

*Will grace finally win?*

# BO'S CAFÉ



*a novel*

**Bill Thrall Bruce McNicol John Lynch**

*"What a ride! Here is grace that transforms the darkest place of the human heart and makes real freedom possible."*

WAYNE JACOBSEN, collaborator on *THE SHACK*

# Look Who Loves BO'S CAFÉ!

"BO'S CAFÉ is a treasure for all of us who harbor a longing to be authentic."

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"BO'S CAFÉ is a signpost directing men and women to a place of freedom through community and honest relationship. It is the story of what happens when God's people lay defenses down and embrace the fullness of grace in the face of our secrets and pain."

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"What a ride! Here is grace that transforms the darkest place of the human heart and makes real freedom possible."

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—Carson Pue, *Mentoring Leaders*

"I cried when Lindsey first hugged Andy, and when Steven confessed to Lindsey, and when Steven realized that Andy was his trusted friend, and when I wondered whom I was controlling through my anger. Kleenex, please."

—Bill Hull, *Choose the Life*

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—Ken Blanchard, coauthor, *The One Minute Manager®* and *Lead Like Jesus*

"BO'S CAFÉ challenges my own authenticity in leadership and encourages me to continue to find room and grant space for greater grace in my own daily living and interaction with others caught in the realities, disappointments, surprises, and challenges of life and faith."

—Commissioner Lawrence R. Moretz, territorial commander USA East, Salvation Army

"BO'S CAFÉ is not a *free ride*. It is a ride to freedom. In BO'S CAFÉ you will find a grace more powerful than willpower or tenacity. You'll find a safe place in God that can handle our deepest wounds and most persistent sins."

—Todd Hunter, *Christianity Beyond Belief*

## BO'S CAFÉ by Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and John Lynch

### A Novel

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**HANDLE**

A novel about a man's world coming apart and blaming all the wrong things until an eccentric mystery man helps him discover the real problem.

**DESCRIPTION**

High-powered executive Steven Kerner is living the dream in southern California. But when his bottled pain ignites in anger one night, his wife kicks him out. Then an eccentric mystery man named Andy Monroe befriends Steven and begins unraveling his tightly wound world. Andy leads Steven through a series of frustrating and revealing encounters to repair his life through genuine friendship and the grace and love of a God who has been waiting for him to accept it.

A fictionalized version of a true story of healing, BO'S CAFE offers steps that are profound but simple, moving from awakening to one's inability to control life, to exchanging guarded safety for messy vulnerability, and finally, transforming life from self-focus to the destiny God intended. A story to challenge and encourage, BO'S CAFE is a model for all who struggle with unresolved problems and a performance-based life. Those who desire a fuller, more authentic way of living will find this journey of healing a restorative exploration of God's unbridled grace.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bruce McNicol is president of Leadership Catalyst, Inc. and an international speaker and consultant. He holds a master's in theology and a doctorate in organizational and leadership development. Previously he served for ten years as president of the international church planting organization Interest Associates.

Bill Thrall serves as vice-chair of Leadership Catalyst, mentor, and coauthor of the bestselling *TrueFaced* resources ([www.truefaced.com](http://www.truefaced.com)), *The Ascent of a Leader*, and *Beyond Your Best*.

John Lynch is a national conference speaker and writer for LCI, holds a master's of theology from Talbot Seminary, and has twenty years' experience as a teaching pastor of Open Door Fellowship. He's also cofounder and playwright of a theater troupe in Phoenix.

**MARKETING PLANS**

Trade ads in PW, Ingram and Christian Retailing  
Book launch at Leadership Catalyst conference  
Targeted promotion to Leadership Catalyst database  
Promotion in conjunction with author's appearances and seminars  
Pre-release podcasts to TheGodJourney.com audience  
Blog tour to early supporters of The Shack  
E-mail promotion to Windblown database  
Coming soon feature in back of The Shack  
Christian and general print and broadcast media campaign

**IMPORTANT NOTES**

EXPERIENCED, SAVVY AUTHORS: McNicol, Thrall, and Lynch are the dynamic team of one of the most influential and best leadership seminars in the world.

BUILT-IN DUAL MARKETS: The strong, established audience for LCI has a demonstrated track record of selling multiple thousands of copies every year through their events, Web site, direct sales, and online retailers. Windblown direct-e-mails an estimated thirty thousand readers of *The Shack*.

EVENT-DRIVEN CONTENT: Leaders at Catalyst speak on the very topics covered in BO'S CAFE. This is the user-friendly manual to success in relational leadership every attendee has been waiting for, and the "community-focused" follow-up to *The Shack*.

**QUOTES / REVIEWS**

"*Truefaced* is one of the best books on practical theology I have seen."

--- Dalls Willard

"*Truefaced* powerfully portrays the heart of my journey with Abba."

--- Brennan Manning

Bo's Café

by Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and John Lynch

Windblown Media

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## Wednesday Evening, March 15

“They just never let up, do they?”

He’s sitting right next to me—a guy about my dad’s age—with a tall glass of ice in front of him. He’s watching the tiny television bolted to the wall in the corner of the bar, balancing his chair with a flip-flopped foot propped up against the counter.

A dozen empty chairs, and this guy’s sitting next to me. I get up and move a couple of stools over. I glance at him just long enough to size him up. He’s scruffy looking, wearing an old Dodgers ball cap, ragged Levi’s, and a loud Hawaiian shirt. He looks like he’s been following Jimmy Buffett on tour. Old guys like this are all over Southern California. It’s as if they’re scattered around strategically by the department of tourism.

“Sometimes it’s hard to figure, isn’t it?” he says, his eyes fixed on the TV.

*Is this guy talking to me? I think he’s talking to me.* “I’m not really watching the game.”

Still staring, he says through a mouthful of ice, “I’m not talking about the game.”

*I just need to stay quiet. He’ll figure out I want to be left alone.*

“You’re not a regular here.”

I glance over at him. “No.”

“No,” he repeats.

“Look, no offense, but I’d really like to be alone.”

He waves his hand. “No, hey. Don’t let me bother you there, champ. You just keep at what you’re doing. Pretend I’m not here.”

There’s a pause, and then he starts in again. “Yep, I’ve got my ice. Tall glass of ice, that’s what I’ve got. Nothing better than nature’s own H<sub>2</sub>O. Am I right?”

*Can’t this guy take a hint?* I stare down at the bar, willing him to be quiet.

“Cold, clean, no aftertaste. Just God’s own beverage. *Agua*. Yep, that’s my drink—*el agua*. It means ‘the water’ in Spanish. Those folk make a big deal out of the definite article, don’t they?” He

shakes his glass and looks through it. “A lot of people might think *el agua* just means “water.” Those same people would be wrong. It’s *the* water, isn’t it?”

He looks over at me again. “Oops. Sorry. I’m bothering you, aren’t I? Look, you just pretend I’m not here.”

Not even twenty seconds pass.

“Truth be told, it’s not the water really. It’s the ice. They say it’s bad for your teeth, but I love it. Crunching it. You know, the ice.”

I shouldn’t be here. I should be home, watching the news with my wife and daughter after dinner. Instead I’m sitting here, listening to some lonely old hippie chew ice.

“Here” is a restaurant in east Culver City that has changed hands more often than a cafeteria tray. Its present name is Fenton’s Grill. On the sign out front, the neon *Gr* is blinking in and out, so the display sporadically reads *Fenton’s ill*. From the look of the place, it’s easy see why he would be.

When I was a kid, Fenton’s wasn’t even Fenton’s. It was Petrazello’s—a friendly neighborhood restaurant, clean, homey, and reasonably priced. Even after dark I felt safe walking there. It was always the centerpiece of life in the ten or so square blocks of my childhood world. Little League teams would wolf down pizza there. Dates sat stiffly in rented outfits at white-linen-covered tables. I was one of them, sitting across from gorgeous Brenda Magnusson. A perspiring freshman in an ill-fitting suit about to go to homecoming, where the entire world would discover that I couldn’t dance. Other nights the place transformed into a loud, smoky den where husbands gathered around a television set in the bar, praising or berating the Dodgers. The women sat nearby, praising and berating their husbands.

Old man Petrazello was always there, day or night, greeting the neighborhood at the cash register or on busy nights reworking tables to jam as many into that room as the fire marshall would allow. Nobody ever seemed to mind how crowded it was. Nobody seemed in a hurry at Petrazello’s.

You were in a room with familiar faces. Friends of your parents walking by your table, tousling your hair, calling you by a nickname, and telling you they saw the double you hit last game.

