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Written by Andrew Gross

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ANDREW GROSS

Fifteen Seconds

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Everyone is guilty of something, or has something to conceal. All one has to do is look hard enough to find what it is.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Prologue

It had all gotten a little blurry for Amanda, behind the wheel of her beat-up, eight-year-old Mazda:

Her recollection of what she'd been doing only twenty minutes before. Katy Perry's voice on the car radio: *"I just kissed a girl . . ."*

The road.

She zipped in front of a yellow school bus crawling along ahead of her, the realization beginning to settle in that this wasn't the right way.

Truth was, things had been going downhill quickly from the time she'd woken up this morning. First was her pathetic, out-of-work dad, waking her out of a deep sleep—*"Why're you always yelling at me, Daddy?"*—threatening to throw her ass out of the house for good if she didn't change her ways.

Then her boss, who always seemed to be on her case. Sure, she'd missed some time. I mean, washing hair at that stupid salon, like it was some fancy-ass boutique in Milan or France or somewhere. And her tight-ass instructor at the local cosmetology school, Miss Bad Hair Tease of 2001. *At least know how to do it if you're gonna teach the shit, right?* I mean, there had to be some reason the bitch was stuck in a shit bucket like Acropolis, Georgia, right . . . ?

Not to mention ol' Wayne, her so-called boyfriend. They'd had another one of their famous blowups last night. Amanda was sure he was nailing the checkout girl at Ruby's Market, Brandee or something, with her big rack and all, and that cheesy, fake-gold necklace with her name in large script.

And here she was—one more missed class away from an F, and late again. That class was the only thing keeping a roof over her head these days. Amanda switched lanes, barely squeezing ahead of a slow-moving SUV with a mom and kid in it. *"C'mon, c'mon,"* she yelled. "I see you— *okay*?" She turned up the music. She just couldn't handle this kind of shit today.

The only way she could even think straight anymore these days was popping a couple of thirty-milligram Oxys like she'd done when she brushed her teeth. Always did the trick.

Especially with a Xanax chaser.

Katy Perry sang, *"It felt so wrong, it felt so right . . ."*

and Amanda sang with her, dancing with her hands off the wheel.

She heard a loud honk. Like a foghorn in her head. She realized she'd been weaving just a bit. *"All right, all right . . . Jesus, keep your ass on, bitch."* Last thing she needed was for the police to be on her butt today. Nineteen years old. With no money. Flunk out and get your ass tossed in jail.

Just like me, right . . . ?

Blinking, Amanda scanned for the turnoff to the school. She knew it was around here somewhere. It was just that everything seemed a little fuzzy about now.

Next to that Burger King, right . . . ?

She pulled into the turn lane. Suddenly horns blared at her from all directions. *Okay, okay* . . . A red pickup swerved, narrowly avoiding her, the driver twisting his head in anger as it zoomed by.

"Asshole . . ." Amanda turned to cuss him out. She stared back at the oncoming traffic. *"Holy shit."*

That's when it finally dawned on her that she'd been driving on the wrong side of the road.

"Deborah Jean? Deborah Jean? Honey, look what you forgot . . . !"

Deborah Jean Jenkins's mom ran out of the house, holding her grandson's "didee." The soft, blue terry cloth that always seemed to make eight-week-old Brett smile

as he clung to it with those adorable, tiny little fingers of his.

Not that he was smiling much at all these days. In fact, the poor boy was really colicky or something, and was barely taking his formula. His dad was still two months from coming home from Afghanistan. He hadn't even seen his own son yet. Only on Skype. He had a position waiting for him at the Walmart. Then they could get their own place. Start their lives over again.

"Okay, Mom, thanks . . ." Deborah Jean said with a loud sigh, going back to pick the didee up from her by the front stairs.

"You want me to come along, honey?" her mother asked.

"No, Mom, I think the two of us can handle this perfectly well ourselves. It's like, *what*—a fifteen-second drive right down the road . . . What can happen in fifteen seconds?"

"Well, okay . . . Just make sure you buckle my grandson in there nice and tight."

"I promise, Mom," Deborah Jean said, rolling her eyes with a tolerant smile.

She took Brett back down the walkway to where her minivan was parked. "You're going to be a very important person in this world one day . . ." she told him. "A doctor or a lawyer, maybe. You'll make us all very proud. And when you *are*"—she gazed into his bright blue eyes—"I want you to promise me something. I want you

to promise, dude, that if *I* ever go on like that when you're all grown up, you're just gonna tell me to shush up! Can I count on you for that, Brett? Huh, can I?"

Deborah Jean tickled her son's chin with her knuckles as she suddenly heard a rumble from behind her. She turned.

To her horror, a rust-colored car had busted right through the white fence off the street and was heading up the lawn right toward the house—*toward her*—seemingly out of control.

"Stop! Stop!" Deborah Jean shouted as the car careened off the large elm in the yard, barreling down on her. *"Oh, Lord Jesus, no . . ."*

She tried to shield Brett, turning directly into the disoriented eyes of the young woman at the wheel. The last thing she ever heard was the terrified cry of her mom, who never ever stopped worrying over the oncoming engine's roar:

"Deborah Jean! Deborah Jean!"

