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HARLAN

COBEN

I WILL

FIND YOU

A THRILLER

**I WILL  
FIND YOU**

**HARLAN  
COBEN**



GRAND  
CENTRAL

New York Boston

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*For  
my nephews and nieces  
Thomas, Katharine, McCallum, Reilly, Dovey,  
Alek, Genevieve, Maja,  
Allana, Ana, Mary, Mei,  
Sam, Caleb, Finn,  
Annie, Ruby, Delia,  
Henry, and Molly*

*With love,  
Uncle Harlan*



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**GRAND  
CENTRAL**

## Part 1

## Chapter

### 1

I am serving the fifth year of a life sentence for murdering my own child.

Spoiler alert: I didn't do it.

My son Matthew was three years old at the time of his brutal murder. He was the best thing in my life, and then he was gone, and I've been serving a life sentence ever since. Not metaphorically. Or should I say, not *just* metaphorically. This would be a life sentence no matter what, even if I hadn't been arrested and tried and convicted.

But in my case, in *this* case, my life sentence is both metaphorical and literal.

How, you wonder, can I possibly be innocent?

I just am.

But didn't I fight and protest my innocence with every fiber of my being?

No, not really. This goes back, I guess, to the metaphorical sentence. I didn't really care that much about being found guilty. I know that sounds shocking, but it's not. My son is dead. That's the lede here. That's the lede and the headline and the all-caps. My son is dead and gone, and that fact would not have changed had the jury forewoman declared me guilty or not guilty. Guilty or not guilty, I had failed my son. Either way. Matthew wouldn't be less dead had the jury been able to see the truth and free me. A father's job is to

protect his son. That's his number-one priority. So even if I didn't wield the weapon that smashed my son's beautiful being into the mangled mess I found on that awful night five years ago, I didn't stop it either. I didn't do my job as his father. I didn't protect him.

Guilty or not guilty of the actual murder, it is my fault and thus my sentence to serve.

So I barely reacted when the jury forewoman read the verdict. Observers concluded, of course, that I must be sociopathic or psychopathic or deranged or damaged. I couldn't *feel*, the media claimed. I lacked an empathy gene, I couldn't experience remorse, I had dead eyes, whatever other terminology would land me in the killer camp. None of that was true. I just didn't see the point. I had been on the receiving end of a devastating blow when I found my son, Matthew, in his Marvel-Hero-themed pajamas that night. That blow had knocked me to my knees, and I couldn't get up. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

The metaphorical life sentence had begun.

If you think this will be a tale about a wronged man proving his innocence, it is not. Because that would not be much of a story. In the end, it would make no difference. Being released from this hellhole of a cell would not lead to redemption. My son would still be dead.

Redemption isn't possible in this case.

Or at least, that was what I believed right up until the moment that the guard, a particularly eccentric case we call Curly, comes to my cell and says, "Visitor."

I don't move because I don't think he is talking to me. I have been here for almost five years, and I have had no visitors in all that time.

During the first year, my father tried to visit. So had Aunt Sophie and a handful of close friends and relatives who believed me innocent or at least not *really* guilty. I wouldn't let them in. Matthew's mother, Cheryl, my then-wife (she is now, not surprisingly, my ex-wife) had tried too, albeit half-heartedly, but I wouldn't let her see me. I made it clear: No visitors. I was not being self-pitying or any kind of pitying. Visiting helps neither the visitor nor the *visitee*. I didn't and don't see the point.

A year passed. Then two. Then everyone stopped trying to visit. Not that anyone, other than maybe Adam, had been clamoring to make the schlep up to Maine, but you get my point. Now, for the first time in a long time, someone is here at Briggs Penitentiary to see me.

"Burroughs," Curly snaps, "let's go. You have a visitor."

I make a face. "Who?"

"Do I look like your social secretary?"

"Good one."

"What?"

"The social-secretary line. It was very funny."

"Are you being a wiseass with me?"

"I have no interest in visitors," I tell him. "Please send them away."

