car gave a muted double honk. When Miller headed toward the passenger door, Daisy was confused. Did he want her to drive? God, she hoped not. Was he more wasted than she thought? That seemed more likely. But she quickly realized it was neither of those things.

Dale Miller was opening the door for her. Like a real gentleman. That was how long it had been since Daisy had known a real gentleman. She hadn't even realized what he was doing.

He held the door. Daisy slid into the car. Dale Miller waited until she was all the way in and properly situated before he carefully closed the door behind her.

She felt a pang of guilt.

Rex had pointed out many times that they weren't doing anything illegal or even ethically dubious. For one thing, the plan didn't always work. Some guys don't hang out in bars. "If that's the case," Rex had told her, "then he's in the clear. Our guy is already out drinking, right? You're just giving him a little push, that's all. But he doesn't have to drink and drive. That's his choice in the end. You're not putting a gun to his head."

Daisy put on her seat belt. Dale Miller did the same. He started the car and put it in reverse. The tires crunched the pebbles. When he was clear of the spot, Miller stopped the car and looked at Daisy for a long moment. She tried to smile, but it wouldn't hold.

“What are you hiding, Daisy?” he asked.

She felt a chill but didn't reply.

“Something happened to you. I can see it in your face.”

Not sure what else to do, Daisy tried to laugh it off. “I told you my life story in that bar, Dale.”

Miller waited another second, maybe two, though it felt to her like an hour. Finally, he looked forward and put the car in drive. He didn't say another word as they made their way out of the parking lot.

“Take a left,” Daisy said, hearing the tension in her own voice. “And then it's the second right.”

Dale Miller was silent then, making the turns deliberately, the way you do when you've had too much to drink but don't want to get pulled over. The Toyota Corolla was clean and impersonal and smelled a little too strongly of deodorizer. When Miller took the second right, Daisy held her breath and waited for Rex's blue lights and siren to come on.

This was always the scary part for Daisy, because she never knew how someone was going to react. One guy tried to make a run for it, though he realized the futility before he reached the next corner. Some guys started cursing. Some guys—too many of them—started sobbing. That was the worst. Grown men, coolly hitting on her moments earlier, some still with their hand sliding up her dress, suddenly starting to blubber like preschoolers.

They realized the severity in an instant. That realization crushed them.

Daisy didn't know what to expect with Dale Miller.

Rex had the timing down to a science, and as though on cue, the spinning blue light came to life, followed immediately by the squad-car siren. Daisy pivoted and studied Dale Miller's face to gauge his reaction. If Miller was distraught or surprised, neither emotion was showing on his face. He was composed, determined, even. He used his blinker to signal before carefully veering to a proper stop by the curb as Rex pulled up behind him.

The siren was off now, the blue light still circling.

Dale Miller put the car in park and turned to her. She wasn't sure what expression to go with here. Surprise? Sympathy? A “What can you

do?” sigh?

“Well, well,” Miller said. “It looks like the past has caught up with us, eh?”

His words, his tone, his expression unnerved her. She wanted to yell for Rex to hurry, but he was taking his time the way a cop does. Dale Miller kept his eyes on her, even after Rex did a knuckle knock on his window. Miller slowly turned away and slid open the window.

“Is there a problem, Officer?”

“License and registration, please.”

Dale Miller handed them over.

“Have you been drinking tonight, Mr. Miller?”

“Maybe one,” he said.

With that answer, at least, he was the same as every other mark. They always lied.

“Do you mind stepping out of the car for a moment?”

Miller turned back toward Daisy. Daisy tried not to cringe under his gaze. She stared straight ahead, avoiding eye contact.

Rex said, “Sir? I asked you—”

“Of course, Officer.”

Dale Miller pulled the handle. When the interior car light came on, Daisy closed her eyes for a moment. Miller rolled out with a grunt. He left the door open, but Rex reached past him and slammed it closed. The window was still cracked, so Daisy could hear.

“Sir, I would like to run a series of field sobriety tests on you.”

“We could skip that,” Dale Miller said.

“Pardon me?”

“Why don’t we go right to the Breathalyzer, if that would be easier?”