Old man Petrazello carried candy in a pocket of his apron for the kids. Good candy. Not the cheap mints they put up front for a donation to the Civitans. Old man Petrazello was always smiling. It's as if he didn't run the place for a profit but because he truly enjoyed being a relative to everyone in our neighborhood.

But that was then, and this is now.

The once attractive freestanding building with a few parking spaces and some nice landscaping was eventually asphalted over, and some other cheap buildings were added to form a strip mall. Fenton's is now more bar than restaurant. The TV is still in the same spot—maybe even the same one judging by the bent antenna. The lighting is a strange combination of harshly glaring and dim. I have no idea how that effect is achieved, but it can't mask the fact that the floor is the same drab green linoleum I remember. Every few feet along the bar—now Formica instead of wood—are mismatched plastic dishes of Spanish peanuts. One bowl has little tiki faces. Another says, "Visit Arizona!"

The "grill" is several wobbly tables with plastic vases of plastic flowers. So I opted for the bar.

Fenton's is about eight miles from where I work—not far by Southern California standards, but I hadn't come down here in years until recently. I guess it's embarrassing to see what my childhood world has become. My old neighborhood is on the decline—one in a long list of once proud middle-class communities falling victim to quick-cash stores and porn shops. Taking the surface streets from my office in Santa Monica, the scenery quickly morphs from manicured curbsides and executive condos to a conveyor belt of sputtering neon.

But now, for the first time in a long time, I'm actually inside this joint. The first two times I ended up in the parking lot and didn't even get out of the car. I just sat there, angry, resentful, and

noisy. Arguments at home, conflicts at work all rattling around in my head. And this horrible feeling that I can't drive far enough to get away from it. Something is wrong. Something's not working, when everything *should* be working. I don't know how to describe what I'm feeling. It's like coming to a place in your life where all the slot lines come up cherry but nothing comes out of the machine. You sit there, hoping that staring will make something happen.

*I'm here again, I thought, and I'm hungry. Fenton's "illness" aside, I might as well see what this place has sunk to.*

Everything on the menu looks a little scary. This is not a place where you gamble on meat loaf.

The bartender is impatient even though he has few other customers.

"I'll have a Manhattan."

Why did I say that? I'm not even sure what a Manhattan is. I think my dad used to drink them. Something about Fenton's wood-paneled décor suggested that a *Manhattan* might be an appropriate drink for a person who doesn't want to stand out.

A half dozen or so patrons are engaged in muffled conversations. The place looks smoky, though I know the smoking ban in California makes that impossible. It's as if all the smoke of years past is still hovering in the air. Or maybe it's grease from the "grill." The surface of the bar feels a little filmy.

My Manhattan appears, and I'm quickly acquainted with why I've never ordered one. It tastes like butane with a splash of syrup. I ask for a glass of water and mindlessly stare at the sports recap on the television.

That's when the scruffy looking guy sat down...I think.

*Okay, what can I say without sounding like a jerk so he'll get the message? Why do guys like this go into bars and try to start conversations with complete strangers?*

"She got to you last night, didn't she?"

“What?” My head whips in his direction.

“Last night.”

Now I’m getting ticked. “*Who* got to me? What are you talking about?”

“Your wife,” he says. “You knew she was right, of course. Same stuff. But no way were you gonna own it. What would you do anyway? Say you’re sorry and repeat the same thing next week? I can see why you drink.”

“I’m *not* drinking!” I nearly shout. “I mean, I’m not a drinker.” I put some cash on the bar and get up.

“Sure...lots of guys come in a bar and order stiff drinks by name because they’re not drinkers. Listen, sport, you’re not obligated to explain anything to me. Most people don’t want to deal with what’s eating at them. Just pretend I’m not here.”

*This guy has just called me “champ” and “sport.” What’s next, “chief”? I gotta get out of here. Anyway, what’s he talking about? What don’t I want to deal with?*

“Your wife,” he says flatly. “The argument. The whole reason you drove down here instead of going home after work. I mean, this is a long way from Manhattan Beach.”

I turn and look at him.

“Gotcha there, didn’t I?” he says with an irritating grin. “Pretty hard to just get up and leave when a total stranger starts reeling off some pretty uncanny details about your life. Am I right?”

He walks over to me and puts his hand on my shoulder, like he’s about to tell an old friend a joke. In one move I push his hand off me and step back.

“Get away from me. You don’t know me!”

For a moment the room is frozen, my words hanging in the air.

He raises his hands, palms toward me. “Whoa, whoa, whoa there, partner. Calm down. I’m just talking.”

Just as I get to the door he calls to me. “You gonna just up and leave? You come to this place for maybe the third time in as many months and finally stumble inside. You’re telling me some guy starts throwing out some pretty accurate details about your life, someone who takes an interest in you and the problems that got you here...*and you walk?*”

“What?” I turn back from the door. “What are saying to me?”

“Look, you’re making me strain my voice here, chief,” he says. “You want to talk, then come sit back down with your nonalcoholic Manhattan.”

Out of some sort of angry curiosity, I find myself walking back to the counter. *What am I doing talking to this nut? I don’t want to talk to anyone.* I sit down in front of the flammable drink.

“—even if he could tell you why you’re so sad? Sorry, I’m not a mind reader.”

He just lets the statement hang there for a moment.

“I just thought you might be thinking something along those lines. See if this fits: It’s like you’re stumbling around in a dark room, bumping into furniture. How am I doing? Making sense?”

I stare at him blankly.

“I’ll take your silence as a yes.”

His voice gets quieter and lower. “After many experiences, you’ve learned to memorize paths around the pain. You think you’ve finally figured out how to navigate in the dark. You almost get used to doing life in the dark. Then the next day, week, month, maybe while you’re sleeping, the furniture gets moved, and you slam your shin into an end table.

“And each time, with each new bruise, you lose more and more hope, more confidence, more sense of purpose. You start reacting to pain more than anything else. You make decisions based on what hurts least. You avoid stuff you know you should face. You avoid interaction with people you suspect might be moving your furniture. Eventually that list grows to include a whole lotta people.”

More silence.

“And the worst part is that it feels like almost everyone else can see you stumbling around. It’s like they can all see the furniture. They might never tell you this, but you’re pretty sure they know. How am I doing, Steven?”

“How do you know my name?” I ask.

He ignores my question. “They want to tell you, you know.”

“Tell me what? Who?”

He taps the bar with his fingertips. “Your friends. Your family. Those you work with. Truth is, some of them have actually tried. They want to help. But you don’t believe they can help. Sound familiar, Steven?”

I sit up straight on my stool and nearly knock over my glass of water. “I don’t know who you think I am, but I don’t know you. Now stop the game, and tell me how you know *me*.”

I pick up my water and take a big gulp. “You’re screwing with the wrong guy.” I lean closer to him and lower my voice. “You want me to call the manager? Or do you want me to pour this glass of ice all over you before I throw you out in the street?”

His voice is quieter now. “Yeah, I guess you could do that. Then you could drive home and pretend this didn’t happen,” he says. “You could go back to what you’ve been doing. Pretend it’s just a bad week, a couple bad breaks. But you’ll be back. If not here then somewhere else.”

He pauses.

“And until you let someone shine a light into your room, nothing’s gonna change. Life’s gonna get more painful, more confusing, and darker. Pour ice on me if you want. Heck, pour your drink on me if it makes you feel better.”

The man tips up his glass and shakes a couple ice cubes into his mouth.

“Oh, by the way, you might wanna take that name tag off your shirt if you don’t want strangers calling you by name, Steven... Just a thought.”

I look down. *What an idiot!* The name tag has been on all day, since that meeting out of the office. It's like I was wearing a sign around my neck saying, "Please talk to me! I'm lonely!" I rip the sticker off my shirt.

We're both quiet, except for his obnoxious crunching.

"Look, buddy," I say. "I shouldn't have said that—the thing about throwing you out in the street. I'm not in a very good place. And some stranger starts spouting stuff about me and I don't know what to do. Maybe this is all a joke someone put you up to, but I need it to stop. What do you say we start over? Tell me your name and how you know me."

He shakes his head. "Oh no, you don't. I'll call the manager out here and see why a perfect stranger wants to know my name."

I chuckle. "I deserved that, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did."

"Steven," he says, "would it help if you knew that I'm from this neighborhood? I grew up here too. I remember when this place was Petrazello's. Gracious Sister of Monrovia, they had great pizza! The sauce... It had this sweetness to it. Remember? Nobody was sure if it was cinnamon or what."

