

THE
LOVE
SCAM

A NOVEL

By

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The Love Scam

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For Lillian, my true love.

First Sighting

The first time I see her, I notice her tight shorts and her even tighter T-shirt. I notice her long, tan legs. Surface impressions. Animal attractions.

But that animal has been caged. I bang on the bars to settle him down. I subdue that temptation and move on.

The young woman is not really so tempting. She's young enough to be my daughter. If I had a daughter. Which I don't. I have no kids.

I have fans.

I don't have a wife . . . anymore.

I have readers. They keep me fed. They take care of me.

Who is taking care of her? That young woman. That girl.

Before I finally turn away from ogling her, I see the boy. Small. Except for his eyes. Lost kitten eyes. Eyes that say, "Are you my mother?"

I loved that story when I was a small boy. About his age.

But the young woman appears unaware of him and of those eyes. She's preoccupied elsewhere. She's looking for a score, for a buyer. She isn't noticing him and his question. Not just now, anyway. But isn't she his mother? It's summer break. He's out of school. She's on the street trying to make a buck. Trying to scam a buck.

What is she selling? Flowers?

A hulking car behind me honks. The light has changed. It's a big car horn. As if the massive SUV was made in 1965 and contains an actual, physical horn. As if being so big is really the result of being old. Grown-up. A grown-up car. Unlike the juvenile sports car I drive.

I do drive. I drive away from that light. I drive away from that girl who lunges toward traffic, waving her small bouquets of flowers and shouting at passing cars.

But I don't drive away from that little boy. I take him with me. He sits in the back seat, looking at me with those question mark eyes. Of course, I just carry him in my imagination. But I don't want to let him go. I noticed his mother because of all that bare skin. But I can't let the boy go because of the longing on his face. The question a kid shouldn't have to ask his mother.

I want to carry that home with me, to my office, to my computer. Where I will write. Where he will motivate me. Inspire me. And he might live on in a book. Maybe. Hopefully.

"Andy." Harrison, my agent, is calling. His voice, over the Bluetooth connection, fills my car. "How's that revision coming?"

He asks this as if the revision is something I'm doing at his bidding. Or maybe as if it's my publisher's requirement, and Harrison is the study hall monitor assigned to supervise me. But it's my revision of which he speaks. My usual revision. Draft number eleven.

"It's fine, Harry. I told you, I'll have it ready Monday."

"I was thinking maybe you sent it directly to Pamela."

Pamela is my editor. She works at the publishing house that likes my books and likes the money my books make for them. Harrison is jealous of Pamela. I like Pamela more than I like Harrison. He figured that out recently. It all started when I discovered that Harrison doesn't even read my stuff. Or, actually, it started when Pamela began loving my writing, and then I found out that Harrison doesn't even read it.

But I'm not going to cut Harrison out. I don't mind supporting him and his obsession with sailboats. I'm glad to pay for his kids' private school education. I don't need those royalties all to myself. And I don't need the headache of having to find a new agent, one that will actually read my novels before he or she sells them.

Pamela works for my publisher. She's a reader. She's even a fan. And she's perfect for me. Pamela is married—don't get me wrong. This is business. Or art. Or whatever. Not romance.

I'm not into romance. I'm a suspense writer. I throw in a dash of romance now and again, just to keep folks happy. Just to keep women readers happy, the marketing people tell me. But my books are about heroism and rescue and risk and resolution. I don't pursue romance—not in my books, not in my life.

That's why I have no romantic intentions toward that skinny young woman in tight pink shorts. That romance stuff is a dangerous mess. Much messier than a violent crime scene. Much more dangerous than a maniacal mass murderer—in one of my stories. I can't say I have any maniacal mass murderers in my personal life to really prove the comparison. Thank God.

"I'll get the final draft to you on Monday, like I said. And you can be the first to read it, even before Pamela." I know that Harrison knows that I'm teasing him.

We hang up, and my car is quiet again, except for the ramping rpm, the shifting of gears, and the coasting hum. Background noise for still thinking about that young woman and her little boy.

A Second Look

Harrison is gushing over the phone. “It’s brilliant. Spell-binding. A real page-turner.”

“Your wife read it?”

“My thirteen-year-old.”

“Well, I guess it’s okay for a thirteen-year-old. Not too much sex or dismemberment.”

“Dismemberment?”

“He didn’t mention that part?” I set the frying pan back on the burner, the surface evenly coated with olive oil.

“Are you messing with me?”

“Whenever possible.” I drop in the sausage and grab a spatula.

I guess this is an improvement—Harrison giving my latest novel to his son to read. Maybe I could contract with his thirteen-year-old to be my agent.

“He really liked it?”

“Yes, he really liked it. He read it in two days.”

“Wow, that’s good. He’s a good kid. I always liked him.”

“Peter. His name is Peter.”

“I would have remembered that eventually.” I turn down the flame under the water in the Dutch oven, postponing the hard boil. “You did send the file over to Rollins, to Pamela?”

“Yes, I sent it.” He seems a little distracted.

Then I get the not-subtle beep that signals another call. “It’s my sister. I should take this.”

“Gotcha. Another masterpiece. Good work. Take a victory lap and get back to writing.”

I hang up on Harrison. I think he was done. And I pick up the call from Martha. “Hello. How are you doing?”

“I’m pretty stressed about the bathroom renovation. But I’m trying to pray my way through it. God’s peace, and all that.”

"Aha. Let me know if that works for you."

"Gee, thanks. Yeah." She takes a change-of-pace breath. "I was calling about Sunday night. Are you bringing someone with you?"

"Bringing someone with me? Like my agent or editor?"

"A date. Don't you think it's time to start dating again? You're not ge—"

"—Getting any younger. Yeah. Thanks. No, I'm not bringing a date. I'm not dating. I'm retired. Because I'm not getting any younger."

"Retired from dating? That's not a thing." Her voice slows and coasts for a second. "You can't just live in your books, Andy. You need to have a real life. Maybe you could go back to church. You might meet a nice woman there."

"Are you trying to be ironic?"

"Oh yeah. Sorry, I wasn't thinking about it that way."

I chop at the bigger chunks of Italian sausage with the sharp edge of the spatula. Then I ease the first of the lasagna noodles into the boiling water next to it. "Uh, I'm cooking right now. Is that all you wanted to ask?"

"Yeah, I think so. That's all I can think of for now."

"Okay. Well, I'll see you on Sunday then."

"You really should think about a woman. You could go to a different church. Somewhere they don't know you."

"I'm a bestselling author. People know me."

"Oh yeah. I guess. Okay. Well, see you Sunday."

"Goodbye, Martha."

"Goodbye, Andy."

By the time the lasagna is assembled and in the oven, I'm craving a particular burgundy wine that goes well with it. So I pray that God will protect my house from burning down, and head for the liquor store. I have plenty of time. Theoretically.

As it turns out, it's the second time I notice that young woman and her son. But notice isn't really a good description. She talks to me. She accosts me on my way out of the store.

"Hey, mister. My kid's hungry. Can you spare us something?"

I guess she figures that people who can afford to blow money on fermented juice squeezed from fruits and grains could spare some cash for actual food. It's a safe bet, assuming I'm not a guy spending his last buck on a bottle of Night Train.

Reflexively I reach for my wallet. That's what I do when someone asks me for food money, even if it's not an attractive young woman. And even if she's not exploiting her little boy, who looks like he's waiting to be photographed for a Les Mis poster. "Sure, I can help out. You live around here? I don't think I've seen you before." I mean before the other day, but I'm just making small talk.

"Uh, yeah. We came up from Florida. Got tired of the scene down there." She takes the twenty I hand her. "Thanks, mister. God bless you."

