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Written by Andrew Gross

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ANDREW GROSS

No Way Back

HARPER

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*If a body is just a body, who will step
forward to ask why someone is killed and
who killed them? If a body has no name or
no history, then who will demand justice?*

—A grieving mother of a victim
of Mexico's drug wars

Prologue

The trip had been Sam's idea.

A five-day R and R down in Mexico over spring break. Only a twenty-hour-drive away. Ned's dad had brought up all the trouble they were having down there, but then things seemed to have quieted down recently. Anyway, where they were going, Aguazula, was just a sleepy town along the coast with not much more than a beach, a thatched-roof cantina, and maybe a little blow-away weed. Sam's buddy George lived there, teaching English. He said it was paradise.

Aguazula.

Blue waters.

At the last minute, Ned's girlfriend, Ana, decided to come along, lured by the promise of some first-rate

photo ops for her photography project. The three of them were seniors at the University of Denver. And it would probably be the last real fun they'd have, at least for a long time, since they were all graduating in a couple of months and then it was out into the world. The only things he'd have on his résumé: two years of lacrosse, a 3.2 GPA, and a business degree. If there would even be a job out there by the time he graduated. The last two summers Sam had interned back east at this boutique fixed-income shop. But now even Wall Street wasn't hiring anymore, and in truth, Sam wasn't even sure finance was his thing. He really didn't know what he wanted to do. Other than, right now, a swan dive off a rocky ledge into a grotto of warm, blue water.

Ned was sleeping in the passenger seat of the Acura SUV, having driven most of the night once they hit New Mexico, all the way to the Mexican border. Culiacán was only ten minutes ahead, according to the AAA map they had. Aguazula was still a three-hour-drive away.

Paradise.

In the hazy light, Sam saw a car coming up from behind him. Once dawn had broken, Sunday morning, he had begun to enjoy the drive, drinking in the amazing countryside. He'd never been in rural Mexico before. Flat stone houses hugging the hills; farmers with goats and chickens along the side of the road. Spindly jacaranda

trees. He'd been to Cabo once, with the family. But that was just about fancy resorts with PGA golf courses and deep-sea fishing. And he'd also been to Cancún once, on spring break, but that was such a party freak show, they hardly left the hotel. This was the real thing. An old woman sat behind a stand on the roadside selling melons and dried chiles. Sam waved to her as they passed by.

On the outskirts of town, the car caught up and went by them on the two-lane highway. A white Jeep with Texas plates. A man and a woman inside. In Culiacán they'd have to fill up. Maybe grab some breakfast. The road seemed to bring them right into the center of town. They passed a school, Escuela Autonomous de Centro Sinaloa. Just a flat-topped, one-level building with a droopy flag and what looked like a rutted soccer field.

There was a backup of some kind, as the road wound down into the center of town. It all seemed pretty quiet this time of the morning. Everyone must be getting ready for church. He was struck by all the crosses. A virtual sea of them—white, shimmering—atop the roofs. It was one of the most beautiful sights he'd even seen.

Next to him, Ned finally stirred. "Where are we?"

"Culiacán. Couple of more hours. Dude, check it out."

Ned sat up and gazed around. "Whoa!" His eyes growing

startlingly wide. "What is this, like a spawning ground for churches?"

Sam nodded. "The mother ship."

The narrow street that led into Culiacán's central square was momentarily backed up. Some old farmer seemed to be stuck, trying to drag his cart across the cobblestone road. Sam pulled up behind the same white Jeep that had passed them a few minutes ago.

In the back, Ana sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Hey, where are we, guys?"

"Paradise," Sam declared, looking at the sea of white crosses. "At least, only a couple of more hours away."

Ana groaned. "Right now, my idea of paradise is a place we can grab some coffee and take a pee."

"I can go for that myself," Ned chimed in approvingly.

"Okay." Sam feathered the clutch. "Soon as this dude goes by, let's see what we can do."

Lupe stood on the roof, with its view of the town square, his AR-15 ready. It was quiet on a Sunday morning. A few food stalls were setting up to do business after Mass. A handful of unemployed men were already drinking in the cantina. A church bell rang. *La ciudad de cruces*. The City of Crosses, it was called. Lupe knew the names and could count ten of them from right here.

