

Promise Me

Harlan Coben



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ALSO BY HARLAN COBEN

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

*For Charlotte, Ben, Will, and Eve.
You're a handful, but you will always be my world.*

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CHAPTER 1

The missing girl—there had been unceasing news reports, always flashing to that achingly ordinary school portrait of the vanished teen, you know the one, with the rainbow-swirl background, the girl’s hair too straight, her smile too self-conscious, then a quick cut to the worried parents on the front lawn, microphones surrounding them, Mom silently tearful, Dad reading a statement with quivering lip—that girl, that *missing* girl, had just walked past Edna Skylar.

Edna froze.

Stanley, her husband, took two more steps before realizing that his wife was no longer at his side. He turned around. “Edna?”

They stood near the corner of Twenty-first Street and Eighth Avenue in New York City. Street traffic was light this Saturday morning. Foot traffic was heavy. The missing girl had been headed uptown.

Stanley gave a world-weary sigh. “What now?”

“Shh.”

She needed to think. That high school portrait of the girl, the one with the rainbow-swirl background . . . Edna closed her eyes. She needed to conjure up the image in her head. Compare and contrast.

In the photograph, the missing girl had long, mousy-brown hair. The woman who’d just walked by—woman, not girl, because the one who’d just walked by seemed older, but maybe the picture was old too—was a redhead with a shorter, wavy cut. The girl in the photograph did not wear glasses. The one who was heading north up Eighth Avenue had on a fashionable pair with dark, rectangular frames. Her clothes and makeup were both more—for a lack of a better word—adult.

Studying faces was more than a hobby with Edna. She was sixty-three years old, one of the few female physicians in her age group who specialized in the field of genetics. Faces were her life. Part of her brain was always working, even when far away from her office. She couldn’t help it—Dr. Edna Skylar studied faces. Her friends and family were used to the probing stare, but strangers and new acquaintances found it disconcerting.

So that was what Edna had been doing. Strolling down the street. Ignoring, as she often did, the sights and sounds. Lost in her own personal bliss of studying the faces of passersby. Noting cheek structure and mandibular depth, inter-eye distance and ear height, jaw contours and orbital spacing. And that was why, despite the new hair color and style, despite the fashionable glasses and adult makeup and clothing, Edna had recognized the missing girl.

“She was walking with a man.”

“What?”

Edna hadn't realized that she'd spoken out loud.

“The girl.”

Stanley frowned. “What are you talking about, Edna?”

That picture. That aching ordinary school portrait. You've seen it a million times. You see it in a yearbook and the emotions start to churn. In one fell swoop, you see her past, you see her future. You feel the joy of youth, you feel the pain of growing up. You can see her potential there. You feel the pang of nostalgia. You see her years rush by, college maybe, marriage, kids, all that.

But when that same photograph is flashed on your evening news, it skewers your heart with terror. You look at that face, at that tentative smile, at the droopy hair and slumped shoulders, and your mind goes to dark places it shouldn't.

How long had Katie—that was the name, Katie—how long had she been missing?

Edna tried to remember. A month probably. Maybe six weeks. The story had only played locally and not for all that long. There were those who believed that she was a runaway. Katie Rochester had turned eighteen a few days before the disappearance—that made her an adult and thus lowered the priority a great deal. There was supposed trouble at home, especially with her strict albeit quivering-lipped father.

Maybe Edna had been mistaken. Maybe it wasn't her.

One way to find out.

“Hurry,” Edna said to Stanley.

“What? Where are we going?”

There was no time to reply. The girl was probably a block ahead by now. Stanley would follow. Stanley Rickenback, an ob-gyn, was Edna's second husband. Her first had been a whirlwind, a larger-than-life figure too handsome and too passionate and, oh yeah, an absolute ass. That probably wasn't fair, but so what? The idea of marrying a doctor—this was forty years ago—had been a fun novelty for Husband One. The reality, however, had not sat as well with him. He had figured that Edna would outgrow the doc phase once they had children. Edna didn't—just the opposite, in fact. The truth was—a truth that had not escaped her children—Edna loved doctoring more than motherhood.

She rushed ahead. The sidewalks were crowded. She moved into the street, staying close to the curb, and sped up. Stanley tried to follow. “Edna?”

“Just stay with me.”

He caught up. “What are we doing?”

Edna's eyes searched for the red hair.

There. Up ahead on the left.

