



**THE  
PHONE  
CALL**

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The Phone Call  
by  
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## Part 1: The Phone Call

"Hello?"

"Hi."

"Hey...hello there." Rosemarie could call Sam three times a day and he always sounded so wonderfully pleased.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm finishing up a site. What time is it?...Damn, it's six. No wonder I'm starving."

"Do you have anything in your fridge? Besides week-old pizza?"

"Yes, I have DAY-old pizza."

Rosemarie laughed, as she knew Sam wanted her to.

"What're you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said quickly. Too quickly. "I just...was wondering if you've got plans next weekend?"

"Valentine's Day weekend? Hell, no. I'm staying home and out of the crosshairs."

"I thought I'd buy you a plane ticket and force you to come out."

"I'll come but you're not buying the ticket."

"Yes, I am. My finger is hovering over the mouse and I just have to hit the 'Charge' button."

"Well you'd better haul that finger back right now."

"No. Can you come?"

"Not if you buy the ticket."

"Don't be an ass. I've got a reason."

"What reason?"

"I...I want to use you."

She heard the grin in his voice. "On Valentine's weekend? That sounds promising. What am I going to be doing? Wait. You're not going to make me paint again? You didn't pay for my ticket that time."

"You wouldn't let me. I bought you dinner."

"Chuck E. Cheese does not count."

"The girls needed out of the house. And I gave you tokens. See, this is exactly why I want to buy your ticket. Then I don't have to feel guilty if you're...uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?" He stuttered a laugh. "What are you going to make me do?"

"I think we should have sex."

The silence after their rapid-fire conversation was deafening. Its roar filled Rosemarie's ears. But she couldn't have proposed it any other way. It had to be quick, like ripping off a Band-aid. Business-like, like suggesting lunch. Instantly and without thought was the only way she could ask for what she needed.

At Sam's continued quiet, Rosemarie began to panic. She couldn't even hear him breathe. She'd coached herself to give Sam the time and space to react however he needed to -- as long as he didn't say no. She looked at her computer screen, where the arrow throbbed over the "Charge" button. She clicked her mouse. "Screw it," she thought. She'd guilt him into having sex with her.

"You know..." his voice, when it rumbled through the phone line, quiet and measured, made her stomach clench. "...When you first said...what you said...I thought you were joking. I was waiting for the punch line." Now she could hear him breathe, a whopping inhale. "Rosemarie, what is going on?"

She laughed nervously. "I think it's pretty obvious. I want you to have sex with me."

"Fuck! Stop saying that."

His bewildered anger, complete and hurting, stabbed at her through the phone.

She was stunned, the realization that she had offended him crawling over her. She had never heard him angry at her. She almost thought it was impossible.

"Sam, I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at..."

"Jesus, Rosemarie, you throw this thing at me..."

"I know, just listen..."

"God..."

"I'm sorry, listen," she pleaded. She took a second, a second to breathe and relax the muscles that had locked. "So...I've been feeling...the lack." The short laughter on the other end of the line had very little humor in it. "Look, you know how long it's been for me."

"No, I don't." His petulant answer dared her to disagree.

"Why are you making this so hard?" she burst out. "I'm asking you because I wanted it to be easy."

"What?!"

She felt near tears and that's the last thing she wanted him to hear.

"I'm sorry. I screwed this up. I'm just going to go."

"Wait, WAIT." Patience was trying to strangle the frustration in his voice. "Don't go. Tell me. Tell me what you need."

And that was it. In the two and a half years since her husband's death, Sam had been there to give her whatever she needed. At first, it was a shoulder for her

and her two young daughters to cry on. Then, when they'd started the long process of healing, he was someone they could share her husband and their father with. As her husband's best friend since kindergarten, his memories stretched farther than theirs. They made the treks across the United States -- more often him to Boston than the three of them to the sunny shores of Southern California -- because they all loved being together. He would visit to work on the house, celebrate birthdays or to gift her some free babysitting.