"I'd forgotten that."

"You can't find that sauce anymore. It died with old man Petrazello."

Then he smiles warmly, searching my eyes. "Maybe it would help if I told you that I know your dad."

"You do? Why didn't you say that at the start?"

"I've seen you before this," he says. "You were sitting in the parking lot."

"How did you know it was me?"

"Your dad told me about the car. Steven, I don't know if you've noticed, but there aren't a lot of late model SL-Class Mercedes in this neighborhood."

“So you know my dad, huh?”

He nods. “We were pretty good friends when you were a little kid. Hung out here a lot. Then I got on the fast track, and we sort of lost touch until a few years ago. Anyway, he brags about you, you know. So I’ve kind of kept a watch for you and followed your life the last couple years. That’s how I was sure it was you today when you walked into Fenton’s. I was walking out of Radio Shack next door and thought, *How cool is this? I know this kid, but he doesn’t know me. Let’s have some fun.*”

“So that’s how you knew about Manhattan Beach?”

“Yep.”

“So, you’re not a mythical character, after all?”

“Not really. But I kind of was there for a while, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, you were.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t told you about me.”

“Me too.”

We’re quiet again, both staring at the television set. Finally I laugh. “So are you going to tell my dad I threatened to beat up one of his friends?”

“No, that can be our secret.”

“Explain this then.” I look away from the TV. “You said some things a couple minutes ago that my dad wouldn’t have known. What was that about?”

He gives me a sideways look. “What stuff is that?”

“You know, the whole bumping into furniture thing.”

“Oh, I just get those little sayings off the Internet. Sometimes they’re from Dr. Phil, sometimes Oprah.”

“No, you don’t.” I shake my head. “How did you know those things about *me*? I hide that stuff pretty well.”

“Maybe not as well as you think.” He lets that last statement hang in the air for a while. I’m not sure what to say. This guy may be my dad’s friend, but he’s still pretty annoying.

He spins around on his stool and jumps up, like a little kid.

“Come outside for a second? I wanna show you something.”

He takes a few steps toward the door and turns to me. “Come on, it’s not like you’ll miss your drink.”

So I follow his flip-flopping feet out to the parking lot. There, sitting directly next to my car, is a shiny cherry-red vintage convertible.

He leans against the trunk. “Nice, huh? 1970 Buick Electra. Only about six thousand ever made it to the street. Less than two hundred are still running. It’s a 455 with eight cylinders and 370 horses pulling this sled. I redid the whole thing myself from the ground up.” He looks lovingly at the vehicle. “Even the upholstery. The door panels and the whole steering assembly came from an Electra owned by Cary Grant.”

When he sees my blank stare, he says, “He was an actor...in the forties and fifties, um, before Brad Pitt was born. Anyway, you gotta jiggle the passenger door handle from the inside to get in, and she drinks a lot of oil. But if you want to get your hair scared, there ain’t nothing like this ride! You can sit in it if you’d like.”

His Electra truly is impressive, if only for the storage compartment. It’s gigantic. It takes up half the vehicle. You could drive a present-day hybrid into that trunk and still have room for groceries. This car looks like a shiny, safety deposit box on white wall tires. No big fins, no gimmicks. It was Detroit’s last attempt to build a car that could comfortably fill an entire lane.

I shake my head. “Thanks. I can see it just fine from here.”

He hops in the car and starts the engine and puts the car in gear. “Suit yourself. Maybe we’ll see each other again. Nice to meet you though.”

“Hold on a minute,” I yell.

He puts the car back in park and lets the engine idle.

“Look, Steven, you’ll never discover most of what you went searching for tonight as long as *you’re* setting the terms. That’s how this stuff works. Maybe you came here for a reason. Or maybe you were brought here. What if God brought you here to meet an old guy with a Buick Electra who may be just a little further down the road than you?” He peers into my eyes. “What if it wasn’t chance that we found each other? This wasn’t on my schedule today either, you know. I don’t believe much in coincidence. This is nothing more than a funny practical joke God let us stumble into. Or maybe both of us have been led here?”

He reaches into his wallet and fumbles around.

“Here’s my card. You decide you want to ride around in this cream puff, e-mail me. Okay?”

He slips the car into reverse. Then he smiles at me and slips on a pair of sunglasses as if it were noon.

His giant Buick Electra with white upholstery and white wall tires slowly rumbles its way out of the parking lot. By the time I look up from putting his card in my wallet, he’s vanished down Colorado Boulevard into the chilly early spring night air.

***“You Really Don’t Get It, Do You?”***

**(Wednesday Late Evening, March 15<sup>th</sup>)**

By the time I work my way down the Coast Highway and into our gated Manhattan Beach neighborhood, it’s after eleven. Our gaslight-lined street looks even more quiet, safe and elegant, after driving through the sketchy weed-choked rental houses that dominate life around Fenton’s.

As I pull into our circular driveway I turn off the car and admire our home. The landscapers did a good job this week upgrading our ground lighting. This is the first time I’ve seen it at night. It really takes the shadows out of the front terrace and ties it in well with the surrounding trees and shrubs.

Lights are all still on inside. That’s not good. It means Lindsey’s up, probably rehearsing tonight’s version of her disappointment.

*I don’t need this. Not tonight.*

I sit there awhile longer; tapping my fingers on the dash, hoping the lights will turn off.

*We weren’t always like this. It wasn’t this hard. I actually used to look forward to coming home. We’d call each other during the day. And when I walked in, I don’t know, it was fun. I’d open some wine and we’d talk.*

More tapping.

*And what does she have to be disappointed about? What am I not doing? I could be doing a lot of other things than working this hard. If anyone should be complaining, it’s me.*

Ten minutes later I finally walk into the house. Lindsey’s standing at the kitchen sink and doesn’t turn around at my “Hey there!” My wife is a strikingly attractive woman. She has dark brown eyes and hair exactly the same color. She’s in great shape and dresses like she knows it. I married her, in part, because of her self-confidence. When we get crossways, it’s what I can’t stand about her.

“I’ve called three times today at your office and twice on your cell phone.” She blurts it out, with her back to me, like she’s hoping the suddenness will cause me to confess something.

“Steven, you were going to pick her up from school today. You and her. You were going to have some time with your daughter. Remember?”

“Crap!” I start for the stairs. “I totally spaced it.”

She lets me get half way up before she says, “She’s asleep. Come back down the stairs. You’ll wake her up.”

She turns fully towards me and lets me see her disdain.

“Steven, she stood at the loading zone for over an hour after school. Parents picking up kids circled around, concerned about her. ‘Are you okay? Do you need a ride?’ ‘No,’ she had to say over and over. ‘My dad will be here soon.’

“Enough. I get it.” If I don’t stop her, she’ll just keep at me.

“She’s eleven once,” she continues. This is it; this is that time. When you promise something, you can’t just—”

“—don’t start this,” I say. “I made a mistake. I forgot. I screwed up, okay? I’ll talk to her later.”

“Oh, ‘later,’” she nods sarcastically. “Which ‘later’ would that be, Steven?”

“Don’t patronize me, Lindsey.” You know what I mean.”

“No I don’t. I really don’t,” she says as she paces into the living room, straightening magazines that are already straight. “Is this the ‘later’ like those other commitments you make and don’t keep? Or is this a different one? I’m curious.”

“Knock it off,” I say, raising my voice. “I don’t need this right now.”

“Shhh! You’re going to wake her up. She doesn’t need to hear this.”

“Oh, that’s great,” I say, even louder, throwing my briefcase down. “Yea, that’s good. Take a few jabs and then tell me to be quiet. Great!”

She turns away and almost under her breath says, “I can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“This.” She swipes her arm across the entire room. “All of it.” She holds her gesture, then slumps her shoulders and sighs. “I can’t keep covering for you, Steven. Jennifer loves you. You’re her dad. But she’s starting to not trust you, to no longer count on you. I don’t want that. I don’t want my daughter to grow up that way. She deserves more, Steven.”

“Don’t start the drama, Lindsey.”

“You don’t get it, do you, Steven? The pattern doesn’t change. You’re upset with your life and you take it out on me, on us. I continually am walking on eggshells around you. I’ve never walked on eggshells with anyone. Didn’t even know what it meant. And now, for Jennifer’s sake, it feels like all I do when you’re around.”

She stops for a moment, as though she’s counting the cost of what’s coming next.

“You know what? I’m not unhappy—not until you come in with your resentment.”

“Here we go,” I mumble.