Curly sighs. "Burroughs."

"What?"

"Get your ass up. You didn't fill out the forms."

"What forms?"

"There are forms to fill out," Curly says, "if you don't want visitors."

"I thought people had to be on my guest list."

“Guest list,” Curly repeated with a shake of his head. “This look like a hotel to you?”

“Hotels have guest lists?” I counter. “Either way, I did fill out something that I don’t want any visitors.”

“When you first got here.”

“Right.”

Curly sighs again. “You got to renew that every year.”

“What?”

“Did you fill out a form this year saying you wanted no visitors?”

“No.”

Curly spread his hands. “There you go. Now get up.”

“Can’t you just tell the visitor to go home?”

“No, Burroughs, I can’t, and I’ll tell you why. That would be more work for me than dragging your ass down to Visitors. See, if I do that, I’ll have to explain why you’re not there and your visitor might ask me questions and then I’ll probably have to fill out a form myself and I hate that and then you’ll have to fill out a form and I’ll have to walk back and forth and, look, I don’t need the hassle, you don’t need the hassle. So here’s what’ll happen: You’ll go with me now and you can just sit there and say nothing for all I care and then you can fill out the correct forms and neither of us will have to go through this again. Do you feel me?”

I have been here long enough to know that too much resistance is not only futile but harmful. I am also, truth be told, curious. “I feel you,” I say.

“Cool. Let’s go.”

I know the drill, of course. I let Curly put on the handcuffs, followed by the belly chain so that my hands can be shackled to my

waist. He skips the leg cuffs, mostly because they are a pain to get on and off. The walk is fairly long from the PC (protective custody, for those not in the know) unit of Briggs Penitentiary to the visiting area. Eighteen of us are currently housed in PC—seven child molesters, four rapists, two cannibal serial killers, two “regular” serial killers, two cop killers, and of course, one filicidal maniac (yours truly). Quite the coterie.

Curly gives me a hard glare, which is unusual. Most of the guards are bored cop wannabees and/or muscleheads who look upon us inmates with staggering apathy. I want to ask him what gives, but I know when to keep quiet. You learn that in here. I feel my legs quake a bit as I walk. I’m oddly nervous. The truth is, I’ve settled in here. It’s awful—worse than you imagine—but still I’ve grown accustomed to this particular brand of awful. This visitor, whoever it is after all this time, is here to deliver rock-my-world news.

I don’t welcome that.

I flash back to the blood from that night. I think about the blood a lot. I dream about it too. I don’t know how often. In the beginning, it was every night. Now I would say it’s more a once-a-week thing, but I don’t keep track. Time doesn’t pass normally in prison. It stops and starts and sputters and zigzags. I remember blinking myself awake in the bed I shared with my wife Cheryl that night. I didn’t check a clock, but for those keeping score at home, it was four in the morning. The house was silent, still, and yet somehow I sensed something was wrong. Or maybe that is what I believe—incorrectly—now. Memory is often our most imaginative storyteller. So maybe, probably, I didn’t “sense” anything at all. I don’t know anymore. It’s not like I bolted upright in my bed and leapt to my feet. It took time

for me to get up. I stayed in my bed for several minutes, my brain stuck in that weird cusp between sleep and awake, floating ever upward toward consciousness.

At some point, I did finally sit up. I started down the corridor to Matthew's room.

And that was when I noticed the blood.

It was redder than I imagined—fresh, bright Crayola-crayon red, garish and mocking as a clown's lipstick against the white sheet.

Panic gripped me then. I called out Matthew's name. I clumsily ran to his room, bumping hard into the doorframe. I called out his name again. No answer. I ran into his bedroom and found...something unrecognizable.

I'm told I started screaming.

That was how the police found me. Still screaming. The screams became shards of glass careening through every part of me. I stopped screaming at some point, I guess. I don't remember that either. Maybe my vocal cords snapped, I don't know. But the echo of those screams has never left me. Those shards still rip and shred and maul.

