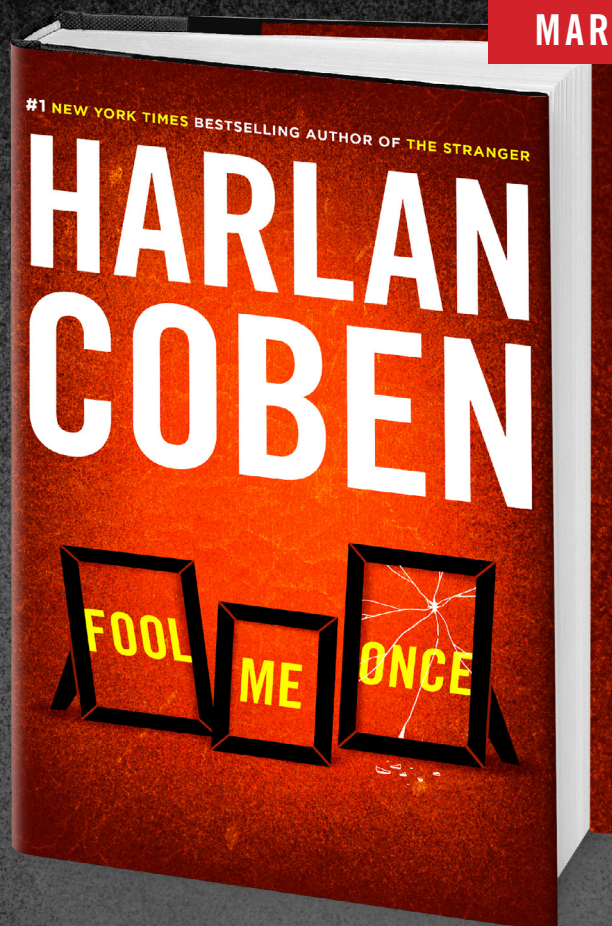


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Maya always woke up at exactly 4:58 A.M. Some claimed that she had one of those internal alarm clocks, but if she did, it could only be set for 4:58 A.M. and it couldn't be turned off, even nights she stayed up late and craved a few extra minutes of sleep, and if she tried to "set" the internal alarm even a few minutes earlier or later, it switched back to the default setting of 4:58 A.M.

This has started during basic training. Her drill sergeant had a wake-up time of five A.M., and while most of her fellow recruits would groan or struggle, Maya had already been awake a full two minutes and was ready for the drill sergeant's imminent and rarely pleasant arrival.

Once Maya had fallen asleep (read: passed out) last night, she had slept soundly. Oddly enough, whatever demons possessed her, they rarely came out in her sleep—no nightmares, no twisting of the sheets, no waking up in a cold sweat. Maya never remembered her dreams, which could mean that she slept peacefully or that whatever happened in those dreams, her subconscious was merciful enough to let her forget them.

She grabbed her hair band from the night table and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Joe had liked the ponytail. “I love your bone structure,” he would say. “I want to see as much of your face as possible.” He also liked to play with the ponytail and even, on some occasions, gently pull it, but that was another matter altogether.

Her face flushed at the memory.

Maya checked her phone for messages. Nothing important. She swung her legs out of bed and padded down the hallway. Lily was still sleeping. No surprise there. In the genetic internal alarm department, Lily was more like her father: Sleep until you absolutely have to rise.

It was still dark outside. The kitchen still smelled of baking, obviously the handiwork of Isabella. Maya didn’t cook, bake, or otherwise engage in culinary activities unless forced to. Many of her friends were big-time into cooking, which Maya found amusing, since for generations and indeed throughout pretty much the entire existence of mankind, cooking was considered a tedious and grueling chore one tried to avoid. In history books, you rarely read about monarchs or lords or anyone the slightest bit elite enjoying spending time in the kitchen. Eating? Sure. Fine dining and wine? Of course. But preparing the meals? That was a menial task given to lowly servants.

Maya debated scrambling herself some eggs with a side of bacon, but the act of merely pouring milk atop cold cereal called out to her. She sat at the table and tried not think about the reading of Joe’s will today. She didn’t think that there would be any surprises. Maya had signed a prenup (Joe: “It’s a family thing—if any of us Burketts don’t sign, we get disinherited.”), and once Lily was born, Joe had set it up so that in the event of his death, all his holdings would go into a trust

for their daughter. Maya was happy enough with that.

