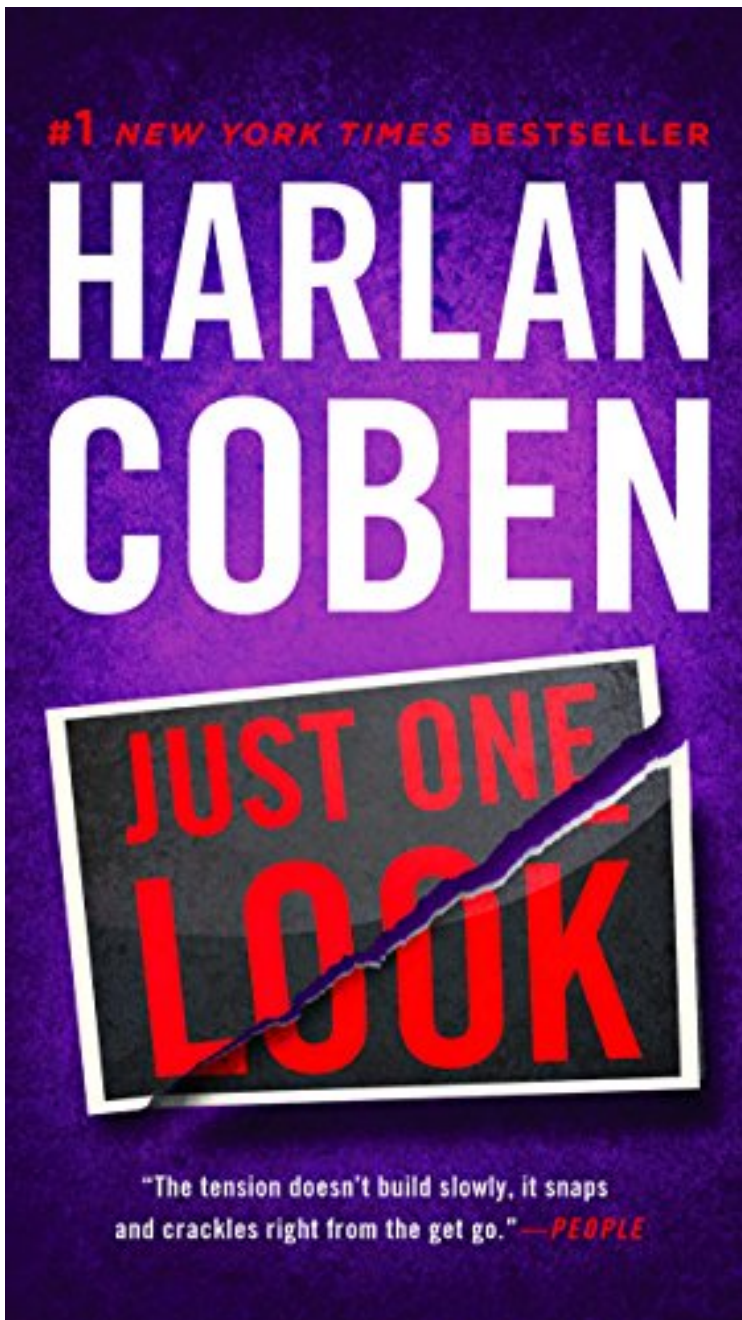


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# Just One Look



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAn ordinary snapshot causes a mothers world to unravel in #1New York Timesbestselling author Harlan Cobens shocking thriller.When Grace Lawson picks up a newly developed set of family photographs, there is a picture that doesn't belong-a photo from at least twenty years ago with a man in it who looks strikingly like her husband, Jack. And though Jack denies it's him, he disappears that

night, taking the photo with him. Now, to save her family from a fierce, silent killer who will stop at nothing to get the photo, Grace must confront the dark corners of her own tragic past...Extrait

Scott Duncan sat across from the killer. The windowless room of thundercloud gray was awkward and still, stuck in that lull when the music first starts and neither stranger is sure how to begin the dance. Scott tried a noncommittal nod. The killer, decked out in prison-issue orange, simply stared. Scott folded his hands and put them on the metal table. The killer's file said he was Monte Scanlon, but there was no way that was his real name. He might have done likewise had his hands not been cuffed. Why, Scott wondered yet again, am I here? His specialty was prosecuting corrupt politicians something of a vigorous cottage industry in his home state of New Jersey but three hours ago, Monte Scanlon, a mass executioner by any standards, had finally broken his silence to make a demand. That demand? A private meeting with Assistant U.S. Attorney Scott Duncan. This was strange for a large variety of reasons, but here were two: one, a killer should not be in a position to make demands; two, Scott had never met or even heard of Monte Scanlon. Scott broke the silence. You asked to see me? Yes. Scott nodded, waited for him to say more. He didn't. So what can I do for you? Monte Scanlon maintained the stare. Do you know why I'm here? Scott glanced around the room. Besides Scanlon and himself, four people were present. Linda Morgan, the United States attorney, leaned against the back wall trying to give off the ease of Sinatra against a lamppost. Standing behind the prisoner were two beefy, nearly identical prison guards with tree-stump arms and chests like antique armoires. Scott had met the two cocky agents before, had seen them go about their task with the serenity of yoga instructors. But today, with this well-shackled prisoner, even these guys were on edge. Scanlon's lawyer, a ferret reeking of checkout-counter cologne, rounded out the group. All eyes were on Scott. You killed people, Scott answered. Lots of them. I was what is commonly called a hit man. I was Scanlon paused an assassin for hire. On cases that don't involve me. True. Scott's morning had started off normal enough. He'd been drafting a subpoena on a waste-disposal executive who was paying off a small-town mayor. Routine matter. Everyday graft in the Garden State of New Jersey. That had been, what, an hour, an hour and a half ago? Now he sat across the bolted-down table from a man who had murdered according to Linda Morgan's rough estimate one hundred people. So why did you ask for me? Scanlon looked like an aging playboy who might have squired a Gabor sister in the fifties. He was small, wizened even. His graying hair was slicked back, his teeth cigarette-yellow, his skin leathery from midday sun and too many long nights in too many dark clubs. No one in the room knew his real name. When captured, his passport read Monte Scanlon, an Argentinean national, age fifty-one. The age seemed about right, but that would be about it. His fingerprints had not popped up in the NCIC computer banks. Facial recognition software had come up with a big goose egg. We need to speak alone. This is not my case, Scott said again. There's a U.S. attorney assigned to you. This has nothing to do with her. And it does with me? Scanlon leaned forward. What I'm about to tell you, he said, will change your entire life. Part of Scott wanted to wiggle his fingers in Scanlon's face and say, Ooooo. He was used to the captured criminal mindset their serpentine maneuverings, their quest for an edge, their search for a way out, their overblown sense of importance. Linda Morgan, perhaps sensing his thoughts, shot a warning glare across his bow. Monte Scanlon, she'd told him, had worked for various connected families for the better part of thirty years. RICO hungered for his cooperation in a starving-man-near-a-buffet way. Since his capture, Scanlon had refused to talk. Until this morning. So here Scott was. Your boss, Scanlon said, gesturing with his chin at Linda Morgan, she hopes for my cooperation. You're going to get the needle, Morgan responded, still trying to give off the scent of nonchalance. Nothing you say or do will change that. Scanlon smiled. Please. You fear losing what I have to say much greater than I fear death. Right. Another tough guy who doesn't fear death. She peeled herself off the wall. Know what, Monte? The tough guys are always the ones who soil their pants when we strap them to the gurney. Again Scott fought off the desire to wiggle his fingers, this time at his boss. Scanlon kept smiling. His eyes never left Scott's. Scott didn't like what he saw. They were, as one would expect, black and shiny and cruel. But and Scott might have been imagining things maybe he saw something else there. Something beyond the standard vacancy. There seemed to be a pleading in the eyes; Scott couldn't turn away from them. There was regret there maybe. Remorse even. Scott looked up at Linda and nodded. She frowned, but Scanlon had called her bluff. She touched one of the beefy guards on the shoulder and gestured for them to leave. Rising from his seat, Scanlon's lawyer spoke for the first time. Anything he says is off the record. Stay with them, Scanlon ordered. I want you to make sure that they don't listen in. The lawyer picked up his briefcase and followed Linda Morgan to the door. Soon Scott and Scanlon were alone. In the movies, killers are omnipotent. In real life, they are not. They don't escape from handcuffs in the middle of a high-security federal penitentiary. The Beef Brothers, Scott knew, would be behind the