She needed to get a closer look. Edna broke into a full-fledged sprint now, a strange sight in most places, a nicely dressed woman in her mid-sixties sprinting down the street, but this was Manhattan. It barely registered a second glance.

She circled in front of the woman, trying not to be too obvious, ducking behind taller people, and when she was in the right place, Edna spun around. The possible-Katie was walking toward her. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments, and Edna knew.

It was her.

Katie Rochester was with a dark-haired man, probably in his early thirties. They

were holding hands. She did not seem too distressed. She seemed, in fact, up until the point where their eyes met anyway, pretty content. Of course that might not mean anything. Elizabeth Smart, that young girl who'd been kidnapped out in Utah, had been out in the open with her kidnapper and never tried to signal for help. Maybe something similar was playing here.

Edna wasn't buying it.

The redheaded possible-Katie whispered something to the dark-haired man. They picked up their pace. Edna saw them veer right and down the subway stairs. The sign read c and e trains. Stanley caught up to Edna. He was about to say something, but he saw the look on her face and kept still.

"Come on," she said.

They hurried around the front and started down the stairs. The missing woman and the dark-haired man were already through the turnstile. Edna started toward it.

"Damn it."

"What?"

"I don't have a MetroCard."

"I do," Stanley said.

"Let me have it. Hurry."

Stanley plucked the card from his wallet and handed it to her. She scanned it, moved through the turnstile, handed it back to him. She didn't wait. They'd gone down the stairs to the right. She started that way. She heard the roar of an incoming train and hurried her steps.

The brakes were squeaking to a halt. The subway doors slid open. Edna's heart beat wildly in her chest. She looked left and right, searching for the red hair.

Nothing.

Where was that girl?

"Edna?" It was Stanley. He had caught up to her.

Edna said nothing. She stood on the platform, but there was no sign of Katie Rochester. And even if there was, what then? What should Edna do here? Does she hop on the train and follow them? To where? And then what? Find the apartment or house and then call the police. . . .

Someone tapped her shoulder.

Edna turned. It was the missing girl.

For a long time after this, Edna would wonder what she saw in the girl's expression. Was there a pleading look? A desperation? A calmness? Joy, even? Resolution? All of them.

They just stood and stared at each other for a moment. The bustling crowd, the indecipherable static on the speaker, the swoosh of the train—it all disappeared, leaving just the two of them.

"Please," the missing girl said, her voice a whisper. "You can't tell anybody you saw me."

The girl stepped onto the train then. Edna felt a chill. The doors slid closed. Edna wanted to do something, do anything, but she couldn't move. Her gaze remained locked on the girl's.

"Please," the girl mouthed through the glass.

And then the train disappeared into the dark.

CHAPTER 2

There were two teenage girls in Myron's basement.

That was how it began. Later, when Myron looked back on all the loss and heartbreak, this first series of what-ifs would rise up and haunt him anew. What if he hadn't needed ice. What if he'd opened his basement door a minute earlier or a minute later. What if the two teenage girls—what were they doing alone in his basement in the first place?—had spoken in whispers so that he hadn't overheard them.

What if he had just minded his own business.

From the top of the stairs, Myron heard the girls giggling. He stopped. For a moment he considered closing the door and leaving them alone. His small soiree was low on ice, not out of it. He could come back.

But before he could turn away, one of the girls' voices wafted smoke-like up the stairwell. "So you went with Randy?"

The other: "Oh my God, we were like so wasted."

"From beer?"

"Beer and shots, yeah."

"How did you get home?"

"Randy drove."

At the top of the stairs, Myron stiffened.

"But you said—"

"Shh." Then: "Hello? Is someone there?"

Caught.

Myron took the stairs in a trot, whistling as he went. Mr. Casual. The two girls were sitting in what used to be Myron's bedroom. The basement had been "finished" in 1975 and looked it. Myron's father, who was currently lollygagging with Mom in some condo near Boca Raton, had been big on two-sided tape. The adhesive wood paneling, a look that aged about as well as the Betamax, had started to give. In some spots the concrete walls were now visible and noticeably flaking. The floor tiles, fastened down with something akin to Elmer's Glue, were buckling. They crunched beetle-like when you stepped on them.

The two girls—one Myron had known her whole life, the other he had just met today—looked up at him with wide eyes. For a moment no one spoke. He gave them a little wave.

"Hey, girls."

Myron Bolitar prided himself on big opening lines.