"Hurry up, Burroughs," Curly says. "She's waiting for you."

She.

He'd said "she." For a moment I imagine that it is Cheryl, and my heart picks up a beat. But no, she won't come, and I wouldn't want her to. We were married for eight years. Happily, I thought, for most of them. It hadn't been so good at the end. New stresses had formed cracks, and the cracks were turning into fissures. Would Cheryl and I have made it? I don't know. I sometimes think Matthew would have



made us work harder, that he would have kept us together, but that sounds a lot like wishful thinking.

Not long after my conviction, I signed some paperwork granting her a divorce. We never spoke again. That was more my choice than hers. So that's all I know of her life. I have no idea where Cheryl is now, if she's still wounded and in mourning or if she's managed to make a new life for herself. I think it's best that I don't know.

Why didn't I pay more attention to Matthew that night?

I'm not saying I was a bad father. I don't think I was. But that night, I simply wasn't in the mood. Three-year-olds can be tough. And boring. We all know this. Parents try to pretend that every moment with their child is bliss. It's not. Or at least that's what I thought that night. I didn't read a bedtime story to Matthew because I just couldn't be bothered. Awful, right? I just sent my child to bed because I was distracted by my own meaningless issues and insecurities. Stupid. So stupid. We are all so luxuriously stupid when things are good in our life.

Cheryl, who had just finished her residency in general surgery, had a night shift in the transplant ward at Boston General. I was alone with Matthew. I started drinking. I'm not a big drinker and don't handle spirits well, but in the past few months, with the strain on Cheryl and my marriage, I had found some, if not comfort, numb there. So I partook and I guess the drinks hit me hard and fast. In short, I drank too much and passed out, so instead of watching my child, instead of protecting my son, instead of making sure the doors were locked (they weren't) or listening for an intruder or heck, instead of hearing a child scream in terror and/or agony, I was in a

state the prosecutor at the trial mockingly called “snooze from booze.”

I don't remember anything else until, of course, that smell.

I know what you're thinking: Maybe he (meaning “I”) did do it. After all, the evidence against me was pretty overwhelming. I get that. It's fair. I sometimes wonder about that too. You'd have to be truly blind or delusional not to consider that possibility, so let me tell you a quick story that I think relates to this: I once kicked Cheryl hard while we slept. I'd been having a nightmare that a giant raccoon was attacking our little dog, Laszlo, so in a sleep panic, I kicked the raccoon as hard as I could and ended up kicking Cheryl in the shin. It was oddly funny in hindsight, watching Cheryl try to keep a straight face as I defended my actions (“*Would you have wanted me to let Laszlo get eaten by a raccoon?*”), but my wonderful surgeon wife, a woman who loved Laszlo and all dogs, still seethed.

“Maybe,” Cheryl said to me, “subconsciously, you wanted to hurt me.”

She said that with a smile, so I didn't think she meant it. But maybe she did. We forgot about it immediately and had a great day together. But I think about that a lot now. I was asleep and dreaming that night too. One kick isn't a murder, but who knows, right? The murder weapon was a baseball bat. Mrs. Winslow, who had lived in the house behind our woods for forty years, saw me bury it. That was the kicker, though I wondered about that, about me being stupid enough to bury it so close to the scene, what with my fingerprints all over it. I wonder about a lot of things like that. For example, I had fallen asleep after a drink or two too many once or twice before—who hasn't?—but never like this. Perhaps I'd been drugged, but by

the time I was a viable suspect, it was too late to test for that. The local police, many of whom revered my father, were supportive at first. They looked into some bad people he'd put away, but that never felt right, not even to me. Dad had made enemies, sure, but that was a long time ago. Why would any of them kill a three-year-old boy for that kind of revenge? It didn't add up. There were no signs of sexual assault or any other motive either, so really, when you add it all up, there was only one true viable suspect.

Me.