one-way glass. The intercom, per Scanlons instructions, would be off. But theyd all be watching.Scott shrugged a well? at him.I am not your typical assassin for hire.Uh huh.I have rules.Scott waited.For example, I only kill men.Wow, Scott said. Youre a prince.Scanlon ignored the sarcasm. That is my first rule. I kill only men. No women.Right. Tell me, does rule two have anything to do with not putting out until the third date?You think Im a monster?Scott shrugged as if the answer was obvious.You dont respect my rules?What rules? You kill people. You make up these so-called rules because you need the illusion of being human.Scanlon seemed to consider that. Perhaps, he allowed, but the men Ive killed were scum. I was hired by scum to kill scum. I am no more than a weapon.A weapon? Scott repeated.Yes.A weapon doesnt care who it kills, Monte. Men, women, grannies, little kids. A weapon doesnt differentiate.Scanlon smiled. Touch.Scott rubbed his palms on his pant legs. You didnt call me here for an ethics class. What do you want?Youre divorced, arent you, Scott?He said nothing.No children, amicable split, still friendly with the ex.What do you want?To explain.To explain what?He lowered his eyes but only for a moment. What I did to you.I dont even know you.But I know you. Ive known you for a long time.Scott let the silence in. He glanced at the mirror. Linda Morgan would be behind the glass, wondering what they were talking about. She wanted information. He wondered if they had the room bugged. Probably. Either way, it would pay to keep Scanlon talking.You are Scott Duncan. Thirty-nine years old. You graduated from Columbia Law School. You could be making a great deal more money in private practice, but that bores you. Youve been with the U.S. attorneys office six months. Your mother and father moved to Miami last year. You had a sister, but she died in college.Scott shifted in his seat. Scanlon studied him.You finished?Do you know how my business operates?Change of subject. Scott waited a beat. Scanlon was playing a head game, trying to keep him off balance or some such nonsense. Scott was not about to fall for it. Nothing he had revealed about Scotts family was surprising. A person could pick up most of that info with a few well- placed keystrokes and phone calls.Why dont you tell me, Scott said.Lets pretend, Scanlon began, that you wanted someone dead.Okay.You would contact a friend, who knows a friend, who knows a friend, who can reach me.And only that last friend would know you?Something like that. I had only one go-between man, but I was careful even with him. We never met face to face. We used code names. The payments always went to offshore accounts. I would open a new account for every, shall we say, transaction, and I closed it as soon as the transaction was completed. You still with me?Its not that complicated, Scott said.No, I guess not. But you see, nowadays we communicate by e-mail. Ill set up a temporary e- mail account with Hotmail or Yahoo! or whatever, with fake names. Nothing that can be traced back. But even if it could, even if you could find out who sent it, where would it lead you? All e- mails were sent and read at libraries or public places. We were totally covered.Scott was about to mention that this total coverage had eventually landed Scanlons ass in jail, but he decided to save it. What does this have to do with me?Im getting to that. Scott could see that Scanlon was warming up to his own tale. In the old dayswhen I say old days, I mean, eight, ten years agowe did it mostly with pay phones. Id never see the name written. The guy would just tell me over the phone.Scanlon stopped and made sure that he had Scotts full attention. His tone softened a bit, became less matter-of-fact. Thats the key, Scott. It was by phone. Id only hear the name on the phone, not see it.He looked at Scott expectantly. Scott had no idea what he was trying to say, so he went, Uh huh.Do you understand why Im stressing that it was done by phone?No.Because a person like me, a person with rules, could make a mistake with the phone.Scott thought about that. I still dont get it.I never kill women. That was rule number one.So you said.So if you wanted to put a hit on someone named Billy Smith, Id figure Billy was a man. You know, with a y. Id never think Billy would be a woman. With an ie at the end. You understand? Scott went very still. Scanlon saw it. He dropped the smile. His voice was very soft.We talked before about your sister, didnt we, Scott?Scott did not respond.Her name was Geri, am I right?Silence.You see the problem, Scott? Geri is one of those names. If you heard it on the phone, youd assume it would be with a J in the front and a y at the end. So fifteen years ago, I got a phone call. From that go-between man I told you about....Scott shook his head.I was given an address. I was told exactly what time JerryScanlon made quote marks with his fingerswould be home.Scott's own voice seemed to come from very far away. It was ruled an accident.Most arsons are, if you know what youre doing.I dont believe you.But Scott looked at the eyes again and felt his world teeter. The images flooded in: Geris contagious smile, the unruly hair, the braces, the way she stuck her tongue out at him during family gatherings. He remembered her first real boyfriend (a dork named Brad), her not getting a date to the junior prom, the gung-ho speech she made when she ran for student council treasurer, her first rock band (they were awful), her college acceptance letter.Scott felt his eyes well up. She was only twenty-one.No response.Why?I dont get into the

