



Present day
Police Precinct
Sunnyside, Queens

There was nothing remarkable about the police interrogation room. If it were a bar, the sign on the wall would have read: TWO PERSONS MAXIMUM. Eggshell walls and a brown tile floor. Andes suddenly wished she were wearing yellow; she'd complete the metaphor: the yolk in the middle. Perhaps they were going for that effect, as if they wanted her to crack, or hatch her confession. Was there really anyone behind the one-way mirror? It too had cracks, and scratches, and particles of dust at the edges that begged for a healthy dose of Windex. Who was watching them from behind the mirror? Were they clutching little notepads and slurping strong black coffee? Andes thought she caught a whiff of it, but she hadn't been offered any. The tape recorder was running.

'I'm telling you right now, this is one big misunderstanding. I didn't kidnap anyone.' The officer, who looked like a kindly old grandfather, if your kindly old grandfather was the type to pick you up by your neck and give you a good shake while slowly but surely cutting off your oxygen with his gnarled knuckles, didn't say a word. Having grown up among them, Andes was no stranger to the strong, silent type. Men with deep voices hiding

behind their common-man exterior, vocal cords covered up by flannel shirts, wool scarves, and social norms. The quiet workingman, who, instead of a word, would just as soon give you a nod or a grunt, despite an eternal spring of sound, and thoughts, and jokes, hidden deep within.

Voices that could shout, sing, and speak in tongues. Voices ragged from years of working in coal mines and smoking cigarettes would somehow transform, melt into deep, dark, silk when the Lord moved on them to preach. The quiet whisper of their day voices would open up into a world of sound that both enchanted and commanded. Sitting here, on the verge of arrest, Andes could taste their voices on the tip of her tongue, catch them like snowflakes. Yet like these strong, silent men, she was suddenly at a loss for words. And it was looking like Andes, the self-proclaimed atheist, was in desperate need of an act of God.

But even if he was a religious man, it didn't look like the Lord or anything else was going to move on the police officer sitting across from her anytime soon, so she pushed her memories aside and continued with her confession. 'In the beginning, I didn't even want to babysit the kid. Not that I'm not a kid person, because I am. Kids adore me, and I've always tolerated them extremely well.' Andes paused again just in case he wanted to jump in, lead the interrogation. She didn't need a lawyer; she'd already told him that, this was just one big misunderstanding.

And people who asked for lawyers always looked guilty, everybody knew that. Still, Andes was keeping an ear out for what her lawyer might be objecting to if she had one. Since the officer had done little more than turn on a tape recorder and stare at her as if she were guilty until proved innocent, she'd done all the talking. Her little voice was whispering for her to stop, but her big voice plowed on.

‘That sounded awful – tolerating them – didn’t it? I just mean they’ve always liked me a little bit more than I’ve liked them. But if you saw how kids take to me, you’d realize it’s not a fair comparison. Basically, they fall madly in love with me, and I fall “normally” in love with them. That’s what I should have said. And I did fall madly in love with the kid. But I won’t lie; in the beginning I wanted to kill him.’

The officer raised an eyebrow. ‘Not literally, of course,’ Andes jumped in. ‘That would be wrong.’ The eyebrow went back down. Andes held her breath. Officer Friendly was starting to look bored. Andes wished again for a cup of coffee and this time added a chocolate cream-filled doughnut to her silent wish list as well.

‘But that’s okay, because at first the kid hated me too. I know, I just told you children fall madly in love with me. Well, the kid was the exception. The first time we met, he mortified me in front of an entire dock of people. I’m sorry.’ Andes apologized for the tears, now spilling out of her eyes and rolling down her cheeks.

She patted down her pockets for a tissue. Ever since she’d met the kid, she’d taken to carrying tissues in her pockets – who would have ever believed that? But she didn’t find one, he’d taken her last one, so instead she sniffed, inhaled, and topped her fantasy cup of coffee off with a shot of Baileys. But her doughnut, once sweet and decadent, now had an arsenic-centered filling. She imagined sliding it across the table to the overweight mute in blue. A glazed Trojan horse. Would she smile as he ate it? Make polite conversation? Would he recognize her betrayal seconds before the poison infiltrated his body? Poison doughnuts, poison pens, poison lipstick. Poppies, apples, parades. A harsh look from a lover. Painted toys from China. The single bite of a deadly snake. Kill him with kindness. *Hello, Juliet. Wake me up when Romeo’s dead.*

