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The Call

“The Call”

The school was buzzing with excitement. Whispers of "Have you seen her?" scattered across the school floor in the busy hallways as students moved to their first class. Mornings in Eastdale were never this lively, let alone this loud, yet everyone today was excited about their first class. What could have stirred a school of tired, drained, and annoyed teenagers to want to rush to the first period?

Loralie did. "Fresh meat," they called her; new students were always an exciting topic, especially pretty ones. Perhaps one of the few exciting parts of high school. Students were eager to go to class, wanting to know whether the new girl was in their class or not. Away from the crowd, a small glimpse of a dark shadow lay resting against a locker with a black hoodie on and gaze lowered, all by themselves.

Clay Ronan, typical "loser" of the bunch, always by himself, wearing his dark, worn-out sweatshirt, smelled a little weird. What would a new student matter to him, he thought, and so did everyone else. Little Ronan was never bullied; maybe teased a couple of times by other people and thought of weirdly by the outside perspective, but never bullied or harassed. He was just the weird kid no one cared to pay attention to, so imagine how odd it was when Loralie took him in as a FRIEND.

It all happened so quickly. Loralie was walking to her next class, and Clay was walking to his, and, like the clumsy loser he is, Clay trips over his two left feet and tumbles down the hall in front of everyone. Loralie Ernest wondered how no one cared to help a fellow schoolmate out, so she did the honors of helping Clay up and collecting his scattered books on the floor.

"Loralie!" she says as she extends her hand out for a handshake.

"Uh, Clay?" he responds with confusion, shaking her hand, firmer than expected.

"You must be new too! You didn't seem to have anyone you know here either."

"I've... been here for three years..."

"Oh... sorry."

As awkward silence filled the air and tension grew between the two, Clay decided to cut the conversation short, excusing himself to go to his next class.

As of that day, Loralie's attention always drifted to Clay. His outcast personality stood out to her, and she found herself looking for him in crowded study halls and classrooms despite the bombardment of people desperate for her attention.

Clay was baffled. What could have struck her to like him? Why is she so lovely? And why does he like it?

Spending years alone creates an invisible wall between you and everyone around you. Being alone becomes a habit, and you get used to the lack of interactions, eventually preferring to remain alone. If Clay had adapted to his setting, why did he still feel warmth every time she said hello to him? Why did her simple presence make him smile a little more? These questions drove him crazy, and he knew he needed to get away before getting too attached.

Despite his aloof demeanor, Clay did have one passion. Gaming. It was always his dream to release a game of his own and watch it do numbers; YouTubers playing his game and uploading play-through videos, getting invited to work for a developer company, and earn a title in society. He didn't care if no one cared about him in school; they were all bound to regret that when he would become his decade's most excellent game developer. But, like any dream, game development took a substantial amount of time, and Clay didn't even have an idea of inspiration. So he stole one.

A con artist. Tricked a developer into sharing their idea in return for a low-cost programmer. Clay took advantage of the needy developer and cut off all contact with him, taking his idea as his own.

It had been a couple of years since then. Coding and programming were going well, and Clay was almost done with his "Game-of-the-year." But, it wasn't until one Sunday night that everything started going downhill. Clay was

spending hours working away on his desk when he got a call.

"Unknown number? Probably spam..." Clay thinks and declines the call.

Ring Ring

"Or maybe not. Hmm. Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello??"

An AI voice appears. But it wasn't a telemarketer.

"Hello? May I speak to Clay? This is the U.S. Marshal. You must pay a fine for missing jury duty."

"W-what? Who are you? And what did you say?" Clay exclaims, shocked.

"You know what you did. You're a thief. You can get arrested for larceny; you know that, right? I'm sure you're aware of the repercussions. But then again, if you knew, why'd you do it in the first place? So pathetic of you, my dear Clay."

"What?! I-I don't know what you're talking about! I can get arrested for defamation, you know? You... you LIAR!"

"My dear Clay, it's not defamation if it actually happened. I'm not trying to ruin your dreams, darling. Not even close." the voice explains in mockery.

"What is it that you want?! And how do you know me?! Answer me!"

"You know this information could ruin everything you want. Your reputation will tank if this information goes out."

"..."

"So listen to me carefully. All you have to listen to what I ask of you. Fairly easy, right?"

"...why are you doing this?"

"Go ahead and save my number. We'll be in touch often."

Beep Beep

Anxiety and paranoia rushed throughout his body. Clay was stunned. How could a mere stranger know all that information about him? And how much more was the caller exposed to?