whys, Scott. Im just a hired handNo, not that. Scott looked up. Why are you telling me this now?Scanlon studied his reflection the mirror. His voice was very quiet. Maybe you were right.Right about what?What you said before. He head turned back toward Scott. Maybe after all is said and done, I need the illusion of being human.chapter 1There are sudden rips. There are tears in your life, deep knife wounds that slash through your flesh. Your life is one thing, then it is shredded into another. It comes apart as though gutted in a belly slit. And then there are those moments when your life simply unravels. A loose thread pulled. A seam gives way. The change is slow at first, nearly imperceptible.For Grace Lawson, the unraveling began at the Photomat.She was about to enter the photo developing shop when she heard a somewhat familiar voice. Why dont you get a digital camera, Grace?Grace turned toward the woman. Im not good with that techno stuff.Oh, come now. Digital technology is a snap. The woman raised her hand and actually snapped, just in case Grace didnt know what the word meant. And digital cameras are sooo much more convenient than conventional cameras. You just erase the photos you dont want. Like computer files. For our Christmas card? Barry, well, he must have taken a zillion pictures of the kids, you know, snapping away because Blake blinked or Kyle was looking the wrong way, whatever, but when you shoot that many, well, like Barry says, youre going to get one thats pretty decent, am I right?Grace nodded. She was trying to unearth the womans name, but it wouldnt surface. The womans daughterBlake, was it?was in Graces sons class in first grade. Or maybe it was last year in kindergarten. Hard to keep track. Grace kept the smile frozen to her face. The woman was nice enough, but she blended in with the others. Grace wondered, not for the first time, if she was blending in too, if her once great individuality had joined the unpleasant swirl of suburban uniformity.The thought was not a comforting one.The woman kept describing the wonders of the digital age. Graces frozen smile began to ache. She glanced at her watch, hoping Tech Mom would pick up the hint. Two-forty-five. Almost time to pick up Max at school. Emma had swim team practice, but another mom was driving the carpool today. A carpool to the pool, as the too-jolly mother had reminded Grace with a little tee-hee. Yeah, funny stuff.We have to get together, the woman said, winding down. With Jack and Barry. I think theyd get along.Definitely.Grace took advantage of the pause to wave good-bye, pull open the door, and disappear inside the Photomat. The glass door closed with a snap, ringing a little bell. The chemical smell, not unlike model glue, hit her first. She wondered about the long-term effects of working in such an environment and decided the short-term ones were annoying enough.The kid workingGraces use of the term working being overly generous herebehind the counter had a white fuzz pellet under his chin, hair dyed a color thatd intimidate Crayola, and enough piercings to double as a wind instrument. One of those wrap-around-low headphones snaked around the back of his neck. The music was so loud that Grace could feel it in her chest. He had tattoos, lots of them. One read STONE. Another read KILLJOY. Grace thought that a third should read SLACKER.Excuse me?He did not look up.Excuse me? she said a little louder.Still nothing.Yah, like, dude? That got his attention. He snarled up, narrowed his eyes, offended by the interruption. He removed the headphones but grudgingly. Stub.Pardon me?Stub.Ah. Grace handed him the receipt. Fuzz Pellet then asked her for her name. This reminded Grace of those damn customer service phones that ask you to dial in your home phone, and then as soon as you get a real live person, they ask you for the same phone number. Like the first request was just for practice.Fuzz PelletGrace was warming up to this nicknameflipped through a file of photo packets before extracting one. He ripped off the tag and told her an exorbitant price. She handed him a Val-Pak coupon, one dug out of her purse in an excavation that rivaled the search for the Dead Sea Scrolls, and watched the price drop to something closer to reasonable.He handed her the packet of photographs. Grace thanked him, but he already had the music plugged back into his cerebrum. She waved in his direction. I come not for the pictures, Grace said, but for the sparkling repartee.Fuzz Pellet yawned and picked up his magazine. The latest issue of Modern Slacker.Grace hit the sidewalk. The weather was brisk. Autumn had shoved summer aside with a patented gust. The leaves hadnt really started turning yet, but the air had that apple-cider quality to it.The shop windows had started up with the Halloween decorations. Emma, her third grader, had convinced Jack to buy an eight-foot blowup Homer-Simpson-as-Frankenstein balloon. It looked, she had to admit, terrific. Her children liked The Simpsons, which meant that maybe, despite their best efforts, she and Jack were raising them right.Grace wanted to slit open the envelope now. There was always an excitement with a newly developed roll of film, an opening-a-gift expectation, a hurry-to-the-mailbox-even-though-its- always-bills rush that digital photography, for all its conveniences, could never duplicate. But there wasnt time before school let out.As her Saab climbed up Heights Road, she took a small detour so that she could pass the towns lookout. From here, the skyline of Manhattan, especially at night, lay spread out like diamonds on black velvet. The longing tugged at her. She

