

One

The call came before dawn.

Had Evan Roth not doodled creamer art into his French Roast, he might have missed the call. Had he not witnessed the eclipse of his neighbor's stretch pants below her adult diaper, he might have missed the call. Had he not exhaled on the parlor window and fogged the ordinary life on a residential street in Silver Creek, Colorado, he might have missed the call. Had he not filled his nights with restoring his grandfather's Victorian house, he might have completely missed the call.

For the call was ordinary in all ways but one.

Evan Roth had ripped the phone out months ago.

Dhring-dhring.

What the hell?

The ring felt like a defibrillator, a hundred kilojoules riding a lightning impulse between his eardrum and heart. The sanding block slipped. His knuckles scraped the wood beam and bled.

“Damn.”

He sucked the wound, tasted metal. He didn't remember his blood that dark. Ten years on the force, hundreds of hostage negotiations, not a drop of blood lost. Mandatory leave of absence, he bleeds everywhere.

Dhring-dhring.

The twelve barren rooms echoed the impatient double rings.

He stalked the sound, past sawhorses set wide, past a coil of electrical cords, past sanders and chisels and awls.

Dhring-dhring.

What *is* that? A buzzer? An alarm clock buried in the house's frame? No, sounds more like an old phone. The kind that rang in that episode of *The Twilight Zone* where the old woman gets a call from the grave, but...

Evan remembered the antique phone in the foyer.

Christ, he always thought it wasn't connected. His grandmother used to hang his coat over the phone when he came in dripping snow and snot. No sooner had the memory bubbled up in his cerebellum than he realized the rings had stopped.

Aware of his breath in the quiet, he walked to the foyer and waited.

The room stretched long, practical. He always imagined it a remote train depot, huddled between two chair-rail tracks. Church pews squared off like weary passengers, ornate in Sunday finery, waylaid for a century. And where there might have been a ticket booth or a ticking clock or teletype signaling a delay, an antique phone all but vanished into the wallpaper.

It was the same hand-crank, oak-encased phone he'd driven his matchbox cars along during his childhood summers, part of the junk from his grandparent's estate he hadn't gotten around to tossing. The auction clerk had asked at inventory time: "You sellin' this here phone?" Evan had said no. Damned if he knew why.

But he knew. He remembered Sylvie—never Mom or Mama or Ma—but Sylvie, twisting her hair on a sigh, plucking flowers from her dress, talking on that phone to no one. It was the only time she smiled.

Dhring-dhring.

Evan jumped, his heart a full-on Zeppelin drum solo. He closed the distance to the phone. Its twin brass bells blurred like a woman's breasts after a fifth of Jim Beam.

He answered it. Sort of. He couldn't figure out the damned thing.

The earpiece he recognized, so he listened. Instead of dead air, the nothingness he expected, he heard a crackle.

Someone breathed through the line.

He leaned closer. "Hello?"

"Who is this?" a woman answered.

"Wayne Gretsky. Who the hell is this?"

"Boston, please."

"Boston? Wrong area code." He deposited the heavy, bell-shaped receiver on its clip and studied his distorted image in the brass bells, now still. Tarnished blotches colored his cheeks. Her voice, her slight accent, replayed like a disturbing tune.

What the—?

He examined the phone's cabinet, couldn't find a way to open it. The thing smelled like

brass and dust and clammy hands. The cloth covering the receiver wire had been reduced to threads. No way the phone worked. No fucking way.

Insane, that's what....

He stopped short of *he*, settled on *it* was.

Dhring-dhring.

The intrusion prickled his skin. Four rings hammered his determination to walk away, no match for the woman's resolve to reach out and touch someone.

He picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" he said, this time more like a boxer that had pulled on his gloves.

"Is it you again?" she said.

"Look, lady, you got the wrong number."

"Please. Stay on the line."

Her plea stirred him. Not in the way the weather girl on News Five did, but in a new, unexpected way. The secretive edge to her tone brushed away his exhaustion, his harsh comeback. He scrambled for something to replace *I'm hanging up now*.

"Stay with me."

"Why are you whispering?" said Evan.

"I cannot take a chance."

"A chance?"

"Someone will hear."

