

CLOSE CALLS

by

Barbara Buckley Ristine

Martha hadn't thought about seeing her mother again. After all, the woman had been dead for almost two years. But then something happened at her monthly grief support group.

Bob, whose wife had died six years ago, announced that a company was beta testing video calls with the dead. "My friend's in the marketing department, and he swears it's the real thing."

The group facilitator interrupted him. "Thank you, Bob, but we've all heard technology rumors before and I wouldn't want to give anybody false hopes. Now, does anyone else have something they'd like to share?"

After the meeting, several of the group cornered Bob in the hall, peppering him with questions. Martha stood at the edge of the crowd as Bob agreed to ask his friend to set up a meeting.

The following Saturday, Martha and five other group members met Bob's friend at a coffee shop. Jeff handed glossy brochures to everyone, and switched on his laptop.

"Welcome. I'm with Serenity Communications, the industry leader in video conferencing. I know Bob mentioned our exciting new service, and I'm here to tell you more about it."

Martha tried to read the information on Jeff's laptop screen, something about decoding high-capacity DNA memory, but he quickly clicked through several slides to an artist's rendering of a brick and glass building with *Serenity* painted on the exterior.

"At our corporate center, we provide a comfortable environment to meet with your departed loved ones." The next few slides showed smiling relatives conversing with images of men and women on small screens.

"In the future, we hope to have the capability for visiting anywhere, anytime." A picture appeared of a woman at an office desk, smiling at a gray-haired woman on a computer monitor. Martha leaned towards the picture, the older woman resembled her mother.

The next slide showed a family around a kitchen table, a birthday cake placed in front of a small screen display of a teen-aged girl. "You'll never again miss an opportunity to share

holidays and birthdays with your departed loved ones." He closed the laptop. "Does anyone have a question?"

Martha didn't say anything, but the others clamored for Jeff's attention.

Paul, a frail widower in his eighties, raised his hand. "Is it like a séance?"

Amy's son had died nearly five years ago in a skiing accident. "Do they hear us? Can I do this from my laptop, like Skype?"

Jeff held up his hand. "Okay, okay, one at a time. No, it's not like a séance. You're able to talk with your loved ones, and they can see and hear you."

"How does it work?" Bambi asked. She'd lost her biker boyfriend in a fiery crash. "I mean, it's not like they have telephones and computers in heaven, right?"

"It's an exciting new technology that digitizes your loved ones' data into streaming video images."

Bambi raised her hand again. "Yeah, I got that, but how does it work?" The others nodded their heads.

"It's sort of like Netflix." Jeff's voice lost some of its salesman bravado. "I'm not an engineer, so I can't do justice to the technical side. Does anyone else have questions? Non-technical ones?" he added, looking at Bambi.

Martha examined the brochure's color photos of smiling families. What would it be like to see her mother again?

She raised her hand. "How much does this cost?"

Jeff smiled broadly as he returned to sales mode. "Right now, we are offering free beta testing to selected groups like yours. Once we open this service to the general public, we will offer attractively priced plans with affordable single visits or discounted multi-visit packages."

He handed her a large green folder. "You don't have to decide today. Take the materials home, discuss it with your family. Call me to set up an appointment—my number is in the folder." He looked around the table. "Who else is interested?" Everyone's hand went up.

Martha tossed the Serenity folder on the kitchen table, and the papers inside spilled out. She gazed at the papers for a moment before sweeping them back into the folder.

She put a bowl of chicken soup in the microwave and leaned against the counter, watching the bowl spin on the carousel. Ever since her mother died, she didn't make any effort to cook, there didn't seem to be much point in preparing a meal for one.

She sat at the kitchen table to watch the news as the anchor introduced the next story. A white-haired woman clung to a younger woman as a reporter's voice-over told how the woman had spent the past forty years searching for the daughter she'd given up for adoption. The older woman's face was wet with tears and she stammered, "I never gave up hope of finding her to tell her how much I loved her." The daughter didn't speak until the reporter asked if she had anything to add.

The daughter looked straight into the camera and said, "I am so incredibly lucky to have found her. I've been waiting forty years to talk to my real mother." The broadcast cut to a commercial.

Martha's chest constricted like someone had wrapped a hand around her heart. She missed the nightly conversations with her mother, telling her about her day at the library. In the first months after her mother died, Martha had often picked up the phone at work and dialed the first digits before the reality hit her.

One night when Martha was twelve, their father told the girls that he was going out for cigarettes. Their mother didn't seem surprised when he didn't return, and she never spoke of him again. Cass was only five at the time, she didn't have a clear memory of what life had been like, but Martha remembered the late-night arguments between her parents when they thought the girls were asleep.

Their mother raised the two girls on her own, determined that they would go to college and never have to depend on a man. She reminded them often of her sacrifices, hoping to keep her girls in a tight orbit around her. As far as she was concerned, all they needed was each other.

Martha attended the local university and lived at home to help her mother raise Cass, who was still in grade school. She understood her mother's expectations, but her sister didn't. When it was Cass's turn to go to college, she didn't hesitate to choose Arizona State.

"But why so far away?" their mother had demanded. "There's a perfectly good college here."

"There's no reason for me to stay here."