loved New York City. Until four years ago, that wonderful island had been their home. Theyd had a loft on Charles Street down in the Village. Jack worked on the medical research for a large pharmaceutical company. She painted in her home studio while scoffing at her suburban counterparts and their SUVs and corduroy pants and toddler-referenced dialogues. Now she was one of them. Grace parked behind the school with the other mothers. She turned the engine off, picked up the Photomat envelope, and ripped it open. The roll was from last weeks annual trip to Chester for apple picking. Jack had snapped away. He liked being the family photographer. He considered it paternal manly work, taking the photos, as if this was a sacrifice a father was supposed to make for his family. The first image was of Emma, their eight-year-old daughter, and Max, their six-year-old son, on the hayride, shoulders hunched, their cheeks reddened by wind. Grace stopped and stared for a moment. Feelings of, yes, maternal warmth, both primitive and evolutionary, rocked her back. That was the thing with kids. It was the little things that got to you. Shed remembered that it had been cold that day. The orchard, she knew, would be too crowded. She had not wanted to go. Now, looking at this photograph, she wondered about the idiocy of her priorities. The other mothers were gathering by the school fence, making small talk and planning play-dates. It was, of course, the modern era, post-feminist America, and yet, of the roughly eighty parents waiting for their charges, only two were male. One, she knew, was a father whod been laid off for more than a year. You could see it in his eyes, his slow shuffle, the missed spots when he shaved. The other guy was a stay-at-home journalist who always seemed a little too anxious to chat up the moms. Lonely maybe. Or something else. Someone knocked on the car window. Grace looked up. Cora Lindley, her best friend in town, signaled for her to unlock the door. Grace did. Cora slid into the passenger seat next to her. So how did the date go last night? Grace asked. Poorly. Sorry. Fifth-date syndrome. Cora was a divorcee, a little too sexy for the nervous, ever-protective ladies who lunch. Clad in a low-cut, leopard-print blouse with spandex pants and pink pumps, Cora most assuredly did not fit in with the stream of khakis and loose sweaters. The other mothers eyed her with suspicion. Adult suburbia can be a lot like high school. Whats fifth-date syndrome? Grace asked. Youre not dating much, are you? Well, no, Grace said. The husband and two kids have really cramped my style. Pity. See and dont ask me why but on the fifth date, the guys always raise the subject ... how should I word this delicately?... of a mnage trois. Please tell me youre joking. I joke with you not. Fifth date. At the latest. The guy asks me, on a purely theoretical basis, what my opinion is on mnage trois. Like its peace in the Middle East. What do you say? That I usually enjoy them, especially when the two men start French-kissing. Grace laughed and they both got out of the car. Graces bad leg ached. After more than a decade, she shouldnt be self-conscious about it anymore, but Grace still hated for people to see the limp. She stayed by the car and watched Cora walk away. When the bell rang, the kids burst out as if theyd been fired from a cannon. Like every other parent, Grace only had eyes for her own. The rest of the pack, uncharitable as this might sound, was scenery. Max emerged in the second exodus. When Grace saw her son one sneaker lace untied, his Yu-Gi-Oh! backpack looking four sizes too big, his New York Rangers knit hat tilted to the side like a tourists beret, the warmth rushed over anew. Max made his way down the stairs, adjusting the backpack up his shoulders. She smiled. Max spotted her and smiled back. He hopped in the back of the Saab. Grace strapped him into the booster seat and asked him how his day was. Max answered that he didnt know. She asked him what he did in school that day. Max answered that he didnt know. Did he learn math, English, science, arts and crafts? Answer: Shrug and dunno. Grace nodded. A classic case of the epidemic known as Elementary-School Alzheimers. Were the kids drugged to forget or sworn to secrecy? One of lifes mysteries. It was not until after she got home and gave Max his Go-GURT snackthink yogurt in a toothpaste-like squeeze tube that Grace had the chance to take a look at the rest of the photographs. The message light on the answering machine was blinking. One message. She checked the Caller ID and saw that the number was blocked. She pressed play and was surprised. The voice belonged to an old ... friend, she guessed. Acquaintance was too casual. Father-figure was probably more accurate, but only in the most bizarre sense. Hi, Grace. Its Carl Vespa. He did not have to say his name. It had been years, but shed always know the voice. Could you give me a call when you have the chance? I need to talk to you about something. The message beeped again. Grace did not move, but she felt an old fluttering in her belly. Vespa. Carl Vespa had called. This could not be good. Carl Vespa, for all his kindnesses to her, was not one for idle chitchat. She debated calling him back and decided for the time being against it. Grace moved into the spare bedroom that had become her makeshift studio. When she was painting well when she was, like any artist or athlete, in the zone she saw the world as if preparing to put it on canvas. She would look at the streets, the trees, the people and imagine the type of brush she would use, the stroke, the mix of colors, the differing lights and casts of shadows. Her work should reflect what she wanted,