"Yeah. You're welcome. God bless you too."

I look at the little boy. More eye contact with the young woman feels somehow inappropriate. Maybe because I was ogling her the first time I noticed her. But what I see in that boy's eyes is even worse than the "Are you my mommy?" look from the other day. This is a cry for help. A "get me out of here" sorta look.

After a mute wave, I stagger to my car. Leaving them, but not leaving that boy's plea.

After I start the engine and rumble toward the exit, I notice the woman's eyes following me out of the parking lot. She's ogling me this time. Or, more likely, my car. Watching a potential meal train, probably.

An Actual Conversation

That following Sunday, I decide to bring some wine to my sister's house. She's one of those church people. The wine-not-only-for-communion type. I plan to bring white wine to go with the fish she's serving.

And you-know-who is at the liquor store again. I'm still carrying some annoyance over Martha's pressure to bring a date to this dinner. That prompts me to briefly play through the twisted fun of bringing this woman and her kid with me. I'm still practically giggling about the idea when she speaks to me.

"You look happy enough already. Why do you need booze?"

I suppose it gets pretty boring just saying, "Hey mister, can you spare a buck so I can feed my kid?" But I'm also guessing that she remembers me and is pretty confident I'm not totally creepy. And she probably assumes I will fork over another twenty.

Cruising on autopilot, I answer her literally. "Going to dinner at my sister's house. I should bring some wine with me. Sort of a dinner guest thing, y' know." I can feel myself blushing. She has caught me laughing at the little play I was writing in my head, the play starring her and her little boy. This is embarrassing. And, of course, the embarrassment is also a thing happening entirely inside my head. This is a totally normal experience for me.

"That sounds nice. Are you close with your sister?"

My wallet out already, I'm preparing for a twenty changing hands. I'm not expecting a real conversation. Nonfictional communication. "Uh, sort of. We have our moments." I'm looking for a way out. I check the little boy. Not that he's going to help me out of my muddle.

"I can't stand my sister. Just my half-sister. She's a b-i-t-c-h."

I get the impression that she spells it for emphasis, not to protect the delicate ears of her little boy. "Sorry to hear that." I pull out a twenty.

"I didn't even ask you for money. How do you know I'm not just here to pick up some Pino for a gourmet dinner with my lover?"

"You have a—?" I know I'm missing some steps here. Sort of like when you stumble over something but try to pretend you didn't, and that you just felt like speeding up your pace for no apparent reason.

"I'm just messing with you." Only she doesn't use the word "messing."

Her use of a popular profanity proves my guess about the previous spelling exercise. And it adds to my overall confusion. I pull the twenty back and then thrust it toward her again. I'm doing a sort of currency tango, uncoordinated and humiliating. Humiliating to me more than her, I think. She acts like she's in her element here.

The boy is not so content in the situation as the woman. I can see his eyes darting left and right when I check again for some way that he might bail me out. But I bail myself out by remembering why I'm here.

"Okay. Well, I gotta go, so I can get the wine and then get to my sister's."

"Thanks again." She grabs the twenty and then raises it like a priest about to toss holy water.

Is she blessing me?

"You're welcome again." I try a clever grin, but probably fail at that too.

Fortunately all that awkwardness doesn't get an encore when I leave with a paper bag wrapped around the bottle of wine. The young woman and her boy are gone. Maybe they headed to the grocery store to buy some healthy, natural food. Or maybe they scooted off to McDonald's. Or to her crack dealer. Of course, I don't know which.

She seemed sober. But maybe those sleepy eyes are accustomed to the highs and lows of illegal substances. The tattoos on her arms might conceal track marks from hypodermic needles. But I decided long ago, around the time I first made a million dollars in a year, that I wasn't going to debate this sort of thing, even in my head. I can never tell what anyone is going to do with twenty bucks. But I'm not responsible for everyone's everything. So I just give when asked, and pray my contribution will bring more help than harm.

Throughout that whole evening at Martha's, my thoughts wander again and again toward that young woman and her boy. But mostly, this time, I'm thinking about her. The tan young woman spoke to me like I'm a person. A man. Not just a mark. At least that's how it felt. And this leaves me looking more closely at her, where she lives on in my memory. Her shoulder-length lanky hair may be dyed that golden tone, a hint of darker color at its part. What is she? Twenty to twenty-five? The boy must be five or six, so the mother must be at least twenty. Assuming she really is his mother.

These are the things I'm thinking when Martha corners me in the kitchen, after the grilled salmon and dessert.

"Just because you got in trouble once, doesn't mean you have to give up on relationships entirely."

Ambush.

"Got in trouble once? Are you referring to my divorce or my humiliation at my church?"

"Okay, maybe that counts as twice."

For a moment, I think I've escaped. But Martha doesn't give up that easily.

"Either way, my point stands."

"You should have been a lawyer." I scrape my pie crust into the garbage can.

"I'm a darn good lawyer, thank you."

I settle my plate into the lower rack of the dishwasher. The grin on my face is a mask. A disguise. I'm hoping she won't

recognize the dodge. Or maybe not even recognize me. Her brother. A winner at life and loser at love.

But Martha isn't done making her final argument. "You just have to raise your head and say you don't care what other people think and get back in there."

"I'm a writer. I survive by what other people think."

She shakes her head, which seems to be deeper into this conversation than mine. "At least that pastor didn't say anything publicly about your misdemeanors."

"Is that a technical term? Does what I did count as a misdemeanor, legally? Or are you using it in the more generic, original usage of the term?"

"Don't get all literary on me."

"Do I need to get a lawyer of my own, then?"

"You could, if that pastor defames you. He has a huge church. You could probably retire on what you'd get out of 'em." Martha goes to a smaller church that doesn't think very highly of the popular church to which she refers. But she's probably kidding about the defamation suit.

"I could retire on what I have now, but I like writing. And I like writing things that people read. It's probably best for my career for me to just be known as that single guy who might be gay, or might just be such a writer-nerd that no woman can stand him."

"Is that what you think? You're not gay."

"Just saying, I'm out of the romance game. And I'd appreciate it if you would respect that. I'm too old to give you nieces and nephews anyway."

"My kids don't need more cousins. And you're only fifty-three. That's not old."

"You gonna go back to the law firm when Annie finishes high school?" Her youngest just started looking at colleges. Her eldest is prepping for her freshman year at Valparaiso University.

"Don't change the subject. This isn't about me."

“Why not? Why can’t we have an intervention that’s about you?”

Her husband, David, comes into the kitchen. “You two fight like siblings, you know. It’s so cute.” David knows how to annoy both of us simultaneously.

Martha huffs. She’s done, I can tell. Maybe something I said actually got through to her. I can at least hope.

Now What Are You Selling?

“Now what are you selling?” I’m muttering to myself. It’s the following Saturday, and I can see that young woman. Her son is nowhere in sight, and she’s wearing lavender this time. Still tight, but a different color. I just notice the change of color, of course.

And the fact that she seems to be selling something again.

Maybe the liquor store chased her away. As far as I could tell, she was making bank over there. At least it was good when she found me buying wine. But then, I don’t buy wine that often.

It isn’t flowers this time. It’s something in a decorative box. Perfume? Soap?

I’m just passing by, on the other side of the four-lane arterial. She might have noticed me. My red sports car stands out in the sea of black, gray, and silver minivans and SUVs. I don’t wave.

I see her again two days later. This time I’m on foot and so is she. As in, she’s hoofing it. Not quite running, but doing the fast walk teenagers learn for escaping from trouble without looking like they’re escaping from trouble. She spots me as I stop next to my car. I’m leaving the massage therapist at which I have a monthly subscription. I’m mellow from my treatment.

