

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF MISSING YOU

HARLAN COBEN

THE

S**T****R****A****N****G****E****R**

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**

DUTTON
— est. 1852 —

DUTTON

→ est. 1852 ←

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Version_1

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*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, C—” 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 hi 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, 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.

Chapter 3

The American Legion parking lot was dark. Only the flashes of light from opened car doors and the smaller bursts from checked smartphones broke the black curtain. Adam got into his car and sat in the driver's seat. For a few moments he did nothing. He just sat there. Car doors were being slammed shut. Engines were starting. Adam didn't move.

"You didn't have to stay with her. . . ."

He could feel his phone vibrate in his pocket. It would be, he figured, a text from Corinne. She'd be anxious to know about team selections. Adam took out the phone and checked the message. Yep, from Corinne:

How did it go tonight??

As he thought.

Adam was staring at the text as though it might contain a hidden message when the rapping of knuckles against the glass made him jump. Gaston's pumpkin-size head filled the passenger-side window. He grinned at Adam and made a rolling-down motion. Adam put the key in the ignition, pressed the button, and watched the window slide open.

"Hey, man," Gaston said, "no hard feelings. Just an honest difference of opinion, right?"

"Right."

Gaston stuck his hand in the window to shake. Adam returned the grip.

"Good luck this season," Gaston said.

"Yeah. And good luck with the job hunt."

Gaston froze for a second. The two men stayed there, Gaston looming large in the window, Adam sitting in the car but not looking away. Eventually, Gaston pulled his mitt free and stalked away.

Buffoon.

The phone buzzed again. Again it was Corinne:

Hello!?!?

Adam could see her staring down at the screen, dying for an answer. Head games had never been his style—he saw no reason not to give it to her:

Ryan's on A.

Her reply was immediate:

Yay!!! Will call u in half an hour.

He put away the phone, started up the car, and headed home. The ride was exactly 2.6 miles—Corinne had measured it with her car’s odometer when she first got into running. He drove past the new Dunkin’ Donuts/Baskin-Robbins combo store on South Maple and made a left at the Sunoco station on the corner. It was late when he got home, but as usual, every light in the house was still switched on. A lot of school time nowadays was spent on conservation and renewable energy, but his two boys hadn’t learned yet how to depart a room without leaving on the lights.

He could hear their border collie, Jersey, barking as he approached the door. When he unlocked the door with his key, Jersey greeted him as though he were a returning POW. Adam noticed that the dog’s water bowl was empty.

“Hello?”

No answer. Ryan could be asleep by now. Thomas would either be finishing up homework or claiming the same. He was never in the middle or end of playing video games or messing around on his laptop—Adam always managed to interrupt him *just* as he was finishing his homework and *starting* to play video games or mess around on his laptop.

He filled the water bowl.

“Hello?”

Thomas appeared at the top of the stairs. “Hey.”

“Did you walk Jersey?”

“Not yet.”

Teen code for: No.

“Do it now.”

“I just need to finish this one homework thing first.”

Teen code for: No.

Adam was about to tell him “Now”—this was a familiar teen-parent dance—but he stopped and stared up at the boy. Tears pushed their way into his eyes, but he fought them down. Thomas looked like Adam. Everyone said so. He had the same walk, the same laugh, the same second toe bigger than the first toe.

No way. No way he wasn’t Adam’s. Even though the stranger had said that . . .

Now you’re listening to a stranger?

He thought about all the times he and Corinne had warned the boys about strangers, about so-called stranger danger, all the lessons about not being too helpful, about drawing attention to yourself if an adult approached, about creating a safe code word. Thomas had gotten it right away. Ryan was more naturally trusting. Corinne had been wary of those men who hung around the Little League fields, the lifers who had an almost pathological need to coach even when their kids were long out of the program or, worse, when they had no kids at all. Adam had always been a little more lax about all that—or maybe it was something darker. Maybe it was the fact that he trusted no one when it came to his kids, not just those who might normally arouse suspicion.

