

Title: Countdowns 2 (working title)

Hey, this is Andy.

I didn't give my name the first time I called, got nervous, forgot to say it. I'm the guy who can see the countdowns - the numbers on everyone's foreheads that countdown until they die. I called a few months back.

I didn't tell you my name. Or where I live.

But somehow you found me. Came to my house. That's weird.

[rationalizing]

I mean, I didn't question it - you deal with the supernatural - that's your thing. I wanted to ask you how you did it, but I thought you'd say something coy like, "A magican never reveals his secrets"...

Or Maybe I was afraid you'd tell me how the magic worked.

You offered me a thousand dollars - cash - to wear a blackstone on a silver chain around my neck while I slept. Told me at somepoint in the near future I'd see two people in my dreams - and you wanted to know what their countdowns were.

You offered me a thousand dollars... And you looked desperate. And you're Dr. Ryder - the guy who's always helping people out of scary problems. And here I had this chance to help you. I mean, of course I would. How could I not?

[disappointed in Dr. Ryder]

I wish you'd told me more up front. I wish I'd asked you more questions. Taken less on faith. Maybe I shouldn't have trusted you so much - so easily. Maybe I wouldn't have agreed then. I don't think I would've.

But I did what you asked. And after several weeks of sleeping with the blackstone around my neck... I saw them in a dream. You told me to call you after... so this is that call...

The dream wasn't normal. I mean normal for me. My dreams... I'm somewhere I've been before or a cocktail of places I've been to or seen. Or it's a Franz Kafka-thing where I've turned into a bug - you know?

This dream wasn't like any of those. The air felt cooler... the air never feels any way in my own dreams - am I dreaming wrong? That's rhetorical. I probably don't want to know.

I was in a cafe - nothing fancy - but somewhere I'd never been or seen in my waking life.

There were highback reading chairs all over - clustered into intimate groups. A brick fireplace against one wall kept it from getting too cold. Snow came down outside. It was cozy. A good place to dream of.

The cafe was crowded - people in the chairs - reading, drinking.

Only nearly everyone in the cafe lacked detail. Like extras in a Van Gough painting.

Almost everyone...

Two people stood out. Weren't like the others.

A man in a grey suit. And a woman... there was something strange about her, but I couldn't tell what. At least not at first.

They were real. Not part of the dream. But still somehow there. They sat at a table near the fireplace.

The one question I asked you was if they'd be able to see me. *Notice me.*

You told me they'd think I was just part of the dream.

It's only because you said that I felt confident enough to get close to them. Get close enough to see their countdowns...

I crept up to their table. Was about to look at the man's countdown first. But something else caught my eye - his left hand was missing a ring finger.

You sent me to spy on The Traveling Salesman...

You sent me to spy on him in a dream - his world - I thought there must have been a mistake. Dr. Ryder wouldn't do that. He helps people out of supernatural problems - he doesn't put them in them.

But then... I listened to the last episode of your show. That's kind of what you did to that guy in Kansas too. Used him to stop a monster. All these years I've thought of you as someone who goes out of their way to help others. But now I wonder how many do you help... and how many do you *use*?

[oh, and by the way.../you were wrong tone]

And you were wrong. The Traveling Salesman noticed me right away. Saw that I wasn't part of the dream.

He grabbed my wrist as I came near the table.

“You don’t belong here,” he said.

My eyes went from him to the woman he was with. The numbers on her forehead... I’d never seen this before, but she had two different sets. The first, the countdown was low. Real low - like she was going to die soon. The other was much longer. And my eyes followed this long dark shadow that formed behind her... into a black door.

I listen to your show. I know who she is.

[accusatory - curious]

“Who are you?” He asked.

“No one,” I said. “No one at all.” He didn’t let go of my wrist.

[calmer now. Placating]

“That’s not true, Andy,” he said. “Everyone is someone. And you - you’re someone very special, aren’t you? Why else would Malcolm send you here?”

He indicated for me to pull up a chair and join them.

[fearful...apologetic]

I hesitated, looked back, searched for a way out. You didn’t tell me how to get out of the dream if I needed to.

[understanding, convincing]

“I understand why you’re scared of me,” He said. “I’ve heard his show - what Malcolm says about me. And everything he says... it’s mostly true. But at the same time... it’s not true at all. I have my gifts. Abilities. Malcolm has his too - he can say things - *tell stories*. Get people to believe him. If you don’t believe me, let me ask you: What did Malcolm say to get you to come here? Did he tell you to enter a dream and spy on The Traveling Salesman? Or did he maybe say something truthful, but maybe not the whole truth... not the part that mattered?”

[epiphany]

He was right - that’s exactly what you did.

“You look cold,” The Traveling Salesman said. “Why don’t you sit with us for awhile. Warm yourself by the fire. Let me tell you a story. One you’ve probably heard before on Malcolm’s show. But at the same time - I bet you haven’t heard the part that matters.”

So I sat down. And I listened to what he had to say.

Dr. Ryder - I'm not going to tell you the rest that we talked about. And you wanted to know the countdowns of The Traveling Salesman and the woman with the black door. I'm not going going to tell you those either. After hearing what he had to say - I don't think you deserve to know that information. I'm afraid of what you'd do with that knowledge.

But...

I'll do you this one last kindness... when you came to my house - I saw your countdown. I know when you'll die. I won't tell The Traveling Salesman.