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Written by Gregg Hurwitz

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Don't Look Back

GREGG HURWITZ



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For Delinah Raya,
'Little Hercules'

Who proves year after year to be the
best choice I ever made

Use *all* your voices. When I bellow, bellow back.

– James Goldman, *The Lion in Winter*

Life is so fucked-up now, and so complicated, that I wouldn't mind if it came down, right quick, to the bare survival of who was ready to survive.

– James Dickey, *Deliverance*

. . . he must not turn his eyes behind him, until he emerged from the vale of Avernus, or the gift would be null and void.

– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

Don't Look Back

Prologue

Terror came as a vibration, a plucked-wire note more felt than heard, primary to the deadening heat, to the flick of unseen insects against her face, to the oppressive night humidity that pressed into her pores. There was excitement, too, the familiar stomach-flipping rush of the 'get' and the piano-trill naughtiness of being where she knew she shouldn't be. But terror was paramount.

As Theresa stole along the trail leading upslope from the river into the jungle, mud caked the soles of her sneakers, making her legs wobbly with a sensation like floating. It wasn't surreal so much as *un*real. Dewy orchids wet-kissed her legs, calves, and arms as she brushed through, her silver digital camera in hand, set to night-vision mode.

Appropriate, since she was on a night hunt of sorts.

She broke into the clearing. At the far edge, a fallen tree trunk lay like a parapet. Beyond, the earth dipped sharply into a canyon.

Breathing hard, she dropped to her stomach and army-crawled across the clearing, coarse stalks tickling her chin, insects stirring, dampness pressing through the knees of her hiking pants. But she couldn't take any chances.

She reached the log and rested for a moment, hiding behind it. She thought of Grady as she most often did – laughing the belly laugh he'd had even as a baby, the one

that could spread through a room, contagious. She knew that her being here had something to do with him – not just here in Mexico but here in this clearing well past dark, away from the safety of the lodge.

Readying her camera, she rose inch by inch and peered over the top of the log.

Down below at the base of the canyon, a squat concrete house sat backed into the far rise, earth spilling across its slab roof. Through the night-vision filter of her little camera, the world appeared green-tinted, an alien landscape.

One window was shoved open, a winking eye. Leaves bobbed around the frame's edge. Blackness beyond.

He was inside.

Theresa's head buzzed. For a moment all she heard was the thrumming of her heartbeat and the whine of flying bugs. She took a picture of the black square of the window. Zoomed in. Took another. And then several more.

One clear image. That's all she hoped for.

It came as quick as the strike of a snake, a face morphing abruptly from the darkness, shadowed eyes oriented upslope, locked on her precise location.

Staring back up at her.

For an instant his dead gaze nailed her to the spot. And then she unclenched, a gasp escaping her lips, the camera slipping down from her panic-sweaty face. Lurching away from the log, she fumbled the silver case, feeling it fall through her slick fingers. As she scrambled to find her feet in the moist vegetation, she knew she couldn't afford to search for the camera. The time for hunting was over.

Now she was prey.

I

'How many . . . ?' Her mouth was dry. 'How many times?'

Rick looked up at her from his perch on the faux-leather chair, elbow resting on the desk they'd crammed into the master bedroom. The computer monitor at his shoulder gave his face a jaundiced pall. 'Five, six. Maybe seven.'

Eve wet her lips, fought her breathing into some semblance of a rhythm. 'Where?'

'Her place, usually.'

'Usually?'

'A car. Once.'

'A car,' Eve said. 'Jesus. A car.' Her hand had made a fist in the bedspread, pulling the fabric into a swirl.

That strangled Inner Voice piped up: *Don't ask. Don't –*

'What's she look like?' Eve asked.

She could feel the sweat beading above the neckline of the worn nursing scrub top she slept in – Los Angeles hadn't gotten the memo that it was supposed to be winter.