"I hear you." Genius. As a primary negotiator he talked down homicidal sociopaths, but gorgeous women always siphoned his brain. And how had he reasoned she was gorgeous? "Are you in trouble?"

“Yes.”

“I’m really not...” Evan hesitated, unsure if she could hear him. The interference on the line sounded like all those times he had crumpled a crisp sheet of paper against the receiver to get off an annoying call from the media. He said, louder, “Maybe you should call nine-one-one.”

“Nine, one, one?”

“If it’s an emergency.”

“No. No emergency.”

Great. No way he was getting involved. The absurdity of standing in the dark, his lips hovering over what he wasn’t sure was the contraption’s mouthpiece, evaporated the moment he heard the woman’s exhale. Soft, despite the abrasive connection.

“Who’s in Boston?”

“My great uncle. He might send for me.”

“Where are you now?”

“I cannot say.”

Evan pinched the bridge of his nose and swallowed his knee-jerk sarcasm. “I get that you’re afraid. Maybe I can help. I’m a cop.”

“A cop?”

His gut soured; his heart scorched as if he had wolfed down a basket of Three Mile Island Wings in three seconds. The question yanked him from the conversation’s mysterious edge. He’d bought into it. A Saturday night prank on the freak holding up town progress.

Evan half-turned, but the cord stopped him. All he wanted was to be left alone.

“How did you get this number?”

“Number? I don’t understand. I am trying to phone Boston.”

Something in her voice was desperate, almost pleading. This was no prank. The dry burn in his chest subsided. “What’s your name?”

“Lily.”

“Like the flower?” No, like in livered, you ass. The first non-Bea-Arthur he’d spoken to in months and he sounded like a tool.

“Yes. But with *i* and *e*.”

“I can’t help you, Lillie, if I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“This place. All I can think of is freedom.”

A sweet adrenal rush, long buried, flooded his body. He straightened and caught himself in full superhero stance—heels apart, hand slung holster-low on his hips, bulletproof—before he realized it distanced him from the mouthpiece. “Someone is holding you against your will?”

“It was my choice.”

Christ, it sounded like ‘twas.

“Now, I cannot leave.” The lilt on her syllables thickened, slowed. “I am trapped.”

Evan swallowed. The weight of her words settled on his shoulders. He thought of his nightly ritual: standing at the front door, slick forehead pressed to the oak, staring out the peephole. “I’m sure we can think of something.”

We? Holy shit, did he say ‘we?’

“What makes you want to help someone like me?” Her voice nudged higher.

“I don’t get many calls.” Ever, really. “My interest is piqued.”

The line sputtered, the pause filled with possibility.

“You never told me where you are,” said Evan.

“Colorado.”

Made sense. Lines crossed locally and all. “This great uncle in Boston—he has money, right? You need money?”

He didn’t bother to consult the checkbook riding his ass. The ledger read zero. He would have sent her what he could, but he was broke. Soy-sauce-packets-for-dinner kind of broke.

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly,” said Evan. Shades of guess-my-dysfunction normally made his palms itch. This time, the cryptic messages lured him deeper.

“I need a way out.”

“Listen, Lillie. I know how you feel. Trapped. It happens to all of us sometimes—me, included. But you have to work through it. One step at a time.” He slipped back into negotiator-speak so seamlessly. Handy, at times. His instincts said this woman wasn’t the average domestic off her meds.

“How are you trapped?” she said.

“Long story.” A cocked-and-loaded pause. He laid his free arm atop the phone, used it to pillow tension from his brow. Did she expect him to tell her? He knew from experience if he wanted to help her, he had to give her a piece of himself. Something honest and raw. “I don’t leave this house.”

“Why not?”

Scares the hell outta me. “Nowhere to go.”

“But you *are* free to leave?”

“I don’t feel free.”

“We have that in common.” Her voice lifted, buoyant compared to the scared whisper it had been. She added, “Wayne.”

“I’m not Wayne.”

“I was certain you said—”

“I did.”

“Your name then?”

“Evan.”

“Evan,” she repeated as if trying on a dress for the first time and posing before a mirror.

“And your Christian name?”

Who says that? “Evan is my *Christian* name.”