not reality. That was how she looked at art. We all see the world through our own prism, of course. The best art tweaked reality to show the artists world, what she saw or, more precisely, what she wanted others to see. It was not always a more beautiful reality. It was often more provocative, uglier maybe, more gripping and magnetic. Grace wanted a reaction. You might enjoy a beautiful setting sunbut Grace wanted you immersed in her sunset, afraid to turn away from it, afraid not to. Grace had spent the extra dollar and ordered a second set of prints. Her fingers dipped into the envelope and plucked out the photographs. The first two were the ones of Emma and Max on the hayride. Next came Max with his arm stretched up to pick a Gala apple. There was the compulsory blurry shot of flesh, the one where Jacks hand had slipped too close to the lens. She smiled and shook her head. Her big doofus. There were several more shots of Grace and the children with a variety of apples, trees, baskets. Her eyes grew moist, the way they always did when she looked at photographs of her children. Graces own parents had died young. Her mother was killed when a semi crossed the divide on Route 46 in Totowa. Grace, an only child, was eleven at the time. The police did not come to the door like in the movies. Her father had learned what happened from a phone call. Grace still remembered the way her father, wearing blue slacks and a gray sweater-vest, had answered the phone with his customary musical hello, how his face had drained of color, how he suddenly collapsed to the floor, his sobs first strangled and then silent, as if he could not gather enough air to express his anguish. Graces father raised her until his heart, weakened from a childhood bout with rheumatic fever, gave out during Graces freshman year of college. An uncle out in Los Angeles volunteered to take her in, but Grace was of age by now. She decided to stay east and make her own way. The deaths of her parents had been devastating, of course, but they had also given Graces life a strange sense of urgency. There is a left-behind poignancy for the living. Those deaths added amplification to the mundane. She wanted to jam in the memories, get her fill of the life moments and morbid as it sounds make sure her kids had plenty to remember her by when she too was no more. It was at that moment thinking about her own parents, thinking about how much older Emma and Max looked now than in last years apple-picking photo shoot when she stumbled across the bizarre photograph. Grace frowned. The picture was near the middle of the pack. Closer to the back maybe. It was the same size, fitting neatly in with the others, though the backing sheet was somewhat flimsier. Cheaper stock, she thought. Like a high-end office-supply photocopy maybe. Grace checked the next picture. No duplicate this time. That was strange. Only one copy of this photograph. She thought about that. The picture must have fallen in somehow, mixed up with another roll. Because this photograph did not belong to her. It was a mistake. That was the obvious explanation. Think for a moment about the quality workmanship of, say, Fuzz Pellet. He was more than capable of screwing up, right? Of putting the wrong photograph in the middle of her pack? That was probably what was going on here. Someone elses photograph had gotten mixed in with hers. Or maybe ... The photograph had an old look about it not that it was black-and-white or antique sepia. Nothing like that. The print was in color, but the hues seemed ... off somehow saturated, sun-faded, lacking the vibrancy one would expect in this day and age. The people in it too. Their clothes, their hair, their makeup all dated. From fifteen, maybe twenty years ago. Grace put it down on the table to take a closer look. The images in the photograph were all slightly blurred. There were four people no, wait, one more in the corner five people in the photograph. There were two men and three women, all in their late teens, early twenties maybe at least, the ones she could see clearly enough appeared to be around that age. College students, Grace thought. They had the jeans, the sweatshirts, the unkempt hair, that attitude, the casual stance of budding independence. The picture looked as if itd been snapped when the subjects were not quite ready, in mid-gather. Some of the heads were turned so you only saw a profile. One dark-haired girl, on the very right edge of the photo, you could only see the back of her head, really, and a denim jacket. Next to her there was another girl, this one with flaming-red hair and eyes spaced wide apart. Near the middle, one girl, a blonde, had God, what the hell was that about? her face had a giant X across it. Like someone had crossed her out. How had this picture ...? As Grace kept staring, she felt a small ping in the center of her chest. The three women she didnt recognize them. The two men looked somewhat alike, same size, same hair, same attitude. The guy on the far left too was not someone she knew. She was sure, however, that she recognized the other man. Or boy. He wasnt really old enough to call a man. Old enough to join the army? Sure. Old enough to be called a man? He was standing in the middle, next to the blonde with the X through her face.... But it couldnt be. His head was in mid-turn for one thing. That adolescent-thin beard covered too much of his face.... Was it her husband? Grace bent closer. It was, at best, a profile shot. She hadnt known Jack when he was this young. They had met thirteen years ago on a beach in the Cte dAzur in southern France. After more than a year of surgery and physical therapy, Grace was still not all the way back. The headaches and memory loss