There was no cold cereal in the cabinet. Dang. Isabella had been complaining about the sugar content in them, but had she gone so far as to toss them? Maya headed back to the fridge and then stopped.

Isabella.

The nanny cam.

She had woken up thinking about it, which was odd. Sure, she checked it most days, but not all. It never felt urgent to her. Nothing even the slightest bit questionable ever occurred. Maya normally kept the fast-forward button pressed down. Isabella was always sunny and happy, which was a bit troubling because that wasn't Isabella's default state. She did light up around Lily, but Isabella had a face like a totem pole. She wasn't big on smiling.

Yet she always smiled on the nanny cam. She was the perfect nanny all the time, and let's face it—no one is that. No one. We all have our moments, don't we?

Did Isabella know the nanny cam was there?

Maya's laptop and the SD card reader Eileen had given her were in her backpack. For a while she had used her military-issue backpack—a beige nylon thing of many pockets—but too many military wannabes ordered the same thing online and something about it felt too showy. Joe had bought her a Kevlar laptop backpack from Tumi. She thought that it was overpriced, until she saw what those military wannabes paid for their backpacks online.

She picked up the picture frame, pressed the button on the side, and took hold of the SD card. Suppose Isabella had figured it out. First off, would that be such a stretch? Not really. If you were at all perceptive—and Isabella was—you might wonder why your employ-

er would suddenly buy a new picture frame. If you were at all perceptive—and, again, Isabella was—you might wonder why this new picture frame would show up for the first time on the day after you buried your murdered husband.

Or if you were at all perceptive, you might not. Who knew?

Maya slid the SD card into the reader and then plugged the reader into the USB port. Why was she feeling anxious about this? She had done this several times before and had seen nothing. Moreover, if her suspicions were correct, if Isabella had figured out that the new picture frame held more than a potpourri of family photographs, then, of course, all Maya would see would be Isabella on her best behavior. She wouldn't be dumb enough to do something suspicious. The whole idea of a hidden nanny cam was that it was hidden. Once a nanny knew about it, the whole enterprise became, at best, moot.

She hit the play button. The video worked on a motion detector, so it started up when Isabella walked by carrying a cup of coffee in, of course, a mug with a protective lid. No chance any hot liquid would spill on a little girl's skin. Isabella picked Lily's stuffed giraffe off the floor and started to walk back to the kitchen and out of the frame.

"Mommy."

There was no audio with this camera, so Maya turned away and looked up the stairs at her daughter. A familiar warmth flowed through her. She might be cynical about so much of the parenting process, but that feeling when you look at your child, when the rest of the world fades away, when everything but that little face becomes just scenery in the deep background—that Maya understood.

"Hey, precious."

Maya read somewhere that the average two-year-old has a vocabulary of about fifty words. That seemed about right. “More” was a big one on the little-kid list. Maya hurried up the stairs and reached over the kid gate and lifted Lily into her arms. Lily clutched one of those indestructible cardboard books in both hands, this one of Dr. Seuss’s classic *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*. Lately she’d been carrying the book around the way some kids carry a teddy bear. A book rather than a stuffed animal—this pleased Maya to no end.

“You want Mommy to read you the book?”

Lily nodded.

Maya brought her downstairs and sat her at the kitchen table. The video was still running. One thing Maya had learned: Little kids love repetition. They didn’t want new experiences quite yet. Lily had a whole collection of cardboard books. Maya loved the narrative drive of the P. D. Eastman, books like *Are You My Mother?* or *Fish Out of Water*, both featuring scary moments and twist endings. Lily would listen—any book was better than no book—but she always returned to the rhymes and artwork of Dr. Seuss, and really, who could blame her?

Maya glanced at the computer monitor as the nanny-cam video played on. On the screen, Lily and Isabella were both on the couch. Isabella fed Lily one Goldfish cracker at a time, like they were smelts awarded to a performing seal. Taking a cue from the feed, Maya grabbed the Goldfish down from the pantry and spread some out on the table. Lily started to eat them one at a time.

“You want something else?”

Lily shook her head and pointed to the book. “Read.”

“Not ‘read.’ Say, ‘Please, Mommy, will you read . . .’” Maya stopped.