“Are you often awake this time of morning?”

“I don’t sleep.”

“Nor do I. Before sunrise is my favorite time of day. Truth hides in sunlight.”

Her meaning escaped him, but the passion in her voice was Shakespeare and Hallmark and artsy cologne commercial rolled into one. It made him want to be the kind of guy who appreciated that shit, who could leave his house to help her, but he couldn’t even spit past the doorframe without hyperventilating.

“What are we to do, Evan? About our predicaments?”

Twice now, they’d become ‘we.’ Strangers tangled by a chance connection, never to cross paths once the call ended. He already mourned her low notes of confession, her shades of truth.

“I think we should find a solution, in case we never speak again,” said Evan. “I wouldn’t feel right knowing you were never free.”

“Nor would I you.” The grin in her words, the phone line’s *shhhh*, realigned her tone to a conspiratorial whisper. “Let us make an arrangement, you and I. You must promise to step

outside today—say, twenty paces—and take two of the deepest breaths in which you have ever indulged.”

Evan stared at the wallpaper. Angry, gardening women stared back. Jaded by all they’d seen when the house had been a brothel, their expressions seemed to say *no, no deal*.

“And,” Lillie added, “you must feast your eyes on something you cannot see whilst indoors.”

Whilst? Is that a word? “And *you* gotta tell someone you trust that you need help.”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed.” A promise he had no intention of keeping. Impulses born in the dead of night rarely made it past first light.

“It is morning,” she said. “I must go.”

Evan glanced at the transom above the front door. The blackness had lifted. He didn’t want her to hang up, hadn’t felt this alive in five months, so he kept talking.

“I hope you reach Boston.”

“And I hope you find your freedom.”

The line quieted, hesitation a third party to the conversation.

“Evan?”

“Yeah?”

“I shall sketch you before I sleep. Good-night.”

“But you’ve never seen me,” he said, a moment too late.

She had already severed the call.

“Night,” he said anyway.

Evan couldn’t say how long he stood in the foyer, hands pocketed, inhaling glue solvent

and faint whiffs of the man he had been five months ago when he breezed in ready to fight for his grandparents place. Sometime later, he shuffled to the front door.

He reached for his grandmother's motivational cross-stitch beside the door and picked at its imperfections. Seize the day, my ass.

Carpe diem, literally translated: *pluck*. Which is exactly how he would describe his pre-dawn ritual of staring out his peephole at the *Silver Creek Gazette*. Pluck the sweat stinging my eyes. Pluck the world breathing on me, disguised as a door draft. Pluck off.

He glanced at the phone, remembered Lillie with an i-e.

The sawing between his temples eased.

Evan? she might say.

Yeah?

I shall not believe something is wrong with you.

Good.

I will sketch you with white eyes and tamed hair.

And pale skin?

No. No pale skin.

He stared through the peephole. His gaze marked imaginary ticks, each anticipated step to retrieve the newspaper: past the rotting columns, past the gingerbread detail—as if this were a fucking Grimm fairy tale—past law enforcement's kill zone.

Get the paper, you bastard.

“It's too far. Practically in the street.” Had he said that aloud?

Bull shit. Your dead grandmother could reach that far.

Evan fidgeted. “How many times I gotta tell that kid? The porch-the porch-the porch. I

pay to have him throw it on the damned porch.”

He glanced again at the phone, now the room’s axis.

Let us make an arrangement, you and I.

Hand on the door handle...Jesus, he shook like an addict...he panted through the anvil on his chest. Sweat escaped his pores.

Say, twenty paces.

He eased open the door and peered out. Glacier-air hit his teeth. Hard. Cold. Unyielding. His nostrils stretched wide, thirsty for oxygen. What death must feel like: the blackness, the numbness, the unknown.

A truck rumbled up the street. Diesel by the sound of it. Tires crashed against the uneven brick road. Headlight beams raised every aspen trunk from the dead.

In the crescendo of engine and axles and muffler—close the door, close the door, close the door—his thumb slipped from the brass pad. He slammed the door.

The delivery truck retreated. Silence advanced.

As quickly as it started, his hand stilled, his lungs ballooned full.

I couldn’t do it, Lillie.