Rick rested the points of his fingers on his kneecap, as if to extract the bone. He cleared his throat. 'She's . . . elegant. Does Pilates. Blond. An accountant. From Amsterdam.'

Elegant. Blond. Pilates. Each specific, an arrow punching through flesh.

Eve looked down at her stretched-out scrub top. She

had the kind of plain good looks that aunts called pretty, but never had she been described as 'elegant.'

That's enough now. Trust me, you don't *want to know anything else.*

'How . . . how old is she?'

He waved a hand. 'I don't know what that has to do with it.' It was a halfhearted attempt, she could tell, and he relented under her skeptical glare. 'Twenty-six.'

Her mouth made a few attempts before she got the words out. 'So she was eight when we were eighteen.'

'Why is that . . . ?'

'We could legally *vote*, Rick. And she was having a My Pretty Pony-themed birthday party.'

An image swept in unannounced, her and Rick's third date, them in the car, driving up PCH to Malibu for a lazy beach day. He'd guessed her favorite Beatles song on the first try – 'Let It Be.' Two hundred and thirteen songs, and he'd known.

How far from there to here. And no bread-crumb trail leading back.

'Remember Malibu?' she asked. Their shorthand.

He gave a woeful nod.

'I wish you still looked at me like that. Like I was . . . special.' Her vision was blurry – she'd held out until now, but then she'd heard the words, even from her own mouth, and that had done it. She hated herself for being such a goddamned open book.

He spread his hands, laced them again. 'What am I supposed to say?'

You're supposed to say, You're still *special.*

She wiped her cheeks. 'I don't know.'

A burst of animation rocked him forward in the chair. 'I feel like our lives have turned into this soulless, scheduled bullshit. E-mails and PowerPoint presentations and e-mails *about* PowerPoint presentations, and none of it matters. None of it. Matters.' He was talking fast, which he did when he was upset, words and sentences tumbling out. 'It's like we never stopped and looked at each other and said, "We don't want to live like this."'

Her gaze found the airplane tickets in their optimistic yellow sleeves on the bookshelf. Their ten-year anniversary was nine months off, and just last week she'd cashed in miles for a vacation package – a full week in the jungles of Oaxaca. Rick thought the trip ambitious, but she'd studied biology with a minor in Spanish, so why not? Plus, the state was the safest in Mexico, none of the narco violence that had people going missing and decapitated corpses washing up even in Acapulco. Just a chance to escape all the petty distractions, the tentacles of modern communication, the tiny violations that chipped away at them minute after minute. A chance to clear their heads, breathe fresh air, get out of range. A chance to remember who they were.

Seven times. Seven. Times.

Rick's cell phone chirped a text alert, and she couldn't help wondering. Past his sallow face, the computer glowed, his Gmail open, four unread e-mails. The screen refreshed, another bold message ticking into the in-box. The life of a public defender, always on call for crises most likely to occur at night, on weekends, in the middle of marital catastrophes.

'– job I hate, can barely keep us in the house,' he was

saying. 'I'm grinding out hours, get home, no energy, you're there with HGTV on –'

'I watch TV at night,' she said, 'because I'm lonely.'

'I'm not a mind reader, Eve.'

A metallic scrape of latch against strike plate announced the door's opening. Nicolas stood in the narrow gap, door and jamb pressing either shoulder, his seven-year-old face taut with concern.

In his droopy pajamas, he brought to mind John Darling from *Peter Pan*, with his tall, dignified forehead, the glasses framing oversize Disney eyes. His tufts of blond hair were tinged faintly green from chlorine. Despite the avalanche of emotions currently threatening to submerge her, she had to be up in six hours to get him to swim practice.

'Why are you yelling?' Nicolas asked.

She forced a smile out of the black inner swamp, fought it onto her face. 'I'm sorry we woke you, Little,' she said. 'We're having a . . . disagreement.'

'No,' Nicolas said. '*Daddy* was yelling.'

'I wasn't yelling,' Rick said.

'I think we could both stand to keep our voices down,' she said.

