

LYDIA & AUSTIN

## THE DETAILED MESSAGE

Lydia and Austin are huddled together on the couch, under Austin's big red flannel blanket. Lydia loves this blanket: it's cozy and soft and it has a bold plaid pattern that strikes her as masculine. It seems like the sort of blanket that a man like Austin would have, and so she loves it as she is coming to love him.

Is that what this is? she wonders. Love? Is that what this comfort is? She has not used the word with him yet, even though they have been involved for almost a year.

She wiggles an arm out to retrieve some more popcorn from the bowl. They are watching *Eight Legged Freaks*. Spiders leap at hapless small-town folk. The small-town folk retaliate by blasting at the spiders with shotguns. Lydia thinks the thing is a hoot, but it makes Austin feel slightly squeamish: when the spiders are shot they burst hideously, spraying forth a fetid goo that makes Austin think of cancer, that reawakens his awareness of the toxins accumulating in the depths of his own body. In one scene, slime leaking from a spider's swollen abdomen drips into the mouth of a local sheriff. Austin's stomach heaves.

Towards the end of the movie the phone rings. Austin ignores the first ring, but as it rings a second time he shifts on the couch anxiously.

—Let me just see who it is, he says.

He goes into the kitchen to answer it.

—Hey, Austin, says an uncertain voice, and he knows who it is even before she says —It's Rose.

He sticks his index finger in his free ear to block out the sounds of the movie from the other room.

—Hey, he says.

—Darren gave me your new number, she says. —I hope you don't mind...

—No, says Austin. —That's great. I mean, I wanted him to. I just . . . I guess I wanted to talk to you.

—Yeah, Rose says. —I wanted to talk to you, too.

And then there is a moment where neither of them say anything. And both of them laugh.

—Listen, Austin says. —Now maybe isn't the best time. I have a friend over.

—Oh, Rose says.

—But I hear you're coming in for a visit? Austin says.

—Yeah, Rose says. —Um, probably around late January, early February? I'm still trying to work out the details with work, but I'm working all through Christmas and New Year's, so I should be able to take my vacation time then.

—Cool, Austin says. —Cause, uh, I'd really like to see you.

—Yeah, Rose says. —I'd like to see you, too.

—So, uh, where are you working these days, anyway?

—I'm working for a counseling center. In Minneapolis. Doing, um, pastoral counseling?

—Oh, cool, Austin says. —How'd you end up doing that?

—It's kind of a long story, Rose says.

—Yeah, and I should, uh, get back to my friend.

—Yeah, Rose says. —You do that.

They exchange a few more words; Austin gets her current contact information. —I have a roommate, Rose says. —Mary. But she's doing her residency right now, so she's like *never* here. You can call any time.

–OK, says Austin. –Maybe I will. It'd be good to catch up a bit, before you're–

–Yeah, says Rose.

–That way when you're here we wouldn't need to spend all the time–

–Yeah, says Rose.

–OK then, says Austin. –I guess I'll talk to you, uh, soon.

–Yes, says Rose. –It'll be good.

Austin gets off the phone and returns to the living room, crawls back under the blanket with Lydia. Fire is pouring through a mineshaft.

–Who was that? asks Lydia.

–Huh? Austin asks.

–On the phone, Lydia says.

–Oh, Austin says. –It was a, friend of Craig's.

–Oh, Lydia says.

–He wanted to leave kind of a detailed message.

–Uh huh, Lydia says.

–I had to, like, find a pen and all that.

–Uh huh, Lydia says.