That offer surprised Rex. He glanced past Miller for a moment and caught her eye. Daisy gave a small shrug.

“I assume you have a field Breathalyzer in your squad car?” Miller asked.

“I do, yes.”

“So let’s not waste your time or mine or the lovely lady’s.”

Rex hesitated. Then he said, “Okay, please wait here.”

“Sure.”

When Rex turned to go back to his squad car, Dale Miller pulled out a gun and shot Rex twice in the back of the head. Rex crumpled to the ground.

Then Dale Miller turned the gun toward Daisy.

*They're back, she thought.
After all these years, they found me.*

Chapter One

I hide the baseball bat behind my leg, so Trey—at least, I assume it is Trey—won't see.

The Maybe-Trey bebops toward me with the fake tan and the emo fringe do and the meaningless tribal tattoos lassoing bloated biceps. Ellie has described Trey as a “purebred twat waffle.” This guy fits the bill.

Still, I have to be sure.

Over the years, I have developed a really cool deductive technique to tell if I have the right guy. Watch and learn:

“Trey?”

The choadwank stops, gives me his best Cro-Magnon forehead furrow, and says, “Who wants to know?”

“Am I supposed to say, ‘I do’?”

“Huh?”

I sigh. See what kind of morons I have to deal with, Leo?

“You replied, ‘Who wants to know?’” I continue. “Like you're being cagey. Like if I called out, ‘Mike?’ you wouldn't have said, ‘You got the wrong guy, pal.’ By answering ‘Who wants to know?’ you've already told me you're Trey.”

You should see the perplexed look on this guy's face.

I take a step closer, keeping the bat out of sight.

Trey is all faux gangsta, but I feel the fear coming off him in hot waves now. Not surprising. I am a respectable-sized guy, not a five-foot woman he could slap around to feel big.

“What do you want?” Trey asks me.

Another step closer.

“To talk.”

“What about?”

I swing one-handed because that's fastest. The bat lands whiplike on Trey's knee. He screams, but he doesn't fall. Now I grip the bat with

both hands. Remember how Coach Jauss taught us to hit in Little League, Leo? Bat back, elbow up. That was his mantra. How old were we? Nine, ten? Doesn't matter. I do just what Coach taught us. I pull the bat all the way back, elbow up, and step into my swing.

The meat of the wood lands flush on the same knee.

Trey goes down like I shot him. "Please . . ."

This time, I lift the bat high overhead, ax-chop-style, and, putting all my weight and leverage into it, I again aim for the same knee. I can feel something splinter when the blow lands. Trey howls. I lift the bat again. By now Trey has both hands on the knee, trying to protect it. What the hell. Might as well be sure, right?

I go for the ankle. When the bat crash-lands, the ankle gives way and spreads under the onslaught. There is a crunching sound like a boot stepping on dried twigs.

"You never saw my face," I tell him. "You say a word, I come back and kill you."

I don't wait for the reply.

Do you remember when Dad took us to our first Major League Baseball game, Leo? Yankee Stadium. We sat in that box down the third-base line. We wore our baseball gloves the whole game, hoping a foul ball would come our way. It didn't, of course. I remember the way Dad tilted his face toward the sun, those Wayfarers on his eyes, that slow smile on his face. How cool was Dad? Being French, he didn't know the rules—it was his first baseball game too—but he didn't care, did he? It was a day out with his twin boys.

That was always enough for him.

Three blocks away, I drop the bat into a 7-Eleven Dumpster. I'd worn gloves so there would be no fingerprints. I had bought the bat years ago at a garage sale near Atlantic City. There is no way you could track it back to me. Not that I was worried. The cops wouldn't bother Dumpster diving into cherry Slurpees to help out the likes of a professional asshole like Trey. On TV, they might. In reality, they would chalk it up to a local beef or drug deal gone wrong or gambling debt or something else that made it well and truly deserved.

I cut through the lot and take a circuitous route back to where I parked. I am wearing a black Brooklyn Nets cap—very street—and I keep my head down. Again, I don't think anyone would take the case seriously, but you might meet up with an overzealous rookie who pulls CCTV or something.

It costs me nothing to be careful.