He spent all years making coding in his game, and everything was running smoothly; He couldn't let anything ruin all his efforts, not when he was almost done. Clay knew he had to do something about this, but unfortunately, the police wasn't an option. What would happen if they found out about his stolen idea? He would lose everything, or worse, he could be jailed. He knew that this was a dilemma of his own. No one could know about his situation.

"Look, I don't know what you want or why you're doing this to me, but I'll have you know that I am capable of many things. I will not let this-"

"Clay," says the AI-hidden voice, "why are you frantically running around your room? What is it that is putting you in so much distress?"

Clay swore he could hear his heart drop and knees buckle under him. In what criminal movie was he living in? What was this person capable of doing? Clay's anxiety only doubled. His heart was racing, and his skin turned to the complexion of a ghost.

"Look, Clay, do you see the old man down the street with his groceries?" the voice continued nonchalantly.

Clay turned towards his window and looked at the street below his two-floor house. Indeed, an old man looked in his late 70s, carrying a paper bag with what seemed like fruits and vegetables and one long baguette stick.

"I want you to approach that poor man and steal that bag of groceries," the AI voice exclaims, "and when you run away from the man, I want you to turn back around and carefully exam his expression."

"Why on earth would I do that? I can't steal from him! He probably has a family to feed!" Clay responds back in disbelief.

"What's the difference between that man and the programmer you stole from? Did the programmer not look pitiful enough to you?"

"No! It's just that-"

"Steal from the grandpa then. The programmer probably had a family to feed as well. Who knows if that game could've been his way of helping? You hypocrite," the voice states as it dismisses Clay's complaints.

Clay hesitates but can't bring himself to stand against the voice.

"Okay, Okay. It's fine. Do it really fast and run away; It'll be like Nothing happened."

He musters up the courage and walks downstairs and out his front door.

The grandpa had walked way ahead of his house. As he stops a few feet away from him, he catches his breath and is about to sprint and take his bag when,

"Oh, hello, young gentleman! What are you doing out at this hour?" the grandpa exclaims in joy as if it had been a while since he's talked to someone.

Clay was damned. He knew that talking to the man would only make it harder for him to take the bag; he didn't want to drag this longer than it had to be.

"I- I'm just doing a late-night jog, sorry if I scared you," Clay says and mentally slaps himself.

"Oh well, good for you! I can't remember the last time I ran! It's been a while since my body was able to do that, haha!" the man exclaimed. Oh, how kind and undeserving of being stolen he was.

Clay knew he had to do this. What would happen if he didn't listen to the voice? Would they call the police on him? There were too many risks laid out on the table for him to forfeit now.

Without any more thought, Clay snatched the bag from the man, and he ran as fast as his wobbly legs could take him. He heard the old man shout behind him. It was painful to hear. Clay could hear how hurt he sounded, voice becoming more and more distant as he ran, not forgetting to turn around and observe the old man's expression like the voice ordered him to.

And oh wow, was it a heart-breaking sight to see.

The old man was slumped. If his voice cut deep, the sight of him ran from his body to the earth. The sadness and disbelief in his face hurt Clay a lot.

Clay arrived home soon after, adrenaline still pumping through his blood. His mom noticed his bag and thanked him for being kind enough to go grocery shopping for her, making Clay feel guiltier about his theft.

Clay walked into his room and fell over his bed, tired and drained, physically and mentally. Just when he was able to go wash, he got another call. This time, Clay was furious. What did the man want from him?

"Clay, what did you learn from this?"

"Learn?! What was I supposed to learn from theft? You have been doing Nothing but accuse me of different crap and threaten me with harmless words, and you're telling me I was supposed to learn something from you?!" Clay yelled, enraged.

"Did you pay attention to his face?" The voice questioned, ignoring Clay's outburst.

"Yes, I did," Clay says, exasperated at this point, "I looked at his stupid face like you told me to."

"What did you notice? See anything that hurt you? Did you see the way he was crushed by your actions?" The AI continued, peering into Clay for a response.

"I-I guess-" Clay whimpers, confused.

"Do you see? Do you understand the gravity of your mistake?"

The AI voice remains monotone but feels like a different tone now.

"That is exactly what you did with the programmer; the Only difference, he was online, and you didn't see the repercussions of your actions. Do you finally understand what you did?"

Clay finally falls to his feet. Everything led up to the moment has been weakening him, which he doesn't even know the identity behind.

"You're a pathetic loser, Clay Ronan. You thief online because you can't do so in person. You are a coward, and you deserve the impact of your decisions," the voice explains in a harsh tone.

Beep Beep Beep

The call ends. Clay is sitting on the floor of his room, practically engulfed in guilt. The stress of the situation and the caller's anonymity was torturing his head, feeling like he had lost grip of his own life. What could he do? The old man would definitely report him to the authorities; that was already a big problem of its own. Another issue at hand was the amount of information the voice was open to. These questions ran through Clay's head.