Rick dipped his head remorsefully, and Nicolas withdrew. The air conditioner labored ineffectively.

'I didn't know you felt alone when you watched TV,' Rick said. 'I thought you didn't want to talk to me.'

His expression of vulnerability choked off her reply. Fourteen years in, and still the sight of his suffering gave her an ache beneath the ribs, no matter – evidently – the circumstances.

'I thought you were sick of me,' he said. 'Last month . . .' His lips trembled, and he pressed his knuckles to his mouth. 'Last month you purse-dialed me. You and Nicolas were singing in the car – "Hey, soul sister, I don't wanna miss a single thing ya do . . ." It was magical.' He took a jerky breath. 'I wished I was with you.'

She wondered when they stopped telling each other things like that. Pulling a thread in the hem of her scrub top, she watched it neatly unravel the seam.

'Then I thought,' he continued, 'if I *was* with you, maybe you wouldn't be singing.'

She didn't say anything, because he was probably right.

'We never found our way back to each other after Nick was born,' he said, with a slightly practiced air that made her wonder if he'd made this case before, to friends, his shrink, maybe even to *her*. After *Pilates*. 'All the craziness of a newborn, the adjustments. And when he got sick, those sleepless nights ruling out the scary stuff. Then the diet, which grains are okay, where to find gluten-free pasta, all that *attention*. I wonder sometimes what we'd have to talk about if it wasn't that.'

She'd wondered the same but had never voiced it. She marveled at how Rick *did* that. Just stated what he was feeling, bold and direct, hitting the nails on the heads, one after another, no matter what they pierced. And her, lost in a haze, groping for bearings.

A car? Really? In a *car*?

'I feel like I always let you down, Evie.'

His cell phone sounded again. She looked away, her eye again catching on the anniversary-trip tickets resting hopefully on the bookshelf. Behind them *Moby-Dick* sat

dusty and unread, glaring out from beneath the price sticker it still bore from the UCLA bookstore, inducing guilt with all 1,011 pages. She was always going to read it next month. When she looked back, she saw that three more e-mails had arrived in Rick's in-box. She wondered how many waited in her own, from the nurse manager, the swim coach, the orthodontist. Life cranking mercilessly onward.

She tried to pull words from the molasses of her thoughts, to piece them together. 'We fail each other,' she said. 'That's part of being human. No one can be perfect. But we try to figure it out *together*. Not with . . .' She swallowed back the bitterness. 'That's the deal, right? We keep fighting and fixing and trying. Which is the best anyone can ask for. So many couples just . . . give up or give in.'

'I'm tired, Evie.'

His blond hair was shaggy, his face unshaven, the messy good looks on display that had drawn her to him their senior year at UCLA. College sweethearts. They'd been warned, but no. It was gonna be all candlelit meals and late-night assignations in the Jacuzzi. And now he'd found someone *elegant*.

'We were gonna be different,' she said.

'Something's just not there,' he said. 'I can't find it anymore. In you.'

The words blew a fist-size hole right through her chest. Her voice, barely audible: 'It's there.'

'You never show it to me anymore.' He saw her expression and started to cry. 'I'm sorry, Evie. I'm so goddamned sorry.'

She wanted to tell him to go fuck his elegant Dutch

Pilates accountant, but she thought of Nicolas beyond the thin wall and bit her lip, hard.

She lowered her head, picked at the sheet, waiting for her throat to open back up. She couldn't push out the words, but her Inner Voice was there, clear as day.

It said, *When did I stop being something worth fighting for?*

2

Eve was driving home from work when she ran herself over in her Prius.

