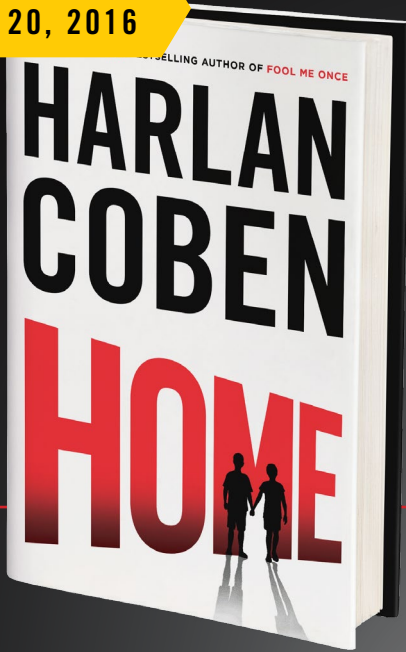


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SEPT. 20, 2016



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The boy who had been missing for ten years stepped into the light.

I am not one for hysterics or even feeling much of what might be labeled astonishment. I have seen much in my forty-plus years. I have nearly been killed—and I have killed. I have seen depravity that most would find difficult, if not downright inconceivable, to comprehend—and some would argue that I have administered the same. I have learned over the years to control my emotions and, more important, my reactions during stressful, volatile situations. I may strike quickly and violently, but I do nothing without a certain level of deliberation and purpose.

These qualities, if you will, have saved me and those who matter to me time and time again.

Yet I confess that when I first saw the boy—well, he was a teenager now, wasn't he?—I could feel my pulse race. A thrumming sound echoed in my ears. Without conscious thought, my hands formed two fists.

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Ten years—and now fifty yards, no more, separated me from the missing boy.

Patrick Moore—that was the boy's name—leaned against the graffiti-littered, concrete support of the underpass. His shoulders were hunched. His eyes darted about before settling on the cracked pavement in front of him. His hair was closely cropped, what we used to call a crew cut. Two other teenage boys also milled about the underpass. One smoked a cigarette with so much gusto I feared the cigarette had offended him. The other wore a studded dog collar and mesh shirt, proclaiming his current profession in the most obvious of uniforms.

Above the cars roared past, oblivious to what was below them. We were in King's Cross, most of which had been “rejuvenated” over the past two decades with museums and libraries and the Eurostar and even a plaque for Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, where Harry Potter boarded the train for Hogwarts. Much of the so-called undesirable element had fled these dangerous in-person transactions for the relative safety of online commerce—much less need for the risky drive-by sex trade, yet another positive by-product of the Internet—but if you go to the other side of the literal and figurative tracks, away from those shiny new towers, there are still places where the sleaze element survives in a concentrated form.

That was where I found the missing boy.

Part of me—the rash part I keep at bay—wanted to sprint across the street and grab the boy. He would now be, if this were indeed Patrick and not a lookalike or mistake on my part, sixteen years old. From this distance, that looked about right to me. Ten years ago—you can do the math and calculate how young he'd been—in the

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über-affluent community of Alpine, Patrick had been on what they insist on calling a “play date” with my cousin’s son Rhys.

That, of course, was my dilemma.

If I grabbed Patrick now, just ran across the street and snatched him, what would become of Rhys? I had one of the missing boys in sight, but I had come to rescue both. So that meant taking care. No sudden moves. I must be patient. Whatever had happened ten years ago, whatever cruel twist of mankind (I don’t believe so much in fate being cruel when the culprit is usually our fellow human beings) had taken this boy from the opulence of his stone mansion to this filthy toilet of an underpass, I worried now that if I made the wrong move, one or both boys might disappear again, this time forever.

I would have to wait for Rhys. I would wait for Rhys and then I would grab both boys and bring them home.

Two questions have probably crossed your mind.

The first: How can I be so confident that once the boys were in sight, I would be able to grab them both? Suppose, you may wonder, the boys had been brainwashed and resisted. Suppose their kidnapers or whoever held the keys to their freedom were many and violent and determined.

To that I reply: Don’t worry about it.

The second question, which was far more pressing in my mind: What if Rhys did not show up?

I was not much of a “crossing that bridge when we get there” sort of fellow, so I hatched a backup plan, which would involve staking out this area and then following Patrick at a discreet distance. I was planning exactly how that might work when something went wrong.

The trade was picking up. Life is about categorization. This street

urinal was no different. One underpass catered to heterosexual men seeking female companionship. This underpass was the busiest. Old-fashioned values, I suppose. You can talk all you want about genders and preferences and kinks, but the majority of the sexually frustrated are still heterosexual men not getting enough. Old-school. Girls with dead eyes took their spots against the concrete barriers, cars drove by, girls drove off, other girls took their places. It was almost like watching a soda-machine dispenser at a petrol station.