“You’re so dissatisfied with your own life,” she says, back to straightening things, “that you can’t bear the thought of anyone being dissatisfied with theirs. You can’t tolerate the notion that it could possibly have anything do with you. So you tear into everyone and everything else and can’t understand why it’s all torn up around you.”

“That’s not fair,” I shoot back.

“You’re right. It’s not fair. Here’s how it goes:”

She runs up to the front door, acting out what she is saying. “You walk in with something you’re unhappy about.” She runs back to the couch. “Then I try to reason with you. And you get louder and louder and meaner and meaner.” She takes a step toward the kitchen. “Then, when I can’t stand it, or you scare me enough, I leave the room.” She then walks back into the middle of the living room with her arms stretched out. “And somehow you imagine that you won.”

I try to respond, but she stops me, raising her hand.

“You know what?” She slowly shakes her head, with a forced smile that is more of a grimace. “I used to be able to stay in the ring with you. But something inside me has gone away. I’ve lost my confidence. I’ve lost who I used to be. I don’t even recognize me anymore. So, Steven, you win. You’ve beaten me down to where I can’t help you anymore.”

“Look,” I say, trying to calm myself down. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I screwed up. Okay?” I walk into the living room. “Is that what you need to hear? I screwed up. I’ll make it up to her. I can find some time later this week. I’m sorry, alright?”

She slowly walks to right in front of me. “No, see, that’s not going to work this time, Steven. I’m done. I sat here tonight, as I waited and waited...again. And somewhere around eight-thirty I found myself thinking, *I don’t want to get sick. I don’t want Jennifer to get sick.* Something’s wrong with you, and I don’t know what it is. I don’t know if you’re having an affair or if the man I thought I knew has turned out to be a phony. So I’m done. I mean really done.”

“Why do you do that?” I ask. I hate it when she pulls the “affair” card. “Why do always have to accuse me of an affair? You do this all the time. You know you can get me angry accusing me of an affair. All right, you got me. I’m angry.”

She spins completely around in exasperation. “You really don’t get it, do you? You’re so wrapped up in your arrogant little world that you can’t see what’s going on, can you?”

“My little world?” I yell, getting louder with each word. “Oh! Excuse me then, would that be the arrogant little world that lets you spend half your day at a health club or gossiping with your little friends at fashionable little wine bars, on my dime? Would it be that arrogant little world?”

“See, there you go. You think it’s all about the stuff. You think everyone should walk around,” she mimics exaggerated bows, “bowing to you for what you can do.”

She runs into the kitchen, calling out from there: “You are so ridiculously blind. Jennifer isn’t going to remember that she had all the stuff.”

She walks purposefully back out of the kitchen, dramatically waiting a moment before she says: “She’s going to remember that you weren’t here. And even when you were here, you weren’t here. That’s what she’ll remember.”

“That’s crap, Lindsey!” I yell.

“All we have ever wanted was you, your person. And with all your skills and magic, you have been totally incapable of providing that for your wife and daughter.”

“Shut up, Lindsey. Shut up!”

“You’re doing it again. You get angry, then you get loud and then you get stupid. Angry and stupid. Angry and stupid.” She pops the final *p* to infuriate me.

“Don’t do that!” I step toward her.

“Do what?”

“Stop it! You know what I’m talking about.”

“Do you know that what you find significant means absolutely nothing to either of us? All your business importance, all your pretend greatness. Nothing at all. Zip. Nada. Nothing.”

That’s when I snap. I yell and then brush hard against her as I run into the kitchen. Wanting to slap at something, I grab a vase of flowers and run with them back into the living room, still yelling. I swing the vase around me, like a discus thrower, flowers and water shooting out over the entire living room and onto her. Then the vase slips out of my hands and shatters into the staircase wall, glass flying in every direction. For a moment, we both look at the room, covered with flowers, broken glass and dripping water. I’m breathing hard, my fists clenched at my sides.

“Sometimes,” I growl through my teeth, “I really, really do not like you, Lindsey!”

“You’re acting like a crazy man, Steven.”

I step right in front of her and yell at the top of my lungs, “Just shut up! Shut your stinking, stupid, fat mouth!”

She tries to move away from me. Almost involuntarily I block her path.

“Get away from me,” she says quietly.

“I hate this!” My entire body is screaming. “I hate you! Do you hear me?”

Lindsey runs up the stairs. I run up after her, not knowing why. She’s standing in front of the closet when I get to the bedroom.

“Get away!” she screams. “Get away from me, Steven! I’ll call the police!”

“Stop it!” I yell. “Just talk to me. I’m not doing anything. I’m not going to do anything.”

She runs toward the bathroom.

“Don’t go in there, Lindsey!” I scream out, “I’m warning you. Don’t close—”

Before she can, I run toward the door and slam my full weight into it, trying to keep her from locking it. The force makes the door fly open, knocking her down on the other side.

She shrieks, “Oh, God! You broke my nose! I think my nose is broken! Get away from this door. Get away from me!”

I let go of the door. She slams and locks it. She’s crying, moaning, and screaming all at the same time.

*What am I doing?*

“Okay. Lindsey, calm down. I want us to talk.”

She’s sobbing on the other side of the door. “I’m scared, Steven. I just need you to leave me alone.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You hurt me! I’m bleeding.”

I rest my forehead on the door. She’s still sobbing. “Come on, Lin. That was an accident. I’m sorry. Open the door.”

After a few moments she says quietly, “Steven?” She has stopped crying.

“What?”

She waits several more seconds before slowly saying,

“I need to take Jennifer and leave right now.”

“What do you mean? Leave where? Where are you going to go?”

“To my mom’s. I need you to get away from the door and go downstairs. Will you do that?”

I hate everything about this. If she leaves everything is going to go nuts. But I can’t stop her. She’s already scared.

“Are you really bleeding, Lindsey? Are you all right?”

“I’ll be all right if you just get away from the door.”

“All right, Lindsey. I’ll go downstairs. I’m going downstairs right now.”

I turn and in a blur somehow find my way to a chair at the far end of the living room. I sit there stunned, my entire body shaking. My mind is racing. *How did this happen? I’ve got to fix this and I don’t know how. What is Jennifer going through? She had to hear most of that. What is Lindsey saying to her?*

In a few minutes both Lindsey and Jennifer descend the stairs, each carrying an overnight bag.

“Call me when you get to your mom’s house, will you?”

Lindsey doesn’t answer. Jennifer looks back at me confused and concerned, like she doesn’t like the option of going or staying.

She walks a step toward me and tries to say something, but nothing comes. She is studying me, trying to figure out what happened. Then she notices the room, still dripping with she just heard from her room. She turns back to me with a look of fear.

“It’s all right, honey. Your mom and dad are just working through some things right now. Everything’s—everything’s going to be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow. We all just need to get some sleep. We’re gonna be fine.”

There are no responses. Only the sound of the front door closing behind them.

*“She’s a Lot of Detroit Magic, She is”*

**(Thursday Morning, March 16<sup>th</sup>)**

...Next time I check, my watch reads 3 a.m. I’ve spent the last few hours staring at the ceiling, rehearsing everything Lindsey and I said, replaying the scene of my wife and daughter walking out the door. I’m spent. I cleaned up the mess. Now I can’t go to sleep, but I can’t think clearly either. Lindsey never called from her mom’s. I can’t call her this late, so I have to wait for a few hours to make sense of anything.

Everything’s too quiet here in the dark. My head is buzzing. And for the last hour all I can hear is Andy’s voice from earlier in the evening: “You could go back to what you’ve been doing...But you’ll be back...And until you let someone shine a light into your room, nothing’s gonna change. Life’s gonna get more painful, more confusing and darker.”

Last evening at Fenton’s seems like a month ago now. Was Andy legit? Does the guy know my dad or is he just some spooky old stalker guy?

I grab my wallet to find his card. No phone number, no address, no job title. Just the name Andy Monroe and an e-mail address.

*Well, that’s a start. Let’s see what Google has to say about you, Mr. Andy Monroe.*

I sit down at the computer and type in “Andy Monroe.” There’s a dark and brooding songwriter named Andy Monroe. He dominates most of the first few pages of entries. I’m pretty sure that’s not our Andy. There’s also a playwright by the same name...an expedition diver...and a bull rider.

Not until about page eight do I stumble across an article that might fit: “Langston Group: Andy Monroe Leaves Position as Financial Head.” The article is from 2003 and describes an apparently hugely successful forty-eight-year-old stepping away from his position at the request of the corporation for reasons of “personal indiscretion.”