It was just easier that way, wasn’t it?

Thomas spotted something in his father’s face. He made a face of his own and did that teenage tumble-walk-clump down the stairs, as though some invisible hand had pushed him from behind and his feet were trying to catch up.

“Might as well take Jersey out now,” Thomas said.

He stumbled past his father and grabbed the leash. Jersey was huddled up against the door, ready to

go. Jersey was, like all dogs, always ready to go. She displayed her intense desire to go outside by standing in front of the door so you couldn't open it and let her out. Dogs.

"Where's Ryan?" Adam asked.

"In bed."

Adam checked the clock on the microwave. Ten fifteen. Ryan's bedtime was ten, though he was allowed to stay up and read until lights-out at ten thirty. Ryan, like Corinne, was a rule follower. They never had to remind him that it was nine forty-five or any of that. In the morning, Ryan got out of bed the moment his alarm went off, showered, dressed, made his own breakfast. Thomas was different. Adam often considered investing in a cattle prod to get his older son moving in the mornings.

Novelty Funsy . . .

Adam heard the screen door shut as Thomas and Jersey started out. He headed upstairs and looked in on Ryan. He had fallen asleep with the light on, a copy of the latest Rick Riordan novel resting on his chest. Adam tiptoed in, picked up the book, found a bookmark, put it away. He was reaching for the lamp's switch when Ryan stirred.

"Dad?"

"Hey."

"Did I make A?"

"The e-mail goes out tomorrow, pal."

A white lie. Adam wasn't supposed to officially know yet. The coaches were not supposed to tell their kids until the official e-mail in the morning so everyone learned at the same time.

"Okay."

Ryan closed his eyes and fell asleep before his head actually touched down. Adam watched his son for a moment. Lookswise, Ryan favored his mother. That never meant much to Adam before tonight—it had in fact always been a plus—but now, tonight, it was making him wonder. Stupid, but there you go. The bell you can't unring. The niggling in the back of the brain wouldn't leave him alone, but there you go again, so the hell what? Let's take a complete theoretical. He stared at Ryan and felt that overwhelming feeling he sometimes got when he looked at his boys—part pure joy, part fear of what could happen to them in this cruel world, part wishes and hopes, all blended together in the only thing in this entire planet that felt completely pure. Corny, yes, but there you go. Purity. That was what hit you when you get lost looking at your own child—a purity that could be derived only from true, unconditional love.

He loved Ryan so damned much.

And if he found out that Ryan wasn't his, would he just lose all that? Does all that go away? Does even matter?

He shook his head and turned away. Enough philosophizing on fatherhood for one evening. So far, nothing had changed. Some weirdo had handed him some nonsense about a fake pregnancy. That was all. Adam had been involved in the legal system long enough to know that you take nothing for granted. You do the work. You do the research. People lie. You investigate because too often your preconceived notions will get blown out of the water.

Sure, Adam's gut was telling him that the stranger's words had a ring of truth to them, but that was the problem. When you listen to your gut, you are often just fooled with greater certainty.

Do the work. Do the research.

So how?

Simple. Start with Novelty Funsy.

The family shared a desktop computer that used to be kept in the family room. This had been

Corinne's idea. There would be no secret web browsing (read: porn watching) in their home. Adam and Corinne would know all, the theory went, and be mature, responsible parents. But Adam quickly realized that this sort of policing was either superfluous or nonsense. The boys could look things up, including porn, on their phones. They could go to a friend's house. They could grab one of the laptop or tablets lying around the house.

It was also lazy parenting, he thought. Teach them to do the right thing because it's the right thing—not because Mom and Dad are looking over your shoulder. Of course, all parents start off believing stuff like that, but quickly, you realize that parenting shortcuts are there for a reason.