“Hey. Could you give me a ride?”

The term “getaway car” comes to mind. Will I be implicated in any crimes she might have just committed, if I innocently agree to give her a ride now? Maybe I should call Martha and get a legal opinion.

“Uh, sure. Where are you headed?” This is the massage talking. Massages free my muscles of tension and my brain of common sense.

“Oh, just up this street a mile or so.” She’s carrying a glossy shopping bag that says “Myrtle’s Girdle” on it, the name of a lingerie store in a big strip mall.

“Okay.” I hit the remote to unlock the doors.

As we simultaneously climb into the car, I see her purple flip-flops and pale lavender toenail polish first, and then the butterfly tattoo on her ankle. I stop myself from completing the visual journey upward.

I need to follow another mental pathway, anyhow. A question: Am I behaving responsibly? I'm letting her get into my car, this young woman that I don't trust. I consider the answer to this question as we drive out of the parking lot.

Here I can rest on a corollary to that dictum which frees me from worrying what she will do with twenty dollars she begs from me. I have no ill intent, no reason to feel guilty for what I'm doing. If giving her a ride is dangerous, then that would be on her, and on God. If I'm kind to the poor, that leaves God responsible for sorting out the aftermath. Such is my theology. It doesn't go much deeper. Just a basic trust. And a conviction that I'm not the one in charge. If I do something dangerous out of kindness, then the results are God's deal. Maybe this is just a working theory. But it has worked for me so far.

"Wanna see what I got?" She's holding that pink and white glossy shopping bag in her lap. It's stiff paper, standing up on its own. She's inviting me into more danger.

"Well, given where you got it, I'd say no. I don't want to see it. It might be too personal."

"What? Are you a Baptist or something?"

"Baptist?"

"Aren't they the holier-than-thou people who clench their sphincters all the time?"

She doesn't say "sphincters." And I'm probably clenching mine right now. The relaxation of the massage is fading even faster than usual.

"I'm familiar with the type. And I hope I'm not one of them."

"But I wanna tell someone how I got this, at least."

"Why? You're proud of yourself?"

"I am kinda proud of myself. It was a damn good scam."

"You scammed Myrtle out of her girdle?"

She laughs. It's the most innocent thing I have seen her do thus far in our awkward acquaintance.

"You're funny."

"When I was a kid, that comment would be followed by the word 'looking.'" I say it with the same gotcha emphasis as the smart-mouthed kids of my youth.

"Yeah. Maybe a bit funny looking. How old are you?"

"I don't think you're supposed to ask that in polite company. How far are you going?"

"Just far enough so that snob at Myrtle's can't find me."

I'm not sure how far that is. I try to think like one of the characters in my novels, but they're usually fleeing Russian mobsters or agents of some foreign government. Or both. Fleeing the clerk at a lingerie store in a strip mall hasn't yet entered one of my stories.

I pull into the parking lot of a Dunkin' Donuts/Baskin Robins. "Is this far enough?"

"Yeah. I don't think she would come to a place like this—not high class enough." She turns toward me like we're on our first date and she's hoping to get to know me a bit better. "You wanna hear my story or not?"

Will it make me an accomplice, even more than driving the getaway car? I'm too intimidated by her to work that out. "Sure, go ahead."

"So, I went in there and asked if they hired models for any shows or stuff like that. You know, underwear models. I got the bod for it, of course." She puffs out her chest and I try to ignore the display this presents. She sputters a laughing expletive and continues. "She didn't know what to say, so I just kept going. 'You got a bag from your store? Let me show you my runway style.'" My passenger laughs until she snorts. "I could tell I had her by surprise. She gives me this bag. Just reaches under the counter and hands it to me. Maybe she was thinking she could bribe me with the bag, and I would go away and leave her alone."

She wipes spit from her chin, where it landed during her last laugh. "But anyway, she gave it to me. And then two women came in. Maybe like a mother and daughter combo."

I'm nodding. Part of me wants to collect all this on tape and play it back to myself later, for character development. By which I don't mean to develop my character, but to create a character based on this girl. Or is she a woman?

She continues. "I started to parade down the aisle with this bag like I was in some fashion show, like I seen on TV. And she's just staring at me like she just drank sour milk and is waiting for me to leave so she can spit it out."

I know now that I'm going to quote her in a book sometime soon. I'll create a small-time female criminal. Maybe later today.

"Then the other two women caught the clerk's attention. 'Excuse me, blah, blah, blah.' And I was suddenly invisible. She turned away and got all smiles and friendly. Which pissed me off, of course. So, on my next turn, I grabbed this cute little bra from a rack and slipped it into my new shopping bag." She turns her attention to the bag still open in her lap. "I wonder if it even fits me."

"So, you stole it because you were mad at her?"

She lifts the scanty bit of lace and underwire and checks the price tag. "Yeah. I was about ninety-nine dollars' worth of pissed off at her." She looks at me and catches me staring at the purloined brassiere. "You wanna buy it for your girlfriend?" She checks my hands, leaning in for a look at the one propping my head off the car window. "No wife?"

I shake my head. It's a loaded gesture. I'm negating. I'm saying "no" to all kinds of things. Things offered, and things only imagined. "No. I'm not buying underwear for anyone but myself these days, and I'm pretty sure that won't fit me." Humor is my only defense at this point.

She laughs again. Still a child-like laugh. Then she sobers slightly. "What's your name, anyway?"

Here is my first temptation to lie. What if I tell her my name and she discovers that I'm well-known, a target for robbery or

blackmail? But my dictum about charity and trust still floats in the somewhat sweaty air of my car. It's time to turn on the air conditioning. "I'm Andy. And you?"

"I'm Tricia. Short for Patricia. And usually short of cash. Which is why I really grabbed Myrtle's girdle."

Here is the part that I wish I can blame on that massage, which has certainly worn off by now. Or maybe I can blame it on divine inspiration. Maybe God makes me do it. Or is it the devil? "What kind of work can you do, Tricia? I might be able to help you find something more permanent. And less dangerous."

She might not be taking me seriously. "You think shoplifting bras is dangerous?"

"Seems a possibility. Did they make you stop asking for money outside the liquor store?"

She offers a colorful description of the store manager, one that wouldn't make it into one of my Christian suspense novels. Strictly general market profanity. "He said they'd call the cops on me if I ever panhandled on their property again. 'Not good for business,' he said." She jostles her head as if it's not attached to her neck, only balanced atop it. "Was pretty good for my business. And for my boy."

"How old is he?"

"Six. You wanna adopt him?"

"Not this week. Where is he now?"

"I found this rec center that takes kids off homeless people and stuff. I mean they keep 'em there while we go looking for work or a drug score or whatever."

"You do drugs?"

"You want me to pee in a cup?"

"Not really."

"Were you serious about helping me find work?"

"Yeah, but what are you willing to do? Cleaning, maybe?"

"Cleaning? Like house cleaning?"

"I own a bunch of apartments, and the common areas need to be cleaned. The regular crew is short these days. Maybe you could work with them, if that's work you don't mind doing."

"Why don't you give me your card, and I'll think about it."

I hit pause for a few seconds, wishing I had cards with the apartment management number. I don't want to give her the card I use for literary contacts. I reach for the glove compartment and brush one of her knees.

"Hey. Watch it."

"Sorry. Looking for a pen and something to write on. You're serious, right? You will call if you want some work? Maybe I can find something else. Not just cleaning."

"What's wrong with cleaning?"

"Nothing. It's a vital service." I grab an unruly handful of stuff out of the glove compartment, trying to hastily end my stretch across her. I'm sweating profusely by now, and there's that smell that comes after the deodorant burns off. Though I can factor in the massage oil too.