And then there were the phone calls. The everyday, whenever she needed it, effortless phone calls to a man who made her laugh, a man who made her feel interesting and intelligent, a man who could talk her through fixing a garbage disposal and who allowed her to talk him through the bookkeeping for his website development company. He'd call at any moment; answer whenever she rang. She restricted her phone calls to him to daylight hours -- he'd picked up twice while he was on a date and once, she was pretty certain, while he was engaging in post-dinner activity. But there had been many nights when he'd called her, when his deep, slightly scratchy, always teasing voice was the last thing she heard before she drifted off to sleep.

She'd hung up quickly the few times she'd felt a hum of electricity over that line. She didn't want that. Her loving husband Philip had given Sam to her, in a way, had given her his best friend to hold her together when she wanted to fall apart. On that horrible night -- the one-year anniversary of Philip's unpredictable, unfair car accident -- Sam had held her on her living room couch and muffled her weeping in his chest so the girls wouldn't hear. He stroked her hair, kissed her cheeks, whispered into her ear. But he'd never kissed her lips.

Now Rosemarie had given a good twang to the lovely, silken tightrope that was their best friendship.

She took a deep breath and structured in her head what she would say. There were reasons -- good reasons -- that had led to him as her only answer.

"You know I haven't been with anyone since Philip. I haven't wanted to be. But lately...God, all of this would be so much easier if any need to have sex had just died with him."

"Oh, sure, that's definitely what Philip would have wanted. You throw your hot thirty-something body on the pyre of widowhood." Thank God he was starting to sound normal again. "Why don't you go on a date?"

"You know better than anyone that people don't go on dates anymore. They go on Tinder. You want me to swipe right until I find some guy who wants to come over and do me? What time did you go to that girl's house, that *stranger's* house? 2 a.m.? That's romantic."

"Christ, no, don't.... I mean, don't they have a ChristianSingles.com or something?"

"Sam?!" she wailed.

"All I'm saying is maybe you should start dating again. Stop being so interested in my love life and get one of your own."

"I don't want to date."

"Why?"

"Do you know who I am?" she asked, exasperated. "I'm a 33-year-old widow with two girls in grade school. I'm a downer. And, thanks to my unfortunately endless curiosity about your love life, I know way too much about what single people do to each other. I don't have the time or the energy for the stuff gorgeous guys like you put women through. I've got to concoct a healthy dinner for two girls who don't eat anything but apple slices and chicken tenders shaped like dinosaurs. And I have no interest – I repeat, no interest – in putting my girls through the drama of a parent who is dating. You know the hang-ups I have about the revolving door on my mom's bedroom.

"You wouldn't..."

"I know, I know. Look, if there was one male in the whole of Boston that I was even remotely interested in, I would probably take your advice." She continued talking over his scoff. "But look what I have to compare them to. Philip. Maybe he wasn't the perfect man, but he was the perfect man for me. Every other man is too smiley or too weak or too Master of the Universe or too everything compared to him. Except you. You don't get compared."

She stopped for a moment to catch her breath and gather her reserves. "So that's why I need you to help me take care of this little issue I'm having. Think of it like a household chore. You cleaned my gutters last spring."

"God," he guffawed.

She charged ahead. "It's a basic biological need. We'd both know what we were doing and why we were doing it, so it shouldn't be uncomfortable. Just a friend doing a favor for a friend. So please say yes."

He huffed a breath. "Rosemarie, I really don't think..."

The sea of mortification she'd been treading was about to pull her under. "I'm dying here, Sam. I couldn't be more humiliated but I didn't..."

"Fine. Fine, God, I don't want you to feel bad. Yes, I'll...yes."

"Really?"

"Yes!"

"I haven't forced you?"

"How am I supposed to answer that?"

"I mean..." She would rather swallow her tongue than say what she was about to say. "You're not opposed to the idea because you find me...unattractive, are you?"

Her heartbeat thudded in her ears three times while she waited for his answer.

"Are you a complete idiot?"