The girls were both high school seniors, both pretty in that coltish way. The one sitting on the corner of his old bed—the one he had met for the first time an hour ago

—was named Erin. Myron had started dating Erin’s mother, a widow and freelance magazine writer named Ali Wilder, two months ago. This party, here at the house Myron had grown up in and now owned, was something of a “coming out” party for Myron and Ali as a couple.

The other girl, Aimee Biel, mimicked his wave and tone. “Hey, Myron.”

More silence.

He first saw Aimee Biel the day after she was born at St. Barnabas Hospital. Aimee and her parents, Claire and Erik, lived two blocks away. Myron had known Claire since their years together at Heritage Middle School, less than half a mile from where they now gathered. Myron turned toward Aimee. For a moment he fell back more than twenty-five years. Aimee looked so much like her mother, had the same crooked, devil-may-care grin, it was like looking through a time portal.

“I was just getting some ice,” Myron said. He pointed toward the freezer with his thumb to illustrate the point.

“Cool,” Aimee said.

“Very cool,” Myron said. “Ice cold, in fact.”

Myron chuckled. Alone.

With the stupid grin still on his face, Myron looked over at Erin. She turned away. That had been her basic reaction today. Polite and aloof.

“Can I ask you something?” Aimee said.

“Shoot.”

She spread her hands. “Was this really your room growing up?”

“Indeed it was.”

The two girls exchanged a glance. Aimee giggled. Erin did likewise.

“What?” Myron said.

“This room . . . I mean, could it possibly be lamer?”

Erin finally spoke. “It’s like too retro to be retro.”

“What do you call this thing?” Aimee asked, pointing below her.

“A beanbag chair,” Myron said.

The two girls giggled some more.

“And how come this lamp has a black lightbulb?”

“It makes the posters glow.”

More laughs.

“Hey, I was in high school,” Myron said, as if that explained everything.

“Did you ever bring a girl down here?” Aimee asked.

Myron put his hand to his heart. “A true gentleman never kisses and tells.” Then: “Yes.”

“How many?”

“How many what?”

“How many girls did you bring down here?”

“Oh. Approximately”—Myron looked up, drew in the air with his index finger—“carry the three . . . I’d say somewhere between eight and nine hundred thousand.”

That caused rip-roaring laughter.

“Actually,” Aimee said, “Mom says you used to be real cute.”

Myron arched an eyebrow. “Used to be?”

Both girls high-fived and fell about the place. Myron shook his head and grumbled

something about respecting their elders. When they quieted down, Aimee said, “Can I ask you something else?”

“Shoot.”

“I mean, seriously.”

“Go ahead.”

“Those pictures of you upstairs. On the stairwell.”

Myron nodded. He had a pretty good idea where this was going. “You were on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.”

“That I was.”

“Mom and Dad say you were like the greatest basketball player in the country.”

“Mom and Dad,” Myron said, “exaggerate.”

Both girls stared at him. Five seconds passed. Then another five.

“Do I have something stuck in my teeth?” Myron asked.

“Weren’t you, like, drafted by the Lakers?”

“The Celtics,” he corrected.

“Sorry, the Celtics.” Aimee kept him pinned with her eyes. “And you hurt your knee, right?”

“Right.”

“Your career was over. Just like that.”

“Pretty much, yes.”

“So like”—Aimee shrugged—“how did that feel?”

“Hurting my knee?”

“Being a superstar like that. And then, *bam*, never being able to play again.”

Both girls waited for his answer. Myron tried to come up with something profound.

“It sucked big-time,” he said.

They both liked that.

Aimee shook her head. “It must have been the worst.”

Myron looked toward Erin. Erin had her eyes down. The room went quiet. He waited. She eventually looked up. She looked scared and small and young. He wanted to take her in his arms, but man, would that ever be the wrong move.

“No,” Myron said softly, still holding Erin’s gaze. “Not even close to the worst.”

A voice at the top of the stairs shouted down, “Myron?”

“I’m coming.”

He almost left then. The next big what-if. But the words he’d overheard at the top of the stairs—*Randy drove*—kept rattling in his head. *Beer and shots*. He couldn’t let that go, could he?