I've managed to grab a couple of other business cards. I cross out the name on the front of one card and flip it over. "Just in case you don't remember that my name isn't Speedy Car Wash."

She doesn't laugh this time. Something has changed. Of course it has. This is serious. A serious mistake, perhaps. A serious stretch of what little trust we have between us. It isn't funny.

I give her the number of my building management office and determine to check in with them for messages. I never do that normally. I will have to start. That is, I will start if I'm convinced she might actually call. "Will you call me?"

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing, except some honest work. I'll give you honest pay and ask nothing else from you."

"Cause I've had jobs before. I've had bosses before. And they always want more than just honest work."

"Always?" It's a genuine question. Has she really been sexually exploited in every job she's held? How many jobs is that? Could it have anything to do with the way she dresses? Or her free use of

sexual language and innuendo? But here is another one of those cases which I will defer to the judges. Or to that one ultimate judge.

She's staring at me. Her lavender blue eyes seem to be asking as many unspoken questions as my own dull brown ones. "I might call you. I gotta take care of Timmy."

"Yeah. Well, I'd like to help. And I promise to keep it straight. I wouldn't do what those other bosses did to you. Never." I'm way out beyond the buoys with this. But her vulnerable stare hasn't stopped, only flickered a couple times.

When That Nasty Woman Calls

After Tricia gets out of my car with another twenty dollars, I'm not sure I'll ever see her again. And the week and a half of silence that follows contributes to my doubt.

Then I get a call from Val, at the apartment management office.

"Mr. Andy, you got a phone call from a nasty woman."

"A nasty woman?" There are a few women in my life who might be abrupt or annoying or even a little mean, but usually only when dealing with me directly. I can't instantly think of how Val would count any of them as nasty. And why would any of them call Val?

Then I remember Tricia.

Val elaborates. "Yes. She called me a son of a female dog and told me to . . ."

At first I'm not sure if Val is seriously quoting her or is just trying not to say the nasty words pronounced by this nasty woman. "Were you rude to her?" This is not a long-shot question.

"Rude? What you mean rude? I just ask her what she want with you. No one calls here for you. I thought she might be ex-girlfriend or ex-wife looking for you. I was defending you from this nasty stalker woman."

"Did she leave a name and number?"

"She told me her number, but I didn't write it down. She's nasty."

"Do you remember the number, by any chance?"

"It had a lot of threes in it." He pauses and mutters strings of numbers for a while. "I think it was 343-3303."

"Local area code?"

"Yes, I think so. Sounded like a pay phone in a house of ill repute."

"What? How could you tell that?"

“Just my impression about the nasty woman, I think.”

“How certain are you of the number?”

“It had a lot of threes in it.”

The 343 part is common on landlines around here. So that only leaves the final four in doubt. I figure I can try moving the zero around a bit. Or Karla can do it. I hang up with Val after an insincere thank you for his service. He’s good with plumbing and with stonewalling overly-sensitive tenants—like Mrs. Phelps, when she thinks the flush of her toilet lasts a second or two longer than normal.

Karla is my personal assistant. I always wanted one of those. I really just wanted to be in a position to pay one and to say that I have one. Since she started working for me, Karla has born two children into the world and has slid back to part-time and flexible hours. I rarely had enough personal assisting needs to keep her busy full time.

“What do I say if I reach this Tricia person?”

“You can give her my second cell phone number.” That number is the one I use for business with strangers. My phone supports two numbers. It’s a rich guy thing, I know. I don’t have a lot of those indulgences, beyond the red sports car and the personal assistant. But then, my personal assistant is probably wearing flannel pajamas with nursing slits in the shirt. Caleb is just three months old now. Still imbibing. Karla isn’t shy about letting me know that kind of stuff. She reminds me just a little of Tricia. But she’s always short of nasty.

The next day Karla reports success. “I reached a recreation center that said there might have been a woman named Tricia using the phone there yesterday, but she wasn’t there anymore.” She tells me which combination of numbers hit the jackpot.

“Any way to leave a message for her?”

“It didn’t sound like it. It was basically a public phone—a service to homeless people, but not really a phone service per se.”

“Okay, thanks. At least we’ve confirmed the number. I can try calling there once in a while.” After hanging up with Karla, as

Caleb sends up a howling request for attention of some sort, I call Val to try to establish when he was assaulted by Tricia over the phone. I will attempt to reach her the next day at the same time.

The next day is Friday. I call at eight in the morning, the approximate time that Val thought Tricia had called him to question his mammalian origins and suggest physical contortions of which he's certainly incapable. Val is pretty heavy and not very flexible.

"Yeah, she was here. I doubt she got far—she was limping pretty bad—but I can't see her right now."

I get the rec center address from the woman on the phone and drive there.

As I expect, it isn't far from my massage therapist. Tricia has always been traveling on foot when I see her. Now she's apparently hobbled somehow, so maybe I can search her out. Again, this is a familiar task in my fiction—a search for a missing person. But it probably won't involve secret messages or having to beat information out of anyone. Or so I hope. I'm up for a little drive around, and maybe even a brief stakeout. But the only place to stake out is the rec center. She has no home that I know of.

I find her boy, Timmy, on the playground. He's getting pushed around by some bigger kids until an adult intervenes. He seems content to accompany that caregiver during the rest of the recess. He's still looking for a mommy. And maybe a daddy too.

After the boy's recess ends, I drive out of that residential neighborhood and up the busiest street near the rec center. It takes me less than five minutes to find Tricia. I spot her arguing with a tall, skinny man with dark brown skin and a skeptical scowl on his young face. She's probably being nasty to that guy. I decide to wait for her to finish before rolling up any closer.

"Tricia?"

She's limping away from what looked like an unfulfilled quest with the skinny guy. Stopping her hobble in the lot of an abandoned gas station, her face changes when she sees me. It isn't joy. Just recognition. "Can you take me to the emergency room?"

This is an easy one. "What time does Timmy get out of day care?"

“I can leave him there till five.”

It isn’t even 10:00 a.m. Even the slowest emergency room experience won’t last that long. “Come on. I know of a better place than the hospital emergency room.”

She does a hop-skip-limp to the car and climbs in as before. This time her foot that leads the way is bruised and swollen.

“What did you do to it?”

“Tripped like an idiot. Wasn’t looking where I was going. Tripped over one of those concrete things in a parking lot up there.” She gestures up the road toward the Dunkin’ Donuts where I last saw her.

“I’ll take you to the urgent care. They don’t charge as much for dropping in as the emergency room does.”

“That’s good, ‘cause I got nothing to pay with.”

“No problem.” That’s enough said for now. I’m not going to make a speech. And I expect she will have no trouble accepting my help. I don’t know how much it will cost, but I can probably negotiate something in cash. I can count it as research. I have never negotiated a cash payment for medical services. I’m a writer. I crave new experiences to write about. Well, maybe “crave” is a bit strong.

Bring Me Your Lane

I have only taken one other person to an urgent care facility in all my fifty-plus years. My former wife once burned herself with boiling water. The urgent care was closer than the hospital emergency room, and we were pretty sure her injury wasn't serious, just very painful. We dashed through the doors, me pushing them out of the way, her holding her hands up, wrapped in cold, wet towels. At least they had been cold when we left home.

There is no dashing with Tricia. She limps and skips. I wonder if I can carry her. She's slim. I'm pretty big, though no weightlifter. The only thing stopping me is the awkwardness. My relationship with Tricia is supplied in bulk with awkwardness.

"You could carry me, you know." She's apparently leaving that bulk pack of discomfort for me to hold.

"Okay. Sure."

