

ONE

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO fix any of the callers’ problems; you just pass them on to someone else who can.”

I nodded. “Got it.”

“Okay, babe. I’ll leave you to it. I’m going out back to have a smoke.”

Smiling through gritted teeth, I tried to ignore the acrid stench of cigarettes that permeated his clothes. Philip Heaven could spend the whole evening toasting his lungs in the alley if it meant I wouldn’t have to listen to him call me “babe” one more time in that gravelly, know-it-all voice. I’d handle every incoming call to the Heaven House Helpline if I had to. I mean, how hard could it be?

“Take your time,” I said, aligning my list of referral numbers with the edge of the blotter and lacing my fingers together on top of the cheap laminate desktop. I glanced hopefully at the multi-line phone.

“Thanks, babe.” He pointed his finger at me and made a gun-cocking sound with his tongue.

Yuck. Thank God, the phone rang. I reached to answer it.

After I referred a nice-but-scared-sounding lady to the next AA meeting in the basement of the Cadyville Catholic Church, the phone was silent for several minutes. The whooshing of tires across wet pavement on the street outside filtered into the spacious old building where I sat, a comfortable, lulling sound. I’d worked my way to forty-two across on the *Seattle Times* Tuesday crossword only to puzzle over a six-letter word for an exclamation of annoyance when the phone rang again. This time I gave a runaway boy an 800 number he could use to find a safe place to stay down in Seattle. I was pretty satisfied with the whole volunteer gig after that one and picked up the next call, feeling helpful as all get-out.

“I have the knife against my wrist. It shines in the light. And it’s cold. I bet this thing is so sharp I won’t even feel it slice through my skin.”

Uh oh.

I struggled to remember what I was supposed to say, but Philip’s meager training hadn’t prepared me for anything like this. Where was he? He couldn’t still be working on that cigarette, could he? After all, I hadn’t really meant that about him hanging out in the alley all night. It was my first night manning the Helpline at Heaven House, and Philip Heaven was supposed to be mentoring me. Sheesh.

So I said the only thing I could think of: “Wait!”

“Why should I wait? I’ve been waiting my whole life to die.”

Oh, brother. A philosopher. And a melodramatic one at that.

“So have I,” I said.

“What?”

I looked at the caller ID, so I could jot it down on the call sheet.

It read *Private Call*. Great.

“I’ve been waiting my whole life to die, too,” I said.

“You have?”

Yeah. Right along with all us other mortals.

Hush, Sophie Mae. He may be a moron, but he sounds pretty serious.

“But I’m not going to die today. And not tomorrow, either, at least not if I get a vote in the matter,” I said.

Silence.

“And neither should you. What’s your name?”

“It’s . . . just call me Allen.”

“Okay, Allen, listen, I’m going to—”

“What’s yours?”

“What’s my what?”

“Your name.”

“Allen, I need you to write down a number. This is someone who knows how to help you.”

“I don’t want another number. I want to talk to you. Tell me your name.”

“Sorry, it’s against—”

“I told you mine.”

No, you didn't, I thought, but stopped myself before I said it out loud. Just call me Allen? That's not how you tell someone your name, for Pete's sake.

"Call me Jane."

"No! I want your real name. Tell me."

An icky feeling crawled up my spine. I put some steel in my voice. "Allen, take down this number: 555-2962. There's someone there who's trained in how to help you deal with your suicidal thoughts."

"You're trying to foist me off on someone else? All I want to know is who I'm dealing with."

My resolve wavered. It was against the rules of Heaven House to give out our names to the people who called the Helpline. For that matter, I shouldn't still be talking to this guy. Volunteers were armed with a long list of experts who dealt with all sorts of different problems, from teenaged runaways to unplanned pregnancy, depression to spousal abuse, alcoholism to ... suicide. If Philip had been honest enough to list Heaven House as a Help *Referral* Line in the phone book maybe this guy wouldn't be so angry about having to call someone else.

Still. There was something about him that gave me the creeps.