When Amanda came to, her car was resting among the hedge work of a large, white house.

A house? She blinked foggily. *How the hell did she get here . . . ?*

A shrill voice beyond the car was shrieking, *"Deborah Jean! Deborah!"*

Would you stop? You're busting my head, lady.

Through her haze, Amanda wasn't sure what had

happened. The car just seemed to go out of control, like it had a mind of its own. Her door was hanging open. Fuzzily, she pushed herself out of the car. She knew she'd done something really bad. The woman kept screaming, "*Brett! Brett!* Oh my God, someone please help!"

Who the fuck is Brett? Amanda wondered. Her head was really killing her now.

Suddenly people were everywhere. "Someone cut me off," Amanda muttered to someone rushing by. No one seemed to be helping her, only the woman who was screaming.

"Hey, I'm hurt too," Amanda said. Blood rolled down her cheek. *"Can't you see? Whatever . . ."*

This was like some really bad dream. *It's time to wake up now!* she told herself. But blinking, she knew that whatever was going on, it was really real. Really bad too.

"*Deborah! Deborah Jean, my daughter!* Help her, please!" the bitch with the piercing shrill wouldn't stop screaming. Then she looked squarely at Amanda: "What have you done?" Her face twisted in anguish. *"What have you done?"*

"I couldn't help it," Amanda said, coming around the car to see.

A woman was pinned under her car. She was kind of pretty. Her eyes were glazed and very wide and her lips moved ever so slightly, though her voice was faint.

"Brett . . ." she murmured.

That's when Amanda saw that she was clutching something under there. Something bundled in blue. A blanket.

A baby's blanket. And people were standing around with their eyes filling up with tears. And there was blood everywhere.

You've done it now, Amanda said to herself.

Just like me.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

You get *ten days,* someone once told me. Ten days in all of your life that qualify as truly "great." That when you look back through the lens of time stand apart from everything else.

All the rest is just clutter.

And driving my rented Cadillac STS somewhere outside Jacksonville, just off the plane from Ft. Lauderdale, looking around for Bay Shore Drive and the Marriott Sun Coast Resort, I thought that today had a pretty fair shot of ending high on that list.

First, there would be eighteen holes with my old college buddy from Amherst, Mike Dinofrio, at Atlantic Pines, the new Jack Nicklaus–designed course you pretty much had to sell your soul—or in my case, remove fifteen years of wrinkles from the face of a

board member's wife—to even get a tee time on.

Then it was the Doctors Without Borders regional conference I was actually in town for, where I was delivering the opening address. On my experiences in the village of Boaco, in Nicaragua, where, for the past five years, instead of heading off each August on some cruise ship or to Napa like most of my colleagues, I went back to the same, dirt-poor, flood-ravaged town, doing surgeries on cleft palates and reconstructive work on local women who'd had mastectomies as a result of breast cancer. I'd even put together a fund-raising effort at my hospital to build a sorely needed school. What had begun, I'd be the first to admit, as simply a way to clear my head after a painful divorce had now become the most meaningful commitment in my life. A year ago, I'd even brought along my then-seventeen-year-old, Hallie, who freely admitted that at first it was merely a cool way to show community service for her college applications. But this year she was back again, before starting at UVA, snapping photos for a blog she was doing and teaching English. I'd even included some of her photos as a part of my presentation tonight: "Making Medicine Matter: How a Third-World Village Taught Me the Meaning of Medicine Again." I wished she could be there tonight, but she was going through exams. Trust me, as a dad, I couldn't have been prouder.

Then later, after everything wound down, I had drinks lined up at the Marriott's rooftop bar with one

Jennifer H. Keegan—former Miss Jacksonville, now regional field manager for Danner Klein—whose visits to my office were always charged with as many goose bumps and as much electricity as there was product presentation. The past few months, we'd bumped into each other at cocktail parties and industry events, but *tonight* . . . hopefully basking in the afterglow of my moving and irresistible speech, with a couple of glasses of champagne in us . . . Well, let's just say I was hoping that tonight could turn a day that was "really, really *good*" into one that would reach an all-time high on that list!

If I could only locate the damn hotel . . . I fixed on the green, overhanging street sign. METCALFE . . . That wasn't exactly what I was expecting to see. Where the hell was Bay Shore Springs Drive? I started thinking that maybe I should've waited for the Caddie with the GPS, but the girl said that could be another twenty minutes and I didn't want to be late.

Bay Shore had to be the next street down.

I pulled up at the light, and started thinking about how life had bounced back pretty well for me after some definite rocky patches. I had a thriving cosmetic practice in Boca, annually making *South Florida Magazine*'s list of Top Doctors, once even on the cover. I'd built my own operating clinic and overnight recovery center, more like a five-star inn than a medical facility. I'd put together a successful group of three storefront medical clinics in

Ft. Lauderdale and up in Palm Beach, and even appeared periodically on *Good Morning South Florida,* "Dr. Henry Steadman Reports" . . . Dubbed by my daughter as "the go-to Boob Dude of Broward County," my reputation cemented as creator of the Steadman Wave, the signature dip I'd perfected just above the areolae that created the seamless, pear-shaped curvature everyone was trying to copy these days.