She reaches around my neck with her right arm, and I bend down and lift her just outside the sliding doors to the clinic. Good thing they have automatic sliding doors these days. My hands are full. And I'm totally preoccupied with making sure that those hands are clearly gripping safe parts of this scantily clad young woman. Awkwardness is all in my head, I know. But my head is chock full of it.

I set Tricia down in front of the registration desk, knowing my full flush from exerting myself will be boosted by the blush of my manifest embarrassment. I resign to being the big, red-faced white guy bringing a tattooed and tanned young woman into the urgent care. There must be story material in this. But there isn't much drama in answering registration questions regarding a twisted ankle. The drama that might have raised the background music to trumpets and trombones is stifled by my guarantee of cash payment.

The receptionist softens even that. “Well, we can look you up by social security number.” The pert girl with a tight Afro is talking directly to Tricia. “We can usually find some funding sources to mitigate the full cost of services.”

Tricia gives her full name and social without hesitation. Once again, she seems to be as comfortably inside her zone as I am uncomfortable outside of mine. In her zone, her comfort cocoon, I see her strength. That ankle is purple, black, and blue, with a hint of rising greens. She doesn’t complain. She hardly winces. This is a girl who has suffered pain before. And survived.

I don’t know if it’s just the writer in me, curious about an interesting character, or something more noble, but this girl fascinates me. I want to know more. And I want to help.

“Okay, just wait over there for a bit, and someone will call you for X-rays. That’ll be the next thing.” Joslyn, the proficient receptionist, dismisses us from the first phase.

It isn’t much of an ordeal. But that impression might be shaded by my preoccupation with this character, this young woman so unlike anyone I know. When she hobbles through the door held open by a nurse, they slip a wheelchair up next to her. I stay in the reception area, of course. I’m not her husband or her father.

Anyway, I want to sit there and think about the fact that I don’t know anyone like Tricia. And this is not just because I’m white and wealthy. I haven’t always been wealthy. I haven’t always been insulated from economic struggles. But I was never as desperate as her. Homeless. Scamming my way from meal to meal.

Is my isolation okay? Shouldn’t I have been at least somewhat interested in people who live this way? Who merely survive? Maybe. Maybe I should take more than an accidental interest in Tricia, and in her boy, Timmy.

It takes over two hours to get the X-rays, the doctor’s exam, and the diagnosis from the radiologist. All of that is then followed by the walking boot and the prescription for pain meds. This latter piece Tricia hands to me as soon as her wheelchair rolls back into

the waiting area, motorized by an orderly. She props a pair of aluminum crutches against one shoulder.

If the attending staff had passed the prescription directly to me, I would have understood their skepticism about how Tricia might use pain meds. That she's the one handing it to me means that she expects me to pay. Will she use them responsibly? Will she sell them instead?

"You don't mind giving me a ride back?" She's more subdued than I have seen her yet. Humble maybe even.

"Of course not. Glad to help." I decide not to offer to stop at the pharmacy. I have seen how high her pain threshold is. She can probably survive without the meds. I don't want her to get in trouble abusing or selling.

"Can you take me to the drugstore, then? I think I get a discount on the pills."

I read the script. It's just for an over-the-counter anti-inflammatory. "You don't need a prescription for this."

"Okay, but I don't got any of it, and I needed the doc to write it down to be sure I got the right thing."

Okay. No sellable opioids. "Maybe the sprain isn't so bad, since they didn't give you prescription drugs." The orderly is rolling her out the door after we confirm my billing information at the desk on the way out.

Tricia isn't thinking about the meds. "What if I memorized the number you just gave her?"

"I gave you my number already."

"That was a different one."

Explaining the intricacies of my phone, my numbers, my building manager, and my assistant, is more than I want to get into. Especially in front of the silent guy pushing the wheelchair. "Yeah, that's a different number. I gave the receptionist my personal number without thinking about it. I gotta get that straight."

"So, you have a number that you give strangers and girls trying to scam you?"

We are at my car. I open the passenger door for her. I hover with my hands outstretched for another dorky moment, while she

stands and climbs into the car on her own. She passes me her crutches. Apparently I don't need to carry her anymore. Neither does the orderly. He says goodbye and takes the empty wheelchair back toward the sliding glass doors.

"Were you trying to scam me?"

"I was trying to sell you stolen lingerie."

"Okay. You think I minded that?"

"You're not married."

Buckled into the driver's seat, I hesitate to pull out of my parking space, waiting for a guy pushing a walker. A hunched woman paces him like an Olympic sprinter's coach. "You can do it. You can do it, Morty." That is what I imagine she's saying.

What Tricia is saying, what she's asking, is also predictable, of course. But it's a sharp line-drive hit right at me when I'm not ready. "Uh, no. Not married anymore."

"What happened?" She slouches more deeply into the body-hugging seat. She seems to enjoy that hug. And she seems to be settling in for a long story.

"Well, we married young. And I guess we were well-matched for the struggles of a young couple trying to get established in the world. But once I achieved some success, she started looking for an exit."

"What kinda struggles did you ever have?" She's looking around my sixty-thousand-dollar sports car for evidence lying there on the black leather.

"I worked as a high school English teacher for almost a dozen years. Not the best pay or the best organization to work for. And, meanwhile, she kept getting bored with one career and then another. So money was always tight."

"Where is she now?"

"Uh, Florida. Your territory, right?"

"Yeah. But I had to get outta there."

"Had to?"

"Well, I'm not like a fugitive or anything. I just had this big fight with my boyfriend and was afraid he might hurt me or even hurt Timmy. I'm just giving him time to cool off."

"This is a long way to go for a timeout."

"Yeah, but it's nice and warm this time of year up here, in the midlands. Or whatever it's called."

"Midwest, I think."

"Whatever. So how long you been divorced?"

I take a deep draft of some of the sweltering afternoon air, thinking about rolling up the windows and turning on the AC. "Uh . . . well . . . It's been about ten years, I guess."

"You have kids?"

"No. That was another reason we broke up. She wanted kids. I was hoping to wait for more financial security first. And high school teaching sort of inoculated me against kids."

"They don't start out as high school kids."

"I know. But it's like those people who buy a puppy because it's so cute and then realize they don't want a full-grown dog that barks at the neighbors and the UPS guy."

"I knew you weren't married."

"Yeah? How?"

"No wife would let you dress like that."

I look down at my sock-less loafers, my slightly torn cargo shorts, and my frayed polo shirt. I look like a guy who used to be married. A long time ago. "I was wearing newer clothes the time you saw me on the way to my sister's house."

"Sure. And you were going to dinner at your sister's all by yourself. Another sure sign that you're not getting any."

"Not getting any?" I'm pretending not to know what she's talking about.

"I can tell."

I decide not to pursue an explanation. The result is a silence that accompanies us into the drugstore parking lot. When I turn off the ignition, I adjust my shoulders toward her. Talking while driving gives me room—room to not make eye contact. Squaring

up and meeting her eyes saps some of my superpowers. Including speech.

She still has the power. “What? You think I’m going in there to buy the stuff on my own? I should stay off this thing. It hurts like hell.”

“Oh. I know. I mean . . . yes. No. No, I will go in and . . . I’ll get the pills . . . the meds for you.” My language app seems to have been corrupted.

In my defense, I have been tricking myself into talking to her like she’s a character in one of my books. Unlike a character I’m writing, I can hear her voice in my physical ears, of course. But a compelling character speaks to me about as clearly as Tricia does, especially considering her limited vocabulary.

But then I look into her eyes. There I find that kid again. Not so different from Timmy. Maybe she isn’t asking if I’m her mother, or even if I’ll take care of her, but her eyes seem defaulted to a question, a request, a neediness. I’m measuring all that while spitting out little bits of speech to cover my exit from the car.

