

THE RENTER

"He's everything I want to be."

"Oh come on, Andrew. He's a writer, just like you're a writer."

"Fifty books, Gwen. Twelve Hugos, five Nebulas, eight Edgars. And how many movies based on his work? He's not *just* a writer."

"Something to shoot for. I always wanted to be with a famous writer."

I take my eyes off the road to look over at her. Her smile is the most beautiful thing in the world, the one she's given me through three years of manuscript polishing, agent searching, and publisher rejections. It's the one she's given me since my first book came out to weak sales. It's a smile that says she doesn't care if we have to scrape by while I work out the kinks in my dream. It's a smile that says 'I believe in you, and I believe in your dream, and we will work together until it happens.'

"Whoa," she says. "Is that the house?"

Richard Green's house is three stories of towers and arched windows, all encased in brick and garnished with climbing ivy. It looks like it came right out of one of his horror novels.

I park the car and take a deep breath.

"You'll do fine," Gwen assures me. She's got her black dress on, the one that brings out her figure so well. I'd fussed over my outfit for an hour before she thrust a respectable oxford shirt at me and told me to wear jeans. "You'll do fine," she repeats, leaning across the car to give me a kiss on the cheek. "Let's go."

Richard Green answers the door as soon as I knock. He looks just like the picture on his dust jackets: fifty-ish, lanky gray hair, John Lennon glasses.

"Andrew, Gwen, so nice to meet you." He shakes my hand, then gives Gwen a peck on the cheek. "Come in, come in. Any trouble finding the place?"

I mumble something about GPS and Richard gives a polite laugh.

"Once we got close enough," Gwen says, "we just let the gravitational pull of the house drag us in."

Richard laughs for real at that. "It is a great granddaddy of a house, isn't it? Should have seen it when we bought the place. Dinner's almost ready. Hope you like mess-hall chili. Nance was the cook around here. Drink anyone? Wine? Beer?"

"Water for me," I say.

"You sure? I opened a very nice Malbec. I wanted it to breathe, shame to waste it."

"A glass for me," Gwen says.

We follow Richard through a stately hallway with twelve foot ceilings and into a huge chef's kitchen. Gleaming stainless steel appliances and impeccable marble countertops make the kitchen seem like an island of modernity in the antique house. He pours a glass of wine for Gwen, and water for me and him.

"None of the Malbec for you?" Gwen asks him.

"Not in almost three years, but I'll enjoy you enjoying it. Nothing prettier than a beautiful woman drinking a beautiful wine."

Gwen smiles at the compliment and takes a sip, then looks at the bottle. "French? Interesting. I'm more used to the South American malbecs."

"The lady knows her wines, Andrew. Hang on to this one!" Richard laughs and I chuckle. "Love your book, Andrew. Wouldn't change a thing."

I was too surprised to answer. When my agent had passed on the dinner invitation from Richard Green, I'd assumed that he'd reached out as a professional courtesy, two writers living in the same small corner of the world.

"I know you got reamed in the reviews, and the sales haven't picked up, but I gotta tell you, it was one of my favorites this year. Damn reviewers get all confused if you're not trying to hide Freud and Faulkner inside every sentence. Not everybody's shooting for the Man Booker prize. Give me a good story simply told. You did that."

"Thanks," I say. "Really, that means a lot. It's been a long road."

"Know what you mean. When I was writing *Drowning Dorothy* it felt like a roller coaster. Some days it felt like a masterpiece, others I wanted to chuck the whole thing in the fire. It's like that the first time, when nobody knows who you are and you can't catch a publisher's eye if you were naked and on fire. Hang in there and you'll catch your break. Lots of good stuff in your first book. *Downstairs*, great title, first of all. We all turn out the lights and go upstairs to bed and there's a part of us that wonders what's going on down there in the dark. Then the Renter, fantastic character."

"We rented a little studio apartment in someone's house when we first got together. We always felt kinda like intruders."

"Sure, sure. And then at the end when we find out what the Renter *really* is. Genius. I did not see that coming. Gave me the chills, Andrew. Not gonna lie."

"That was Gwen's idea, the twist at the end."

"A muse, too."