The other problem was more obvious: If you wanted to use the computer for its intended use—to study or do homework—the noise from the kitchen and the television would be certain to distract. So Adam had moved the desktop into the small nook that they'd generously dubbed a "home office"—a room that was too many things to too many people. Corinne's students' papers, ready to be graded, were stacked on the right. The boys' homework was always in disarray, a rough draft of some essay left behind in the printer like a wounded soldier on a battlefield. The bills were piled on the chair, waiting for Adam to pay them online.

The Internet browser was up and on a museum site. One of the boys must be studying ancient Greece. Adam checked the browser's history, seeing what sites had been visited, though the boys had grown too savvy to leave anything incriminating behind. But you never knew. Thomas once accidentally left his Facebook up and logged in. Adam had sat at the computer and stared at the front page, trying like hell to fight off the desire to take a peek in his son's message file.

He'd lost that fight.

A few messages in and Adam stopped. His son was safe—that was the important thing—but it had been a disturbing invasion of his son's privacy. He had learned things that he wasn't supposed to know. Nothing heavy. Nothing earth-shattering. But things that a father should perhaps talk to his son about. But what was he now supposed to do with this information? If he confronted Thomas, Adam would have had to admit going through his private things. Was that worth it? He'd debated telling Corinne about it, but once he relaxed and gave it some time, he realized that, really, the communications he'd read were not abnormal, that he himself had done some stuff when he was a teenager he wouldn't have wanted his parents to know about, that he had simply outgrown it and moved on, and if his parents had spied on him and confronted him about it, he probably would have been worse off.

So Adam let it go.

Parenting. It ain't for sissies.

You're stalling, Adam.

Yeah, he knew that. So back to it.

Tonight there was nothing spectacular in the recent history. One of the boys—probably Ryan—was indeed studying ancient Greece or just getting really into his Riordan book. There were links to Zeus, Hades, Hera, and Icarus. So more specifically, Greek mythology. He moved down the history and clicked for yesterday. He saw a search for driving directions to the Borgata Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City. Made sense. That was where Corinne was staying. She had also searched for the convention's schedule and clicked on that.

That was about it.

Enough stalling.

He brought up his bank's web page. He and Corinne had two Visa accounts. They unofficially called one personal, the other business. It was for their own bookkeeping records. They used the

“business” card for what they might deem a business expense—like, for example, the teachers’ conference in Atlantic City. For everything else, they used the personal card.

He brought up the personal card account first. They had a universal search feature. He put in the word *novelty*. Nothing showed up. Okay, fine. He logged out and made the same search through the business Visa.

And there it was.

A little more than two years ago, there was a charge to a company called Novelty Funsy for \$387.83. Adam could hear the low hum of the computer.

How? How had the stranger known about this charge?

No idea.

Adam had seen the charge way back when, hadn’t he? Yes, he was sure of it. He racked his brain and scraped together the flimsy remnants of a memory. He had been sitting right here, checking the Visa charges. He had asked Corinne about it. She had made light of the charges. She’d said something about decorations for the classroom. He’d wondered about the price, he thought. Seemed high. Corinne had said the school was going to reimburse her.

Novelty Funsy. That didn’t sound like anything nefarious, did it?

Adam opened up another window and Googled *Novelty Funsy*. Google spit back:

Showing results for Novelty *Fancy*

No results found for Novelty *Funsy*

Whoa. That was odd. Everything was on Google. Adam sat back and considered his options. Why wouldn’t there be even one hit for Novelty Funsy? The company was real. He could see it on his Visa charge. He assumed that they sold some kind of decorations or, uh, fun novelty items.

Adam chewed on his lower lip. He didn’t get it. A stranger comes up to him and tells him that his wife lied to him—elaborately, it seemed—about being pregnant. Who was he? Why would he do it?

Okay, forget those two questions for now and let’s get to the one that matters most: Is it true?

Adam wanted to simply say no and move on. Whatever their problems, whatever scars were left from eighteen years of marriage, he trusted her. Many things slipped away with time, broke down and dissolved or, more optimistically, altered and changed, but the one thing that seems to remain and grow more cohesive is the protective family bond—you are a team, you and your spouse. You are on the same side, in this together, you have each other’s backs. Your victories are hers. So are your failures.