And suddenly, he thought of Loralie.

Loralie, the pretty, popular girl from school he thought he almost developed a crush on. Oh, what a simpler time it was when the only thing Clay worried about was his feelings for her. How did it get here, from worrying about a harmless school crush to fearing the possibility of going to jail?

Clay had school the next day. Getting no sleep would worsen his mental state, so he quickly gets ready and slowly but surely dozes off to sleep.

4th period was his class with Loralie. He wanted to get his mind off of recent events, and Loralie was a perfect distraction. His eyes started wandering around to find her. When she finally walked into class, Clay's eyes lit up, and she was about to greet her.

But she walked right past his desk.

Clay recalled all the times she's greeted him. All the times she's treated Clay like a friend. Clay's support-person-to-be and she traverse away from him. This couldn't be, right? Maybe she didn't notice his small wave, Clay thought. He is pretty small, after all. So he musters up the courage to walk down to Loralie's desk and greet her upfront.

"H-Hi Loralie! How's your day?" Clay stutters.

But it came out too loud. The buzzing class stops talking and turns around to see what the commotion is about. Everyone is staring at Clay.

Loralie sighs a heavy sigh. Her body turns to Clay, and for a moment, Clay is relieved, but as he notices her eyes and expression, he could feel his face heat up from embarrassment.

"What do you want?" Loralie says with so much disgust, something Clay has never seen from her.

"Oh, I uh, I just wanted to say hi?" Clay squeaks out, pressured under the piercing gazes from his classmates.

"Okay, well, I heard you the first time. You didn't have to make the class go quiet for this" She insults.

"O-Oh, sorry, you didn't say anything back, so I thought-"

"Is he still talking to me?" Loralie asks her deskmate.

"What? I-"

"Get lost dude! Can't you see she doesn't like you? Take a hint my man." A classmate chirps, making everyone laugh.

"Yea, go back to your seat!" Another person says, and soon the entire class was telling Clay to sit down.

Clay returned home after school. He didn't go to his computer like he always would. This week, he felt that his life turned for the worst. Wanting to sleep away the pain, he crawled under the covers and closed his eyes.

Until the phone started ringing. Not his phone this time, but the house phone.

Clay was too tired to go downstairs and reach for the phone so he waited until his mom answered. Another big mistake.

"Clay Ronan! You come down here this instant!" His mother yells, scaring Clay.

As he walks down the stairs, he sees his mother talking on the phone with an apologetic look on her face, and when she notices him, she puts the phone on speaker mode.

"...and we are requesting for Clay to come into the station tomorrow around 12 PM. There, we will discuss the casualties he has caused and how long he will be serving as he is still a minor. Thank you." and the ends.

Clay is confused out of his mind. What's happening? What station? And serving? What?

"Mom, who was this? Why did they call?" Clay asks his mom a few of the hundreds of questions running through his head.

"It was the damn police. You're arrested for theft. What the hell are you doing?!"

Could this week get any worse? Clay felt his world shatter. It didn't matter if he listened to everything the voice told him to do. He's still getting arrested.

The next day, Clay walked into the police station with his mom and sat down with the officers.

"You're a young kid. Just because you want something, it doesn't mean you steal. We-"

Clay cuts the officer off, wanting to know who ratted him out.

"Who called in to report me?"

The officers are taken aback but maintain their furious composure.

"This is what is worrying you? So, what will you do when you find out? You're gonna go and tell them off? Aren't you a bit worried about the repercussions of your actions? Or what will happen to you?" the officer speaks, and he was right, but Clay was too blinded by the fact that he thought he wasn't going to be called in that he couldn't understand the gravity of the situation.

"It was an anonymous caller, for your information. They filed a case of theft for Clay Ronan, highschool junior attending Eastdale High."

Clay's blood was boiling with anger. But he couldn't do anything. He didn't have proof that the voice threatened him to do anything, and he didn't even know who the threatener was!

"You will be serving in juvenile prison for 5-6 months. While this isn't a huge crime, the fact that you have gone years without any punishments is offendable. Please fill this form out, and we will get you assisted."

"Oh Loralie, what did you do this time?"

"Nothing, mom, y'know, just the usual. My hacking skills have increased a lot, have you noticed?"

"Yes dear, and I'm so proud of you for that! Alright, we need to go home and pack our bags. We can't have the police keep a trail on us too, right sweetie?"

"Duh, of course, I know, mom," Loralie says, dumbfounded. "Let's go to Louisiana next!"

"Louisiana, hmm, not bad of a choice. Alright, let's go!"