“I want to tell you a story,” Myron began. And then he stopped. What he wanted to do was tell them about an incident from his high school days. There had been a party at Barry Brenner’s house. That was what he wanted to tell them. He’d been a senior in high school—like them. There had been a lot of drinking. His team, the Livingston Lancers, had just won the state basketball tournament, led by All-American Myron Bolitar’s forty-three points. Everyone was drunk. He remembered Debbie Frankel, a brilliant girl, a live wire, that sparkplug who was always animated, always raising her hand to contradict the teacher, always arguing and taking the other side and you loved her for it. At midnight Debbie came over and said good-bye to him. Her glasses were low on her nose. That was what he remembered most—the way her glasses had

slipped down. Myron could see that Debbie was wasted. So were the other two girls who would pile into that car.

You can guess how the story ends. They took the hill on South Orange Avenue too fast. Debbie died in the crash. The smashed-up car was put on display in front of the high school for six years. Myron wondered where it was now, what they'd eventually done to that wreck.

"What?" Aimee said.

But Myron didn't tell them about Debbie Frankel. Erin and Aimee had undoubtedly heard other versions of the same story. It wouldn't work. He knew that. So he tried something else.

"I need you to promise me something," Myron said.

Erin and Aimee looked at him.

He pulled his wallet from his pocket and plucked out two business cards. He opened the top drawer and found a pen that still worked. "Here are all my numbers—home, business, mobile, my place in New York City."

Myron scribbled on the cards and passed one to each of them. They took the cards without saying a word.

"Please listen to me, okay? If you're ever in a bind. If you're ever out drinking or your friends are drinking or you're high or stoned or I don't care what. Promise me. Promise me you'll call me. I'll come get you wherever you are. I won't ask any questions. I won't tell your parents. That's my promise to you. I'll take you wherever you want to go. I don't care how late. I don't care how far away you are. I don't care how wasted. Twenty-four-seven. Call me and I'll pick you up."

The girls said nothing.

Myron took a step closer. He tried to keep the pleading out of his voice. "Just please . . . please don't ever drive with someone who's been drinking."

They just stared at him.

"Promise me," he said.

And a moment later—the final what-if?—they did.

CHAPTER 3

Two hours later, Aimee's family—the Biels—were the first to leave. Myron walked them to the door. Claire leaned close to his ear. "I heard the girls were down in your old room."

"Yep."

She gave him a wicked grin. "Did you tell them—?"

"God, no."

Claire shook her head. "You're such a prude."

He and Claire had been good friends in high school. He'd loved her free spirit. She acted like—for lack of a more appropriate term—a guy. When they'd go to parties, she'd try to pick someone up, usually with more success because, hey, she was an attractive girl. She'd liked muscle-heads. She'd go with them once, maybe twice, and then move on.

Claire was a lawyer now. She and Myron had messed around once, down in that very basement, on a holiday break senior year. Myron had been much more uptight about it. The next day, there had been no awkwardness for Claire. No discomfort, no silent treatment, no "maybe we should discuss what happened."

No encore either.

In law school Claire had met her husband, "Erik with a K." That was how he always introduced himself. Erik was thin and tightly wound. He rarely smiled. He almost never laughed. His tie was always wonderfully Windsored. Erik with a K was not the man Myron had figured Claire would end up with, but they seemed to work. Something about opposites attract, he guessed.

Erik gave him a firm handshake, made sure that there was eye contact. "Will I see you on Sunday?"

They used to play in a pickup basketball game on Sunday mornings, but Myron had stopped going months ago. "I won't be there this week, no."

Erik nodded as though Myron had said something profound and started out the door. Aimee smothered a laugh and waved. "Nice talking to you, Myron."

"Same here, Aimee."

Myron tried to give her a look that said, "Remember the promise." He didn't know if it worked, but Aimee did give him a small nod before heading down the path.

Claire kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear again. "You look happy."

"I am," he said.

Claire beamed. "Ali's great, isn't she?"

"She is."

"Am I the greatest matchmaker ever?"

“Like something out of a bad road production of *Fiddler*,” he said.

“I’m not rushing things. But I am the greatest, aren’t I? It’s okay, I can take it. I’m the best ever.”

“We’re still talking about matchmaking, right?”

“Fresh. I know I’m the best at the other.”

Myron said, “Eh.”

She punched his arm and left. He watched her walk away, shook his head, smiled. In a sense, you are always seventeen years old and waiting for your life to begin.