"I'm not going to tell you my real name. That's against the rules here. I'm here to help you find someone to talk to. Are you going to let me do that?"

"No! All I want to know is who—"

A finger came down on the disconnect button. I went from staring stupidly at the phone to staring stupidly up at Philip. His cousin, Jude Carmichael, stood slightly behind him. I hadn't heard either of them come in.

“Should you have done that?” I finally managed.

“I could hear him yelling. He’s a crank,” Philip said.

I licked my lips, ambivalent about the intense relief I felt at the timely rescue. “But what if he really needed help?”

Jude, his coat collar still turned up around his ears, shuffled his feet and looked at the floor. In the brief time I’d known him, I’d noticed that he did that a lot. When he spoke, I leaned closer so I could hear his soft voice.

“Then he should have taken it. You don’t have to put up with abuse, Sophie Mae. Philip should have told you. Sometimes people call in just to call in. They’re lonely.” He shuffled his feet again. I had the feeling he knew about lonely. “Or they’re weirdos. Like this guy. His next call will probably be heavy breathing and obscene language. He’s just bored.”

“Well, he better not call back here, then.”

Philip bent toward me. “Tell you what, babe. It’s your first night. Your shift’s almost over. Go ahead home.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. It’s fine. My boy here can start his overnight shift early.”

“That okay with you?” I asked Jude, since Philip hadn’t bothered.

Jude shrugged and tried a smile. “Sure. I forward the calls to my cell and keep it on my night stand. It hardly ever rings.” He pulled a phone out of his pocket and started pushing buttons on the one on the desk.

“I hope that guy didn’t scare you off,” Philip said.

“No, I’ll be back,” I said. “Friday, right?”

“That’ll be great. We’ll need your help. Friday night’ll be hop-pin’!” He made it sound like great fun, taking all those desperate phone calls from people in horrible situations.

Woo hoo!



So that was volunteer work, I thought as I drove home a little after nine. Not that Heaven House was likely to be the best example. Philip Heaven, grandson of the famous, or more accurately, infamous, Nathaniel Heaven, had started Heaven House in Cadyville over a year ago. Funded with money granted to the project by the foundation created after the old man’s death, it was a nonprofit organization devoted to the community of Cadyville. What that meant in practical terms was yet to be seen.

So far there was the helpline and a bunch of empty rooms. Philip had programs planned for teens and the elderly, for job training, for low-cost childcare and helping the housebound, and even for the environment. It was a vague hodgepodge of good intentions. I’d heard several months before that he’d brought in his cousin to help, but from what I could tell they needed more help than Jude could provide.

The name was misleading, too, as most people assumed it was a religious organization. But Nathaniel had been a died-in-the-wool agnostic, and while the foundation didn’t actually ban religious activities altogether, it was clear in the informational packet provided to volunteers that the board would not grant funding to any activity that wasn’t open to people of any and all denominations or belief systems.

I pulled to the curb in front of the house I shared with Meghan Bly and her eleven-year-old daughter, Erin. Jumping out of my little Toyota pickup, I ran up the sidewalk. Rain spattered down for the twentieth day in a row, and the temperature hovered around forty-two degrees—typical weather in the Pacific Northwest in February. The damp air smelled of rotting leaves and wood smoke.

In the foyer I shook like a dog, scattering the stray drops I hadn't managed to avoid in my mad dash from the street. I waved at Meghan as I passed the doorway to the kitchen on my way to the stairs, breathing in the scent of freshly baked bread.

“Back in a sec,” I called over my shoulder and climbed to the second floor.

I poked my head into Erin's room. “How's it going?”

Meghan's daughter sat in bed, wedged in on one side by a stuffed platypus and on the other by a big purple hippo. Brodie, Erin's aging Pembroke Welsh Corgi, lay on his back, legs splayed open as he slept by her feet. His right eye cracked open so he could peer at me upside down, then squeezed shut again. A textbook lay open on Erin's lap, and she looked up from scribbling on loose-leaf notepaper when I spoke. Her elfin features held pure disgust.