After I close the car door and take a step away, I turn back and bend down. “You need anything else, besides the pain meds? Maybe an ice pack that you can refreeze?”

She swears at me, in a grateful way. “Yes. That would be great. I forgot all about that. I gotta ice this thing like every hour or something.”

Or something? I don’t say that aloud. “Anything else?”

“I don’t got anything to feed Timmy tonight. They might have something in there.”

“What does he like?”

“Meat and potatoes. That’s always good for Timmy. Or at least good to get him to eat.”

“Okay. Be right back.”

I have the keys in my pocket. She isn’t going to steal my car. Unless she knows how to hot-wire an Audi.

Thoughts like that certainly don’t reduce my bumbling through the pharmacy and grocery aisles. Before I met Tricia, I

didn't feel like I was bumbling. She doesn't bumble. Even when she limps, she does it with a hop. Maybe I could be like her when I grow up. But, of course, I don't want to be like her—waiting in a car while a stranger buys me frozen dinners and ibuprofen. Oh, don't forget the ice packs.

This is when it occurs to me that I have no idea where she's living. Does she have a microwave? Does she have a freezer?

I return to the car with much more stuff than I had planned to buy. I covered my uncertainty by adding alternatives. Maybe she has no microwave but can boil water. Maybe she doesn't have a freezer but can use those cold packs that you break and squish up to make chemically cold. I spend over \$300 for pain meds, cold packs, and frozen dinners . . . plus.

"Wow, you really did it up. This stuff is all for me?"

"I forgot to ask if you have a freezer or a microwave."

"So you just bought everything in the store?"

"Kind of." I'm seated behind the steering wheel.

When she stops her rummaging through the pile of plastic bags on her lap and between her feet on the floor, she studies me for a moment. "What are you hopin' to get out of all this?"

That is the question.

I would really like to hear the answer to that myself. I would love to switch places, to sit in the passenger seat with boxes of frozen food numbing my lap and look at this husky guy next to me. Yeah. What about it? What do you get out of all this? What do you get out of all this?

My mental stumbling doesn't prevent an honest answer. "I wasn't really thinking of what I get. I guess I don't have an answer for that. I don't really expect you to do or say anything. I'm just playing this by ear."

"But, if some sexy stuff comes from all this giving, you'd be okay with that, right?"

I have my hand on the ignition key. That hand is starting to cramp. I've been holding my elbow out and twisting my wrist during this whole question-and-answer hiatus.

"Did you say 'sexy stuff?'"

Yes, it's a delay tactic, I admit. But I'm truly unfamiliar with the phrase.

"You know. Doing it. Afternoon delight. Some sugar."

"I have to watch how much sugar I eat. Borderline diabetic." I guess the zombie part of my brain has an ironic sense of humor.

She doesn't laugh. She just flexes these little muscles above her eyebrows that show tremendous development and definition. Apparently people have been saying inexplicable things, and doing the same, around her for years. "What the . . . ?" She ends with her favorite expletive.

I inhale a chest-expanding breath and let go of the key. "Look Tricia, I'm being totally honest. I just saw someone in need, and it seemed completely inexcusable for me to refuse to help. I haven't thought much about anything beyond that. Except maybe asking myself the same question you just asked—what do I expect to come from this?" I shrug. "I haven't found a clear answer to that yet."

"You'll get back to me, then?" She ends her torso twist toward me and flops both arms onto her pile of loot. She looks out the windshield, clearly ready to be chauffeured back to the rec center.

She answers my earlier question. "Where I live is a motel. The shelter for women and children was full. They gave me vouchers for a motel just up the strip." She nods to the east. "We have a mini fridge with one of those freezer compartments. And a small microwave. This stuff will be good."

"They didn't give you food vouchers too?" I'm not interrogating, just tossing the first question that comes to mind.

"I traded those for something."

I don't ask for what. If I'm being real about my lack of expectations, then that includes no expectations of complete explanations. It's the way I wish my sister would treat me. Do unto others

. . .

Still Not Sure What You Get Out of This

I leave her and her goods at the rec center. They have a fridge where she can keep her stuff out of the summer heat until Timmy is done for the day. She's excavating in the rustling folds of plastic bags when I see her last. She glances at me and waves distractedly. I think the pain is getting to her now.

"So, Andy, what are you doing with this young woman?"

I'm seated at my desk. That sentence sneaks into the notes for my next novel. Maybe I can answer that question by writing about it. For me, fiction comes out of a part of my brain that hides under a polite façade. That's how I can write about abduction, drug dealing, and murder. These are not part of my polite life. Not part of my real life. But they seem to be lurking inside the darker folds of my brain. Maybe those dark twists and turns are where I'll find the answer to what this whole thing with Tricia is about.

I know what it's about for her, of course. She seems accustomed to getting help from individuals and institutions. Maybe she was raised that way, raised by a welfare mother. This is me relying on clichés to explain something I can only pretend to understand. I'm pretty sure why she's in this relationship—if it even is a relationship, in the broadest sense. Financial assistance. Even if she brings up romance and sex, I'm confident that she's not looking for that from me. Old me. Not little.

My writing has stalled entirely. Now I'm pondering signing up again at the fitness center around the corner. I've put on a few pounds. Well, a few dozen. Somewhere along the way I let my membership lapse. I justified it by using the weight machine I bought off the shopping channel. It works. If I use it.

Maybe a walk. I should go for a walk.

I shut down my computer, pick up my empty coffee cup, and barefoot it over the shiny hardwood floor. The cleaning crew that

comes once a week does a great job on these floors. Polished like the deck of a yacht.

Instead of getting into proper workout clothes, I slip on my older running shoes and wander out the front door. I use my phone to set the electronic front door lock and squint against the summer sun. I didn't bother to check the weather.

Dang. Hot.

I pause under the shade of vines that connect a catalpa tree to my garden wall. Maybe this is a bad time for a walk. Or maybe I can just take it slow. Think of it as a free sauna. I can afford a real sauna these days. Towels provided. I need a towel already.

What the heck. I set out on the walk that I had planned, as far as I had bothered to plan anything. The point is, I'm escaping. Escaping the incrimination of my jumbled notes for the next novel. Escaping the unanswered questions about Tricia.

A crow mocks me with cacophonous cawing. Maybe he's glad to see someone who is suffering in the heat more than him. At least I'm not dressed in all black like him. A little sweating will do me good. That's what I used to pay the fitness center for.

The heat reminds me of my honeymoon in Mexico. We went to Aruba for the warm weather, financed by her parents. But we had no idea the resort would be suffering some meteorological phenomenon involving the Gulf of Mexico heating up and trapping hot, dry air from inland. That was the explanation I got from the concierge at the hotel—at least, what I could understand from his limited English and my lame Spanish.

Connie, my bride, stayed in the hotel room until dark for three days in a row. She refused to go outside and "bake like a tamale." Pointing out that tamales are not baked didn't change her mind.

I haven't thought about Connie for a long time. Tricia has brought this on. She has scraped a layer of rust off my memories of my marriage. Yeah, blame it on Tricia.

Waiting for a Lexus to pull out through an electronic gate, I catch a drip of sweat right at the tip of my nose and flick it onto the black asphalt. I don't hear the expected hiss from it hitting the

pavement. I nod to the driver of the Lexus and project the image of a man who always walks in ninety-degree heat, wearing cargo shorts and a polo shirt. My dull maroon shirt is two-tone now, large circles darkening the predictable places. And a few other places that I don't want to discuss. I really should lose some weight.

Why? So you can impress the cute young homeless girl?

Was that an accusation? Steamed out of me by the intense heat? She does make me feel fat. Tricia does.

