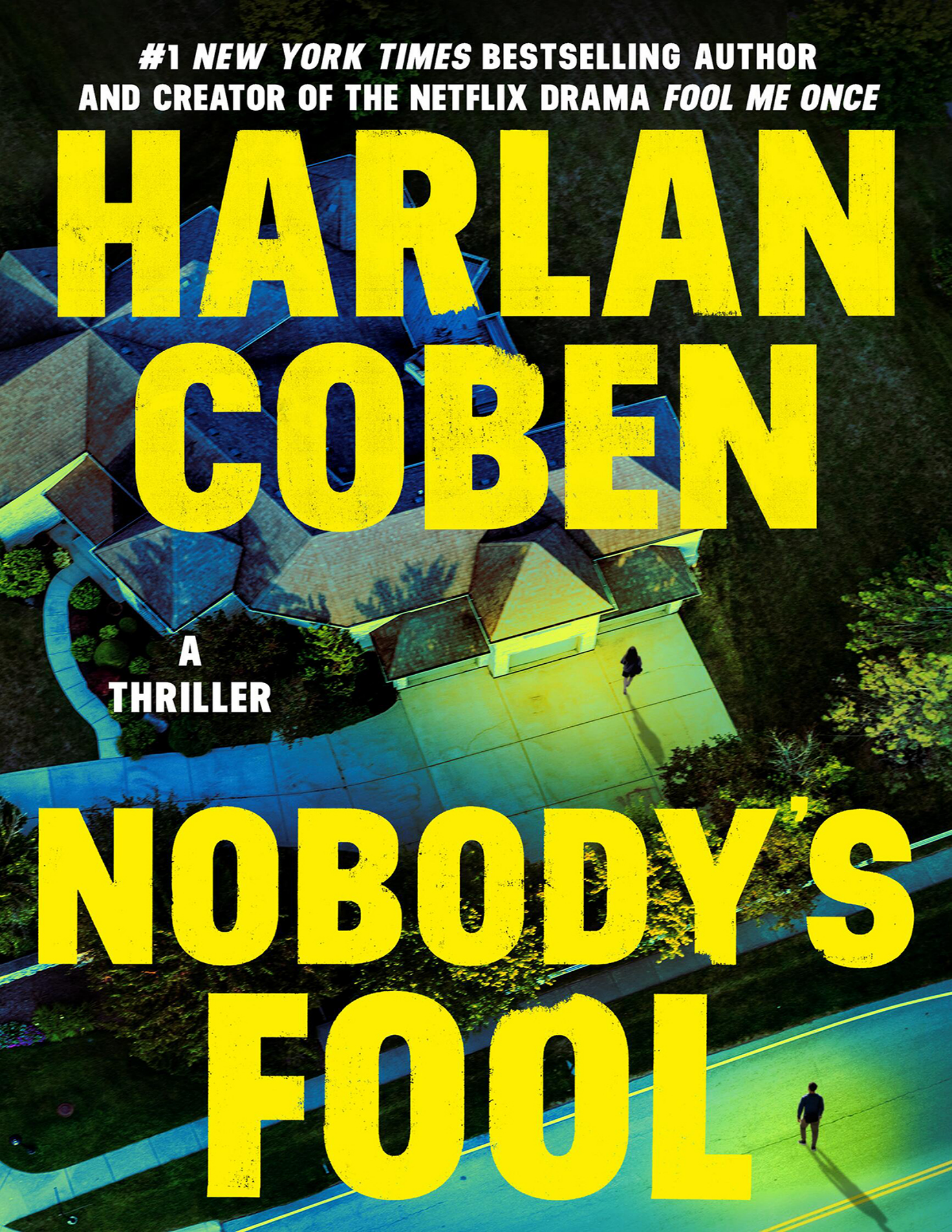


**#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AND CREATOR OF THE NETFLIX DRAMA *FOOL ME ONCE***

HARLAN COBEN

**A
THRILLER**

NOBODY'S FOOL



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HARLAN COBEN



GRAND
CENTRAL

NEW YORK BOSTON

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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.