“I hate math. I hate algebra, I hate geometry, and I plan on hating trigonometry and calculus as well.” She squinted blue-gray eyes at me and shook her head of dark curls for emphasis.

“Trig? When do you start that?” Could be next week for all I knew. She was in an advanced class and last year had blown by everything I'd retained from my English major's admittedly pitiful math education. But trig? In the fifth grade?

“And proofs. I hate proofs, too.”

I had no idea what proofs were. I went in and looked at what she was working on. Drawn on the wide-ruled paper was a y-axis. And an x-axis. Lines connected some of the points in the grid. I still had no idea what proofs were.

“Looks like a graph,” I said. “What are you supposed to be proving?”

The look she gave me was full of pity.

“Okay. Well, I’m going to change my clothes and go talk to your mom. So, er, g’night.”

She sighed. “Goodnight, Sophie Mae.”

I smiled to myself as I went down the hallway to my room and changed into my flannel pjs. Erin was a drama queen. It would only get worse as she morphed from tween to teen, but at heart she was such a great kid I knew she’d make it through okay.

I just hoped Meghan and I made it through okay, too.

TWO

DOWNSTAIRS, I SLICED A hunk off the loaf cooling on the counter and grabbed a jar of peanut butter and some homemade raspberry freezer jam out of the fridge. Meghan raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow at me as I settled in at our butcher-block kitchen table and began slathering a thick layer of peanut butter on the warm bread.

“What? I didn’t eat dinner.”

“Okay,” she said, and turned back to the lunch she was packing Erin for school. Meghan and Erin looked even more alike than you’d expect from a mother and daughter, with identical glossy dark hair, delicate bone structure and short, slight frames. Meghan’s eyes were a little brighter blue. I, on the other hand, had little in common with the Bly girls. My hair was straight and blonde and hung in a practical braid down my back; I’d been told my green eyes were pretty, and sometimes I believed it; I was a little taller, and a little heavier. But who wasn’t? Meghan couldn’t have weighed much more than a hundred pounds.

I sighed at that thought, then noted with triumph there was already a peanut butter and jam sandwich on the counter beside Erin's lunch bag. Ha! If it was good enough for her kid, it was good enough for me.

"Is Erin doing her math?" Meghan asked, completely unaware of my covetous feelings about her waistline.

"Yep. And loudly hating every minute of it."

"I don't care, as long as she's doing it. She's been so obsessed with studying for that spelling bee coming up that she's been neglecting it."

"There are worse problems than your child avoiding her math homework because she's studying spelling words."

Meghan threw me a glance over her shoulder and turned back to the big fat brownie she was encasing in cling wrap. "I know." She shrugged. "I think I'd feel better about the bee if she weren't doing it just because she's got a crush on Jonathan Bell."

I eyed the brownie. "Who's he?"

She turned around and rolled her eyes. "You are so clueless sometimes. He's been over here studying almost every day after school. They're spending too much time together."

"Meghan, they're eleven."

"Eleven is the new fifteen," she said.

"I don't get that. Then how can twenty-six be the new twenty-one, with kids living with their parents until they're practically middle-aged?"

She cocked her head. "Good point. We should talk to someone about that."

"Damn straight," I said.

"How was the Helpline?" she asked.

“Um. It was okay. A little sad. Kind of boring. Until the end, at least. This creep called and said he was going to kill himself, but then seemed more interested in finding out my name than in slicing his wrists.”

“Sophie Mae! You can’t make fun of people who call in to the Helpline.”

“No, really, he was creepy. Philip hung up on him. He even sent me home early. I think he was afraid I’d quit right then and there.”

“Did the man who called get the number of someone to help him?”

“I gave it to him, but I don’t know if he wrote it down.”

“Oh, that poor soul. I hope he’s okay.”

“Um, yeah. Me, too.” Which was true, of course. Never mind that the main reason I volunteered at Heaven House was because Meghan had talked me into it.