*Well, well, well. Is that you, Andy boy?*

He had said something that night about once being on the fast track. Tracks don't get much faster than the Langston Group. Those guys had dominated the South Coast financial scene since I was a boy. So maybe our flip-flop wearing friend was somebody at one time, until "personal indiscretion" got the better of him.

*Still, how does a guy like this figure into knowing my dad?*

I nose around some more and start picking up repeat articles with the occasional grainy photo of a younger looking Andy Monroe. Various entries detail Andy's exploits in the financial world, but everything just sort of stops with that "indiscretion" back in 2003. It's as if the Andy Monroe of the financial world ceased to exist after that. And I can't find a thing that ties him to Culver City or my dad.

I decide to pull down some boxes of family pictures from the garage. If this guy's for real, there has to be some evidence of it somewhere in my life. Besides, I got nothing else to do. Where am I going?

I make a pot a coffee and within minutes I'm sitting at the kitchen table with pictures spread out in front of me. I almost forget what I'm looking for. It's been so long since I've seen pictures of my childhood. I'm actually almost enjoying myself. But there's nothing of Andy. Forty-five minutes later I begin re-filling shoeboxes with pictures...

That's when I notice it. I think I saw it earlier, but it didn't register. It's a picture of my dad and me on a fishing trip. I can't be more than eight years old. Dad used to take me on those half-day charter-fishing trips off San Pedro. We'd go with his buddies—three or four guys who show up in a lot of our pictures. We really didn't know their families that well. They were just normal guys who grew up together in the neighborhood and never left. They all did guy stuff together: bowling, fishing, sitting around playing cards at Petrazello's. There was a heavysset bearded guy; Stan, I think. He was a machinist or something like that. I just remember his big, beefy hands always had grease in

the cracks. There was Mr. Ketchum. He was a salesman of something or other. He and his wife did a lot of stuff with my parents. I really couldn't remember much about the others.

In the picture, I'm holding a fish that is several feet long. My dad has his arm around me. He's smiling. And behind us are the boys: Stan, Mr. Ketchum, a real tall guy wearing a straight-billed ball cap with a marlin on it. And *him*. He's younger and thinner, but it's clearly him.

He's smiling that same obnoxious grin, as if he's thinking, *That's right, kid. It's me, Andy. You thought I was making it all up about knowing your dad. So what're you gonna do with this picture, huh? You know, I actually helped you bring in this little trophy fish, my friend. I'm in several others too. Check out the one at your dad's birthday. That's me trying to play Old Man Petrazello's accordion.*

I sit there, staring, stunned. This guy's a part of my life, my family history, and I have no memory of him! I laugh out loud. *I almost decked a friend of our family.*

I decide to e-mail him.

Andy,

So, my wife and I, last night, we sort of got into an argument. Bottom line, I think maybe I could probably use a drive around to kind of air some things out. I guess I could use a little advice.

Steven Kerner

Within an hour, which would be about 5:20 a.m., I get his reply.

Steven,

You couldn't shake the Electra, could you? She's a lot of Detroit magic, she is. Before you agree to this there are a few things about me you should know:

1. I smoke cigars. Really good cigars. Never inside, but when I'm out in the Electra, I smoke. I'm not proud of it. I've been trying to cut back.
2. Sometimes I play music while I'm driving. I've been told that I play it really loud. So, there's that.
3. We don't talk about the Los Angeles Rams' move to St. Louis. It's still a sore subject with me.

What do you say we meet at Fenton's next Tuesday, around 7:00 p.m.?

Andy

*That's it? Did this guy not get my e-mail? Next Tuesday? That's six days from now! And he makes no mention of anything I said. He's kidding, right? ...No wonder my dad stopped hanging around with him.*

## *The Marriot-Room 643*

**(Mid-morning, Thursday, March 16<sup>th</sup>)**

By eight-thirty Lindsey and I are on the phone with each other. She informs me that Jennifer needs to be in her home and that I should be the one who finds a place to stay. This isn't blowing over. I work until noon and then leave the office with an excuse, spending the rest of the day locating a hotel between our home and my office in Santa Monica. I end up at a Marriot in a business section of El Segundo. I drive back home to pick up some clothes. As I open the front door everything feels very odd, as if my own home is no longer even sure I should be here. This whole thing feels so humiliating. What am I doing, in the middle of a workday, packing toothpaste and business clothes to stay somewhere a few miles away? I change into jeans and a sweater. Before I walk back out the front door I hesitate, wondering what I'm giving up once I give into this.

It feels like almost everyone is aware of my situation. Our next-door neighbor, Melanie Patton, an overweight woman in a perpetual hair net, is out front, watering bushes as I walk from the house, carrying my hang-up bag. She's never liked me. I think she brings property values down. She peeks over her sunglasses at me, and turns away, like she's thinking, *Finally*.

The guy at the Marriot front desk stares at my driver's license. "Why, you can't live five miles from here." I give a weak nod, saying nothing. He looks at my bag, back at me, and then back at my bag again. He gives an awkward smile, as if he suddenly realizes he may have stumbled into a guy hiding from the law or something. Snatching up my license, a pen, and a room agreement, he drops them onto the counter, all in one noisy and flustered motion. I mumble something about relatives in town and scratch out my name on the contract, all while moving away from the counter to the elevator.

I soon discover the Marriot room at a resort destination and a business park are two different animals. Mine has a bed, a "work station," a smaller television, and a top floor view of a parking garage. It'll do. I'm not going to be here long. I open up a can of nuts from the mini bar, kick off my

shoes and flop back against the bed headboard, soon staring at an oil painting of a bowl of fruit. *Very edgy, Mr. Marriot. Very edgy.*

I'm not calling her. She'll call me when she feels bad enough, realizing I'm taking the hit for all this. I grab the channel changer and mindlessly surf cable stations, eventually lying in the dark, fighting this nagging thought that I should probably get up, put on some shoes and walk down the hall for a bucket of ice. But I'm too drained to do anything about it. I think those were my last thoughts as I fall asleep to the Food channel, a half-eaten can of mixed nuts sitting on my chest.

## *The Bluff Facing South*

**(Tuesday evening, March 21<sup>st</sup>)**

Day six. I'm still sleeping at the Marriot. I've talked twice to Lindsey. All business and very cryptic. She did say, "I just need some time, Steven. I'll call you and we can talk about what comes next." I've come by several times when they're gone, to pick up mail and more clothes. I've talked to Jennifer on the phone once. She seems to be acting like I'm away on business, pretending nothing is very wrong or abnormal. She gets that from me, I think...

I'm discovering I hate eating dinner by myself. The worst part is, you run out of places to look. I need to take a book with me. I used to make fun of those nerds who read in public. Now, I'm wondering what they're reading. And everyone seems to be staring and talking about you, like they're warning their children, "Bobby, if you don't pay attention in school, you could end up like that man—all alone."

I've chosen to tell no one about what has happened. Nobody needs to know and I'm pretty sure this won't last much longer.

He's sitting in the Electra as I drive up. I park my Mercedes at the end of the lot. This is the kind of place where someone would open his door into yours without thinking twice about it. I get out, hit the button on the remote locks, and walk toward his car. I pause at the passenger door of the Electra.

"Hop in. You'll have to reach in and use the inside handle."

He's wearing another gaudy Hawaiian shirt and the same Dodger's ball cap from the last time I saw him. I have the feeling his wardrobe has definite limitations. He puts on his sunglasses and leans over the passenger seat to hand me a pair. "You'll need these."

"These" are a clunky pair of black frames with equally black lenses. How anyone is supposed to see through these during the day, let alone at night, is beyond me.

“No, thanks. I’m good,” I say, but he presses the glasses toward me with a look that says he won’t take no for an answer. To move things along, I put them on.

As I look at Andy’s self-satisfied grin, I’m having second thoughts about this trip. I’m not a very good passenger. I drive; I don’t ride. But, even this seems better than another evening sitting around in my Marriot cell, # 643.

I so want to tell Andy that I’m on to him—that I know all about his business failings—if only so he’ll stop with the wizard routine. But I decide to save my findings for later. I also decide he also doesn’t need to know I’m living on the street, until I see how this ride works out.

I open the passenger door from the inside handle and climb in. The car is huge. I feel like I’m sitting on an enormous, slippery, plastic tuck ‘n’ roll couch. I slide to the back of the seat until my feet are almost no longer touching the ground. It appears back in the day they manufactured cars for only giants to drive.

As I’m looking around for a seat belt, he notices and says, “They’re jammed into the seat somewhere. Good luck.”