Andes bit her lip and tried to remember if she’d given

to the policemen's ball last year. 'I'm sorry. I don't normally cry in front of people. But the kid and I – we've come a long way, baby.' Andes laughed. 'Oh. Don't misunderstand that either. I don't smoke and neither does the kid. Believe me, if I was going to start, it would have been in here (not that you would have offered me one), and if the kid ever started, I'd kill him. Not literally, of course—'

'That would be wrong,' the officer finished for her. He heaved forward and snapped off the tape recorder. Andes, who had become accustomed to him being seen and not heard, was startled when he started speaking.

'You don't smoke?' he asked.

'No.'

'Then why all these?' The officer reached into his lap, brought up a plastic Foodtown bag, and shook the contents onto the table. Once again, he clicked Record on the tape recorder. Andes stared at her matchbook collection, obscenely splayed across the table for the world to see. She curled her fingers around the side of her chair and squeezed, fighting the urge to sweep the matchbooks onto her lap and caress them.

'Do these belong to you?' the officer asked. The tiniest flicker of apprehension manifested itself on Andes's upper lip in the form of a little bead of sweat.

'Where did you get them?' she asked. Her voice sounded hollow and foreign in her ears. It wasn't really what she wanted to know anyway. What she really wanted to know was what had happened to the carved wooden box in which her collection belonged. It was an old snake box Brother Elliot carved by hand forty years ago. It once housed cottonmouths, diamondbacks, and timber snakes, but Andes didn't bother to mention that either. 'Where's the box? Didn't they come in a wooden box?' She was aware of her voice rising and cracking, but compared to the out-and-out fit she wanted to throw, she was holding it together remarkably well. Who would take those beautiful little works of fire art out

of a hand-carved box and toss them into a plastic Foodtown bag?

How many people had touched her gems, how much oil from how many fingers had seeped into the miniature works of art, marring their individuality with anonymous fingerprints? As if wanting to ratchet up her distress, the officer grabbed her matchbook from Barcelona and flicked it open with his fat thumb. He was going to ruin the cover! Had he no respect for the vibrant orange cover and tiny flamenco dancers?

‘Can you please—’ Andes said, bringing her hands up and clutching at air. The officer stared at her, matchbook in hand. He didn’t drop it, but at least he stopped rubbing it between his dirty fingers. ‘I know they might not look like much to you—’

‘What? These?’

‘But they are part of a collection.’

‘I can see that.’

‘And I would really appreciate it if you wouldn’t bend the cover like that.’ There, she’d said it. Andes watched incredulity invade the officer’s face only to be swallowed up by a shake of his head. It was just as she thought: he had no clue how precious they were to her, how gorgeous, how priceless. Each little packet a painting, a purse of potential fire, the start of something, a flick, a flame. Matchbooks with names of places she’d been; the snapshot of the traveler’s life.

‘You don’t mind if I . . . ?’ The officer feigned taking a match out of the book.

‘I do, I do. As you can see, none of the matches has ever been used. Not a single one.’ Andes, who minutes ago had been crouched over in a self-pitying pose, was now sitting ramrod straight. The officer threw the matchbook down and crossed his arms across his stonewall chest. He’d been waiting for this.

‘I know that. I’ve had them thoroughly checked out.’ Andes couldn’t have been more mortified if he’d passed

her panties around the precinct for New York's finest to sniff. She had to remind herself to focus on the kid. He was her first priority here, no matter what was being done to her. The officer was just trying to bait her. *Calm down and focus on the kid.*

'Is Chase okay? I need to know he's okay.'

'This ain't Guantanamo.' The officer laughed at his little joke, a chuckle that rose sharply and died down just as quickly when he realized he, alone, found it humorous.

'It's just, the kid can really bottle it up,' Andes tried to explain. 'I thought I was bad, but you've never seen someone stuff down feelings like that kid.'

'Ah. That explains the hunger strike.' The stress of the day, coupled with the thought of Chase going on a hunger strike for her, struck Andes as absurdly funny. This time it was her turn to laugh, and the officer's turn to shame her into silence.