Her heartbeat receded to its normal silent rhythm. "Phew! Good." She waited a beat. "I do think we should have some rules."

"Rules?! Wait, you didn't say anything about rules."

"I just think we should set some clear boundaries so that things don't get confused."

"What? No kissing on the lips? You're going to make me feel like a whore."

The words "kissing" and "lips" coming out of Sam's mouth sent a sizzle of sparks down her spine. That particular brand of fireworks had been lighting up more and more during their conversations. But it had to do nothing whatsoever, she told herself, with her decision to have sex with him. In fact, she hoped the sex would serve to extinguish any niggling embers of curiosity.

"No, we can...kiss, but no sleeping together."

"I thought sleeping together was what this phone call was about."

"No, no sleeping. You have to go back to your own bed."

"I'm going to fly out there to be your personal stud and you're going to make me sleep on that plank you call a sofa bed?"

"I just don't want any confusion."

"Yeah. And what are the rest of the rules?"

"After you go home, no talking to each other for a week."

He went silent again. This time, she could hear his slow breathing into the phone. It sounded like he was trying to restrain himself.

"I'm sorry." She could feel the urge to babble. "I just don't want sex and our friendship getting mixed up. I think it's easy for people to mistake feelings about sex for feelings...about something else. I don't want any—"

"Confusion. Yeah, you said that. So me sleeping in another bed and us not talking for a week will somehow keep everything straight even though *I've been inside you.*" He enunciated the last four words clearly. They hit her like shots out of the dark.

She lowered her eyes to her lap, the phone still pressed to her ear. Her body felt leaden. She felt like she spent all day dragging it behind her. She remembered a not-so-pretty day, it had been a cold and wet fall, when she and

Philip and the girls had entertained themselves by tossing a tennis ball over a volleyball net. She remembered running backwards, leaping off her toes to catch the ball one second, and then diving to the cracked pavement to catch it again. That body could have hopped right over that volleyball net into Philip's arms.

"What else can I do, Sam?"

The silence was heavy before he answered.

"I don't know." He sighed, a seriousness she was sad to have put in his voice. "I don't know why I'm giving you such a hard time about this. We'll keep it light and..."

"It's just biological."

"Right, biological. And I'm buying my own ticket."

"Too late."

"What?"

"I've already pressed the button."

"Goddamit."

"I'll send you an e-mail. See you Friday."

She hung up on him.

## Part 2: The Text Message

The text that Friday afternoon, on the eve of Valentine's Day, shouldn't have come as a surprise.

But it did.

They never texted each other. It was something Rosemarie realized a year into their phone calls. Even if it was just a quick, "My plane is going to be late," they always called each other. It was something she loved about their friendship, the quick rasp of his voice that was never impersonal. She'd decided not to analyze too deeply why it pleased her so much.

But Sam had sent this message by text, when he should have already been in the air on his way to her.

*"I can't,"* the message said. *"I'm so sorry. But I can't. I'll send you the money for the plane ticket."*

She actually laughed when she saw it. The plane ticket. She could lose the money for the plane ticket; Sam could burn it for all she cared. What she couldn't lose was her best friend. But her hasty, ill-conceived, poorly delivered phone call might have done that. It might have lost her her best friend.

Where could she send money to get Sam back?

### Part 3: The Return Call

Late in the last hour of Valentine's Day, Rosemarie sat in the bay window seat of her living room, rain pattering against the three dark windows surrounding her, staring at a ginormous bottle of wine and a one-pound box of chocolate when her phone rang. It was probably her mom, who lived on the West Coast and could never seem to get her head around the time difference. She picked up the phone without looking at the ID, too busy contemplating whether to start with the wine or the chocolate. Both were getting demolished.

"Hello?"

"So you didn't get a date for tonight?"

At the sound of Sam's voice, joy, shock and anger sluiced over her all at once. And a rushing torrent of relief. That last was what caused her to drop her face into her free hand and spontaneously begin weeping.

"Rosemarie..."