Martha doesn't make me feel fat. Harrison doesn't. They're both amply proportioned. Husky like me. Borderline obese maybe.

I wonder if I can sign up at the fitness center online. I pull out my phone to check and discover a missed message. A voice mail.

"Hey, Andy. I just wanted to thank you. I don't think I said thanks enough, for all the ways you helped me today. And yeah, I did memorize your personal number. So there."

Tricia.

A slight queasiness rises and disappears. It's not like finding her sitting in my living room when I get home. She doesn't know where I live. I only found her in my voice mail. She doesn't even have a phone of her own—how much trouble can she cause? I guess I knew she was serious about memorizing that personal number. It didn't worry me enough at the time to make me pause.

It's even kind of funny, the way she ended her gratitude with that belligerent note: "So there."

Ha.

A Little Help Here?

My phone rings as soon as I step into the air-conditioned refuge of my foyer.

“Andy? Can you come get me and Timmy from the rec center? Turns out we can’t get a ride on one of their buses. And you know . . . my ankle.”

She’s playing the ankle card. Combined with the Timmy card, it’s an unbeatable hand. Not to mention all those groceries. Three of a kind? A full house, maybe.

“I’ll be right over.” I only take time to wipe off a layer of sweat and change shirts. I can crank the air conditioning on the drive.

Timmy stands next to his mother, holding the crutches which are taller than him. He’s looking at me through the big opening above the hand grip. He appears to be studying me. His eyes follow me out of the driver’s seat and around to the passenger side.

“Hey, Timmy. I’m Andy.” I hold out my hand for a shake, once I open the door for Tricia.

“I know.” He studies that hand suspiciously.

I get the idea that the men in his mother’s life have not always been safe, not always a welcomed addition. I hope to be different from them in just about every way.

I withdraw the offered handshake and move further out of Tricia’s way. She’s hauling all those bags from the drugstore. She squeezes some of them into the back and drags the crutches into the front with her. And that leaves Timmy’s access to the back seat cut off.

“Come on around to my side, so you can slip into the back.”

He hesitates, appears to calculate an alternate route, and then surrenders to the pull of my wake around the back of the car. He keeps his head down, a thatch of hair sheltering his eyes as I stand

holding the front seat forward. His curiosity about the car nudges aside his suspicions about the driver, it seems.

"An Audi?" He pronounces it "Oddie."

"Yeah. A couple years old."

"Okay." He climbs into the back seat, which is designed for someone his size and no bigger.

I pause to wonder about a child seat but expect he's too old for that. The driver's seat clicks back into place. I find Tricia checking on him when I climb in.

"You okay back there, buster?" She hands a pharmacy bag to him and he crackles it into the pile next to him on the seat.

Maybe he nods an answer. I don't hear anything, but Tricia seems satisfied.

"How fast does it go?" Timmy is still curious.

"I think 160 miles per hour, but I've never tested that." I start the car and pull out of the rec center at closer to sixteen miles per.

"I guess there's nowhere around here you could go that fast."

"Not on the street."

"Are you rich?"

At this point, most mothers would warn their kid not to ask impolite questions. Tricia is quietly re-situating her crutches so they rest against the car door. She says nothing.

"Well, rich is one of those words that means something different to different people. I remember getting my first five-dollar bill when I was a kid. I felt pretty rich back then." Pretty skillful dodge, in my opinion.

"It's a rich car, though."

"Costs more than five dollars." Tricia is apparently listening. Her insertion is tame and factual, not argumentative.

"Yeah, costs more than five dollars." I'm distracted by realizing that I don't know where we're going.

"More than five thousand dollars?"

"Yep. More than that." I can just see the crown of his head in the rearview. He appears to be scanning the car's interior. "I guess that's a lot to pay for such a small back seat." I'm self-deprecating. Or auto-deprecating.

"It fits me."

"Yes, it does." I turn to Tricia. "Where's your motel?"

She nods straight ahead. "Up this way."

I had absorbed that direction from our previous conversations, but I'm having a hard time remembering a motel along the road on which we are driving. Rush-hour traffic is giving me time to think about it. I increase the air conditioning a bit more. I can't smell myself, and I hope my passengers can't either.

"So, what do you do for a job?" This is Tricia pursuing the same information Timmy was seeking, in a more adult fashion.

"I'm a writer."

"Like, books and shit?"

"Books." I'm not going to comment on the second part of her description. "Novels. Crime novels."

"Really? You know about that kinda stuff?"

"I know enough to imagine stories. And I do some research."

Timmy shuffles back into the conversation. "You live with your mom?"

I nearly rear-end the sedan in front of me, trying to figure out where he got that question. A guy who writes books for a living but has a rich car. His mom must be taking care of him. Is this Timmy's life layered on top of mine? "Uh, my mom died two years ago." I could have just said that I don't live with my mom. Why did I have to mention that she died?

Tricia is nodding. "Was she real old?"

"In her eighties."

"That's pretty old." Timmy's voice at least borders on sympathetic. Maybe just sympathy for the agedness of a woman he never met.

I haven't thought about my mom for a while, maybe weeks. Something about that fact embarrasses me. Why? I'm not going to look at that while stuck in traffic with Tricia and Timmy.

"So, your books must be popular, right? Nice car. Don't live with your mom." That last note is the closest thing to a joke I think I've heard from Tricia.

I'm nodding and chuckling under my breath when she points to the right. "Here it is. Our place. For now, anyway."

There is a motel back there, behind the car wash and the pancake house. I've driven past it a few dozen times and never noticed. I signal as I turn. She didn't give me much warning. But I was driving pretty slowly because of the traffic.

"Where do you live?" Timmy is still investigating me. I think he's still doing the good cop part.

"Not too far from here. In a house. By myself." That last note is meant as a reference to not living with my mom. But it sounds sadder than I intended.

"A big house?"

"Big enough for me. And my mom did live there for the last year of her life." Maybe Timmy should be a therapist, not a cop. I'm spilling my guts here.

I'm guessing Tricia is taking all this in, based on what I've seen so far. She makes no comment, just gestures toward a parking space in front of an orange motel room door.

I slip into that spot and leave the engine running. Then I remember all the shopping bags. The collection of bags is bigger than Timmy. Getting those into the room will be an ordeal without my help. Though I suspect these two are used to that kind of struggle. I'm probably the only one who will be frustrated by their arduous wrangling of crutches and shopping bags.

Their room is on the second floor. Not a good deal for a woman on crutches. Tricia says nothing about that. She just opens the door with her key card and supervises as Timmy transfers white plastic bags from my hands into the dark interior of the motel room. I can't tell who is more hesitant about me entering their temporary home. It may be a three-way tie for first place.

Then it occurs to me that this might be the last time I see them. With her sore ankle, Tricia's not likely to call me for cleaning work. We have no future commitment to each other, no reason to believe this is an ongoing thing. We have just navigated one day together. I helped her out. Now she has groceries and ice packs

and crutches. She can even use those crutches to enhance her pan-handling appeal.

And yet, I suspect this is not our final goodbye. So I keep it neutral. No grand farewell.

“Well, I hope you feel better soon.”

“Thanks. Thanks again, Andy.” The way she says my name reminds me of a practiced salesperson. She even offers a handshake.

Are we closing a deal? Or closing the door on this little adventure?

“You are quite welcome.”

“I’ll call if I decide I need the work.” She remembers my offer.

I wonder if she still has the card I gave her. But then, she’s the only person I know who still memorizes phone numbers.

“Good. I hope you’re feeling well enough to work soon.”

She nods. She’s not playing the ankle card with me right now.

Timmy is staring at me from the dim interior of their room.

“Bye, Timmy.”

“Bye.”

