

## The DeadLine | Emma Sterling

“Hello. You’ve reached the DeadLine telephone service for postmortem communication.

With whom may I connect you today?”

Once she finished rattling off the scripted greeting, the operator covered the mouthpiece of the telephone and yawned. She could deduce how many hours remained in her shift even without the clock above her desk. The light outside the window verged on vermillion, as it always did at sunset, and her thoughts had wandered long ago from tedious company policies to daydreams of hunky men driving hot rods. She examined her manicure as she coiled the telephone cord around her finger. Even the anemic mauve polish outshone every other color in the room; by contrast, the office appeared as bleak as the voices that dribbled like tears from the phone speaker. One such voice sobbed into the operator’s ear now.

“Please... I would like to speak to my husband.”

The operator leaned back in her seat and stifled an exasperated sigh. “Ma’am, I’m going to need more information. Full government name and dates of birth and death, please.”

“His name was Cecil.” The caller stopped to catch her breath. “He passed away on December 13, 1953.”

Yesterday, the operator noted with a grimace. Customers inquiring about recent deaths always tested her patience the most—inconsolable parents, siblings, and widows weren’t known for their coherence. She pinched the phone between her ear and her shoulder, freeing her hands to slide out the file drawer labeled ‘December 1953’.

“Alright, ma’am. I still need a full name and date of birth,” she pressed.

The caller hesitated. Only the faint crackle issuing from

the other end of the line indicated that the call was still active, until the woman cleared her throat.

"I'm afraid I don't know."

The operator ground her teeth. "Ma'am, I cannot connect you without the proper information. You mean to tell me you don't know your husband's birthday?"

"Well, you see, I can't remember. It's all been a blur. One moment we were enjoying our coffee and one last smoke together, and the next... Gosh, let me see..."

The speaker picked up nothing but rustling. When the caller continued, her voice sounded strangely mechanical, and her sniffing had subsided.

"Cecil Moore. Born April 25, 1908. Do you need more, or shall we continue?"

The operator raised an eyebrow, but proceeded with the usual spiel as she found the corresponding file and began sorting through the tangled switchboard wires on her desk. "You will be connected with the requested individual shortly. Please hold while I transfer your call."

She placed the telephone receiver on the desk and flipped open the manila envelope she'd retrieved. Inside sat a complete catalogue of Cecil Moore's life—oldest of three, ex-military, loved dogs, and other trivial details—but the operator skimmed until she reached the diagram at the back. It showed the specific combination of wires and plugs to reach the person in question; in turn, the operator needed to configure the switchboard and merge it with the caller's line.

She only managed to attach ten wires before she noticed the light above her desk flashing red, indicating another incoming call. She accepted it and picked up the receiver, but before she could recite the usual greeting, a stern voice beat her to it.

"Hello. This is Detective James Burnett, calling on behalf of the Sunset County Police

Department. We request clearance for contact due to a pending homicide investigation." The operator perked up. "Approved. Please specify who you wish to reach." "Cecil Moore. Born April 25, 1908, died December 13, 1953."

Incredulity sent her heart racing. "Of course, sir. I actually just spoke to his wife, so this should be a quick connection. Please hold while I transfer your call."

She placed the receiver on the table again. The red light above the switchboard blinked a steadfast staccato pattern, showing that the first caller was waiting on the line. Even so, the second call took precedence—DeadLine required its employees to handle all legal matters above personal ones. Fingers trembling, she hastily plugged the rest of the wires into their slots and pressed the button to merge the lines, then raised the telephone back to her face.

"Alright, sir. Please dial any number after the tone, and you will be transferred shortly."

The anti-eavesdropping policy in her employee handbook echoed through her mind, but temptation compelled her to lean forward and clutch the phone to her ear, twisting the speaker away from her lips.

"I think I've earned some entertainment," she murmured once she was sure the detective wouldn't overhear. Only the beep that indicated a call transfer answered her.

"Hello," she heard Burnett start, "this is—"

"Please help me," a garbled voice whispered into the phone, sending a chill prickling up the operator's spine. "I think there was something in the coffee."