Enough with the performing seal. She picked up the book, turned to page one, started with the one fish, two fish, turned the page. She was just reaching the fat fish with the yellow hat when something on the computer monitor snagged her gaze.

Maya stopped reading.

“More,” Lily demanded.

Maya leaned toward the screen.

The camera had turned itself on again, but the view was completely blocked. But how . . . ? Maya guessed that she was staring at Isabella’s back. Isabella was standing directly in front of the picture frame and that was the reason Maya couldn’t see anything.

No.

Isabella was too short. Her head might block it. But her back? No way. Plus Maya could now make out color. Isabella had been wearing a red blouse yesterday. This shirt was green.

Forest green.

“Mommy?”

“One second, honey.”

Whoever it was moved away from the picture frame and out of view. Now Maya could get a look at the couch. Lily sat on it alone. She held this very book in her hands, paging through it on her own, pretending to read it.

Maya waited.

From the left—the kitchen—someone stepped into view. Not Isabella.

It was a man.

At least it appeared to be a man. He was still standing close to the camera and at an angle that made it impossible to see his face. For a

moment she figured that it might have been Hector, coming inside for a break maybe, grabbing a glass of water or something, but Hector had been wearing overalls and a sweatshirt. This guy was wearing blue jeans and a green—

—forest green

shirt. . . .

On the screen, Lily looked up from the couch toward the maybe-man. When she smiled widely at him, Maya felt a rock take form in her chest. Lily wasn't good with strangers. So whoever this was, whoever was wearing that familiar forest green shirt . . .

The man started toward the couch. His back was to the camera now, blocking Maya's view of her daughter. Maya felt panic when her daughter was out of sight, actually leaning to the left and right as though she could see around this man and make sure that her daughter was still there, on the couch, safe with that same Dr. Seuss book. It felt as though her daughter was in danger and that danger would last until, at the very least, Maya could once again see her and keep an eye on her. The danger was, of course, nonsense. Maya knew that. She was watching something that had already happened, not a live feed, and her daughter was sitting next to her, healthy and seemingly happy, or at least she had been happy until her mom had gone silent and started staring at this compute screen.

"Mommy?"

"One second, honey, okay?"

The man in the familiar blue jeans and forest green shirt—that was how he'd always described the shirt, not green or dark green or bright green but forest green—had obviously not harmed or snatched her daughter or anything like that, so the anxiety Maya was

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now experiencing seemed uncalled for and more than overblown.

On the screen, the man moved to the side.

Maya could see Lily again. She figured that the fear would subside now. But that wasn't what happened. The man turned and sat on the couch right next to Lily. He faced the camera and smiled.

Somehow Maya didn't scream.

Flex, relax, flex. . . .

Maya, always cool in the battle, always managing to find someplace inside of her that made her pulse stay even and kept the adrenaline spikes from paralyzing her, tried to find that place now. The familiar clothes—the blue jeans and especially the forest green shirt—should have set her up for this possibility—and by possibility, she meant impossibility—of what she was now seeing. So she, yes, didn't scream out loud. She didn't gasp.

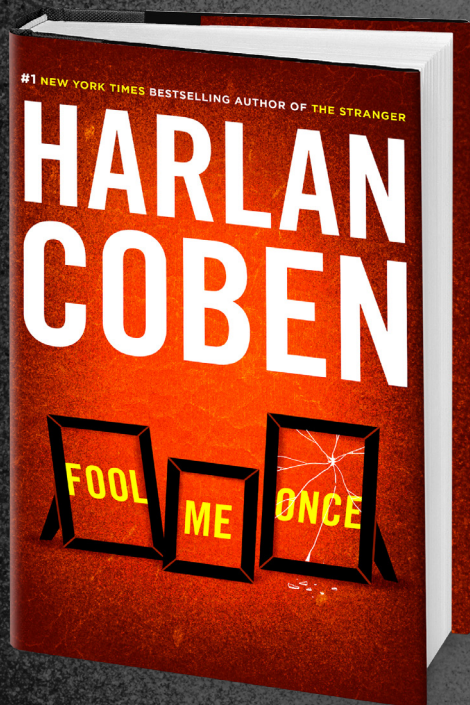
There was instead a steady spreading across her chest that made it hard to breathe. There was a chilling in her veins. There was a small quiver in her lips.

There, on the computer monitor, Maya watched Lily crawl onto the lap of her dead husband.

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