"Shut up," she whispered, trying to control her voice and her tears so they wouldn't wake her girls sleeping upstairs.

"Aw, sweetie..."

"No, just...just give me a minute."

She should offer to call him back. But there was no way she was letting his warm, scratchy voice out of reach. Taking deep breaths, she worked to calm her tears. "Fourteen messages, Sam," she shuddered into the phone. "I left 14 messages. I know your voicemail by heart now. Do you know I'd never heard it before?"

"I know. I'm sorry, sweetie. I just had to..."

"Don't, Sam. *I'm sorry*. I'm so, so sorry. I should have never put you in that position. I should never have asked...that of you, or worry you about our friendship, or make you feel uncomfortable, or...do anything that makes you feel-

"Rosemarie," he cut into her babble.

"Just, please forgive me Sam. Please say you'll forgive me."

"Always. Of course."

The sweet benediction almost started her crying again.

"And know that I won't ever discuss...that with you again," she reassured him. "That issue is *off* the table. We'll just pretend that conversation never happened."

"No." His voice cracked like a whip through the phone.

Rosemarie recoiled, like it had flicked her.

"Sam?"

"We can't keep going like we were before, Rosemarie."

She slowly raised her hand over her trembling mouth. "What?" she croaked.

"Everything is different now."

A hole opened up inside her and all the gleaming hope she'd gathered over the last minute, the tiny spark of it she'd held onto while leaving fourteen voicemails, drained away. Left behind was only endless, infinite black. She'd done it. With her callousness, her thoughtlessness, her lack of gratitude, she'd destroyed the second biggest reason she got out of bed every morning. This second biggest reason had made it so, so much easier to get out of bed for the first biggest reason.

His voice rumbled over the phone like a death knell. "You remember, when we met, I didn't like you very much."

"Yes," she said dully. It was actually one of her favorite stories. How, when she met and quickly fell in love with Philip her junior in college, she soon met his best friend, the embittered and sarcastic Sam. Sam had just ended a four-year relationship and wasn't a big fan of pretty girls or couples in love. His sarcasm -- now mellowed to a grin at the whole world -- was back then a precisely sharpened weapon he used to cut the protective layers off anyone he met. He'd regularly stripped a piece off Rosemarie.

"You were such an asshole," she said with none of the past verve she used to tease him with. "I always think it's funny that that guy became my best...friend." She had to swallow the tears in her voice.

"Philip asked me once -- when he took me aside to demand for the twentieth time that I back off -- if the reason I was so mean to you was because I had a crush on you."

Rosemarie gave a humorless huff of sound at the ridiculousness of that suggestion.

"I didn't. I was a dick to everybody back then," he continued. "It wasn't until a few years later that I wanted you so much it hurt."

## Part 4: Hanging Up

Rosemarie's heart stopped beating in her chest. Her breath paused in her lungs. Everything strained to re-hear those words, to hear them correctly over whatever had warped them into the shape they took; maybe the bay windows or an echo or the sudden booming of the blood in her veins. But there was not another sound in the room except the soft flick of rain against the windows.

"We were all out at that old-fashioned Italian place and you were leaning over to put the baby in her car seat...and I got hard. Right in front of my best friend and my godchild, I'm having a 3D vision of smoothing my hand over the ass of their wife and mother, warming it, and then grabbing a handful to bring her to me. I couldn't even look at you the rest of the night."

A hazy memory penetrated Rosemarie's shock. "I remember that," she said, hushed, unbelieving that this conversation was happening. "You were acting so weird. You shook my hand when you left."

"Yep. No way was I going in for our kiss and hug."

Rosemarie leaned back against a cool, rain-spattered window, her brain a useless, heavy brick on top of her neck.

"I told myself that I just needed to get laid, that I was suffering from...what did you say...the lack? But no matter how many women I slept with, you kept showing up -- in my car, in my shower, in my dreams. Who does that? What kind of scumbag falls asleep thinking about how sweet his best friend's wife must taste between her legs?"