So here we are...two men wearing sunglasses after sunset, strapped into seat belts with no shoulder harnesses, rumbling down the boulevard in a vehicle designed before fuel economy was a gleam in a car designers’ eyes. For a while we’re just driving, neither of us speaking a word. The wind in my face and the deep hum of the Electra 455 is almost trancelike.

He yells above the engine, “Mind if I smoke?”

“Would it matter?”

“Probably not.”

“I guess it’s fine then.”

With an obviously well-practiced skill, he pulls out an old Zippo lighter and as the flame flickers in the wind, he lights up (on his first try) a cigar he calls a Padron 1924 Anniversario.

Eventually we pull onto the 405 for a few minutes and then up into the hills overlooking Marina Del Rey and Venice and the Pacific Ocean. Andy parks the car on a bluff facing south. From there you can see most of the LA basin. After some time looking over the city, he takes a long draw on his cigar and blows an impressive smoke ring into the still night air.

“Steven, if this was 1970 and I was sitting here with the top down in this gem with a pretty high school girl, well let’s just say that the guy in the Chevy Nova next to me would be driving back down the hill out of embarrassment.”

“I wouldn’t know, Andy,” I say. “I wasn’t born yet. I don’t think my parents had even *met* in 1970.”

Andy clutches his heart. “Ouch.”

Looking over the city, it strikes me that I haven’t sat like this in a long time. Just sitting and looking at a great view for no other reason than because it’s there. I begin to relax a little.

Eventually he breaks the silence.

“So, Steven, what do you see from up here?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean, what do you see when you look out over the city?”

“I see lights. Lots of lights.”

Andy rolls his eyes at me a little. “That’s it? Lots of lights?”

“Yeah. What are you getting at?”

“Tell me what you imagine is going on in some of those homes down there.”

*I don’t like this. I don’t need this. I’m not up for wherever he thinks this is heading.*

“Go ahead,” he presses. “Humor me. What’s going on down there tonight in LA?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Lots of stuff. Some good, some not so good.”

He takes a minute before speaking again. His tone seems to change, his volume is lower, his pace a little slower, as if he’s saying something he thinks is important.

“Yea, lots of *stuff*. Husbands and wives fighting. Angry kids fuming in their rooms, resenting their parents’ authority. Some of those lights are cars with sad and lonely kids inside, driving around, acting tough, looking for something...anything.”

Andy closes his eyes and rubs his thumb and forefinger together over them. “It starts young, doesn’t it? They get hurt. Maybe they get hurt real bad early on. And if they’re not careful, they learn something that takes a lifetime to unlearn. They learn to cover up, to protect themselves. They don’t even know they’re doing it at first. But later they can’t stop it even when they want to.

“All those people down there, walking and driving around, confused—angry, hurt, wounded, afraid, resentful—they all have some things in common.”

He stops speaking, as if he wants me to ask. I begrudgingly reply, “What’s that?”

“Well,” he says, after doffing his cigar into an oversized ashtray all cars used to come equipped with, “They’ve learned to protect themselves. Now they’re adults and they’re discovering this cruel secret: *they can’t protect themselves*. In fact, the last person who can protect them is them.”

I turn to look at him. That was almost profound, what he just said. I ask him to repeat it.

“They end up trusting only themselves,” he continues, ignoring my request. “And all of these people have others around who could help them see...if only they asked for help. But fear keeps them from asking. So everybody does an elaborate dance around each other. A guarded, well-intended conspiracy of silence surrounds almost every conversation. What isn’t said is louder than what’s spoken. Friends dance around friends for years, holding back truths that would set the other free. The memory of failed attempts, hurt feelings, and estranged relationships blocks light from entering the room.”

Andy pauses before saying, “We’re an entire population of people with spinach in our teeth—and no one to tell us.”

He puts his hands behind his head, leaning back into the sofa-like seat. “Every light down there represents a person. Every light tells a story. A lot of them are stories of what happens when we try to self-protect.”

I need to change things up. I open the door and walk out several feet onto the bluff. It is so quiet I can hear my feet scuffing at the dirt. I turn back toward the car. “What do you mean, ‘self-protect’?” I ask, knowing I risk another speech.

“Self-protection. You know, that guarded self-deception where we miss how we’re really coming off because we’re afraid to let anyone tell us.”

“Give me an example.”

“Well, some forms are pretty inconsequential. Like talking too long before allowing the other to respond. Or talking too close. *Man*, that one, whew!” He shudders a little. “But there are much harsher and more damaging expressions of self-protection.”

Andy takes another long draw on his cigar, adjusting his rearview mirror.

“These are the people fully blind to the destruction they’re causing or allowing. Like a homemaker too embarrassed to tell someone about the hidden pain in her marriage—that she’s contemplating running away to escape it. She’s convinced she has to live alone in her pain.

“Or a high school student trapped by porn but too ashamed to let anybody know. So day after day, he wraps himself in increasing darkness that will follow him into his marriage and contaminate the family he’ll one day raise.”

I’m slowly walking along the edge of the bluff, taking in the entire Southland as he speaks. Andy’s voice is like a narrator’s soundtrack, and my eyes are the camera capturing what I imagine might be happening at this very moment in the homes below.

“Maybe it’s a single guy, so desperate to be known but so afraid he’s gonna be rejected that he overwhelms anyone who gets close. Or a salesman so full of arrogance that he pushes away those

he longs to impress. It's a teacher, still scarred by something once done to her. She now wears a façade of bland, empty politeness—leaving her unable to reach her students.

“Or it's a son bottling up his anger at his parents' control, unaware the anger is excreting a poison that will make him sick for a long time. Or a middle-aged man who feels irrelevant and overwhelmed by life, so he retreats into clichés and packaged slogans. He'd give anything just to feel important and known again.

“Hundreds of thousands of lights represent the immensely talented and gifted who rarely get to see their abilities released. They keep slamming up against the same wall over and over because there's no one to protect them in their weak areas. They end up bitter and cynical.”

I call back to the car, “We've got an entire department of those at my company. It's called Creative Development. They're all bright and have talent to burn, but there's always some fatal flaw seething under the surface just waiting for a run-in with a supervisor.”

“And none of this, Steven, even begins to describe the lights that have been intentionally turned off. They're convinced if others can't see an issue, it might somehow not exist. These are the most pitiful. They're being eaten alive in private. In fact, it's the hiding that gives it power. That's how obsessions and addictions and all forms of twisted junk all gain their strength. And slowly, gradually, its fruit begins to define their lives.”

Hoping he'll reveal something about Langston, I ask, “You struggle with this kind of stuff, Andy?”

He slowly looks back at me. “Every one of us wrestles with something, Steven, something that threatens to take us down. I do. You do. God watches these scenes every night, all night. Every one. He's able to slow it down and enter in, one person at a time. He's the only one who can see in the dark. It breaks His heart long before the rest of us see the results.”

I kick at the ground. “And this lecture? It's supposed to encourage me?”

He looks directly at me. “I'm sorry. I'm talking a lot, aren't I?”

“Yes, you are.”

“Steven, let me ask you a question. What do all these people need?”

I walk back from the ledge, taking off the ridiculous sunglasses. “That’s kind of like asking a person who’s lost his keys to tell you where he lost them. Don’t you think?”

He smiles and then laughs. “That’s good.”

We’re both quiet for a bit. I’m wishing I’d worn a jacket. And I’m wishing we could find a way to wrap this up. This really isn’t heading in a direction that’s going to help. I guess I thought he saw something that night and would have some good advice that would somehow change things. But I’m starting to get that Andy’s just a nice guy. As a friend of my dad’s, I owed him this. But I don’t want to string the guy along, letting him think he’s helping me when he’s not.

Andy’s leaning against the driver door, like he’s settling in for another long dissertation on something or other. I’m about to tell him I need to get back, when he speaks in almost a whisper.

“So, Steven, why weren’t you able to go home that afternoon last week?”

This is my chance.

“Andy, that’s a great question. And if I wasn’t getting cold, I’d probably enjoy answering it. What do you say we head back, and maybe we’ll figure it out another time? I appreciate what you’re trying to do. I really do.”

I think I’ve genuinely caught him off guard. He seems embarrassed. “Oh! You want to head back. Well...sure.” He inspects his cigar. “I’m not even halfway done with this puppy. You want to head back, huh? Down the hill...?”

“I just need to get back.”

“He immediately sits up and fumbles with his keys. “Yep. Back. That’s what we’ll do.” He starts up the car and I climb back in and buckle up.