He was nineteen, the son of a baker. He had dropped

out of school in the fifth grade and come under the influence of his uncle, Oscar, who took out a wad of American hundred-dollar bills and asked Lupe if this was what he wanted in life. And he answered, yes, it was. He'd seen the American movies. It was always the rich men who got the girls, who knew how to enjoy life. He started by doing simple things, like being a lookout and delivering packages. He knew exactly what the packages contained. Then, a few months back, they needed a local policeman to disappear. It was easy to do these jobs; these *magistrados* were fat and bought and sold themselves to the highest bidder. They lined their own pockets and did nothing for the poor. The man Lupe worked for had built schools and soccer fields. He had provided food for those who needed it. The policeman disappeared; only his hands and feet were ever found. And his badge. Which sent the message *You do not fuck with the Z's. Or we'll paste you.* Now, nervously, Lupe manned his own crew for the first time.

The white SUV would come down the road into town at a little after 10:00 A.M., he was told. Two Anglos would be inside. A man and a woman. *Do it in the open,* he was instructed. *Let the whole world see.*

Lupe didn't like killing people. He would rather play football and impress the girls. With his sandy-colored hair and bright blue eyes, he was always popular. Except he knew this was the way to climb up the ladder. And

they were all part of the same corrupt game, no matter which side they were on. *Govermentales*, politicians, the police. Even the priests. No one was innocent. Even he knew that much.

Someone shouted, one of the lookouts from the rooftops up ahead. "*They are coming!*" Then: "Hay dos!" he heard. There are two.

"Dos personas?" Lupe called. Just as told.

"No. Dos coches." Two cars.

No one had told Lupe that.

He quickly radioed back. His uncle, who was having coffee at his hacienda, asked him, "Are you sure?"

"Sí. Two white wagons. Anglos. They are passing the school now."

That meant they would be in the square in a matter of seconds. Lupe gave the signal to the old man, who brought the cart across the narrow stone street, instructing the burro to stop. Coming down the hill, Lupe did see two white vehicles making their way down Calle Lachrimas, named for the Holy Mother's tears.

"There are two!" he radioed Oscar, and looked up to the verandah across the square. "Both Anglos. Which one is it? Do you know the plate number?"

His uncle's voice came back. "No. Let me check."

The front car honked at the cart. The old man appeared to do his best, moving as slowly as possible, but he couldn't block the road all day. The joke was,

he'd probably had a hand in more killings than all of them!

"What do you want me to do?" Lupe asked again, as the old man cleared the road. "It must be done now?"

"Kill them all," his uncle's voice came back. "Let God decide."

The old man gave the burro a whack, and the cart seemed to magically clear the road.

By that time, Ned was going over the map. Ana had pulled out her Nikon and was snapping away at a little girl who waved back at her, going. "Oh, man, this is great!"

Sam put the car back in gear. "We're rolling!"

All of a sudden several men in jeans with white kerchiefs around their faces stepped out from the buildings. From the square itself. Some were even on the rooftops.

The one in front of Sam seemed no older than himself, maybe even younger, looking at him with a dull indifference in his eyes.

They were all aiming automatic weapons.

No! Sam wanted to tell them, *No, wait . . . You've made some mistake!* but the next thing he heard was a scream—Ana's, he was sure—as the car's front and side windows exploded virtually at once, ironlike fists slugging him all over like the hardest lacrosse balls he had ever felt,

and then the explosions seem to just go on and on, no matter how much he begged them to stop. On and on, until the boy pulling the trigger in front of him was no longer in his sight.

WENDY

CHAPTER ONE

He *was* handsome.

Not that I was really checking anyone out, or that I even looked at guys in that way anymore—married going on ten years now, and Neil, my youngest, my stepson actually, just off to college. I glanced away, pretending I hadn't even noticed him. Especially in a bar by myself, no matter how stylish this one was. But in truth I guess I had. Noticed him. Just a little. Out of the corner of my eye . . .

