

Beth Meko
Voice

To Amanda, the voice had ceased to belong to a person and had become a faceless, disembodied cluster of sound waves with no origin and no meaning, just an endless crackling torment coming through the receiver.

It had all started several months before with a simple wrong number. Amanda had been dozing on the couch, as she often had done in the days following her son's death when Travis was at work and Lauren wasn't over for a visit, when a restricted number came in on the cordless phone. She answered sleepily, thinking it was probably a telemarketer.

She heard a sharp intake of breath on the other end, and then a man's voice spoke, low-pitched and crooning. "Is this Kelly?"

She told the voice that it had the wrong number, and started to hang up. "Wait," the voice said. "You sound familiar. You don't work at the grocery store downtown, do you?"

She had said no, sorry, and was about to hang up, but he had told her to hold on—he was new to the area and wanted to know what she thought about the restaurants in town. Did she know of any good ones? She had named a couple and then said goodbye.

He had called again that afternoon. "I was trying to call someone else before," he had said in a cheerful, singsong tone, "but I think *you* are the right number." It sounded like a cheesy pickup line, something that she hadn't heard from a man in years, and it made her laugh.

He had started telling her funny stories about things that had happened to him in high school, all the awkward ways he had tried to pick up girls. In turn, she had told him about her first kiss in junior high with a boy who had braces, and he laughed heartily.

In time she had opened up to him about everything. Why not? It was just a voice on the phone, and she had no one else to talk to besides people from the church. He was the only person she knew who listened to her and didn't care if what she said was against Scripture. She felt she could trust this voice.

She told him that she missed music. When she and Travis had joined the church, they had gotten rid of their TV and stereo. The only thing that played music in the house was a clock radio, which barely got any stations, but she would turn it to a fuzzy-sounding hard rock station and dance around to it and act against Scripture on purpose sometimes.

They were always using that phrase—"against Scripture."

She told him about Lauren, who was married to an elder and whom they had sent to be with her during the days immediately following Ethan's accident. Amanda needed women around while she went through the trauma of losing a child, the elders said. They were always talking about how women needed to reach out to one another in sisterhood and how it was not right for someone outside the church to provide that comfort and support. They were always talking about brotherhood and sisterhood.

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Lauren was a crisp-looking woman in her late 40s, almost twice Amanda's age, with blond hair graying at the temples. She had a hungry-looking smile like she was baring her teeth at the world, daring anyone to do something that went against Scripture. Her own string of pale-faced daughters were all in different stages of schooling, so she had nothing to do during the day but try to engage Amanda in sisterhood. Every other day she would show up, bright and businesslike, armed with items from the grocery store or crafts aisle, ready to subject Amanda to a task such as baking banana bread or stringing together decorations for someone's retirement party.

Months after the accident, Lauren and her husband Elder Tilson had pulled her into the prayer room after Sunday service and told her gently that while it was natural to grieve, after a certain amount of time extended grief became a sign of selfishness and self-absorption, which were both against Scripture.

She had told the voice that she sometimes fantasized about Lauren dying so that she could be left alone.

She thought this coldhearted turn to her character might shock the owner of the voice, but it didn't. The voice laughed loudly and it became a running joke—the million ways that Lauren could meet her end. Fire, tornado, shark attack, spontaneous combustion, falling over dead at the sound of a curse word...there was no end to the possibilities.

She had finally managed to haltingly tell the voice the story of the day Ethan was hit by a car while she and Travis were trying to fix the truck in the garage. She told the voice about the loud crash and the woman who came running out of the car wailing and scratching at her face. The woman had not been speeding. It had been her, the mother's, own negligence that had caused the accident, she told the voice.

The voice had sounded near tears as he told her that it wasn't her fault, that she was the best example of a mom he could think of, he could tell, and the same thing could have happened to anyone else.

Then one day soon after that, the voice had called and said, "I saw you undressing the other day."

She at first thought she was hearing wrong, but the voice had repeated itself and there was no question what it had said. Amanda had hung up the phone and stared around the bedroom for a while, at the flimsy vinyl blinds with missing slats that the sunlight poked through, then she rigged up some makeshift curtains with a plaid flannel blanket and clothespins. When Travis had asked about it, she told him the streetlight had been keeping her up at night.

The voice had called again the next day and it had sounded back to normal. It didn't seem to remember saying what it had said the day before. But the next day it lapsed again. "I don't think I could stand not talking to you anymore if you stopped answering the phone. I killed a man once and I feel like I could do it again. Your husband, maybe."

She felt like she had been hit in the chest with a heavy bag of sand. She told the voice she didn't want her husband dead. The voice seemed to

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shrug. "Whatever you want," it said. "I just don't know what I would do if I couldn't talk to you anymore."

She thought about having the number traced and blocked; she thought about telling Travis. But the voice knew too much about her now. It knew things that only she and Travis were supposed to know that no one else would ever possibly be able to figure out. She pictured the entire congregation turning its back on her at once, Travis included, and the thought filled her with an electric panic. She had no family to turn to, having long ago cut them out of her life.

She was scared not to answer the phone for fear of what it would do. The voice got worse and worse over time. It would say, "It would be a shame if Mr. Mechanic knew what you *really* think of your sex life," and "What would you do if Travis just didn't come home one day, Amanda?" He kept up the jokes about Lauren's death, but it was no longer funny to her. "I wonder what it would be like if Lauren's whole family were murdered with her?" it asked. She hated herself for giving the voice enough information about the church and about Travis and Lauren for it to figure out specifics.