We sit there for a few moments with the car rumbling. He's looking forward, his hand still on the keys. Then, as though he's had a complete change of mind, he turns the car off, reworks his ball cap, and turns back toward me. He stares at me for an uncomfortably long time.

*Just start the car! I'm thinking.*

"You're not used to answering questions like this one, are you?"

I look back at him, trying to look sincere. "No, it's not that. I'm just tired. And cold. I need to get back."

"It's probably sixty up here. If this were working for you, it wouldn't seem that cold. You're done with this conversation, aren't you? You're impatient with the pace of all this. You've lost interest. You're an important guy, and when you're done, you're done. Don't patronize me, Steven. That's what's happening, right?"

"Yes, Andy," I say. "That's what's happening."

He winces and then smiles. "Don't mince words, speak your mind, Steven." Then suddenly he slaps his hand to his forehead. "You know, I completely forgot! What would you say if I told you I had a Dodger warm-up jacket in the trunk?"

"I'd say you're trying to keep us from going back."

He smiles as he opens the driver side door and heads to the trunk. "It's a really nice jacket. Give me a second."

A few moments later I'm wearing a Dodger warm-up. Not a flimsy windbreaker but one of those shiny heavyweight flannel-lined ones relief pitchers wear in the bullpen. This guy is something! I think he just wants to be with me.

"So?" he asks, as if he's just served me a fancy dinner and wants some feedback.

"It's fine. Plenty warm. Thanks."

"About my question—you gonna take a hack at it?"

"I'm sorry, Andy," I say. "What was the question again?"

“Why weren’t you able to go home that afternoon last week?”

“Andy, did you even read my e-mail?”

“Yes.”

“Did you not read the part about Lindsey and me having an argument? You’re up here with me and you’re talking about people down there. I’d like to help them. But I happen to be in the middle of a marriage that’s having some problems at the moment.”

“Tell me about it,” he says.

“It was just stupid. I forgot to pick up our daughter. And Lindsey lit into me. It’s like she waits until she’s got the right ammo. And then she keeps poking until she gets me angry. She knows she can do it almost anytime she wants. It got pretty ugly. I got exasperated and I lost my temper. I just need to stop letting her get to me, you know?” That’s all he needs to know.

“That’s it?” he asks.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Andy shakes his head. “Because I gotta tell you, it doesn’t sound like that’s it. Married people get into arguments. And most married people get exasperated. Comes with the vows. But none of that sounds like bumping-into-furniture-in-the-dark kind of stuff.”

“Look, I know what you’re gonna say. I know what I need to do. It’s just a matter of doing it. It’s the God thing. I need to get back on track. I know I’d be able to face things better. I know I should make time. But I get busy. I need to just get away and get things back in order.”

Andy’s quiet.

“They’ve got a married couples’ class at our church. That would make her happy and we probably wouldn’t be at each other’s throats. You know, just being around other couples.”

“So, you’ve got it figured out. You just need a spiritual kick in the pants, eh?”

I give a half smile. “Well, more than that, but yeah, sort of. Right?”

“And that’ll solve it? You know, the reason you keep showing up in Fenton’s parking lot?”

“Andy, you want to know the truth. At least half of this stuff is about her. But she thinks it’s about me. I can’t win that one. So I can just fix my stuff, get my world in order.”

“And you were kind of hoping maybe I might be that magic man with the silver bullet, huh?” he says.

“What are you saying, Andy?”

“I’m saying that you think you understand what your problems are. You don’t need anyone’s help; you just need better coffee. Listen, there’s a great place in Hermosa Beach. High-octane. We’ll get you some caffeine, and you can be on your way.”

He starts the car.

“Hold on a minute. I don’t get it. Why are we leaving?”

He speaks over the sound of the engine. “I think I’m trying too hard for something you don’t want. Maybe *I’m* the one getting cold now.”

This guy is a piece of work. “Andy, I don’t get you.”

“Look, Steven, like those people down there, you’ve been protecting yourself like this all your life.”

“Why do say that?” I ask. “How do you know that?”

“Here’s the pattern.” “You go along the best you can... until every now and then, when some issue slaps you in the face. You ignore it until the slapping gets too painful. Then you go to work on the symptoms. Maybe you get your wife to admit to her issues, or you take an extra day off here and there. You learn how to argue nicer. You read a book on dealing with your anger. Symptoms. Maybe you even kind of fix one or two and think that life will now be all better. The slapping actually seems to get a little less frequent and painful for a while.”

I have no idea where this is supposed to be heading.

“But eventually the pain returns,” Andy continues. “But now it starts to scare you because you realize that fixing the symptoms didn’t fix anything. And you don’t maybe know it yet, but this

time, until you face what's causing the slapping, you won't be able to get back to your day to day. That's why you've been showing up in Fenton's parking lot. That's why this last argument freaked you out enough to make you e-mail me."

"Turn off the car," I say.

He does.

"What, are you saying we're not supposed to work on our issues?"

Andy shakes his head. "No. I'm saying you *think* you know what's wrong. You can identify symptoms, so you're sure you've discovered the real issues of your life. You think because you know something is wrong, you have the ability to solve it. You've been doing this for as long as you can remember. And so far, every time, you've been wrong. You're zero for the last several years, my boy. And sometimes, late at night, lying in bed, you get really scared. A can't-go-back-to-sleep scared. Because you suspect there are deeper issues—ones you don't have the foggiest idea how to solve."

Against my will I look Andy directly in the eyes.

"And on this particular assessment," he says, "you are 100 percent correct."

"Look," I say, "I thought you wanted to help me."

"I can't. At least not on your terms. So, are you gonna stop trying to buy me off and answer my question, or am I buying you a pound of coffee and sending you on your way?"

"Stop the drama, Andy. What are you trying to get out of me?"

"A *way in*." Andy taps his chest with his fingers. "Steven, I don't think anyone has had access to your real issues—maybe ever. You've managed to keep everyone who wants to help at the surface level of our symptoms and behaviors. If you want my help, we can't have that kind of relationship. Even *I'm* too busy for that."

I do not get this guy.

Andy reaches toward the ignition switch. “Look, it’s late. I’ve confused you enough. Let’s call it a night.”

“Wait,” I say. “Don’t start the car. Lindsey and I—she asked me leave the house. I’m living out of a hotel right now.”

Andy waits for a few seconds before he suddenly yells out, “Oh, man I knew it! I was afraid of that.”

“What?”

“I *knew* it.”

“Don’t give me that,” I snap back. “Nobody knows.”

“I did. I’m good, that’s all I can say.”

“Tell me then. How do you think you know?”

“I put it together when you pulled into Fenton’s tonight. The parking garage tag on your rearview mirror. An executive doesn’t get one of those for parking at his office. You people get a nice little card to put in a machine.” He slaps his knee. “I could have been a detective, I tell you. I’m that good!”

“That’s it? My parking garage tag?”

“Yea, that and the fact that you look like crap. No offense, but few wives would let their husbands leave the house looking like you do. Have you taken a look at your hair?”

Just when I’m ready to rip into him, I look over and he’s smiling kindly at me. He says quietly, “Thanks, Steven. That took a lot of courage. And I’m sorry. I really am.”

“So now what?” I ask.

“Down there in that city, millions of people are hiding stuff, presenting only what they think they can control. They carry around guilt or anger or bottled-up hurt and don’t have any idea where to put it. It eats at them. It wakes them up at night. It sits in the passenger seat on long drives alone. It goes with them on vacation. It follows them into church and drowns out the message.”

Somewhere off in the distance I hear the low roar of an airliner passing across the sky. There's also the never-ending hum of traffic, like the earth is running on a noisy battery. But in the Electra there's no sound.

*I can't stop this blur of noisy thoughts. Something feels like it's never going to get better. And it's slowly tearing apart everything around me. Whatever it is, it's been there a long time.*

Andy interrupts my thoughts. "What are you feeling, Steven?"

"See, that's just it," I tell him. "Most of the time I don't feel. I just react to whatever's going on around me. I've become really good at it. I don't like this, where we are right now. I hate pain. It all feels like I should have figured it out by now. A feeling that no one knows Steve Kerner and if I died today I'd be nauseated by what others would say at my funeral. There."

It is quiet...and uncomfortable. I think I've said too much.

Andy lights another cigar. He puts his hand on my shoulder. "That, what you just said a moment ago? That was good and real. I can work with that."