Ten minutes later, Ali Wilder, Myron’s new lady love, called for her children. Myron walked them all to the car. Jack, the nine-year-old boy, proudly wore a Celtics uniform with Myron’s old number on it. It was the next step in hip-hop fashion. First there had been the retro uniforms of your favorite greats. Now, at a Web site called Big-Time-Losahs.com or something like that, they sold uniforms for players who became has-beens or never-weres, players who went bust.

Like Myron.

Jack, being only nine years old, didn’t get the irony.

When they reached the car, Jack gave Myron a big hug. Unsure how to play this, Myron hugged back but kept it brief. Erin stayed back. She gave him a half-nod and slipped into the backseat. Jack followed his big sister. Ali and Myron stood and smiled at each other like a pair of newly dating doofs.

“This was fun,” Ali said.

Myron was still smiling. Ali looked up at him with these wonderful green-brown eyes. She had red-blond hair and there were still remnants of childhood freckles. Her face was wide and her smile just held him.

“What?” she said.

“You look beautiful.”

“Man, you are smooth.”

“I don’t want to brag, but yes. Yes, I am.”

Ali looked back at the house. Win—real name: Windsor Horne Lockwood III—stood with arms folded, leaning against the doorframe. “Your friend Win,” she said. “He seems nice.”

“He’s not.”

“I know. I just figured him being your best friend and all, I’d say that.”

“Win is complicated.”

“He’s good-looking.”

“He knows.”

“Not my type though. Too pretty. Too rich-preppy-boy.”

“And you prefer macho he-men,” Myron said. “I understand.”

She snickered. “Why does he keep looking at me like that?”

“My guess? He’s probably checking out your ass.”

“Good to know somebody is.”

Myron cleared his throat, glanced away. “So you want to have dinner together tomorrow?”

“That would be nice.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven.”

Ali put her hand on his chest. Myron felt something electric in the touch. She stood

on tiptoes—Myron was six-four—and kissed his cheek. “I’ll cook for you.”

“Really?”

“We’ll stay in.”

“Great. So it’ll be, what, like a family-type thing? Get to know the kids more?”

“The kids will be spending the night at my sister’s.”

“Oh,” Myron said.

Ali gave him a hard look and slipped into the driver’s seat.

“Oh,” Myron said again.

She arched an eyebrow. “And you didn’t want to brag about being smooth.”

Then she drove off. Myron watched the car disappear, the dorky smile still on his face. He turned and walked back to the house. Win had not moved. There had been many changes in Myron’s life—his parents’ moving down south, Esperanza’s new baby, the fate of his business, even Big Cyndi—but Win remained a constant. Some of the ash-blond hair around the temples had grayed a bit, but Win was still the über-WASP. The patrician lockjaw, the perfect nose, the hair parted by the gods—he stank, deservedly so, of privilege and white shoes and golfer’s tan.

“Six-point-eight,” Win said. “Round it up to a seven.”

“Excuse me?”

Win raised his hand, palm down, tilted it back and forth. “Your Ms. Wilder. If I’m being generous, I give her a seven.”

“Gee, that means a lot. Coming from you and all.”

They moved back into the house and sat in the den. Win crossed his legs in that perfect-crease way of his. His expression was permanently set on haughty. He looked pampered and spoiled and soft—in the face anyway. But the body told another story. He was all knotted, coiled muscle, not so much wiry as, if you will, barbed-wiry.

Win steepled his fingers. Steepling looked right on Win. “May I ask a question?”

“No.”

“Why are you with her?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No. I want to know what precisely you see in Ms. Ali Wilder.”

Myron shook his head. “I knew I shouldn’t have invited you.”

“Ah, but you did. So let me elaborate.”

“Please don’t.”

“During our years at Duke, well, there was the delectable Emily Downing. Then, of course, your soul mate for the next ten-plus years, the luscious Jessica Culver. There was the brief fling with Brenda Slaughter and alas, most recently, the passion of Terese Collins.”

“Is there a point?”

“There is.” Win opened the steeple, closed it again. “What do all these women, your past loves, have in common?”

“You tell me,” Myron said.

“In a word: bodaciousness.”

“That’s a word?”

“Smoking-hot honeys,” Win continued with the snooty accent. “Each and every one of them. On a scale of one to ten, I would rate Emily a nine. That would be the lowest. Jessica would be a so-hot-she-singes-your-eyeballs eleven. Terese Collins and Brenda

Slaughter, both near-tens.”

“And in your expert opinion . . .”

“A seven is being generous,” Win finished for him.

Myron just shook his head.