I changed the subject. “Have you decided what we should take to the preserves exchange?”

“Oh, God, I’d forgotten. It’s tomorrow night, isn’t it?” She walked to the pantry, opened the door and peered in. “We pickled extra asparagus last spring; it’s cured almost a year, so it’ll be just right.”

“Okay, but leave some for us.”

She turned around and gave me a look. “We’ll make more in May, you know.”

“But a year, Meghan. You said it yourself—it’s better after it sits a while. And it’s only February.”

A ghost of a smile crossed her face, and she turned back to the open doorway. “We have a ton of watermelon pickles.”

“Watermelon pickles,” I moaned. “I love watermelon pickles.”

“We can make more of those next summer, too.”

“Keep a few jars. Please, please, please?”

“God, you’re worse than Erin. Of course I’ll keep a few jars, if only for you children.”

“Hey.”

“Do you think we should whip up another batch of wine jelly in the morning? Everyone loves to eat that with beef and lamb, and it’s done in a jiffy.”

But I wasn’t really listening. I was thinking about all the good stuff we were about to have added to our pantry. The preserves exchange was another project at Heaven House, though it was designed less to aid the community and more for the volunteers. It was based on an old Cadyville town tradition. During the Depression, Cadyville High School had sponsored a preserved food contest for the senior girls. They canned and pickled and jellied frantically for weeks; whoever canned the most food won the recognition of their peers and the kudos of a grateful town. It probably didn’t hurt much in the search for a husband, either.

And Cadyville *was* grateful because most of the food preserved for the contest went straight into the kitchen of the local hospital to feed the patients all year long. It sounded like a perfect setup—the hospital won, and the girls had a chance to compete in something meaningful, both in terms of charity and in terms of learning how to preserve food for their future families. Though, truth be told, most of them were probably old hands at such things by the ripe old age of eighteen.

Thirty is the new eighteen . . .

Anyway, the preserves exchange at Heaven House worked in much the same way, except we only exchanged among ourselves.

So many of the volunteers at Heaven House were great cooks, and this way we got to sample each other's home-preserved specialties.

Thaddeus Black would bring brandied peaches. Nothing like those eaten with a little vanilla-bean ice cream in front of an apple-wood fire on a cold snowy night. Yum. I hoped his niece, Ruth Black, would bring her famous blueberry conserve, perfect baked as a tart filling in a shortbread crust. There would be dilly green beans and bread-and-butter pickles and homemade sauerkraut for the best Reuben sandwiches in the world or to stew with lamb sausage in the slow cooker all day. I'd heard rumors of relishes, beets, marinated mushrooms and corn. If everything went as planned, everyone would have well-stocked and varied pantries.

Mmmm ...

"Sophie Mae! What are you doing?"

I looked down to where I was about to double dip into the peanut butter jar with the biggest spoon in the silverware drawer.

"Mmmph." I said. Which meant, "I have no idea how this happened, but I require milk this very instant."

I headed to the refrigerator, bending just a bit under Meghan's look of mild reprimand.

"No drinking out of the carton."

I poured the milk into a tall glass and swigged it. Once again able to talk, I said, "Jeez. One little faux pas with the peanut butter, and you act like I'm going to start eating like a guy or something."

"Don't you dare," she said.

I grinned. "I'm off to bed. See you in the a.m."

"Uh huh. Don't forget the phone, 'Honeybunch.'"

"Shut up," I said and walked out, snagging the cordless phone off the hall table as I passed by. Behind me, Meghan laughed.

“It was okay,” I said, repeating what I had said to Meghan about my evening of volunteer work to Barr Ambrose. “I’m not so sure I like the kind of clientele you get to talk to, though.”

“Hell, Sophie Mae, the point is to help people in trouble who don’t have anyplace else to turn. Those folks tend to be a tad less refined than you or me.”