Longish black hair and kind of dark, smoky eyes. A white V-neck T-shirt under a stylish blazer. Late thirties maybe, around my age, but seemed younger. I would've chalked him up as being just a shade too cool—too cool for my type anyway—if it wasn't that something about him just seemed, I don't know . . . natural. He sat down

a few seats from me at the bar and ordered a Belvedere on the rocks, never looking my way. His watch was a rose-gold chronometer and looked expensive. When he finally did turn my way, shifting his stool to listen to the jazz pianist, his smile was pleasant, not too forward, just enough to acknowledge that there were three empty seats between us, and seemed to say nothing more than *How are you tonight?*

Actually the guy was pretty damn hot!

Truth was, it had been years since I'd been at a bar by myself at night, other than maybe waiting for a girlfriend to come back from the ladies' room as part of a gals' night out. And the only reason I even happened to be here was that I'd been in the city all day at this self-publishing seminar, a day after Dave and I had about the biggest fight of our married lives. Which had started out as nothing, of course, as these things usually did: whether or not you had to salt the steaks so heavily—*twice*, in fact—before putting them on the grill—he having read about it in *Food & Wine* magazine or something—which somehow managed to morph into how I felt he was always spoiling the kids, who were from Dave's first marriage: Amy, who was in Barcelona on her junior year abroad, and Neil, who had taken his car with him as a freshman up at Bates. Which was actually all just a kind of code, I now realized, for some issues I had with his ex-wife, Joanie. How I felt she was always belittling me; always putting out there that she

was the kids' mother, even though I'd pretty much raised them since they were in grade school, and how I always felt Dave never fully supported me on this.

"She *is* their mother!" Dave said, pushing away from the table. "Maybe you should just butt out on this, Wendy. Maybe you just should."

Then we both said some things I'm sure we regretted.

The rest of the night we barely exchanged a word—Dave shutting himself in the TV room with a hockey game, and me hiding out in the bedroom with my book. In the morning he was in his car at the crack of dawn, and I had my seminar in New York. We hadn't spoken a word all day, which was rare, so I asked my buddy Pam to meet me for a drink and maybe something to eat, just to talk it all through before heading home.

Home was about the *last* place I wanted to be right now.

And here it was, ten after seven, and Pam was texting me that she was running *twenty min late*: the usual kid crisis—meaning Steve, her hedge-fund-honcho husband, still hadn't left the office as promised, and her nanny was with April at dance practice . . .

And me, at the Hotel Kitano bar, a couple of blocks from Grand Central. Taking in the last, relaxing sips of a Patrón Gold margarita—another thing I rarely did!—one eye on the TV screen above me, which had a muted baseball game or something on, the other doing its best to avoid the eye of Mr. Cutie at the end of the bar.

Maybe not looking my 100 percent, knockout *best*—I mean, it was just a self-publishing seminar and all—but still not exactly half-bad in an orange cashmere sweater, a black leather skirt, my Prada boots, and my wavy, dark brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Looking decently toned from the hot-yoga classes I'd been taking, texting back to Pam with a mischievous smile: BETTER HURRY. V. SEXY GUY @ BAR AND THINK HE'S ABT TO MAKE CONTACT. *GRIN*

And giggling inside when she wrote me back: HANDS OFF, HON! ORDERED HIM ESP FOR ME!

THEN BETTER GET YOUR ASS HERE PRONTO :-)) I texted back.

"Yanks or Red Sox?" I heard someone say.

"Sorry?" I looked up and it was you know who, who definitely had to be Bradley Cooper's dreamy first cousin or something. Or at least that's what the sudden acceleration in my heart rate was telling me.

"Yanks or Red Sox? I see you're keeping tabs on the game."

"Oh. Yanks, of course," I said, a glance to the screen. "Born and bred. South Shore."

"Sox." He shrugged apologetically. "South *Boston*. Okay, Brookline," he said with a smile, "if you force it out of me."

I smiled back. He was pretty cute. "Actually I wasn't even watching. Just waiting for a friend." I figured I might as well cut this off now. No point in leading him on.

"No worries." He smiled politely. *Like he's even interested, right?*

“Who happens to be twenty minutes late!” I blurted, thinking I might have sounded just a bit harsh a moment ago.

“Well, traffic’s nuts out there tonight. Someone must be in town. Is he coming in from anywhere?”

“Yeah.” I laughed. “Park and Sixty-Third!” Then I heard myself add, not sure exactly why, “And it’s a *she*. Old college friend. Girls’ night out.”