“So pray tell,” Win said, “what is the big attraction?”

“Are you for real?”

“I am indeed.”

“Well, here’s a news flash, Win. First off, while it’s not really important, I disagree with your awarded score.”

“Oh? So how would rate Ms. Wilder?”

“I’m not getting into that with you. But for one thing, Ali has the kind of looks that grow on you. At first you think she’s attractive enough, and then, as you get to know her—”

“Bah.”

“Bah?”

“Self-rationalization.”

“Well, here’s another news flash for you. It’s not all about looks.”

“Bah.”

“Again with the *bah*?”

Win re-steepled his fingers. “Let’s play a game. I’m going to say a word. You tell me the first thing that pops in your head.”

Myron closed his eyes. “I don’t know why I discuss matters of the heart with you. It’s like talking about Mozart with a deaf man.”

“Yes, that’s very funny. Here comes the first word. Actually it’s two words. Just tell me what pops in your head: Ali Wilder.”

“Warmth,” Myron said.

“Liar.”

“Okay, I think we’ve discussed this enough.”

“Myron?”

“What?”

“When was the last time you tried to save someone?”

The usual faces flashed strobeline through Myron’s head. He tried to block them out.

“Myron?”

“Don’t start,” Myron said softly. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Have you?”

He thought now about Ali, about that wonderful smile and the openness of her face. He thought about Aimee and Erin in his old bedroom down in the basement, about the promise he had forced them to make.

“Ali doesn’t need rescuing, Myron.”

“You think that’s what this is about?”

“When I say her name, what’s the first thing that comes to mind?”

“Warmth,” Myron said again.

But this time, even he knew he was lying.

Six years.

That was how long it had been since Myron had played superhero. In six years he hadn't thrown a punch. He hadn't held, much less fired, a gun. He hadn't threatened or been threatened. He hadn't cracked wise with steroid-inflated pituitary glands. He hadn't called Win, still the scariest man he knew, to back him up or get him out of trouble. In the past six years, none of his clients had been murdered—a real positive in his business. None had been shot or arrested—well, except for that prostitution beef out in Las Vegas, but Myron still claimed that was entrapment. None of his clients or friends or loved ones had gone missing.

He had learned his lesson.

Don't stick your nose in where it doesn't belong. You're not Batman, and Win is not a psychotic version of Robin. Yes, Myron had saved some innocents during his quasi-heroic days, including the life of his own son. Jeremy, his boy, was nineteen now—Myron couldn't believe that either—and was serving in the military in some undisclosed spot in the Middle East.

But Myron had caused damage too. Look what had happened to Duane and Christian and Greg and Linda and Jack. . . . But mostly, Myron could not stop thinking about Brenda. He still visited her grave too frequently. Maybe she would have died anyway, he didn't know. Maybe it wasn't his fault.

The victories have a tendency to wash off you. The destruction—the dead—stay by your side, tap you on the shoulder, slow your step, haunt your sleep.

Either way, Myron had buried his hero complex. For the past six years, his life had been quiet, normal, average—boring, even.

Myron rinsed off the dishes. He semi-lived in Livingston, New Jersey, in the same town—nay, the same house—where he was raised. His parents, the beloved Ellen and Alan Bolitar, performed aliya, returning to their people's homeland (south Florida) five years ago. Myron bought the house as both an investment, a good one, in fact, and so that his folks would have a place to return to when they migrated back during the warmer months. Myron spent about a third of his time living in this house in the burbs and two-thirds rooming with Win at the famed Dakota apartment building on Central Park West in New York City.

He thought about tomorrow night and his date with Ali. Win was an idiot, no question about that, but as usual his questions had scored a hit, if not a bull's-eye. Forget that looks stuff. That was utter nonsense. And forget the hero complex stuff too. That wasn't what this was about. But something was holding him back and yes, it had to do with Ali's tragedy. Try as he might, he couldn't shake it.

As for the hero stuff, making Aimee and Erin promise to call him—that was different. It doesn't matter who you are—the teenage years are hard. High school is a war zone. Myron had been a popular kid. He was a *Parade* All-American basketball player, one of the top recruits in the country, and, to trot out a favorite cliché, a true scholar-athlete. If anyone should have had it easy in high school, it would be someone like Myron Bolitar. But he hadn't. In the end, no one gets out of those years unscathed.

You just need to survive adolescence. That's all. Just get through it.

Maybe that was what he should have said to the girls.