

Three Phone Calls

The Phone Rings

I've pictured a thousand phone calls like this.

She picks up the handset and holds her breath. She doesn't know who is on the other end—only who she *wants* it to be. And she wants it to be her husband, not a person like me.

"Hon," he says, and she hasn't heard his voice in so long that those three letters, that one syllable, is enough to make her resolve falter.

"Nathan," she whispers, unable to say more, unwilling to let her husband hear the waver in her voice. She's been too strong through all of this to give up now. And besides, she doesn't know what he's going to say—only what she wants to hear.

"Meg, none of it is true. I want to come back. My car's starting to smell too much like me."

"You haven't actually been...sleeping in your car, have you? Why would you—"

"It's the truth. A hotel would have felt...too permanent. I don't know." He says this in a way that makes her believe him even though she knows she shouldn't.

She saw those pictures, after all, the ones with him and the other woman, enjoying each other's company, somehow even worse than the pictures she had expected her private investigator to give her. That's why she kicked him out of the house weeks ago. But this is the perfect world she's built in her head, so what he says is the truth.

"But Nathan, those pictures..." she says, trailing off, giving him the room he needs to defend himself the way she wants him to.

"I know how they look. She was fun, and I lost my head for a moment. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to, for a second. But I'm *not* lying when I say it didn't go farther than that dinner. I couldn't ever do that to you," he says, the same conviction in his voice.

The private investigator followed them to a motel, but his camera had technical difficulties and he was unable to get proof. She knows this, but in this perfect world, in this perfect phone call, her husband's word matters more than the stranger she paid to spy on him.

"I know, Nathan, I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me this *earlier*?" she pleads, already lamenting the weeks she wasted brooding in her house, alone.

"I didn't think you'd believe me," he says, relief in his voice.

Tears roll down her face now, even though she's smiling for the first time in weeks. "Well, I do. I haven't had time to change the locks, so your key still works. I'll be waiting for you."

I've spent a lot of time imagining what Megan is going through, and this is the phone call I think she hopes for the most.

The Phone Rings

She picks up the handset and holds it to her ear. It's her husband on the other end, still not me, and she's been waiting for him to call and try to defend himself.

"I'm sorry, Megan. Please. I don't know why I did it. It was exciting, she was young, I don't know what else to say. But it won't ever happen again."

He knows he's been caught, and this confession is supposed to be a first step toward forgiveness that she's not capable of. Not for this. Not after she saw those photos and realized that he could be *just* as happy with someone else. She's spent the last three weeks telling herself that she won't be the kind of person that takes someone back after this, and she holds herself in too high of a regard to ever be fooled twice.

"My car's starting to smell too much like me," he says, after a moment.

"You're not living out of your car, we both know that."

"I have. It's been—"

"Just stop it," she says. "You want to end this with more lies?"

"I want to come *back*."

She lets the anger mask the unsteadiness in her voice. "That's not how it works, Nathan. You did what you did. And we can't come back from that."

"But we *can* come back. I know it. Let me make this up to you," he says, and if she didn't know better, she might have believed him. But this isn't the fantasy world in her head—this is the real world, where your husband's word can suddenly mean nothing. Where your life partner can get so comfortable in the lies he tells you, that he accidentally forgets to delete an email that he never should have gotten in the first place.

"I don't care if you can. I can't. How long were you planning on letting this go? If I hadn't found out, would you have just kept on seeing her?" she says, and it isn't so hard to hide the tears in her voice now, the image of the two of them sitting together so burned into the forefront of her mind that she might as well carry the actual photograph around with her forever.

"Meg, please, I'm so—"

If she ever gets that phone call, that's where she'll end it. She knows she can't take him back. Not now, not ever. His fate was sealed the moment he decided he was willing to cheat on his wife.

This is the phone call she's been expecting for weeks, but still hasn't come.

The Phone Rings

This time the phone actually rings, because I'm the one dialing her number. It's not her husband on the phone, but someone who actually cares about her.

She breathes into the mouthpiece. "Is it you?" she asks, almost too faint to hear.

"It is," I say, hoping she recognizes my voice.

"Are you sure it's okay to talk about this on the phone again?"

"I'm sure. It'll look like an accident anyway, so they won't have any reason to check phone records."

She hesitates. "You're doing it tonight?"

"Yes."

"Where is he staying? Do I even want to know?" She lets me hear the tremble in her voice.

"No, you don't."

"I thought so," she says, with a mixture of anger and resignation.

"If she's there, too...if it'd make you feel better, I'd get her for free," I say, knowing that she's afraid to ask for it herself, doesn't want me to think less of her.

We had met in a park the first time after she requested my services, a favorite spot of mine that helps to set a certain mood.

And I took her out to dinner the night after that. A place that was dirty, inexpensive, but dimly lit in a way that made it feel sort of romantic nonetheless. After that, I wasn't *really* just a hitman anymore—I was doing something for someone that meant the world to me, someone who needed an act of kindness. It didn't even matter that she still paid me.

"No, don't hurt her," she says. "It's not her fault. It's his. If everyone knows, I won't have to play the grieving widow anyways." And then, after a pause, "How are you...going to do it?"

I almost share this part of myself with her, but I get scared that she isn't ready and I change my mind. "Well, you don't want to know that either. Trust me, if there's anything I've learned, it's that you only *think* you want to know the details."

"I guess you're right. It's just that...I was a loving wife for twenty-two years, and this is where I am now..."

"I get it," I say, even though I don't, not really. Considering the line of work I've chosen, a spouse has always been impractical, a fantasy. No one wants to devote their life to someone who kills for a living. No one except these women, the ones who want their husbands dead, who know what it is that I do and don't seem to care.

But the ones before Megan didn't understand, ignoring my phone calls like they forgot that the whole point of us going through everything was so that we could be together. We had fixed the old marriage, but they never wanted to start something better.

I think Megan will be different. Maybe it's because she lets me see the sadness in her eyes, shares the necessary tragedy of all this with me like the others never did.

We don't say anything for a while, and eventually she just hangs up the phone.

Sitting in my car outside of her husband's motel room, I can't help but wish I could do something to make this easier for her, somehow. Helping others just comes naturally to me—sometimes I think I should have chosen a career as some sort of

therapist, but I've been paid enough times to kill a cheating spouse that I'm starting to think that my job is the easier of the two.