"What can I say." Gwen says. "I've wanted to be Zelda Fitzgerald since I was fourteen."

"Hold on tight to this one, Andrew. Take it from someone who knows."

"You lost your wife," Gwen says. "I think I read a newspaper story."

Green stirs the chili with his back to us for a beat.

"Almost three years ago."

I remember the story. Car accident, drunk driver. Richard was injured too, still has a limp. He wrote a novel about the guy who did it, made him into a scum-of-the-earth villain who got the shit kicked out of him in the end. I guess that's one way to deal with anger, tell your million readers what a dick the guy was.

"I'm so sorry," Gwen says.

"Thank you," Richard says. "Funny how you write about things your whole career, people dying stupid, brutal deaths, but when it happens to you for real you're still not ready."

"I can't imagine," Gwen says. Richard refills her glass.

"Speaking as a professional of the imagination, I can tell you that it is not possible to imagine. We're not built for that kind of loss." He heaves a deep sigh. "But that's not why we're here, is it?"

“Richard Green’s blue ribbon chili?” I say.

“Exactly! You have a way with words, Andrew. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

I glance at Gwen. Her cheeks are flushed from the wine and she’s staring at Richard.

“Andrew, I’d like to co-author your next book.”

—

“It’s an amazing opportunity.”

Gwen and I are back in the car. I don’t remember the chili or dessert if there was one. All I can think about is Richard Green and my next book.

“So you’re going to do it?”

“I’d be a fool not to. It’s everything I wanted. Put his name next to mine on the next book and I’m guaranteed readers. Can’t ask for more.”

“Would it be a sequel?”

“I don’t know. Seemed like Richard was thinking a sequel based on the Renter character.”

“How would it work?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never co-written before. He gave me his email. I guess maybe we’d trade chapters, or work up an outline.”

“He really liked your ideas.”

“Yeah, that was fun, riffing on the first book, how the Renter survived, next victims, all that stuff.” I laugh and it feels good. It takes a second to recognize the feeling.

“Well, this better work, mister. I’ve always wanted to be with a famous writer. This is the big one, isn’t it?”

I roll the car window down and put my hand out into the warm June air. She’s right. This is the big one.

“Gwen, this is the big one.” My voice rises and by the end of the sentence I’m yelling in triumph.

“We did it!” Gwen kicks her feet under the dash and shoots both hands into the air like a little girl at a birthday party.

It’s more of a relief than anything. I’ve felt it before, when an agent said yes after all those rejections, and again when I signed the deal with the publisher. This time it’s bigger though. It’s going to work out, this crazy idea, this job that doesn’t pay a dime until you’ve put in a few thousand hours and maybe not even then. I’ll be able to pay bills, take a vacation, retire eventually, write books until I’ve got nothing more to write about.

Gwen leans over and hugs me around the neck. Normally I’d scold her for distracting the driver but tonight I just lay on the horn as we fly through the night past farmhouses and open fields. Gwen grabs my earlobe in her mouth and tugs lightly, then falls back into her seat. I look over and she’s unbuttoning her dress, the one that shows off her figure so well.

“Pull over somewhere,” she says.

I pull over.

Date: 4/6
To: Andrew@TLink.com
From: Richard@GreenStory.com
Re: 1st Chapter

Got what you sent me and I like a lot of what's going on. Good dialogue, solid setting. I like the "like Toni Morrison in a Celtics jersey" line. I can't help thinking that we're not getting enough pop on the plot, though. What's the heart of this story and how does this chapter aim us there?

No Renter yet? People are going to want to hear from him again as soon as possible. I've added some notes and revisions. Let me know what you think.

Date: 4/6
To: Richard@GreenStory.com
From: Andrew@TLink.com
Re: 1st Chapter

I'm with you on the heart of the story question. I don't think we ever really hammered that out so I thought I'd send some work and see what comes out of it. As far as the Renter, I was thinking he only showed up halfway through *Downstairs* so I wanted to hold off for a while before introducing him.

I took a readthrough on your revisions. I like the pitbull joke, definitely gives us a better idea of who Myla is. I'm not sure about the cliffhanger right at the end of ch. 1. It seems a little like we're working too hard to keep 'em moving forward with tricks.