'I'm sorry. It's just that – he never would have done anything like that before he met me. I think I've really helped him express his feelings in productive ways. Not that starving is necessarily productive – but it's creative, don't you think? And – how long have I been here?'

The officer looked at his watch. 'Thirty minutes.'

'Oh. It seems like longer. He likes cheese pizza.'

'That's what we offered him.'

'Oh. Well, did you cut it into circles?'

The officer raised an eyebrow.

'That's the only way he'll eat it,' Andes explained. 'He's diametrically opposed to triangles. Get it? He likes circles. Never mind. And squares are – well – square. I've never tried a rhombus or an octagon, so feel free, but I'm doubtful. After all, even a kid like Chase likes routine. I'm sorry, but can I have some tissues?' *And maybe a fucking cup of coffee and a motherfucking glazed doughnut, you fat fuck?*

The officer spread his hands out in an I-have-nothing

type of way. Andes nodded and wiped the back of her hand against her nose. 'I'm sorry. This has been a very emotional day. And that woman out there. I don't care what you call her. She is not his mother. Do you hear me? She's a horrible person who doesn't even know that kid, let alone love him. And if you let her walk out of here with him, I'm going to the newspapers and I'm going to let everyone know that you turned an innocent ten-year-old boy over to a gold-digging crack whore.' Andes leaned down and shouted the last bit into the tape recorder before putting her head down on the table and sobbing. After a few moments she lifted her head and tried to calm herself in her sea of matchbooks, spread out on the table like stepping-stones to unseen worlds.

'Have you called his dad yet?'

'Are you speaking of Dave Jensen or Jay Freeman?'

Andes bit her lip. Apparently, the officer had been talking to people. What had they told him? Pick a father. Any father.

'Jay,' she said at last. Then, 'How long am I going to be here?'

'That's up to you.'

'How so?'

The officer had another surprise waiting for her underneath the table, and he wasted no time producing it. It was extremely disorienting seeing his thick hand wrapped around her slim neck. It was her doll, Rose. Or what used to be her.

The left half of her body was completely charred; only one eye was still twinkly and blue, the other was seared out of its socket except for a single eyelash pointing straight up like the last stick standing in a desperate attempt to spell out 'HELP' on a deserted beach. Gone was all but a few wisps of her silky blond hair, plastered against a blackened plastic head, and the remains of her purple dress were singed beyond repair. She was barely recognizable; Jane Doe, Jane Doll. Andes stared. The officer leaned in.

‘Who did this, Emily?’ he said. ‘Who’s been setting the fires?’ Andes looked at her matches. She looked at the one-way mirror. She looked at the wall. She wanted to yell at him that he wasn’t supposed to call her Emily. Nobody had called her Emily for a long, long time. And okay, maybe she never legally changed her name, but a person should be called what they want to be called. Of course he couldn’t have known that. And even now she wasn’t opening her mouth to explain it to him. Because deep down, she was still Emily; she hadn’t run far enough or fast enough, she had always been Emily. The thought, while bringing tears to her eyes, brought with it a surprising sense of relief, of letting go. She thought about all the chances some people got in life, and then she thought about the kid out there and all that he’d already been through in his ten young years. Maybe it was too late for her, but she could still save him. ‘I used to be a peaceful world traveler,’ Andes said. ‘Did you know that?’

‘I asked the kid who’s been starting the fires. Do you want to know what *he* said?’

‘Would you please go and cut that pizza in circles before it gets cold?’

‘Why don’t you answer my question and then you can go and cut it yourself?’

‘And remind him Gandhi was a lot older than ten, okay? But don’t say it like that – like he doesn’t already know exactly how old he was, because as you’ve probably figured out by now, the kid is a genius. And I’m not using that term lightly. But he does need emotional support.’

‘What does Satya— oh what was he saying?’

‘Satyagraha.’

‘Yeah. Who’s that?’

‘He’s trying to tell you he’s taking a nonviolent stand to my arrest. Ahimsa. You gotta love that kid. But you tell him he’s gotta eat. Just get a glass or a bowl or something and turn it upside down on the pizza and cut. But don’t make it an oval. He won’t eat an oval. Believe me, I

learned that the hard way.’ With that, Emily Tomlin
leaned forward and snapped off the tape recorder.

‘So what are you saying here?’ the officer asked.

‘I’d like to call that lawyer now,’ Andes answered.