Then he starts up the Electra and steers it down the hill and back toward all those lights full of stories of pain, struggle, and hiding, one of which is my own. The smell of his cigar, mixed with the feel of the wind and the sound of the engine, is strangely comforting. Andy slides a cassette of Van Morrison into the dash.

Soon we catch the 405 and merge onto Washington before taking the several-mile stretch of surface streets back to Fenton's. It must be 9:30. I look at my watch for the first time. 11:55.

He lifts his cigar in my direction. "You want one next time? They smell a lot better if you're smoking one."

"No, thanks."

"Just thought I'd ask." He pulls the car to a stop next to mine.

I look down at my hands, unsure what to say after our strange evening together. "Thanks, I guess."

“You gotta jiggle the handle to get it open. I keep meaning to get it fixed.”

I get out of the car and head toward mine. As Andy starts to pull away, I turn back and flag him down. I walk up to the driver’s side. “So, why are you doing this?” I ask.

“Uhm,” he says, scratching his chin, like he’s contemplating the answer to a riddle. “Because I can’t get home without leaving the parking lot?”

“You know what I mean. Why are you doing this for me?”

He answers, “Hey, can you get off one afternoon next week?”

“During the day?” I ask.

“Yeah, that’s where they’ve started putting the afternoons now.”

His evasiveness is frustrating me. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“Right. Fair question. Lots of answers to that one. It’s late. Can we get at it next time?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No. Probably not.”

“Then I guess next time it is.”

“Would you like my phone number, Steven? Just in case you can’t make it.”

“Yea. That would be good.”

I punch his number into my phone.

“It’s a new phone. I’m not very good at answering it yet. I’m still trying to figure it out. Half the time it rings this obnoxious jingle, the rest of the time it doesn’t ring at all. I’ll find missed calls from the week before. But I’ve noticed it takes good pictures. Lot of money a month for a tiny camera. I actually tried to punch my number into my own phone yesterday. I wasn’t made for this decade, I tell you.”

“I understand,” I say, not understanding at all.

“Have a good night, Steven. Next Thursday, say noon?”

Before I can answer, he revs the engine and the giant Buick Electra rumbles out of the parking lot. By the time I look up from unlocking my car door, he has vanished down Colorado Boulevard and into the cool night air.

I check my e-mail upon my arrival back at the Marriot. Lindsey has written this:

Steven, I've been praying a lot about this. I know this doesn't sound right coming in an e-mail, but I'm considering pursuing a legal separation. One moment I'm thinking I should call this off and invite you back home. The next moment I'm replaying one of the dozens of times where you yelled me down until I had to leave the room. Time apart from you and some talks with friends have opened my eyes. This is not normal, Steven. I don't want to live like this anymore. I love you, Steven, but I don't love this life we're in. I want Jennifer to have a future where she can just be a kid and laugh and hear laughter in her home. I don't know what needs to happen for you. You are so angry and unhappy and I don't know how to help you anymore. I know God can help us, I just don't know how right now.

***“My Respect for Burglars is Rising by the Moment”***

**(Friday afternoon, March 25<sup>th</sup>)**

I need a document on my desk at home for a meeting later today and I’m running short on clothes. So I leave the office and run over to our house at lunchtime. I put my key into the lock and the door doesn’t open. I check my key and try it again. Nothing. I go around back and try the patio entrance. Same nothing.

*You gotta be kidding me. She’s had the locks changed. Lindsey’s locked me out of my own house!*

I stay in the backyard for fear that Melanie Patton might see me.

I call Lindsey’s cell phone. I can’t believe she’d do this. No answer. I check some doors. No luck. This is as stupid as it gets. Do we have a key under something? I’m so angry I can’t even remember. Does a neighbor have a key? I call her cell phone again. I leave a message for her to call me. Then I try the garage side door. Locked...

Finally I discover an unlocked window. Jennifer’s bathroom. It’s tiny and about seven feet up. After several efforts of gouging it with a garden trowel, I eventually pry the screen off. I grab a lawn chair, prop it against the patio wall, and start to work my way up and over. But there’s nothing below in the bathroom to break my fall. And the window’s so small there’s no room to cram my feet in first, so I try to wedge my legs around the outside brickwork and work myself down the bathroom wall—my left hand almost supported by the toilet roll dispenser with the slick metal lid. I’ve now got grease on the front of my shirt from the window frame. Great. The final drop is about four feet.

*I cannot believe I am doing this, breaking into my own home, dangling over some really hard tile...My respect for burglars is rising by the moment.*

Blood rushing to my head, I finally drop to the floor, landing really hard on my shoulder. I get up, inspect myself for damage, and begin my search for clothes and work papers. Then the phone rings. It’s her.

“Steven?”

“Yes. Lindsey, do you know where I am?”

“No.”

“I’m in our house.”

“You’re in the house?”

“That’s right.”

“What are you doing in there? How did...I had the locks changed.”

“I noticed. Lindsey, what in the hell are you doing, locking me out of my home?”

“Don’t even start. What are *you* doing? How did you get in the house?”

“Jennifer’s bathroom window was open. This is crazy, Lindsey. This is my house. I cannot believe you did this.”

“You need to get out of the house right now, Steven.”

“How could you possibly think it was a good idea to change the locks? Huh?”

“Steven, you scared me. You scared us. Laura told me I should change the locks until we figure things out. I don’t know what to do right now.”

I scream into the phone. “Laura Creighton told you! Great. The voice of reason. She’s an idiot! I can’t believe this!”

“Please, get out of the house, Steven.”

“Lindsey, did you ever think I might need some clothes at some point? I’m picking up clothes and some papers.”

“I don’t know who to call. I want you out of there.”

“Stop saying that!” I yell.

“Stop yelling at me, Steven.”

“You locked me out of my own house!”

Then I hear a click. She has hung up on me.

I walk into the living room and sit down in the same chair I sat in the night they both walked out the front door.

*What is happening? This is so stupidly out of control.*

I don't know what else to do and I don't know who to call. I remember I have Andy's number. I call him.

"Hello? Hello? Geez, I hate that jingle."

"Andy, it's Steven."

"The dangd thing rang this time. I completely miss a bunch of calls earlier and this one gets through. I'm at the same place the whole time. Go figure."

I'm rethinking my choice to have called him.

"I don't even know why I called, Andy."

"Well, I'm not sure how I answered. So we're even. What's up, Steven?"

"I'm so mad I can barely sit still," I say. I'm up and pacing now as I talk.

"And so you called me? And to think I picked this one up and missed four others."

"I'm serious, Andy."

"So am I. I gotta get another provider. That's what they call 'em right? Providers?"

"Yes, Andy. Providers."

"So, what's up, young man?"

"My wife locked me out of my house."

"Hmmm. That sounds serious."

"Look, I've taken the high road for the last, what, ten days? And look what it's gotten me. I should've never left this house. This is my house. Right? This is crap. She's got a whole pack of people taking up for her. It's crap! I'm not going to let this happen. If she wants someone gone, it's gonna be her. I'll freeze her credit cards, I'll freeze the checking. I'm not gonna keep doing this."

The line's silent.

“Andy?”

“That’s another thing. The line can just go dead on me. For no reason. Thought it just happened again. Obviously not. ’Cause I can hear you talking now clear as a bell.”

“Did you hear me, Andy?”

“Yes, I heard you, Steven. So you’re gonna freeze her credit cards, huh?”

“I just don’t want to make Jennifer pay for this.”

“This reminds me of a Henny Youngman joke,” Andy says. You ever hear of Henny Youngman, Steven?”

“I guess.”

Andy continues, “So a guy walks into a bar and says, ‘My wife’s credit card just got stolen.’ So, I ask him if he’s going to shut down the account. He answers, ‘I don’t think so. He’s spending less than she did.’ Woo, that’s funny!”

I do not get this guy at all.

“Anyhoo,” he finishes, like a bad comedian. “So, what then, after you freeze the cards?”

“I don’t know. I’m just sick of this.”

“Steven, listen to me. I want you to gather up enough clothes and stuff to last for a while, and then I want you to walk out the door and lock it behind you.”

“What? I’m really serious, Andy.”

“So am I, Steven. You scared your wife. I have no idea what you did, but you really scared her. And she has no ability to stop you. Only this temporary fix. You have no idea how serious this is. Unless I’m wrong, you don’t want to lose her. And you are this close to losing her—this close. And you don’t want that, Steven. Listen, you don’t know me well yet, but this one is about you, my friend. Now you can hang up on me and freeze the accounts all you want, but tonight the furniture will move again, and you won’t be able to turn that light on again for a long time.”

“She says she’s considering getting a separation,” I add.