It wasn't exactly what I thought I'd be known for when I got out of med school at Vanderbilt twenty years ago, but hey, I guess we all could look back and say those things, right?

I'd played the field a bit the past few years. Just never found the one to wow me. And I'd managed to stay on decent terms with Liz, a high-powered immigration lawyer, who five years back announced, as I came home from a medical conference in Houston, that *she'd* had one of those "days that made the list" herself—with Mort Golub, the managing partner of her practice. It hurt, though. I suppose I hadn't been entirely innocent myself. The only good thing that came of it was that I'd managed to stay active in my daughter's life: Hallie was a ranked equestrian who had narrowly missed going to the junior Olympics a couple of years back and was now finishing her freshman year at UVA. I still went with her to meets around the South, just the two of us.

But I hadn't had a steady woman in my life for a

couple of years. My idea of a date was to cruise down to the Keys on weekends in my Cessna for lunch at Pierre's in Islamorada. Or whack the golf ball around from time to time to a ten handicap. All pretty much "a joke," my daughter would say, rolling her eyes, for one of "South Florida's Most Eligible Bachelors"—if he was trying to keep up the reputation.

Traffic was building on Lakeview, nearing I-10, as I continued on past Metcalfe. I saw a Sports Authority and a Dillard's on my left, a development of Mediterranean-style condos called Tuscan Grove on the right. I flipped on a news channel . . . *Another day of U.S. missiles pummeling Gadhafi air defenses in Libya . . .* The dude had to go. *Tornadoes carve a path of death and destruction through Alabama.*

Where the hell was Bay Shore Springs Drive?

Yes! I spotted the name on the hanging street sign and switched on my blinker. The plan was to first check in at the hotel, then head over to Mike's, and we'd go on to the club. My mind roamed to the famous island green on the signature sixteenth hole . . .

Suddenly I realized the cross street wasn't Bay Shore Springs at all, but something called Bay Ridge West.

And it was one-way, in the opposite direction!

Shit! I looked around and found myself trapped in the middle of the intersection—in the totally wrong lane, staring at someone in an SUV across from me

scowling like I was a total moron. Behind me, a line of cars had pulled up, and was waiting to turn. The light turned yellow . . .

I had to move.

The hell with it, I said to myself, and pressed the accelerator, speeding up through the busy intersection.

My heart skipped a beat and I glanced around, hoping no one had spotted me. Bay Shore Springs had to be the next street down.

That was when a flashing light sprang up behind me, followed a second later by the jolting *whoop, whoop, whoop* of a police siren.

Damn.

A white police car came up on my tail, as if it had been waiting there, a voice over a speaker directing me to the side of the road.

I made my way through traffic to the curb, reminding myself that I was in *North* Florida, not Boca, and the police here were a totally different breed.

I watched through the side mirror as a cop in a dark blue uniform stepped out and started coming toward me. Aviator sunglasses, a hard jaw, and a thick mustache, not to mention the expression that seemed to convey: *Not in my pond, buddy.*

I rolled down my window, and as the cop stepped up, I met his eyes affably. "I'm really sorry, Officer. I know I cut that one a little close. It was just that I was looking for Bay Shore Springs Drive and got a little

confused when I saw Bay Ridge West back there. I didn't see the light turn."

"License and proof of insurance," was all he said back to me.

I sighed. "Look, here's my license . . ." I dug into my wallet. "But the car's a rental, Officer. I just picked it up at the airport. I don't think I have proof of insurance. It's part of the rental agreement, no . . . ?"

I was kind of hoping he would simply see the initials *MD* after my name and tell me to pay closer attention next time.

He didn't.

Instead he said grudgingly, "Driving without proof of insurance is a state violation punishable by a five-hundred-dollar fine."

"I know that, Officer, and of course I have proof of insurance on my own car . . ." I handed him my license. "But like I said, this one's a rental. I just picked it up at the airport. I'm afraid you're gonna have to take that one up with Hertz, Officer . . . *Martinez.*" I focused on his nameplate. "I just got a little confused back there looking for the Marriott. I'm up here for a medical conference . . ."

"The Marriott, huh?" the policeman said, lifting his shades and staring into my car.

"That's right. I'm giving a speech there tonight. Look, I'm really sorry if I ran the light—I thought it was yellow. I just found myself trapped in no-man's-land

and thought it was best to speed up than to block traffic. Any chance you can just cut me a little slack on this . . . ?"

Traffic had backed up, rubbernecking, slowly passing by.

"You realize you were turning down a one-way street back there?" Martinez completely ignored my plea.

"I did realize it, Officer," I said, exhaling, "and that's why I didn't turn, not to men—"

"There's a turnoff two lights ahead," the patrolman said, cutting me off. "I want you to make a right at the curve and pull over there."

"Officer . . ." I pleaded one more time with fading hope, "can't we just—"

"Two lights," the cop said, holding on to my license. "Just pull over there."