I should be able to get a good chunk of work in tomorrow. Will send what I have.

Date: 4/6
To: Andrew@TLink.com
From: Richard@GreenStory.com
Re: Selling Books

Readers love cliffhangers, lap 'em up like a drunk who spilled his whiskey on the bar. I see what you're going for by keeping back the Renter, but you've really gotta hit 'em with your best punch right out of the gate. Plenty of other books out there these days. We gotta make 'em grab ours and never let go.

I'm attaching a revised first chapter and a potential second chapter. Let me know what you think.

"How's it going?" Gwen says, cracking my office door and peeking her head through.

"How do you know just when to interrupt me?"

"I listen. When you're typing fast, no interruptions. "

"So you come in when I'm not typing?"

"Nope, that's when your thinking."

"When then?"

"When you're typing slow. Peck, peck, peck. That means you're stuck." She steps into the room and I pull her into my lap.

"I did not know that."

"So how's it going?"

"I'm stuck. Didn't know it but you just said I was so I must be."

"No really, how's it going. This thing with Green. You guys started, right?"

"We've been emailing."

"And?"

"And ...it's been strange."

"Hmm, not a glowing report."

"No, it's fine. We're just feeling each other out, I think. I'm sure we'll settle into a groove."

"You don't sound sure."

"It's just ...I sent him a first chapter and he had some notes. No problem. I'm not saying it's perfect. But then he sends me his version, and another chapter, and I just don't get it. He said he liked *Downstairs* but this stuff he sent me is really different from that."

"Different how?"

"Different like over the top huge drama right from the first chapter. He says readers like cliffhangers, right from the beginning."

"And how many books has he sold?"

"I know, I know," I reply. "I get that. And I know that I signed up for this. It just feels weird to have someone in there and messing around with my work, you know?"

"Go to sleep," Gwen says, ruffling my hair. "You're feeling sorry for yourself because you got your big break. Come back in the morning and hit it out of the park. What's he gonna say then?"

Date: 4/8

To: Andrew@TLink.com

From: Richard@GreenStory.com

Re: *Downstairs*

Hey, just spitballing but have you considered a new edition of *Downstairs*? I know it just came out last year, but I think we could really go in and fix a couple things and while we're at it add a few bridges to this new piece we're working on. I've attached a

doc with some of my revision ideas. I know it's a pain in the ass, but I'm sure the publisher would be on board if I talked to them.

Date: 4/9

To: Andrew@TLink.com

From: Richard@GreenStory.com

Re: Sequel Twist

I'm just wondering where we might be headed with the twist on the sequel. No rush, but it would be nice to get some ideas flowing. Maybe ask Gwen for help. She knows what's up.

Date: 4/9

To: Richard@GreenStory.com

From: Andrew@TLink.com

Re: Sequel

I'll think about a twist. I was thinking of going more straightforward this time.

As far as *Downstairs*, I put that one to bed, not sure I want to go back to it, you know what I mean?

Date: 4/10

To: Andrew@TLink.com

From: Richard@GreenStory.com

Re: Sequel

Not sure I agree on the twist. I think we need one; your readers expect it. Last thing you want to do is jerk your readers around, sell 'em something they aren't expecting.

Also, I've been thinking about Myla and her mother. I like the diversity angle, but I'm wondering whether we should make them white. I think the sexual undercurrent works better that way. Maybe base Myla on Gwen. Write what you know, right :)

"Whatcha reading?"

"Nothing." I click my email tab closed and turn my chair to face Gwen.

"This project going slow?"

"Not really," I say, rubbing my eyes. "Kinda. I don't know. I feel like we're getting a lot of words down, but we're writing past each other."

"Example?"

"So he *really* wants this twist thing to happen. I get it, but this story feels more organic to me. I feel like a stunner at the end is going to leave people chuckling, not shocked. Like *not* having a surprise ending would be more surprising than having one."

"Maybe you're overthinking it. People like patterns. And remember the reviews, 'a turn you'll never see coming.' That was your best bit last time."

"*Your* best bit," I say with a smile. "It just seems like all we do is disagree. He's got a ton more experience, but ..."