remained. She had the limpstill has it nowbut with all the publicity and attention from that tragic night still suffocating her, Grace had just wanted to get away for a while. She matriculated at the University of Paris, studying art in earnest. It was while on break, lying in the sun on the Cte dAzur, that she met Jack for the first time. Was she sure it was Jack? He looked different here, no doubt about it. His hair was a lot longer. He had this beard, though he was still too young and baby-faced for it to come in full. He wore glasses. But there was something in the way he stood, the tilt of his head, the expression. This was her husband. She quickly sifted through the rest of the roll. There were more hayrides, more apples, more arms raised in mid-pick. She saw one that shed taken of Jack, the one time hed let her have the camera, control freak that he was. He was reaching so high, his shirt had moved up enough to show his belly. Emma had told him that it was eeuw, gross. That, of course, made Jack pull up the shirt more. Grace had laughed. Work it, baby! shed said, snapping the next photo. Jack, much to Emmas ultimate mortification, obliged and undulated. Mom? She turned. Whats up, Max? Can I have a granola bar? Lets grab one for the car, she said, rising. We need to take a ride. Fuzz Pellet was not at the Photomat. Max checked out the various themed picture frames Happy Birthday, We Love You, Mom, that kind of thing. The man behind the counter, resplendent in a polyester tie, pocket protector, and short-sleeve dress shirt flimsy enough to see the V-neck tee beneath it, wore a name tag that informed one and all that he, Bruce, was an assistant manager. May I help you? Im looking for the young man who was here a couple of hours ago, Grace said. Josh is gone for the day. Something I can do for you? I picked up a roll of film a little before three oclock.... Yes? Grace had no idea how to put this. There was a photo in there that shouldnt have been. Im not sure I understand. One of the pictures. I didnt take it. He gestured toward Max. I see you have young children. Excuse me? Assistant Manager Bruce pushed his glasses up off the end of his nose. I was just pointing out that you have young children. Or at least, one young child. What does that have to do with anything? Sometimes a child picks up the camera. When the parent isnt looking. They snap a picture or two. Then they put the camera back. No, its not that. This picture had nothing to do with us. I see. Well, Im sorry for the inconvenience. Did you get all the photos you took? I think so. None were missing? I really didnt check that closely, but I think we got them all. He opened a drawer. Here. This is a coupon. Your next roll will be developed for free. Three by fives. If you want the four by sixes, there is a small surcharge. Grace ignored his outstretched hand. The sign on the door says you develop all the pictures on site. Thats right. He petted the large machine behind him. Old Betsy here does the job for us. So my roll would have been developed here? Of course. Grace handed him the Photomat envelope. Could you tell me who developed this roll? Im sure it was just an honest error. Im not saying it wasnt. I just want to know who developed my roll. He took a look at the envelope. May I ask why you want to know? Was it Josh? Yes, but Why did he leave? Pardon me? I picked up the photos a little before three oclock. You close at six. Its nearly five now. So? It seems strange that a shift would end between three and six for a store that closes at six. Assistant Manager Bruce straightened up a bit. Josh had a family emergency. What kind of emergency? Look, Miss ...he checked the envelope Lawson, Im sorry for the error and inconvenience. Im sure a photograph from another set fell into your packet. I cant recall it happening before, but none of us are perfect. Oh, wait. What? May I see the photograph in question please? Grace was afraid hed want to keep it. I didnt bring it, she lied. What was it a picture of? A group of people. He nodded. I see. And were these people naked? What? No. Why would you ask that? You seem upset. I assumed that the photograph was in some way offensive. No, nothing like that. I just need to speak to Josh. Could you tell me his last name or give me a home phone number? Out of the question. But hell be in tomorrow first thing. You can talk to him then. Grace chose not to protest. She thanked the man and left. Might be better anyway, she thought. By driving here she had merely reacted. Check that. She had probably overreacted. Jack would be home in a few hours. She would ask him about it then. Grace had homebound carpool duties for the swim practice. Four girls, ages eight and nine, all delightfully energetic, piled two into the backseat and two into the way, way back of the minivan. There was a swirl of giggles, of Hello, Ms. Lawson, wet hair, the gentle perfume of both YMCA chlorine and bubble gum, the sound of backpacks being shucked off, of seat belts fastening. No child sat in the frontnew safety rulesbut despite the chauffeur feel, or maybe because of it, Grace liked doing carpool. It was time spent seeing her child interact with her friends. Children spoke freely during carpool; the driving adult might as well have been in another time zone. A parent could learn much. You could find out who was cool, who was not, who was in, who was out, what teacher was totally rad, what teacher was most assuredly not. You could, if you listened closely enough, decipher where on the pecking order your child was currently perched. It was also entertaining as all get-out. Jack was working late again, so when they got home, Grace quickly made Max and Emma dinnerveggie chicken nuggets (purportedly