He lifted his drink to me, and his dark eyes smiled gently. “Well, here’s to gridlock, then.”

Mr. Cutie and I shifted around and listened to the pianist. The bar was apparently known for its jazz. It was like the famous lounge at the Carlyle, only in midtown, which was why Pam had chosen it—close to both her place and Grand Central, for me to catch my train.

“She’s actually pretty good!” I said, suddenly not minding the thought of Pam stuck in a cab somewhere, at least for a while. Not to mention forgetting my husband, who, for a moment, was a million miles away.

“Donna St. James. She’s one of the best. She used to sing with George Benson and the Marsalis brothers.”

“Oh,” I said. Everyone in the lounge seemed to be clued in to this.

“It’s why I stay here when I’m in town. Some of the top names in the business just drop in unannounced. Last time I was here, Sarah Jewel got up and sang.”

“Sarah Jewel?”

“She used to record with Basie back in the day.” He

pointed to a stylishly dressed black woman and an older white man at one of the round tables. "That's Rosie Miller. She used to record with Miles Davis. Maybe she'll get up later."

"You're in the business?" I asked. I mean, he did kind of look the part.

"No. Play a little though. Just for fun. My dad was actually an arranger back in the seventies and eighties. He . . . anyway, I don't want to bore you with all that," he said, shrugging and stirring his drink.

I took a sip of mine and caught his gaze. "You're not boring me at all."

A couple came in and went to take the two seats that were in between us, so Mr. Cutie picked up his drink and slid deftly around them, and asked, motioning to the seat next to me, "Do you mind?"

Truth was, I didn't. I was actually kind of enjoying it. And I did have a rescue plan, if necessary. I checked the time: 7:25. *Wherever the hell Pam was!*

"So this friend of yours," he asked with a coy half smile, "is she real or imaginary? Because if she's imaginary, not to worry. I have several imaginary friends of my own back in Boston. We could set them up."

"Oh, that would be nice." I laughed. "But I'm afraid she's quite real. At least she was this summer. She and her husband were in Spain with me and my . . ."

I was about to say *my husband*, of course, but something held me back. Though by this time I assumed he

had taken note of the ring on my finger. Still, I couldn't deny this was fun, sitting there with an attractive man who was paying me a little attention, still reeling from my argument with Dave.

Then he said, "I suspect there's probably an imaginary husband back at home as well . . ."

"Right now"—I rolled my eyes and replied in a tone that was just a little digging—"I'm kind of wishing he was imaginary!" Then I shook my head. "That wasn't nice. Tequila talking. We just had a little row last night. Subject for tonight with friend."

"Ah. Sorry to hear. Just a newlywed spat, I'm sure," he said, teasing. This time I was sure he was flirting.

"Yeah, right." I chortled at the flattery. "Going on ten years."

"Wow!" His eyes brightened in a way that I could only call admiring. "Well, I hope it's okay if I say you surely don't look it! I'm Curtis, by the way."

I hesitated, thinking maybe I'd let things advance just a bit too far. Though I had to admit I wasn't exactly minding it. And maybe in a way I was saying to my husband, *So see, David, there are consequences to being a big, fat jerk!*

"Wendy," I said back. We shook hands. "But it sure would be nice to know where the hell Pam is. She was supposed to be here twenty minutes ago." I checked the time on my phone.

"Would it be all right if I order up another of whatever

you're drinking?" He raised his palms defensively. "Purely for the imaginary friend, of course . . ."

"Of course," I said, playing along. "But no. One more of these and I'll be up at that piano myself! And trust me, I wasn't playing with anyone in the eighties . . . Anyway"—I shrugged, deadpan—"she only drinks *imaginary* vodka."

Curtis grinned. "I'm acquainted with the bartender. Let me see what I can do."

My iPhone vibrated. Pam, I was sure, announcing she was pulling up to the hotel now and for me to get a dirty martini going for her. But instead it read:

Wend, I'm so sorry. Just can't make it tonite. What can I say . . . ? I know u need to talk. Tomorrow work?

Tomorrow? Tomorrow didn't work. I was here. Now. And she was right, I did need to talk. And the last place I wanted to be right now was home. *Will call*, I wrote back, a little annoyed. I put down the phone. My eyes inevitably fell on Curtis's. I'd already missed the 7:39.