So maybe something like my raccoon-kick dream happened here. It's not impossible. My attorney, Tom Florio, wanted to make an argument like that. My family, some of them anyway, believed that I should take that route too. Diminished capacity or some such defense. I had a history of sleepwalking and some of what could have been described as mental health issues, if you pushed the definition. I could use that, they reminded me.

But nah, I wouldn't confess because, despite these rationales, I didn't do it. I didn't kill my son. I know I didn't. I *know*. And yes, I *know* every perp says that.

Curly and I make the final turn. Briggs Penitentiary is done up in Early American Asphalt. Everything was a washed-out gray, a faded road after a rainstorm. I had gone from a three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath Colonial, splashed in sunshine yellow with green shutters, decorated in earth tones and pine antiques, nicely situated on a three-quarter-acre lot in a cul-de-sac, to this. Doesn't matter. Surroundings are irrelevant. Exteriors, you learn, are temporal and illusionary and thus meaningless.

There is a buzzing sound, and then Curly opens the door. Many prisons have updated visiting areas. Lower-risk inmates can sit at a table with their visitor or visitors with no partitions or barriers. I cannot. Here at Briggs we still have the bulletproof plexiglass. I sit on a metal stool bolted into the floor. My belly chain is loosened so that I can grab hold of the telephone. That is how visitors in the supermax communicate—via telephone and plexiglass.

The visitor isn't my ex-wife Cheryl, though she looks like Cheryl. It's her sister, Rachel.

Rachel sits on the other side of the plexiglass, but I see her eyes widen when she takes me in. I almost smile at her reaction. I, her once beloved brother-in-law, the man with the offbeat sense of humor and the devil-may-care smile, have certainly changed in the past five years. I wonder what she notices first. The weight loss perhaps. Or more likely, the shattered facial bones that had not healed properly. It could be my ashen complexion, the slump from the once-athletic shoulders, the thinning and graying of my hair.

I sit down and peer at her through the plexiglass. I take hold of the phone and gesture that she should do the same. When Rachel lifts the phone to her ear, I speak.

"Why are you here?"

Rachel almost manages a smile. We were always close, Rachel and I. I liked spending time with her. She liked spending time with me. "Not much on pleasantries, I see."

"Are you here to exchange pleasantries, Rachel?"

Whatever hint of a smile there was fades away. She shakes her head. "No."

I wait. Rachel looks worn yet still beautiful. Her hair was still the same ash blonde as Cheryl's, her eyes the same dark green. I shift on my stool and face her at an angle because it hurts to look directly at her.

Rachel blinks back tears and shakes her head. "This is too crazy."

She lowers her gaze and for a moment I see the eighteen-year-old girl I'd met when Cheryl first brought me to her New Jersey home from Amherst College during our junior year. Cheryl and Rachel's parents hadn't really approved of me. I was a little too blue-collar for them, what with the beat-cop father and row-house upbringing. Rachel, on the other hand, had taken to me right away, and I grew to love her as the closest thing I would have to a little sister. I cared about her. I felt protective of her. A year later, I drove her up and helped her move in at Lemhall University as an undergrad and later to Columbia University, where she studied journalism.

"It's been a long time," Rachel says.

I nod. I want her to go away. It hurts to look at her. I wait. She doesn't speak. I finally say something because Rachel looks like she needs a lifeline and so I can't help myself.

"How's Sam?" I ask.

"Fine," Rachel says. "He works for Merton Pharmaceuticals now. In sales. He made manager, travels a lot." Then she shrugs and adds, "We're divorced."

"Oh," I say. "I'm sorry."

She shakes that off. I'm not really sorry to hear it. I never thought Sam was good enough for her, but I felt that way about most of her boyfriends.

"Are you still writing for the *Globe*?" I ask.

“No,” she says in a voice that slams the door on that subject.

We sit in silence for a few more seconds. Then I try again.

“Is this about Cheryl?”

“No. Not really.”

I swallow. “How is she?”

Rachel starts wringing her hands. She looks everywhere but at me. “She’s remarried.”