healthier and, once dipped in ketchup, the kids can never tell the difference), Tater Tots, and Jolly Green Giant frozen corn. Grace peeled two oranges for dessert. Emma did her homework too big a load for an eight-year-old, Grace thought. When she had a free second, Grace headed down the hallway and flipped on the computer. Grace might not be into digital photography, but she understood the necessity and even advantages of computer graphics and the World Wide Web. There was a site that featured her work, how to buy it, how to commission a portrait. At first, this had hit her as too much like shilling, but as Farley, her agent, reminded her, Michelangelo painted for money and on commission. So did Da Vinci and Raphael and pretty much every great artist the world has ever known. Who was she to be above it? Grace scanned in her three favorite apple-picking photos for safekeeping and then, more on a whim than anything else, she decided to scan in the strange photograph too. That done, she started bathing the children. Emma went first. She was just getting out of the tub when Grace heard his keys key jangle in the back door. Hey, Jack called up in a whisper. Any hot love monkeys up there waiting for their stud muffin? Children, she said. Children are still awake. Oh. Care to join us? Jack bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time. The house shook from the onslaught. He was a big man, six-two, two-ten. She loved the substance of him sleeping beside her, the rise and fall of his chest, the manly smell of him, the soft hairs on his body, the way his arm snaked around her during the night, the feeling of not only intimacy but safety. He made her feel small and protected, and maybe it was un-PC, but she liked that. Emma said, Hi, Daddy. Hey, Kitten, how was school? Good. Still have a crush on that Tony boy? Eeuw! Satisfied with the reaction, Jack kissed Grace on the cheek. Max came out of his room, stark naked. Ready for your bath, mah man? Jack asked. Ready, Max said. They high-fived. Jack scooped Max up in a sea of giggles. Grace helped Emma get in her pajamas. Laughter spilled from the bath. Jack was singing a rhyming song with Max where some girl named Jenny Jenkins couldnt decide what color to wear. Jack would start off with the color and Max filled in the rhyme line. Right now they were singing that Jenny Jenkins couldnt wear yellow because shed look like a fellow. Then they both cracked up anew. They did pretty much the same rhymes every night. And they laughed their asses off over them every night. Jack toweled Max off, got him into his pajamas, and put him to bed. He read two chapters of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Max listened to every word, totally riveted. Emma was old enough to read by herself. She lay in her bed, devouring the latest tale of the Baudelaire orphans from Lemony Snicket. Grace sat with her and sketched for half an hour. This was her favorite time of the day working in silence in the same room as her eldest child. When Jack finished, Max begged for just one more page. Jack stayed firm. It was getting late, he said. Max grudgingly acquiesced. They talked for another moment or two about Charlies impending visit to Willy Wonkas factory. Grace listened in. Roald Dahl, both her men agreed, totally rocked. Jack turned down the lights they had a dimmer switch because Max didnt like complete darkness and then he entered into Emmas room. He bent down to give Emma a kiss good night. Emma, a total Daddys Girl, reached up, grabbed his neck, and wouldnt let him go. Jack melted at Emmas nightly technique for both showing affection and stalling going to sleep. Anything new for the journal? Jack asked. Emma nodded. Her backpack was next to her bed. She dug through it and produced her school journal. She turned the pages and handed it to her father. Were doing poetry, Emma said. I started one today. Cool. Want to read it? Emmas face was aglow. So was Jacks. She cleared her throat and began: Basketball, basketball, Why are you so round? So perfectly bumpy, So amazingly brown. Tennis ball, tennis ball, Why are you so fizzy, When youre hit with a racket, Do you feel kind of dizzy? Grace watched the scene from the doorway. Jacks hours had gotten bad lately. Most of the time Grace didnt mind. Quiet moments were become scarcer. She needed the solace. Loneliness, the precursor to boredom, is conducive to the creative process. That was what artistic meditation was all about boring yourself to the point where inspiration must emerge if only to preserve your sanity. A writer friend once explained that the best cure for writers block was to read a phone book. Bore yourself enough and the Muse will be obligated to push through the most slog-filled of arteries. When Emma was done, Jack fell back and said, Whoa. Emma made the face she makes when shes proud of herself but doesnt want to show it. She tucks her lips over and back under her teeth. That was the most brilliant poem Ive ever heard ever ever, Jack said. Emma gave a head-down shrug. Its only the first two verses. That was the most brilliant first two verses Ive ever heard ever ever. Im going to write a hockey one tomorrow. Speaking of which ... Emma sat up. What? Jack smiled. I got tickets for the Rangers at the Garden on Saturday. Emma, part of the jock group as opposed to the group who worshipped the latest boy band, gave a yippee and reached up for another hug. Jack rolled his eyes and accepted it. They discussed the teams recent performance and set odds on their chances of beating the Minnesota Wild. A few minutes later, Jack disentangled himself. He told his daughter that he loved her. She told him that she loved him too. Jack