On the way home from their motel it occurs to me that my imagination has become reality. I imagined Timmy in the back of my car that first time I saw them. Today he rode back there for real. But this gateway from the imagined to the real doesn’t feel so strange for me. I am, in fact, used to the images in my head getting out into the wild, taking on a certain level of reality. A published book created out of a flash of inspiration.

Having provided a ride for a very real boy has me thinking about Timmy more carefully than I did when I didn’t know his name and hadn’t heard any of his curious questions. But this real-life experience with Timmy and Tricia, which has left a certain odor in my car, bears only a little more weight on my soul than having a novel for sale on the internet and in bookstores.

I gave them a ride. That’s all.

Still, I fully expect to see them again. Tricia has found an easy mark, a soft target. She hasn’t even begun to milk me for all I’m

worth. This thought puts me in the role of a cow. I need a better metaphor. More gender appropriate.

When I get home, I'm still chuckling over Timmy's question about living with my mother. Harrison will find this amusing. Or Martha's husband, David. I have to remember to tell them next time we talk. From there, my attention turns to checking email and responding to Pamela's initial response to the manuscript she received from Harrison.

Andy,

Looks like another winner. I'll get through it this weekend.
Give you more feedback.

Cheers,

Pamela.

After that it's on to fan mail. Then an invitation to read at a book club in another city, a long car ride away. Too short for a flight, probably.

And I'm back to my life. My single, solitary life.

Into My Life

That Saturday night I visit a book club just a half hour from my house. I had forgotten about it until my phone reminded me of the appointment. Good job, phone.

“Andrew McCrae has inspired all kinds of feelings in us for years now. Over a decade, in fact, since I first read *The Broken Hammer*—as many of you did—his creative genius has kept us coming back for more twists and turns, and more profound observations. And now we have the privilege of welcoming him to our humble book club.” Mrs. Graybill turns to me and leads the applause. She proudly informed me before we started that they expected a much bigger gathering than their usual two dozen readers. And the fifty plus people rising from the cushioned stackable chairs fulfill her prophecy.

“Thank you. Thanks for the warm welcome. It’s always a pleasure and a privilege to meet readers. It’s like finding out who’s on the other end of a phone call, after a lot of words have already passed between us. And this is a chance to hear back from you. But first I want to read from my most recently published novel, to get things started.”

I have given this speech more than a dozen times in the last couple years. It probably sounds spontaneous and sincere to them, but I can hear my own clipped delivery of much too familiar words. I need to work up a better intro. One that sounds relaxed and open, while carrying me into the only part of these gatherings that’s comfortable for me—reading my writing. I’m pretty good at that. And scared to death of the rest of it.

“What motivated you to do crime fiction in the first place?” After my reading, this is the eighth or ninth question, one from a younger woman, pretty and fresh-faced.

I smack down my attraction to her and give my standard answer. "It just came naturally. Friends have warned me that I'm too suspicious of all kinds of things. I seem to have a natural criminal mind. And it's much safer to express that in writing novels than in robbing banks."

"And why both secular and Christian novels?" A follow up from that same blonde-haired young woman with stylish black-rimmed glasses. She looks like central casting for a Hollywood book club.

I resist looking around for the cameras. "I found that there were things I had to say, that I wanted to explore, that weren't unique to church people. I had audiences I wanted to address beyond the walls of the traditional religious gatherings that come so naturally to us, me included." I drone on in this vein for a minute, ignoring my own duplicity. I haven't been in church for months, except for a couple of book clubs like this one. And I write the secular novels because they sell. They also allow me to violate some taboos not allowed in Christian fiction. But I'm not going to say any of that.

By the time I'm winding down my answer, I'm intentionally not looking at that attractive young woman. I'm looking at my hostess, the older schoolmarm type who introduced me. Unfortunately, I'm forgetting her name for the moment.

She heeds my silent appeal nonetheless. Again, she leads the applause, after stretching a motherly grin at me and nodding her acknowledgment of my passing of the baton. "Coffee and cookies are at the back of the room. Mr. McCrae will be back there to sign your books and answer more questions."

Yes. He will. And he will shake your sweaty hand and nod politely at your description of the murder mystery you are writing. I just hope the coffee is strong.

I'm still blotting at the prolonged discomfort of the book signing the next morning. Sunday morning has become one of my most productive writing times. Maybe I do it to excuse myself for staying away from church. Maybe my anger over what happened

at the last church is just the sort of rock salt I need to get traction on a book about people violating each other for personal gain. Of course, I'm not at my desk to think about church. Not to think about the embarrassing end to my association with my last fellowship. I'm in front of my computer for my story, crafting the harrowing rescue of Candace Breckenridge.

And that's when Tricia calls. She leaves a message that breaks my flow.

"Hello?" She clears her throat on the voice mail. "Andy? Are you home? Or do you go to church? Me and Timmy go sometimes, but just for the bagels. Anyway, give me a call if you can." She recites the phone number, probably of her motel room.

The maple tree outside my office window waves at me. I don't wave back. I wonder if I should call Tricia. Actually, I wonder if there's any way I could not call her back. But I can't find one. I'm looking for a part of myself that holds the permission slips. I can't locate one that says I can ignore this needy woman and her little boy. Even if I'm pretty sure she has some scam in mind.

"Hi, Tricia. How's your ankle?"

"Not good yet. But not so painful if I just sit here and watch TV. But Timmy's getting stir crazy. You think you could take him somewhere? Or if that's no good, then maybe you could take us both somewhere."

Wow. How to choose? An uneasy afternoon with Timmy. Or an uneasy afternoon with Tricia and Timmy.

Tricia fills in. "He says you could take him to a movie if you want."

Not a bad option. But what kid-appropriate movies are out there? How would I know that?

"Is he old enough for a superhero movie?" There is one of those in theaters these days.

"Oh, sure. He loves those." She names a few of his favorite comic book heroes. They were comic book heroes when I was a kid. Now they're movie stars.

I'm searching the web for movie times. "How about lunch and a superhero movie, then?"

"Awesome. That would be great. Just you and Timmy?"

Okay, here is another of those squirmy moments. This is even harder than when that guy last night asked if I would read his suspense thriller. Clearly, I had overplayed my fake interest in his novel.

"Uh, which do you prefer? I could take both of you or just him. Whichever you want."

Even after we settle on me picking up just Timmy, and the time and all, I hang up feeling like this is part of a scheme. What if she's trying to lure me into her web? I picture Shelob from *The Lord of the Rings*. But Tricia isn't a giant spider. She's a skinny young woman.

Probably more dangerous than a giant spider.

But what is the danger? I'm not going to fall in love with her. She's not going to fall in love with me. I'm not going to have to endure another of those cringy confrontations with my pastor over inappropriate behavior with another consenting adult.

Maybe that is why I write the secular novels. In case I get outed as a man with sexual needs and rejected by the Christian reading public. I can still sell books to the sinners.

Tangent.

No, this isn't about my break from the church. This is about me and this young woman who seems to survive by scheming and scamming.

What if she scams me? She's not going to take all my money. She probably can't even conceive of how much money I have. She knows better than Timmy that my car is worth more than \$5,000. But she's strictly small-time.

Is it okay to go ahead with all this, knowing that she's just trying to get stuff from me? I feel okay. Like it's okay. Like she could take me for hundreds of dollars and it wouldn't matter. Really. I wouldn't miss it. And I seem to have lost my indignation, my fear of being made a fool.

Been there. Done that.

THE LOVE SCAM

So what if she fools me and gets away with it? Let her. There are bigger things at work here. I may not be in church on Sunday morning, but the Jesus they worship at my old church is still in me. And I'm pretty sure he's not worried about this poor woman and her kid getting a few meals and movies out of me. Or even more.