Adam trusted Corinne with his life. And yet . . .

He had seen it a million times in his line of work. Put simply, people fool you. He and Corinne might be a cohesive unit, but they were also individuals. It would be nice to trust unconditionally and forget the stranger ever appeared—Adam was tempted to do just that—but that felt a tad too much like the proverbial sticking your head in the sand. The voice of doubt in the back of his head might one day quiet, but it would never go away.

Not until he knew for sure.

The stranger had claimed that the proof was in this seemingly harmless Visa charge. He owed it to himself and, yep, Corinne (she wouldn’t want the voice around either, would she?) to follow up, so Adam called the Visa’s toll-free number. The recorded voice made him dial in the card number, the expiration date, and the CVV code number on the back. It tried to give him the information via a

machine, but eventually the recorded voice asked whether he'd like to speak to a representative. Representative. Like he was calling Congress. He said, "Yes," and heard the phone ring through.

When the representative came on, she made him repeat the exact same information—why do they always do that?—along with the last four numbers of his social security and his address.

"What can I help you with today, Mr. Price?"

"There's a charge on my Visa card from a company called Novelty Funsy."

She asked him to spell *funsy*. Then: "Do you have the amount and date of the transaction?"

Adam gave her the information. He expected some pushback when he said the date—the charge was more than two years old—but the representative didn't comment on that.

"What information do you need, Mr. Price?"

"I don't recall buying anything from a company called Novelty Funsy."

"Um," the representative said.

"Um?"

"Um, some companies don't bill under their real name. You know, to be discreet. Like when you go to a hotel and they tell you the name of the movie won't be on your phone bill."

She was talking about pornography or something involving sex. "That's not the case here."

"Well, let's see what's what, then." The clacking of her keyboard came over the phone line.

"Novelty Funsy is listed as an online retailer. That usually indicates that it is a company that values privacy. Does that help?"

Yes and no. "Is there any way to ask them for a detailed receipt?"

"Certainly. It may take a few hours."

"I guess that's okay."

"We have an e-mail for you on file." She read off his address. "Should we send it there?"

"That would be great."

The representative asked whether she could assist him with any other matter. He said no, thanks. She wished him a good evening. He hung up the phone and stared at the charge screen. Novelty Funsy. Now that he thought about it, the name did sound like a discreet name for a sex shop.

"Dad?"

It was Thomas. Adam quickly reached for the screen's off switch like, well, one of his sons watching porn.

"Hey," Adam said, the very essence of casual. "What's up?"

If his son found his father's behavior bizarre, he didn't show it. Teens were ridiculously clueless and self-involved. Right now, Adam appreciated that. What Thomas's father did on the Internet couldn't be the least bit interesting to him.

"Can you give me a ride to Justin's?"

"Now?"

"He has my shorts."

"What shorts?"

"My practice shorts. For practice tomorrow."

"Can't you wear other shorts?"

Thomas looked at his father as though a horn had sprung out of his forehead. "Coach says we have to wear the practice shorts to practice."

"Can't Justin just bring them to school tomorrow?"

"He was supposed to bring them today. He forgets."

"So what did you use today?"

“Kevin had an extra pair. His brother’s. They were too big on me.”

“Can’t you tell Justin to put them in his backpack right now?”

“I could, yeah, but he won’t do it. It’s only like four blocks. I could use the practice driving anyway.”

Thomas had gotten his learner’s permit a week ago—the parental equivalent of a stress test without using an actual EKG machine. “Okay, I’ll be down in a sec.” Adam cleared the history on the browser and headed downstairs. Jersey was hoping for another walk and gave them the pitiful “I can’t believe you’re not taking me with you” eyes as they hurried past her. Thomas grabbed the keys and got behind the wheel.