Rosemarie sat straight up, a forbidden bolt rocketing through her.

"Sam..."

"I stayed away from you guys as long as I could," he continued as if she hadn't said a thing. All humor and tease had left his voice; her Sam was a stranger in her ear, a determined stranger with a leather-tanned voice drawing erotic pictures in the dark. "The next time I saw you...I don't think you noticed, but I couldn't stop myself from touching the shiny soft ends of your hair."

His sigh held mountains.

"So, I finally decided, 'Fuck it. I'm in love with Rosemarie.' It's not like I was ever going to do anything about it. I could handle it as long as I had you and Philip and the girls in my life. I'd accept the attraction and reject the impulses. And that's what I've been doing for the last eight years and what I'd planned on doing for the next 50."

Her voice broke on his name as she clung to the phone, her emotions rattling her like an earthquake as the continents of the last eight years of her life

moved into new positions based on his words. She was as terrified by his revelation as she was made deeply, deeply sad by it -- her dearest, most deserving friend had gone without what he wanted for eight long years.

And she felt shame to her foundation.

All that she had asked of him, all that he had done for her and the girls, the trips and the babysitting and the household repairs. Oh God, and all the phone calls.

He was 37, four years older than her. She had assumed -- because it was convenient for her, because her life would have shattered if something had changed -- that he had gone without being in a serious relationship all this time because he just hadn't found "the one."

And she'd asked him to fly 2,700 miles and, essentially, be her dildo on Valentine's Day.

"I can't believe I asked you to have sex with me the way I did," she gasped, breath stolen by her own callousness.

The so-soft huff he gave was full of irony, full of pain.

And then she heard the steel in his voice. "I'll make love to you Rosemarie. I'll fuck you six ways to Sunday. No one's going to be able to do it better than me - every time you've liked the feel of something against your skin, every pleasurable stretch, every moan; I've remembered it. I've got a doctorate in what gets you off and, gorgeous girl, I'm ready to put it to use.

"But let's be clear. Once you invite me into your bed, I'm not leaving."

Rosemarie's heart pounded with a full-body throb like a prisoner beating on bars.

His voice grew gentler, stroking her ear. "I love the girls like my own. Right or wrong, I've loved you like my own for two years. If you'd gone on a date like I suggested, if another man had touched you -- I would have found him and torn his fucking head off."

Rosemarie closed her eyes as his primal claim swept through. There, in the dark, she could also hear his frustration. His weariness. His loneliness.

"I can't pretend anymore, Rosemarie. I'm sorry. I wish I could. But this pseudo-relationship is keeping you from putting yourself out there again. It's keeping those little girls from having a father in their lives. I understand why you asked me for sex -- I give you everything else without making you risk anything, why not an orgasm?"

"Sam, no," she gasped through tears. But there was no denying her cruelty.

He forged on, his voice dead as if he already knew her answer. "If I'm not the man for you, then we have to end this so you can go find him. Philip wouldn't

want you to be alone. Love," she heard him swallow thickly. "I don't want you to be alone."

And wasn't that just like Sam. Putting her first. Giving her exactly what she needed.

Rosemarie wiped at the tears on her cheeks as she gripped the phone closer to her ear, her quaking emotions settling into a newly formed reality.

"Sam?"

"Yeah," he echoed back tonelessly.

"Sam," she urged.

A spark of curiosity lit his voice. "Rosemarie?"

"Do you ever think that Philip gave you to me?"

He was quiet a full, deathly five seconds before his breath whooshed into the phone, like he was giving life to it. "Holy shit," he said. "I think that all the time. I mean, that Philip gave *you* to *me*."

"Right," she said, accidentally shoving the pound of chocolate to the floor. "Because our conversation has always been so--"

"Exhilarating," he finished for her.

"Yeah, and our connection feels so --"

"Effortless."

"It's like we've been blessed somehow."