I get into my car, hit Interstate 280, and drive straight back to Westbridge. My mobile phone rings—a call from Ellie. Like she knows what I'm up to. Ms. Conscience. I ignore it for now.

Westbridge is the kind of American Dream suburb the media might call “family-friendly,” maybe “well-to-do” or even “upscale,” but it wouldn't reach the level of “tony.” There are Rotary Club barbecues, July Fourth parades, Kiwanis Club carnivals, Saturday morning organic farmers' markets. Kids still ride their bikes to school. The high school football games are well attended, especially when we play our rival, Livingston. Little League is still a big deal. Coach Jauss died a few years ago, but they named one of the fields after him.

I still stop by that field, though now in a police car. Yep, I'm *that* cop. I think of you, Leo, stuck out in right field. You didn't want to play—I know that now—but you realized that I might not have joined without you. Some of the old-timers still talk about the no-hitter I pitched in the state semifinals. You weren't good enough to make that team, so the Little League powers that be put you on as a statistician. I guess they did that to keep me happy. I don't think I saw that at the time.

You were always wiser, Leo, more mature, so you probably did.

I pull up to the house and park in the driveway. Tammy and Ned Walsh from next door—in my head he's Ned Flanders because he's got the pornstache and the too-folksy manner—are cleaning their gutters. They both give me a wave.

“Hey, Nap,” Ned says.

“Hey, Ned,” I say. “Hey, Tammy.”

I'm friendly like that. Mr. Nice Neighbor. See, I am the rarest of creatures in suburban towns—a straight, single, childless male is about as common out here as a cigarette in a health club—and so I work hard to come across as normal, boring, reliable.

Nonthreatening.

Dad died five years ago, so now I guess some of the neighbors perceive me as *that* single guy, the one who still lives at home and skulks around like Boo Radley. That's why I try to keep the house well maintained. That's why I try to make sure I bring my appropriate female dates back to the house during daylight hours, even when I know said date won't last.

There was a time when a guy like me would be considered charmingly eccentric, a confirmed bachelor. Now I think the neighbors

worry that I'm a pedophile or something along those lines. So I do all I can to alleviate that fear.

Most of the neighbors also know our story, and so my staying here makes sense.

I'm still waving to Ned and Tammy.

"How is Brody's team doing?" I ask.

I don't care, but again, appearances.

"Eight and one," Tammy says.

"That's terrific."

"You have to come to the game next Wednesday."

"I'd like that," I say.

I'd also like to have my kidney removed with a grapefruit spoon.

I smile some more, wave again like an idiot, and head into the house. I moved out of our old room, Leo. After that night—I always refer to it as "that night" because I can't accept "double suicide" or "accidental death" or even, though no one really thinks it is, "murder"—I couldn't stand the sight of our old bunk bed. I started sleeping downstairs in the room we called the "little den" on the first floor. One of us probably should have done that years earlier, Leo. Our bedroom was okay for two boys, but it was cramped for two teenage males.

I never minded, though. I don't think you did either.

When Dad died, I moved upstairs into his master bedroom. Ellie helped me convert our old room into a home office with these white built-ins in a style she calls "Modern Urban Farmhouse." I still don't know what that means.

I head up to the bedroom now and start to shed my shirt, when the doorbell rings. I figure it's the UPS or FedEx guys. They're the only ones who stop by without calling first. So I don't bother going down. When the doorbell rings again, I wonder whether I ordered something that would need a signature. Can't think of anything. I look out the bedroom window.

Cops.

They are dressed in plain clothes, but I always know. I don't know if it's the bearing or the outfit or just some intangible, but I don't think it is strictly because I am one—a one-cop-to-another kind of thing. One of the cops is male, the other female. For a second, I think that it might be connected to Trey—logical deduction, right?—but a quick glance at their unmarked police car, which is so obviously an unmarked police car it

might as well have the words “unmarked police car” spray-painted on both sides, reveals a Pennsylvania license plate.

I quickly throw on a pair of gray sweats and check my look in the mirror. The only word that comes to mind is “dashing.” Well, that isn’t the only word, but let’s go with it. I hurry down the steps and reach for the doorknob.

I had no idea what opening that door would do to me.

I had no idea, Leo, that it would bring me back to you.