That Saturday morning, the voice hadn't called in three days, and she had begun to hope that it had ceased to exist. At the same time, its absence gave her a horrible feeling in her gut. What if it was lurking outside Travis' shop, waiting for the right minute to tell him everything? Or waiting to kill him? She even thought about calling Lauren, but Lauren was at the Saturday service, teaching the children's Bible study class. The church met every other Saturday at 11 in addition to the weekly Sunday services, but Amanda had not had a way to make it in that morning since Travis had to work and the truck was in disrepair.

She was doing dishes when the phone rang. Restricted, the display read. She answered the phone with wet hands, a pit in her stomach.

Incredibly, the voice sounded bright and happy. It told her it was excited for today and then giggled, like a child with an evil secret. It was the first time she had heard such a hideous-sounding noise come from it.

"I woke up today with a little worm in my mind," the voice said. "I've decided that today is the day that Lauren dies. I know she's at church this very moment. My original plan was going to be just to walk in and shoot her, right in front of your eyes, 'cause I thought you might be there too. Let you savor the sight of Lauren struggling for her last breaths. But then I realized, as nice as you are, you wouldn't like that. You wouldn't want to see the kids dying in front of your eyes either, now would you?"

"No!" she shouted, clenching the phone so hard her knuckles were white.

"Well, it's a good thing you won't be there then. Or will you? Maybe you could show up to watch. I'm going to be there at noon."

She looked at the chipped yellow digital clock on the fireplace mantel. 11:08 a.m.

"I'm serious, Amanda."

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A picture flashed before her eyes of a child's body—Ethan's, misshapen and horribly still as it had been after the accident. It was a picture she had tried to block out of her mind. But now not only did she see it, but a dozen other lifeless child's bodies joined it, parents hovering around screaming in grief.

It sounded like the voice said, "You're the only one who can stop this." Or maybe it said, "You only wish you could stop this." In any case, it laughed once more before hanging up the phone.

She threw the phone away from herself as if it were infected with a disease, then grabbed it again and started to dial 9-1-1. She hung up mid-dial. If the voice showed up and the cops were already there, it might head straight to Travis' shop. What if that was the plan all along? And who knew when it was lying or telling the truth?

The image of the broken bodies piled up on each other like dolls flashed in her mind again. *You're the only one who can stop this.*

The truck was old and rusted and hadn't been driven for months. It stalled out at red lights and was hopelessly leaking oil, but it was drivable in an emergency. She ran all three of the lights she encountered on the way through town, laying on the horn that Travis said sounded like an angry goose. Others' horns squawked back at her in protest. In the cracked rear-view mirror, she caught a glimpse of herself—plaintive and traumatized-looking eyes against a white, pallid face with dark shadows as dark as paint under her eyes.

The church sat on a steep hill with a dark winding driveway leading up to it. It was a squat, low brick building with high windows that looked like its purpose was to spy on everything around it. As the truck creaked and sighed around the final curve, she saw a man in a black suit walking toward the entrance. She couldn't see him that well from across the parking lot, but he had broad shoulders and a lean face that tapered off to a razor-thin chin with a sparse graying beard. He was almost at the door, and he was holding something long and thin in his hand.

She didn't know what she was going to do until she felt her foot pressing hard against the gas. The steering wheel bucked and shuddered underneath her hands as she steered it toward the man and the entrance to the church. The man heard the engine revving and turned, a look of terror taking over his face. She thought for an instant that he looked familiar, but there was no time to consider this as she plowed into him with a sickening crunch. She hit the front of the building with an explosion like a bomb.

After the crash there was a swollen silence for a full minute, and then the sound of footsteps and screams as members of the church came running from around the other side of the building. Amanda had banged her head against the window from the impact, hard enough to leave a spidery crack. Red splatters stained the steering wheel from her bloodied nose. In her haze, she saw several women ushering children back around the building, shielding them from the sight of the body underneath the tires of the truck.

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She saw a bent item that looked like a cane lying on the pavement and she realized that the man she had hit was Brother Lowell, the handicapped man who played organ at the services. Several different voices, including Lauren's high, wavering one, were shouting to call 911.

"Must have lost control of the truck," a man's voice boomed.

"I saw it happen from the window. Didn't look like an accident to me."

"It had to have been. Why would she—"

"Remember, the accident."

"Just a shame," clucked a woman's voice she recognized as Sister Helen, the oldest woman in the congregation.

Someone was trying to open the driver's side door and someone else was coming in the passenger side, asking if she was OK and dabbing at her head with a wadded-up shirt.

A group of four women had stepped to the side to hold hands in a circle and pray.

"Call Travis," she heard Lauren shout.

And suddenly, from somewhere just outside the driver's side window, she heard the voice. There was an excitement in its voice that sounded barely contained, giving it a higher, wispier quality. "This has been coming for a while. We all should have seen it. Something just wasn't right." She heard murmurs of agreement throughout the small crowd. "A shame," someone repeated.

She tried to turn her head to see the owner of the voice, tried to tell them she had gotten the wrong man, that they all were being tricked, but before she could speak a word, a shadow came down around her eyes and then the world fell dark.