"Sure, why don't we do just that?" I nodded about that drink.

I'm not sure exactly what made me stay.

Maybe I was still feeling vulnerable from my fight with Dave. Or even a little annoyed at Pam, who had a habit of bagging out when I needed her most. I suppose

you could toss in just a bit of undeniable interest in the present company.

Whatever it was, I did.

Knowing Dave was out for the night on business and that it was all just harmless anyway helped as well. And that there was a train every half hour. I could leave anytime I wanted.

We chatted some more, and Curtis said he was a freelance journalist here in town on a story. And I chuckled and told him that I was kind of in the same game too. That I'd actually worked for the Nassau County police in my twenties before going to law school for a year—having signed up after 9/11, after my brother, a NYPD cop himself, was killed—though I was forced to resign after a twelve-year-old boy was killed in a wrongful-death judgment. And that I'd written this novel about my experience, which was actually why I'd been in the city today at a self-publishing conference. That I'd been having a tough time getting it looked at by anyone, and that it likely wasn't very good anyway.

"Care to read it?" I asked. I tapped the tote bag from my publishing conference. "Been lugging it around all day."

"I would," Curtis said, "but I'm afraid it's not exactly my field."

"Just joking," I said. "So what is your field?"

He shrugged. "I'm a bit more into current events."

I was about to follow up on that when the pianist

finished her set. The crowded room gave her a warm round of applause. She got up and came over to the end of the bar, ordered a Perrier, and to my surprise, when it arrived, lifted it toward Curtis. "All warmed up, sugar."

Curtis stood up. I looked at him wide-eyed. He shot me a slightly apologetic grin. "I did mention that I played . . ."

"You said a bit, *for fun*," I replied.

"Well, you'll be the judge. Look, I know you have a train to catch, and I don't know if you'll be around when I'm done"—he put out his hand—"but it was fun to chat with you, if you have to leave."

"I probably should," I said, glancing at the time. "It was nice to talk to you as well."

"And best of luck," he said, pointing as he backed away, "with that imaginary friend of yours."

"Right! I'll be sure to tell her!" I laughed.

He sat down at the piano, and I swiveled around, figuring I'd stick around a couple of minutes to hear how he played. But from the opening chords that rose magically from his fingers, just warming up, it was clear it was *me* he was playing when he coyly said he only played "a little."

I was dumbstruck, completely wowed. The guy was a ten! He wasn't just a dream to look at, and charming too—he played like he was totally at one with the instrument. He had the ease and polish of someone who clearly had been doing this from an early age. His fingers

danced across the keyboard and the sounds rose as if on a cloud, then drifted back to earth as something beautiful. It had been a long time since goose bumps went down my arms over a guy.

Donna St. James leaned over. "You ever hear him before, honey?"

I shook my head. "No."

"His father arranged a bunch of us back in the day. Sit back. You're in for a treat."

I did.

The first thing he played was this sumptuous, bluesy rendition of Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," and the handful of customers who were paying their checks, preparing to leave, started listening. Even the bartender was listening. I couldn't take my eyes off him. Whatever my definition of *sexy* had been an hour ago, forget it—he was definitely rewriting it for me now.

I didn't leave.

I just sat there, slowly nursing my margarita, growing more and more intoxicated, but not by the drink. By the time he segued into a sultry version of the Beatles' "Hey Jude," it was as if his soul had risen from that keyboard and knotted itself with mine.

Our eyes came together a couple of times, my smile communicating, *Okay, so I'm impressed . . .* The twinkle in his eye simply saying he was happy I was still there.

By the time he finished up with Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind," goose bumps were dancing up and

down my arms with the rise and fall of his fingers along the keys. With a couple of margaritas in me—and fifteen years from the last time anyone looked at me quite that way—the little, cautioning voice that only a few minutes back was going, *Wendy, this is crazy, you don't do this kind of thing*, had gone completely silent.

And when our eyes seemed to touch after his final note and didn't separate, not for a while, I knew, sure as I knew my own name, that I was about to do something I could never have imagined when I walked into the place an hour before. Something I'd never, ever done before.