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Don't Let Go by Harlan Coben

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One of this year's highly acclaimed books, *Don't Let Go* is Harlan Coben's latest standalone mystery novel, set in present day New Jersey—the writer's home state. The protagonist is Napoleon "Nap" Dumas, a police detective in his early thirties, who is a changed man since the events of that one fateful night when he was a high school student. Five years ago he lost his father and ever since then he has been living alone; unmarried. At the story's core is the resurfacing of a dreadful event from Nap's past—15 years to be precise. A post-midnight murder of another policeman named Rex (also from the same high school as Nap) involving fingerprints of Nap's high school girlfriend Maura—who went missing 15 years ago—rakes up the events of the past for him. "That night"—as Nap refers to it—is when he lost his twin brother Leo and his girlfriend Diana after the couple got hit by a train, but this reason is never truly accepted by him. The news of Maura's fingerprints at the crime scene unsettles Nap and now he wants to know the truth behind the coinciding events of his brother's death and his lover's disappearance on the same night, both of which have been shrouded in mystery ever since. What then ensues is Nap's pursuit of the truth—as a brother and a lover than a cop.

Apart of the omniscient narrative which is employed in just two chapters (including the introductory one), the entire book is a first-person narrative of Nap Dumas who addresses both reader and his dead twin brother Leo during moments of introspection. His conversations with his brother and the other characters make up most of the book and provide us with the background of the events that took place in Westbridge years ago. The reader witnesses the unravelling of events and mysteries through the eyes of the protagonist. Nap's first concrete evidence comes in the shape of knowledge about the existence of a *Conspiracy Club* in his high school which comprised of 5 students including Leo, Maura, and Rex. Their visit to the restricted Nike missile control center in the heart of the town of Westbridge a week prior to the scarring events opens doors to the existence of a bigger conspiracy. Now, it is up to Nap to find the links between the missile base and what transpired that night to know the truth about his brother's death and the sudden disappearance of his girlfriend. The theme of this novel is best expressed by the character of Dale Miller in the first chapter when he says: "It looks like the past has caught up with us, eh?"

What separates this book from other crime novels is that the crimes mentioned in this book aren't restricted to the usual stories of murders and abductions. The writer has taken into consideration the fact that this is the cyber age and the psychological impact of online shaming on the victim could be as bad as physical harassment if not worse. In the book, there is a mention of a Facebook page named 'Shame-A-Perv' on which somebody has posted a video of a character named Hank (another member of the *Club*)—who is mentally unstable—which is riddled with offensive comments, accusing him of being a paedophile and calling out for physically abusing him. Upon reading the comments Nap's "faith in humanity plummets." Coben's cognisance of the uncalled for nature of this form of vigilantism is apparent. Then there is the mention of a girl named Cathy from sixth grade whose phone is misused by another girl to send pictures of her privates as Cathy's own to all of latter's contacts. The mention of this ostensibly out-of-context incident serves a dual purpose for the writer: it critically comments on sixth graders being allowed to own mobile phones by their parents and how it provides them ease of access to adult content which in turn assists their premature understanding of sexual topics and furthers their desire to exploit others' sexuality in order to assert dominance, all caused by lack of parental supervision.

There are several characters in the novel, and at some point the reader might find it hard to remember all of the names. However, it helps Coben in weaving the narrative of a well-knit community where people know more about others than just their names. When introducing and developing his characters the writer's objective has been to provide reasonable motives to their deeds; it makes them more human. This serves the author's higher objective to show how within an apparent cheerful community like that of Westbridge lie secrets and acts that are degrading the community from within. It wouldn't be wrong to draw comparisons between Coben's Westbridge and the community of Monterey from the successful television miniseries *Big Little Lies* (2017).

Nap's investigation takes the reader to several parts of Westbridge town such as offices, residences, abandoned areas, bars, etc., and all these delectable images help the reader in indulging themselves in this beautifully thrilling novel. This is a book meant to be enjoyed while understanding the fact that to get to the truth one needs to dig deeper. It has mentions and stories about characters from all age groups, and that makes this a book which can be universally savoured. Every chapter ends with a sense of suspense and continuity that compels the reader to read the next chapter immediately. Coben has employed a flowing writing style in the book which affirms his position as a seasoned writer. There is one beautiful transition in the novel where the narrative swiftly travels through Nap looking at the Westbridge Memorial Library to him revisiting his childhood memories of the place which, in turn, lead him to the veteran librarian Dr. Kaufman who then reveals to him that the truth about the Nike missile base is more than meets the eye. Knowing the real purpose of the base is still far from Nap's reach. This is

just one of the many mysteries that the reader shall look forward to when reading the novel. The truth is for the reader to know, and for Nap to find out.

The adrenaline rush that Nap experiences in the climax of the novel would be felt by the reader as well just when every piece of the puzzle starts falling into place; events happen with much intensity and bring the reader to the edge of the seat. How the magnitude of the mystery increases from a mere crime scene to the invocation of FBI involvement is highly interesting and well-depicted by the author. The one thing that makes Coben's latest work so unmissable is his indulging take on how one should let go of things which hold them back even when those things are the closest to their heart. All it takes is an initiative to search for the answers which would quench your thirst for inner peace and set you free.