It had been eight months since The Conversation, and her whole life had grown not unrecognizable but *too* recognizable. After a cynically brief interval of 'trying,' Rick had moved to Amsterdam with his elegant girlfriend to live in an elegant apartment where they hoped to spawn elegant children. Eve had assumed the role of over-taxed single mom always driving car pool or working her hateful better-paying new job. After a training seminar – five days in Appleton, Wisconsin, during which Rick had returned to resume parenting duties – she'd left nursing to take a managerial position with Banner-Care Health Insurance, elucidating the small print for angry and despairing policy-holders. This morning she'd been reduced to tears with empathy and self-loathing after explaining to an elderly former schoolteacher that he held no rider for in-home hospice.

It had been that kind of day, a day that had never gotten bright enough to keep the existential questions at bay. The nagging sense that somewhere along the way, she had misplaced herself. That she was plodding along like a draft animal, pulling her load, managing three gym sessions a week, hating herself for caring so goddamned much

about firming up her body, about wanting men to want her whom she had no interest in wanting back. Where did it lead? She didn't want to become one of *those women* – strategically applied makeup, Trader Joe's Syrah perennially open in the fridge, happy-hour tequila on Thursdays. Trying to get back a glimpse of her former self, a taste of the marrow, the squish of mud between her toes. Desperate to recapture that lighting-bolt shudder that had gone through her when Timmy Carpenter felt her up through her sweater behind the gym during the eighth-grade Sadie Hawkins dance, when the better part of her life still stretched out in front of her, undiscovered and full of promise.

The night was moonless, overcast, the freeway a dark river glimmering with brake lights. Fifteen more minutes to the new town house outside Calabasas, closer to her new job. Every home looked the same; more than once she found herself pulling in to her neighbor's driveway, puzzled that the garage door wouldn't lift when she pressed the remote.

She checked the clock, then spoke to her car: 'Dial One.'

Hands-free Bluetooth recognized 'one' more readily than 'home,' and so she'd changed it for convenience. *Home. One.* When had efficiency become a priority above all else? It never seemed to yield more time; the contrary, in fact, seemed true. With all the screen tapping and speedy downloading, her attention span had shrunk to a meager increment, a tweet. She missed putting on a tape, a CD even, anything other than virtual clicking and instant gratification. She missed waiting for a favorite song to

come on the radio. She missed not just having patience but *requiring* it. In college she was the girl who'd sneak away to read *The Great Gatsby* in the stacks, who showed up barefoot to outdoor seminars – a bit affected, sure, but still. Where had that girl gone? How had her entire life gotten reduced to two exits on the 101?

Convenience had been the death of her.

Lanie, the sitter, picked up. 'Hey, Mrs H. Sorry, I mean *Mizzzzz* H.'

Eve heard her shift heavily, pictured her reclining on the couch in a shapeless sweater, purple streak in her bangs, bare feet propped on the coffee table next to that stack of pre-med textbooks she dutifully lugged to the house each night.

Eve said, 'Home in fifteen.'

'Bated breath.'

'All good?'

'No fires.'

'He there?'

A rustling, then Nicolas said, 'Mommy? Mom, so Zach? He got the David Finch Batman figurine, you know the one with the new Batsuit?'

His voice made her smile – her first of the day, it seemed. 'You're *such* a nerd.'

'Thanks, Mom. That's a lifetime of video games and being smart.'

'You're right. Nerds shall inherit the earth.'

'Can I go spend the night? At Zach's? Can I please?'

The old fight.

'Honey, we've talked about this. A sleepover's tough. Other parents don't get your diet.'

Wounded silence.

'Look, I'm sorry. I just don't want you getting a rash again. Or cramps. I know it doesn't seem fair.'

It sure didn't. Nicolas had been a great fat, calm baby – his *elbows* had chins – before he'd leaned out overnight in his second year, save a perpetually distended abdomen. After a few go-rounds with various pediatricians, Eve had finally diagnosed him herself. Celiac disease, a huge relief and a lifetime pain in the ass. For the past three years, he'd been largely thriving – in fact, she'd gotten home yesterday to discover that, in a single lurch, he'd outgrown *all* his clothes – and she didn't want to risk a setback.

'*When* then?' he asked.