In the second underpass, there was a small contingency of transgender or cross-dressing women of various alterations and stages and then, at the tail end, where Patrick was now standing, was the young gay trade.

I watched as a man in a melon-hued shirt strutted toward Patrick.

What, I had wondered when Patrick first appeared, would I do if a client chose to engage Patrick's services? At first blush, it would seem that it would be best that I intercede immediately. That would appear to be the most humane act on my part, but again, I could not lose sight of my goal: bringing both boys home. The truth was, Patrick and Rhys had been gone for a decade. They had been through God knows what, and while I didn't relish the idea of allowing either to suffer though even one more abuse, I had already added up the pros and cons and made my decision. There was no use in lingering on that point anymore.

But Melon Shirt was not a client.

I knew that immediately. Clients do not strut with such confidence. They don't keep their head up high. They do not smirk. They do not wear bright melon shirts. Clients who are desperate enough to come here to satisfy their urges feel shame or fear discovery or

most likely, both.

Melon Shirt, on the other hand, had the walk and bearing and crackle of someone who was comfortable and dangerous. You can, if you are attuned to it, sense such things. You can feel it in your lizard brain, a primitive, inner, warning trill that you cannot quite explain. Modern man, more afraid of embarrassment sometimes than safety, often ignores it at his own peril.

Melon Shirt glanced behind him. Two other men were on the scene now, working Melon's flanks. They were both very large, decked out in full camouflage fatigues, and wore what we used to call wifebeaters over shiny pectorals. The other boys working the underpass—the smoker and the one with the stud collar—ran off at the sight of Melon Shirt, leaving Patrick alone with the three newcomers.

Oh, this was not good.

Patrick still had his eyes down, his quasi-shaved head gleaming. He was not aware of the approaching men until Melon Shirt was nearly on top of him. I moved closer. In all likelihood, Patrick had been on the streets for some time. I thought about that for a moment, about what his life must have been like, snatched from the comforting bubble of American suburbia and dumped into . . . well, who knew what?

But in all that time, Patrick might have developed certain skills. He might be able to talk his way out of this situation. The situation might not be as dire as it appeared. I needed to wait and see.

Melon Shirt got right up in Patrick's face. He said something to him. I couldn't hear what. Then, without additional preamble, he reared back his fist and slammed it like a sledgehammer into Patrick's solar plexus.

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Patrick collapsed to the ground, gasping for air.

The two camouflaged body builders started to close in. I moved fast now.

“Gentlemen,” I called out.

Melon Shirt and both Camouflages spun at the sound of my voice. At first, their expressions were those of Neanderthal men hearing a strange noise for the first time. Then they took me in, narrowing their eyes. I could see the smiles come to their lips. I am not a physically imposing figure. I am above-average height and on the slight side, you’d say, with blond-heading-toward-gray hair, a skin tone that runs from porcelain in the warmth to ruddy in the cold, and features that some might consider delicate in, I hope, a handsome way.

Today I wore a light-blue Saville Row hand-tailored suit, Lilly Pulitzer tie, Hermès pocket square in the breast pocket, and Bedfordshire bespoke shoes custom made from GJ Cleverley’s lead craftsman on Old Bond Street.

I am quite the dandy, aren’t I?

As I sauntered toward the three thugs, wishing I had an umbrella to twirl for maximum effect, I could feel their confidence growing. I liked that. Normally I carry a handgun, often two, but in England, the laws are very strict about such things. I wasn’t worried. The beauty of the strict British laws meant that it was highly unlikely that my three adversaries would be carrying either. My eyes did a quick three-body scan for locations where one might conceal a gun. My thugs favored extraordinarily tight attire, more suitable for preening than weapon-concealment.

They might be carrying knives—they probably were—but there were no guns.

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Knives do not worry me much.

Patrick—if it was indeed Patrick—was still on the ground gasping for air as I made my arrival. I stopped, spread my arms, and offered them my most winning smile. The three thugs stared at me as though I were a museum piece that they couldn't comprehend.

Melon Shirt took one step toward me. "Who the fuck are you?"

I was still smiling. "You should leave now."

Melon Shirt looked at Camouflage One on my right. Then he looked at Camouflage Two to my left. I looked in both directions too and then back at Melon Shirt.

When I winked at him, his eyebrows jumped high.

"We should cut him up," Camouflage One said. "Cut him into little pieces."

I feigned being startled and turned toward him. "Oh my, I didn't see you there."

"What?"

"In those camouflage pants. You really blend in. By the way, they are very fetching on you."

"Are you some kind of wiseguy?"

"I'm many kinds of wiseguy."

All the smiles, including mine, grew.

They started toward me. I could try to talk my way out of this, perhaps offer them money to leave us be, but I didn't think that would work for three reasons. One, these thugs would want all my money and my watch and whatever else they could find upon my person. Money offers would not help. Two, they all had the scent of blood—easy, weak blood—and they liked that scent. And three, most important, I like the scent of blood, too.