"Yeah, blessed," he rumbled slowly, as if he was processing what she was saying. She heard his slow inhale. "I think he knew, Rosemarie. He trusted me. But I think he knew."

She smiled, filled with the sweet melancholy of all she'd lost and the sweet memories of all she'd been given. "Not much got past that brilliant, loving man."

"Not much at all," Sam said, and Rosemarie loved hearing the mix of joy and sadness in his voice, the realization that they would never, ever have to push the memories of her adored Philip to the side.

"But Sam?"

"Yes, Rosemarie."

"I never knew." Her voice strengthened with her words. "And you had two-and-a-half years to tell me."

"I...I didn't want to push you."

"Or you were afraid." She was beginning to realize that she was a little pissed. "I might have been clueless and inconsiderate --"

"I never said that," he returned with his own heat.

"But I had a right to know that I was the thing keeping you from moving on with your own life. I don't want *you* to be alone, either."

"That was...different."

"No, it's not. You help me and I help you. You protect me and I protect you. That's how this thing works. And Sam?"

"What?"

"When I touch myself at night, I think of *you*."

Thunderous silence echoed back at her.

"I never allowed myself to think of you that way during the day," she continued, more shy now that it was out there. "But at night, in my bed, you've been finding your way in there with me. I told myself it was, you know, a fantasy -- like, choosing an actor or a rock star. But Sam, I never choose an actor or a rock star. It's always your name I moan."

"Jesus," he breathed, hunger and pain all there in his voice.

"I think my body has known for a long time what my brain was too cowardly to admit."

She wanted to say this clearly, but she couldn't keep the tears out of her voice. "I'm in love with you, Sam. I called *you*, I asked *you*, because I love you. I don't want to date anyone else. I don't want to Tinder anyone else.

"I want *you* because I'm in *love* with you."

She heard him shudder into the phone. She wasn't the only one crying.

"Sam?" she said with a watery voice.

"Baby?"

"I'm really, really afraid."

He laughed, deep and tear-clogged. "Me too, love."

"Sam?"

"Love?"

"Why couldn't you have gotten on that stupid plane?"

"Um...sweetie?"

"Yes?"

"Open your door."

She scrambled off the window seat and ran to her front door, phone still up to her ear. She flipped the lock, threw the door open, and there he was, stepping out of the rain and onto her landing, his rental car parked in front of the next door neighbor's house. Her Sam. Her Sam made new with his overnight bag slung over his shoulder, Gerbera daisies -- her favorite -- bobbing in one hand, and his phone at his ear. His smile grew slow and wondrous as he looked at her.

He took a step toward her.

A clench of sudden fear made Rosemarie stick her hand out, against his t-shirt-covered chest. She looked at her hand, clenched it into his shirt and skin and

muscle. Even this simple touch was different now. This chest, this incredible man, now belonged to her.

"Will you still sound excited when I call?" she asked into the phone as she looked into his eyes, unwilling to let go of the tenuous safety the phone provided.

His smile softened, as if he understood her fear, knew what she was trying to do. He also spoke into his phone, creating an echo that surrounded her in his warm voice and loving words.

"Rosemarie, my love, my heart, you're the first person I want to see every morning. You're the last face I want to see every night. So will I be excited to get your call? Absolutely fucking not. Because it will mean I'm not close enough to touch you. I'm tired of bottling up my love for you and squeezing it into a weekend visit or a 30-minute phone call. This all might have happened on Valentine's Day, but I want to love you fully and intensely and gloriously every single day of the rest of your life."

Sam let go of his phone. It dropped to the stone porch with an audible crack.

As he stepped closer to her, her free hand traveled up his strong chest to wrap around his neck, her body wiser than all of her anxieties. Then, with his breath on her lips and his eyes staring into hers with the same impassioned look he would give her for the rest of her days, Rosemarie's best friend in the whole world slid her phone out of her hand and ended the call.

THE END

Thank you for reading!

Learn more about author Angelina M. Lopez at

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*"Sexy contemporary stories about strong women and the confident men lucky enough to love them."*