started for the door. Gotta grab something to eat, he whispered to Grace. There's leftover chicken in the fridge. Why don't you slip into something more comfortable? Hope springs eternal. Jack arched an eyebrow. Still afraid you're not enough woman for me? Oh, that reminds me. What? Something about Cora's date last night. Hot? Ill be down in a second. He arched the other eyebrow and hustled downstairs with a whistle. Grace waited until she heard Emma's breathing deepen before following. She turned off the light and watched for a moment. This was Jack's bit. He paced the corridors at night, unable to sleep, guarding them in their beds. There were nights she'd wake up and find the spot next to her empty. Jack would be standing in one of their doorways, his eyes glassy. She'd approach and he'd say, You love them so much ... He didn't need to say more. He didn't even have to say that. Jack didn't hear her approach, and for some reason, a reason Grace wouldn't want to articulate, she tried to stay quiet. Jack stood stiffly, his back to her, his head down. This was unusual. Jack was usually hyper, constant motion. Like Max, Jack could not stay still. He fidgeted. His leg shook whenever he sat. He was high energy. But right now he was staring down at the kitchen counter, more specifically, at the strange photograph, still as a stone. Jack? He startled upright. What the hell is this? His hair, she noticed, was a shade longer than it should be. Why don't you tell me? He didn't say anything. That's you, right? With the beard? What? No. She looked at him. He blinked and looked away. I picked up this roll of film today, she said. At the Photomat. He said nothing. She stepped closer. That photograph was in the middle of the pack. Wait. He looked up sharply. It was in with our roll of film? Yes. Which roll? The one we took at the apple orchard. That doesn't make any sense. She shrugged. Who are the other people in the photo? How should I know? The blonde standing next to you, Grace said. With the X through her. Who is she? Jack's cell phone rang. He snapped it up like a gunfighter on a draw. He mumbled a hello, listened, put his hand over the mouthpiece, and said, It's Dan. His research partner at Pentacol Pharmaceuticals. He lowered his head and headed into the den. Grace headed upstairs. She started getting ready for bed. What had started as a gentle nagging was growing stronger, more persistent. She flashed back to their years living in France. He would never talk about his past. He had a wealthy family and a trust fund, she knew, and he wanted nothing to do with either. There was a sister, a lawyer out in Los Angeles or San Diego. His father was still alive but very old. Grace had wanted to know more, but Jack refused to elaborate, and sensing something foreboding, she had not pushed him. They fell in love. She painted. He worked in a vineyard in Saint-Emilion in Bordeaux. They lived in Saint-Emilion until Grace had gotten pregnant with Emma. Something called her home then a yearning, corny as it might sound, to raise her children in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Jack wanted to stay, but Grace had insisted. Now Grace wondered why. Half an hour passed. Grace slipped under the covers and waited. Ten minutes later, she heard a car engine start up. Grace looked out the window. Jack's minivan was pulling out. He liked to shop at night, she knew, hit the grocery store when it wasn't crowded. So going out like this was not unusual for him. Except, of course, he hadn't called up to tell her he was going or to ask if they needed anything in particular. Grace tried his cell phone but the voice mail picked up. She sat back and waited. Nothing. She tried to read. The words swam by in a meaningless haze. Two hours later, Grace tried Jack's cell phone again. Still voice mail. She checked on the children. They slept soundly, appropriately oblivious. When she could stand it no longer, Grace headed downstairs. She looked through the packet of film. The strange photograph was gone. *Revue de presse* Praise for *Just One Look* The tension doesn't build slowly; it snaps and crackles right from the get-go The only plausible reason for setting down this book is to make sure your front door is locked and double-bolted. *People* A nifty suspense premise... [Coben] does a good job of riveting the reader. *The New York Times* A heck of a ride. *New York Daily News* Coben twists story lines into psychological thrill rides. The pages flip so fast it's a wonder you don't develop paper cuts. *The Orlando Sentinel* There's plenty of adrenalin-pumping stuff here, but it's the walk down the hall of mirrors Coben does so well that rivets the attention. *The Houston Chronicle* Harlan Coben remains one of the best in the game... It's one of those books in which the main character and readers have no real idea what's going on until the very last pages. This is both highly satisfying and enjoyably frustrating, especially when the plot twists are being carefully doled out by a pro like Coben. *The San Francisco Chronicle* It's only when the last page turns that the reader has a chance to breathe, say Wow! and marvel at the impressively interconnected structure. *The Miami Herald* Coben proves his nimble, knowing grasp of plot and pace, juggling as many as seven plotlines while still imparting a healthy backstory to cameo characters. You'll read it in a day, maybe two; it's fresh fast food in a cup-of-ramen world. *Entertainment Weekly*