"Not to worry, Mr. Moore. My name is Detective James Burnett. I'm calling because a homicide investigation case has been opened following your death. I'd like to hear—"

"Investigation?" The voice paused. "I didn't think anybody would bother."

The operator frowned, her eyes darting to the bulb above the switchboard. It continued flashing in angry opposition to the darkening office.

"Well," said the detective, "we hope we can help. Do you remember anything notable from the day of your passing—anything at all? You mentioned some suspicious coffee."

"Yes. I ate at Joe's Diner on First Street, and this waitress brought me a coffee I hadn't ordered—said it was on the house. I'd never seen her before, even being a regular at that joint for years. I remember thinking it tasted funny. Well, then I got to feeling so dizzy that I couldn't finish my meal. The last thing I recall is having a smoke in my armchair once I got home."

"Alright. Can you think of any reason that someone might want to harm you?"

"No, sir, I can't. I usually kept to myself—not the type to make friends or enemies. To be frank, I didn't think many people would care that I was gone."

"Well, Mr. Moore, I reckon a few folks did. Your boss called in a tip—said it was unlike you to miss work without notice. Besides, what about your missus? A DeadLine operator told me that she's on hold right now, waiting to speak to you."

A long beat of silence punctuated the detective's voice. Anticipation crawled under the operator's skin like a colony of ants. She ran her nail along the edge of the telephone speaker, feverishly twisting the cord around her hand to channel the nervous energy buzzing in her stomach. The entire office flashed red in time with her rapid pulse.

"Detective," said Moore, "I'm not sure who that caller is, but it couldn't possibly be my wife. She died seven years ago."

A heavy pang of panic struck the operator.

The detective hesitated. "Then how do you suppose

this person got your information?"

"Well... I did have an ID badge in my pocket. Was it still there when the police...?" He

trailed off, his voice fraught with misery.

"No, I don't believe any such thing was recovered."

The operator jammed the button to switch back to the first caller. The call could be traced with a device that plugged into the switchboard. She remembered learning about it during her training, though she had long since forgotten the details. Silently cursing her poor memory, she dug into the mass of wires in front of her. Even if she found the right plugin, it would only function if the caller stayed on the line for long enough—a prospect that dwindled with every second the operator spent rummaging through the jumble of telephone parts on her desk.

"I apologize for the delay," she blurted into the receiver, her voice stilted as she tried to scrounge together an excuse. "Due to an influx of traffic to our line, your request may take longer than usual. May I have your name to ensure that your call transfers correctly?"

The telephone speaker crackled as the caller scoffed. "I don't believe that's necessary."

"I assure you, it's all part of the process. You see—"she spotted the plugin and scrambled to trace its wiring back to the switchboard, "—we must verify that each customer is correctly paired with the person they requested to contact, so the names of both parties are required."

"I see. I'm afraid I must go, then. Would you kindly pass on a message to Mr. Moore?"

The operator's hands turned listless. Dread buzzed through her body like an electric current, compounded by the pulsing scarlet light around her. She pictured the nameless woman slipping a drop of arsenic into Moore's mug, slinking up behind him as he smoked his last cigarette, parroting the birthday printed on a stolen ID badge, hanging up the call and fading back into the world...

"Yes, I suppose so," she heard herself mumble.

"Splendid. Please tell him that it wasn't personal in the slightest. In fact, I may have done him a favor. Now he can reunite with his dearly departed wife."

"Why did you do it?" the operator whispered desperately.

"Well, if I may be so bold as to use your words: I think I've earned some entertainment," the caller lilted, her shrewd smile audible in her voice.

"But how did you hear—"

"Why, I suspect that in your own haste, you forgot to put my line on hold before switching to the other. Do be more attentive next time. It's rather unprofessional to let a customer overhear conversations in which legal matters are concerned. Goodbye, darling."

The operator flinched at the sharp click of the phone being hung up, and darkness enrobed the office as the red signal finally switched off. The drone of the dial tone might as well have been a death rattle.