Adam was now able to let go when he sat in the passenger seat. Corinne was too much of a control freak. She would keep shouting out instructions and cautions. She almost put her foot through the imaginary passenger-side brake. As Thomas pulled onto the street, Adam turned and studied his son’s profile. Some acne was forming on his cheeks. There was faint hair growing down the side of his face. Abe Lincoln’s lines if not thickness, but his son had to shave now. Not every day. Not more than once a week, but it was there. Thomas wore cargo shorts. His legs were hairy. He had beautiful blue eyes, his son. Everyone commented on them. They had the sparkling blue of ice.

Thomas pulled into the driveway, drifting a little close to the right curb.

“I’ll be two seconds,” he said.

“Okay.”

Thomas put the car in park and sprinted toward the front door. Justin’s mom, Kristin Hoy, opened it—Adam could see the bright shock of blond hair—and that surprised him. Kristin taught at the same high school as Corinne. The two women had grown pretty close. Adam had figured that she’d be down in Atlantic City, but then he remembered that this conference was for history and languages. Kristin taught math.

Kristin smiled and waved. He waved back. Thomas vanished into the house as Kristin started down the path toward the car. Politically incorrect as it sounded, Kristin Hoy was a MILF. Adam had overheard a bunch of Thomas’s friends saying that, though he could have figured it out on his own. Right now, she was sashaying toward him in painted-on jeans and a tight white top. She was some sort of competitive bodybuilder. Adam wasn’t sure what kind. Her name had a bunch of letters after it, and she had earned the distinction of being a “pro,” whatever that exactly entailed. Adam had never been a fan of the muscular weight lifting women of old, and in some of her competitive pictures, Kristin did indeed look a little corded and cut. The hair was a little too blond, the smile a little too white, the tan a little too orange, but the look worked pretty damn well in person.

“Hey, Adam.”

He wasn’t sure whether he should get out of the car. He settled for staying in his seat. “Hey, Kristin.”

“Corinne still away?”

“Yep.”

“But she’s back tomorrow, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay, I’ll touch base with her. We have to train. I’ve got the states in two weeks.”

On her Facebook page, she claimed to be a “fitness model” and “WBFF Pro.” Corinne envied her body. They had started working out together recently. Like most things that were good or bad for you, you reach a stage where what started as a happy habit turns into something of an obsession.

Thomas was back with the shorts.

“Bye, Thomas.”

“Bye, Mrs. Hoy.”

“Have a good night, boys. Don’t have too much fun with Mom away.”

She sashayed back toward the house.

Thomas said, “She’s kind of annoying.”

“That’s not nice.”

“You oughta see their kitchen.”

“Why? What’s wrong with their kitchen?”

“She has bikini pictures of herself on the fridge,” Thomas said. “It’s gross.”

Hard to argue. As Thomas pulled out, a small smile tugged at his lips.

“What?” Adam said.

“Kyle calls her a butterface,” Thomas said.

“Who?”

“Mrs. Hoy.”

Adam wondered if that was a new term for MILF or something. “What’s a butterface?”

“It’s what you call someone who’s not pretty—but she has a good body.”

“I’m not following,” Adam said.

“Butterface.” Then Thomas spoke slowly. “But. Her. Face.”

Adam tried not to smile as he shook his head in disapproval. He was about to admonish his son—wondering exactly how to do so and keep a straight face—when his cell phone rang. He looked down at the caller ID.

It was Corinne.

He hit the ignore button. He should pay attention to his son’s driving. Corinne would understand. He was about to put his phone in his pocket when he felt it vibrate. Fast for a voice mail, he thought, but no, it was an e-mail from his bank. He opened it. There were links to see the detailed purchases, but Adam barely noticed them.

“Dad? You okay?”

“Keep your eyes on the road, Thomas.”

He would go through it in detail when he got home, but right now, the top line of the e-mail said more than he wanted to know.

Novelty Funsy is a billing name for the following online retailer:

Fake-A-Pregnancy.com

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