"You're beating yourself up. Of course all you do is disagree. You don't need to talk about the things that are good."

"He wants to change the two main characters, make them white because he thinks people won't dig the sex as much if they're black. Wants me to base Myla on you."

"Does he now?" she says, cocking an eyebrow. "And you were thinking of doing some research?"

I give her a rueful smile and turn back to my computer. "Love to, but I've gotta get back to Richard."

She leans over my back and brings her mouth up to my ear. "Okay, baby," she whispers. "But don't be too long. Maybe the twist is that Myla knows exactly who the Renter is, and she likes it, and she's waiting for him, but she won't wait forever."

She gives me a nip on the earlobe and then turns to leave, giving me one last look over her shoulder. I turn back to my computer.

Date: 4/14

To: Andrew@TLink.com

From: Richard@GreenStory.com

Re: Twist

Hey, still thinking about that twist. Not sure if you have anything but it's not coming to me. I asked Gwen and she said she'd think about it.

Date: 4/14

To: Richard@GreenStory.com

From: Andrew@TLink.com

Re: Twist

You asked Gwen? I didn't know you had her email.

Date: 4/15

To: Andrew@TLink.com

From: Richard@GreenStory.com

Re: Twist

Yeah. That idea in *Downstairs* was inspired. Use what you can, right?

Date: 4/16

To: Andrew@TLink.com, Richard@GreenStory.com

From: Gwen@TLink.com

Re: Upstairs

Hey guys, thanks for inviting me to the clubhouse. I'm with Richard on the twist thing. I'll work on it but I think something where we see the Renter outdone would be awesome. In *Downstairs* he was soooooo creepy so if we can get something where we totally flip that on its head then readers will go crazy. Maybe Myla seduces him in the end, gets him to go *Upstairs*.

Myla and mom being black or white doesn't matter to me, but I know some readers have a hard time with the whole race thing. I'd defer to you on that one, Richard.

Date: 4/16

To: Andrew@TLink.com, Gwen@TLink.com

From: Richard@GreenStory.com

Re: Upstairs

Love the upstairs idea, Gwen. Andrew, wanna write that scene up, that way we have something we're aiming toward.

Date: 4/19

To: Andrew@TLink.com, Gwen@TLink.com

From: Richard@GreenStory.com

Re: Sex scene

Got your first draft of the sex scene. I'm not sure you're really capturing Gwen, here. Readers want details. What does she look like? What does she sound like? What does she *taste* like? I feel like you're trying to avoid turning us on when that's the whole point! Don't be a prude, go for gold. Remember this is the climax of the book, the turning point for Myla and the Renter. This first draft just isn't getting us there.

Date: 4/19

To: Andrew@TLink.com, Richard@GreenStory.com

From: Gwen@TLink.com
Re: Sex scene

I'm with Richard on the sex scene. You're holding back. Take the plunge and give us everything!

Date: 4/23
To: Andrew@TLink.com, Gwen@TLink.com
From: Richard@GreenStory.com
Re: Upstairs

New sex scene = better, by about a thousand miles. You've really given us everything and it's quite a ride. One question, why'd you leave out how much she likes to bite earlobes?

My stomach goes cold as I read the last line of Richard's email. "Gwen!" I shout. The house feels empty but maybe she's asleep. I tear up the stairs and snatch open our bedroom door. She's not there. A minute later I'm in the car and peeling out of the driveway. Richard's house is a forty minute drive. I make it in twenty-five.

I squeal to a stop and take the porch stairs two at a time. I start banging on the front door and then someone's moving behind the frosted glass. I can hear two muffled voices arguing for a minute but I don't stop banging.

The door cracks open and Gwen looks out.

"Andrew," she says. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?"

"You know how this ends, don't you? You know the last line of this little story. In a minute I'm going to close the door and you're going to turn around and drive away. You'll feel like you got horse-kicked, like your life got dropped out from under you, however you want to put it. You always had a way with words. Just don't say everything you knew was a lie. There weren't any lies, Andrew. You know the last line of the story. I've said it so many times."

I know what she's going to say before she says it.

"I've always wanted to be with a famous writer."