'I'm not sure, honey. But not tonight.'

A longer silence. She screwed up her face, awaiting his reply. After the call with the elderly schoolteacher, she wasn't sure she could withstand administering another disappointment today, no matter how small.

'Okay, Mommy,' he said.

She eased out a breath. 'Tuck you in soon, Little.'

'Okay, Big.'

She clicked off. As the Prius bounced onto the exit, she ran through the list of what she needed to take care of before morning: review homework, pack lunch, do laundry. God, she needed a vacation. She pictured those plane tickets, still waiting there in front of *Moby-Dick* on the bookshelf in their cheery yellow sleeves, another promise she and Rick had failed to keep. For months she'd been meaning to cancel the trip, and now it was three weeks off. Well – *enough*. She'd do it now, pay the fee, and reclaim her

miles for another vacation someday. One less thing to do tomorrow, one more chore to cross off the list.

These things were so easy now: You asked your phone to do something and it did it. It took a few commands to navigate Aero-Mexico's menu, and she got a customer-service rep on the line in short order. Eve's explanation came out bumbling, and she felt a flush in her cheeks and realized why she'd actually been putting off the cancellation all these months.

'Oh,' the rep said, still misunderstanding. 'Happy anniversary.'

'No.' Eve fumbled to bring up her frequent-flier number on her iPhone. 'It's not – We're not –'

She didn't see herself until it was too late. At first a dark streak off the corner of the front bumper and then a single flash of clarity. It *wasn't* her, of course, but the biker looked just like her. More precisely: a *better* version of herself. Same build, slightly more fit. A sleeker model of her Diamondback mountain bike. Same hair – same hair*cut* even, if more stylish, that straight fringe across the back of the neck.

Eve hit the brakes, hard, and the Prius started to skid. The iPhone flew from her grasp into the passenger seat. Rubber screamed. She choked on a breath, waiting for the sickening crunch of metal grinding, for the thud of flesh against shatterproof glass. But, miraculously, the hood swept through the space the biker seemed to occupy and the car lurched to a stop, piling Eve against the door.

She fought the handle and tumbled out, ground scraping her palms. She stood, night air scouring her throat, sweat trickling cool-hot down her back. The wide residen-

tial road had no streetlamps, just flares from her headlights and various porches and windows.

Up ahead, the biker continued on, tires purring, chain clicking, spokes winking in the high beams.

'Hey,' Eve called out. *'Hey!'*

The helmet didn't rotate. The biker didn't slow. Was she spooked and eager to get away? Or blaring an iPod, oblivious?

'Wait!' Eve shouted after her. 'I'm sorry! I just want to make sure you're okay!'

But the woman kept on, fading into darkness.

Eve leaned heavily, hands on thighs, panting, her gorge rearing. She thought she might throw up from the adrenaline. A muted squawk broke the nighttime stillness.

'Ma'am? Ma'am?'

The phone. On the passenger seat.

'Ma'am? Mrs Hardaway? Are you all right?'

Eve crawled across, lifted the phone in a trembling hand, pressed it to her hot cheek.

The silky-smooth voice, now in her ear. 'Are you there?'

Eve's breaths came in shallow puffs. A bitter taste suffused the back of her mouth. She couldn't find her voice. Bridging the console, one hand shoved into the bisque cloth of the passenger seat to support her weight, she stared disbelievingly through the windshield at the spot of inky blackness into which she had just vanished on a better model of her bike.

'Mrs Hardaway? Are you still there?'

She thought of herself up ahead somewhere in the night, spared. She thought of the cheery yellow sleeves of the airline tickets, the miles she'd planned to reclaim for

another trip someday if she ever found the time. She thought of Oaxaca, the safest state in Mexico, wild and new and set like a jewel against the Pacific, a cosmic distance from the hamster-wheel cage she'd created for herself.

She slid back behind the wheel of the stalled-out Prius, angled toward the curb, going nowhere.

'I don't know,' she said.