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It had been too long.

I tried not to smile as they started to make their approach. Melon Shirt took out a large bowie knife. That pleased me. I don't have many moral qualms about hurting those whom I recognize as evil. But it was nice to know that for those who require such self-rationalizations to find me "likable," I could claim that the thugs were the first to draw a weapon and thus I was acting strictly in self-defense.

Still, I gave them one last out.

I looked Melon Shirt straight in the eye and said, "You should leave now."

Both over-muscled Camouflages laughed at that, but Melon Shirt's smile started to fade. He knew. I could see. He looked in my eyes and he knew.

The rest happened in seconds.

Camouflage One came right up to me, getting in my personal space. He was a large man. I was face-to-face with his waxed and toned pectorals. He smiled down at me as though I were a tasty treat he might devour in one bite.

There was no reason to delay the inevitable.

I slashed his throat with the razor I'd kept hidden in my hand.

Blood sprayed at me in a near perfect arc. Damn. This would require another visit to Saville Row.

"Terence!"

It was Camouflage Two. There was a resemblance and, now sliding toward him, I wondered whether they were brothers. The thug's grief stunned him enough to make disposing of him very easy, though I don't think it would have helped much had he been better prepared.

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I am good with a straight razor.

Camouflage Two perished in the same manner as dear Terence, his possible-brother.

That left Melon Shirt, their beloved leader, who had probably attained that rank by being somewhat more brutish and cunning than his fallen comrades. Wisely, Melon Shirt had already started to make his move while I was dispensing with Camouflage Two. Using my peripheral vision, I could see the glint of his bowie blade heading toward me from above.

That was a mistake on his part.

You don't strike a foe from above like that. It's too easy to defend. Your adversary can buy time by ducking or a raising a forearm for the purpose of deflection. If you shoot someone with a gun, you are trained to aim for the middle mass so that if your aim is slightly askew, you can still hit something. You prepare for the likelihood of error. With a knife, the same is true. Make the distance of your stab as short as possible. Aim for the middle so that if your adversary moves, you can still wound him.

Melon Shirt didn't do that.

I ducked and used my right forearm to, as noted above, deflect the blow. Then, with my knees bent, I spun and used the razor across his abdomen. I didn't wait to see his reaction. I moved up and finished him in the same manner as I had the other two.

As I said, it was over in seconds.

The cracked pavement was a crimson mess and getting messier. I gave myself a second, no more to relish the high. You would too, if you didn't pretend otherwise.

I turned toward Patrick.

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But he was gone.

I looked left, then right. There he was, nearly out of sight. I hurried after him, but I could see very quickly it would be useless. He was heading toward King's Cross station, one of London's busiest. He would be in the station—be in the public eye—before I could reach him. I was covered in blood. I might be good at what I do, but despite the fact that King's Cross station was indeed where Harry Potter headed off for Hogwarts, I did not possess an invisibility cloak.

I stopped, looked back, considered the situation, came to a conclusion.

I had messed up.

It was time to make myself scarce. I was not worried about any CCTV recording what I had done. There was a reason the undesirable element chose spots like this. It stood apart from all prying eyes, even the digital and electronic ones.

Still. I had blown it. After all these years, after all the fruitless searches, one lead had finally come my way, and if I lost that lead...

I needed help.

I hurried away and pressed the 1 on my speed-dial. I hadn't pressed the 1 for nearly a year.

He answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

Hearing his voice again, even though I had steeled for it, sent me reeling for a moment. The number was blocked, so he had no idea who had called him.

I said, "Don't you mean 'articulate'?"

There was a gasp. "Win? My God, where have you been—?"

"I saw him," I said.

"Who?"

HARLAN COBEN

“Think.”

The briefest of pauses. “Wait, both of them?”

“Just Patrick.”

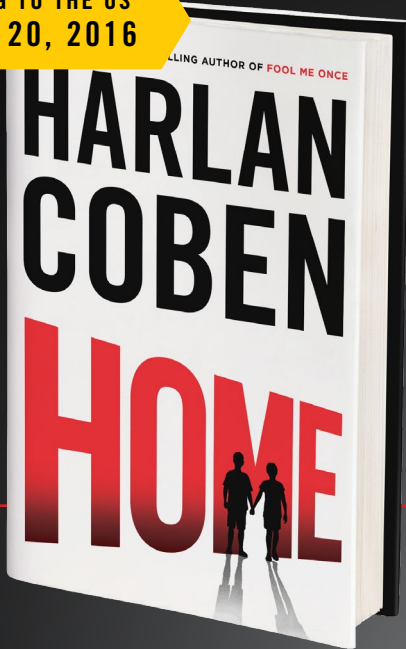
“Wow.”

I frowned. Wow? “Myron?”

“Yes?”

“Catch the next plane to London. I need your help.”

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