“That’s not what I mean. I talked to a couple of people who probably fall a lot higher on the social scale than I do. But there was a kind of scary guy this evening, and I bet he’s only the first. It’s not because they’re bad people or anything. It’s just that desperation makes you do things you wouldn’t otherwise do. Like I did last October. And that’s a little . . . frightening.”

He was silent for a moment, and I knew he was thinking about the fact that I’d burned someone quite badly the previous fall, trying to keep Erin safe. That was okay, though: the silence. I liked Barr’s silences. Rather, I liked the silences that fell between us. They felt full, not empty. Comfortable. I hadn’t felt that with anyone since my husband had died five years before.

“What did the scary guy do?” he asked. Trust him to zero in on the one thing I wished I hadn’t mentioned. Barr was a detective, make that *the* detective, on the Cadyville police force, and while that was nice in many ways, he did have a way of blowing the idea of me being in danger all out of proportion.

“It was nothing,” I said.

“Sophie Mae.”

“No, really. Just that desperation I was telling you about. Made me a little uncomfortable. I’ll get used to it. And I really like the

idea of helping people out. Maybe I can make a difference in somebody's life. You know, like in a big way."

"You're already making a big difference in somebody's life, just by being your sweet self."

And that was why I took the phone to bed with me, whether Meghan teased me about it or not. Because that was the kind of thing I liked to hear right before going to sleep every night. Not big statements, but the little bits of sugar he'd slip in now and again. That and the fact that he really wanted to talk to me every night when we were apart. Even when he was working. In his gentle, understated way he made me feel special.

"Aw," I said. "Ain't you sweet."

"Yes, I am. But I do have to go. I have at least two hours of paperwork to plod through before I can leave, and I'm working in the morning."

All the overtime Barr had to put in wore him out and tried my patience. "When are they going to hire another detective? Or at least make the uniformed officers do more of the investigative work?"

"When they get the funding," he said. "The Chief is working on it. And there's only so much the uniforms can do."

"I don't understand. How much crime is there in a little town like Cadyville, anyway?"

"More than I'd like to tell you about. I spent most of this evening interviewing a woman who was attacked walking to her car after work. It happened right downtown. I want you to be extra careful, Sophie Mae. We haven't caught the guy yet."

"When you say attacked..."

“He didn’t rape her. But he might have if some high school kids hadn’t cut through that alley and scared him off. He left her bruised and shaken, but that’s all.”

“That’s enough.”

He murmured his agreement. “Just be careful. Goodnight.”

“Night. Sleep tight. You know, when you get a chance to sleep at all.”

We rang off, and I lay in bed thinking. We weren’t to the I-love-you stage of things yet. That was okay. We’d been seeing each other for over three months, and I liked moving slowly after years of relationship hiatus. Not that everything was moving that slowly, mind you. But I got the feeling when Barr Ambrose said “I love you,” there would be a whole lot of strings attached. I was getting to like the idea of those strings, but I was still a little gun-shy. He knew that. I hoped that was why he was being so reticent. I sure didn’t want it to be because he didn’t know how he felt about me.

The phone rang. I pushed the talk button quickly, afraid the shrill sound would wake Erin and Meghan, both of whom had turned out their bedside lights down the hall.

“Forget something?” I asked.

“Sophie Mae Reynolds.”

Oops. Not Barr. “Yes?”

“Sophie Mae, Sophie Mae, Sophie Mae.” The man on the other end of the line softly sang my name.

All snug in my flannel pjs, under my mountain of down comforter, I suddenly felt very cold. “Who is this?”

“I found out your name after all, Sophie Mae. And that’s not all I found out.”

“Allen?” I knew it wasn’t his real name, but I didn’t know what else to call him. Correction: I knew what else I wanted to call him, but that seemed like a bad idea at the moment.

“I’ll call you again, soon. I’m looking forward to talking more.”
And he hung up.

I beeped off the phone and lay there for a few moments, trying to think. I could call Barr back. But what could he do? Just worry. And I’d already caused him enough worry. I’d figure out how to deal with this Allen jerk myself.