The words hit me like a gut punch, but I take it without so much as flinching. This, I think to myself. This is why I don’t want visitors.

“She never blamed you, you know. None of us did.”

“Rachel?”

“What?”

“Why the hell are you here?”

We fall back into silence. Behind her, I see another guard, one I don’t know, staring at us. There are three other inmates in here right now. I don’t know any of them. Briggs is a big place, and I try to keep to myself. I am tempted to stand up and leave, when Rachel finally speaks.

“Sam has a friend,” she says.

I wait.

“Not really a friend. A co-worker. He’s on the marketing side. In management too. At Merton Pharmaceuticals. His name is Tom Longley. He has a wife and two boys. Nice family. We used to get together sometimes. For company barbecues, stuff like that. His wife’s name is Irene. I like her. Irene is pretty funny.”

Rachel stops and shakes her head.

“I’m not telling this right.”

“No, no,” I say. “It’s a great story so far.”

Rachel smiles, actually smiles, at my sarcasm. “A hint of the old David,” she says.

We go quiet again. When Rachel starts speaking, her words come out slower, more measured.

“The Longleys went on a company trip two months ago to an amusement park in Springfield. Six Flags, I think it’s called. Took their two boys. Irene and I have stayed friends, so she invited me over to lunch the other day. She talked about the trip—a little gossipy because I guess Sam brought his new girlfriend. Like I’d care. But that’s not important.”

I bite back the sarcastic rejoinder and look at her. She holds my gaze.

“And then Irene showed me a bunch of photos.”

Rachel stops here. I don’t have the slightest idea where she is going with this, but I can almost hear some kind of foreboding soundtrack in my head. Rachel takes out a manila envelope. Eight-by-ten size, I guess. She puts it down on the ledge in front of her. She stares at it a beat too long, as though debating her next step. Then in one fell swoop she reaches into the envelope, plucks something out, and presses it against the glass.

It is, as advertised, a photo.

I don’t know what to make of it. The photograph does indeed appear to have been taken at an amusement park. A woman—I wonder whether this is pretty-funny Irene—smiles shyly at the camera. Two boys, probably the Longleys, are on either hip, neither looking at the camera. Someone in a Bugs Bunny costume is on the right; someone dressed like Batman is on the left. Irene looks a little put out—but in a fun way. I can almost imagine the scene. Good ol’

Pharmaceutical Marketing Tom cheerily goading Pretty-Funny Irene to pose, Pretty-Funny Irene not really in the mood but being a good sport, the two boys having none of it, we've all been there. There is a giant red roller coaster in the background. The sun is shining in the faces of the Longley family, which explains why they are squinting and slightly turning away.

Rachel has her eyes on me.

I lift my eyes toward hers. She keeps pressing the photograph up to the glass.

"Look closer, David."

I stare at her another second or two and then I let my gaze wander back to the photograph. This time I see it immediately. A steel claw reaches into my chest and squeezes my heart. I can't breathe.

There is a boy.

He is in the background, on the right edge of the frame, almost out of the picture. His face is in perfect profile, like he's posing to be on a coin. The boy appears to be about eight years old. Someone, an adult male perhaps, holds the boy's hand. The boy looks up at what I assume is the back of the man, but the man is out of frame.

I feel the tears push into my eyes and reach out with tentative fingers. I caress the boy's image through the glass. It is impossible, of course. A desperate man sees what he wants to see, and let's face it—no thirsty, heat-crazed, starved desert-dweller who ever conjured up a mirage has ever been this desperate. Matthew had not yet reached the age of three when he was murdered. No one, not even a loving parent, could guess what he would look like some five years later. Not for certain. There is a resemblance, that's all. The



boy looks like Matthew. Looks like. It's a resemblance. Nothing more.  
A resemblance.

A sob rips through me. I put my fist into my mouth and bite down.  
It takes a few seconds before I am able to speak. When I do, my  
words are simple.

"It's Matthew."