Their mother had stormed, cried, and pleaded with Cass to reconsider, to stay closer to home. "What about everything I've done for you? You're being selfish."

But Cass stood her ground, impervious to their mother's emotional blackmail. She left for Arizona and never came back. Martha envied her little sister's independence, but she remained at home, her life settling into a predictable rhythm of going out Friday nights with work friends, and spending time with her mother, who seemed to grow lonelier each year. They went to the movies every Tuesday, and she drove her mother to mass every Sunday. She'd loved a man once—Jimmy—but she'd broken things off when he asked her to move to California. Her mother begged her to stay, and Martha didn't have the strength to withstand her mother's tempests and tears.

At the end, her mother's cancer had been so aggressive that by the time Martha had convinced her to see the doctor it had spread too far to operate. Her mother lingered for nearly nine months, stubbornly insisting on continuing the chemo even when it was obvious that the tumor wasn't shrinking. Through it all, Martha drove her to doctors and treatments, cleaned and shopped for her, kept her company night after night. Over time, the scope of Martha's world shrank to an endless circuit of home and hospital.

Cass lived 800 miles away with her husband and two small children. "I'll come out to help if you need me," she'd offered. Martha longed for her sister's help but never told her because Cass had her own family to consider. The responsibility of their mother was hers alone, as it always had been.

After their mother died, Cass encouraged Martha to keep the family home. "It's yours. You earned it taking care of Mom all those years."

Cass didn't want anything for her share of the house; she'd never cared for its old-fashioned style. Martha didn't mind and thought perhaps she'd remodel someday but for now the house was comfortable enough. She continued on as before, working at the library, occasionally meeting a friend for a drink.

But now, watching that mother and daughter on the television, she felt a prick of regret, a memory that had bothered her for years.

Opening the Serenity folder, she focused on the picture of the family sitting around the screen, smiling at the image of an older woman.

Maybe she should do this.

Would her mother look like she had at the end when she lay dying in the hospital? Or would she resemble the angels in childhood catechisms, with a beatific smile, flowing white robe, wide feathery wings? Perhaps she'd be ethereal, transparent like the spirits they showed on television shows about the occult.

What would her mother sound like? Martha recalled long-distance phone calls in the last century when the voices at the other end were tinny and sounded far away, which of course they were.

She went into the living room and ran her fingers along the tops of the framed family photos, displayed on the piano just as her mother had left them: her college graduation, Cass and Scott's wedding, baby pictures of Cass's children, Martha and Jimmy at the lake before he left for L.A. She stared at that photo for a while, wondering what he was doing now. A few years back, she'd heard that he was divorced.

Martha picked up the photo of her mother on her seventieth birthday, the last one before the cancer. Her gray hair curled softly around her face, and she smiled shyly for the camera. Was that the last time she'd seen her mother truly happy?

She returned to the kitchen and studied the brochure again. *Loved ones...an opportunity to say...lasting memories*. She traced the outline of the older woman's face in the photo. Would her mother be pleased to see her? Would she answer Martha's questions?

The old phone on the kitchen wall rang, startling Martha. She picked up the receiver and heard her sister's high-pitched voice at the other end.

"Hey, where's that thing you were going to send me?" Cass asked.

Talking to Cass sometimes felt like walking into a movie that had already started.

"What thing?"

"You know—the sun thingy you made for Hayley?"

Martha closed her eyes as she tried to recall their last conversation. "Do you mean the sun catcher?"

"That's it. Have you mailed it yet? It's okay if you haven't. Hayley was asking."

"No, I forgot. I'll send it tomorrow. Hey, while I've got you on the phone—"

There was a scratching noise, then, "Brian, stop poking your sister. Sorry, what were you saying?" Cass sniffed loudly; she suffered from sinus trouble exacerbated by the dry Arizona air.

Martha hesitated. "Oh, nothing, something I heard in group last week."

"Do you think that group thing is helping you? I don't see the point of sitting around and talking about how sad everyone feels."

"That's not what we do."

"You could join a club or do yoga."

"I already tried yoga." Martha felt awkward attempting to twist and bend into the poses the young instructor gracefully demonstrated. Martha wasn't sure what she craved, but she knew that yoga wasn't the answer. Cass couldn't understand; she had her husband and children who depended on her. Martha only had this empty house, a poor substitute for a family.

"Cass?"

"Yeah, I'm here. So what happened at your group?"

"Never mind—you'll laugh." Martha gazed at the black and white checkerboard pattern of the floor, allowing her eyes to go in and out of focus, which soothed her.

Cass's voice softened. "C'mon, tell. I'm listening."

"I went to this thing and this guy talked about, well, now it sounds stupid, but he told us about calling the dead."

"What? Like a séance or an Ouija board thing? I thought your group met at Mom's church."

Martha heard the doubt in her sister's voice. "No, nothing like that. It's some new technology thing that streams video, like Netflix." God, it sounded so bizarre when she said it aloud.

"Stay clear of it, Martha, it sounds like a scam."

"Yes, you're right, I suppose. Still, it's an interesting idea—if it were possible."

Cass snorted into the receiver. "Yeah, that's a big if. They're just looking to make money from sad people."

"That's the thing. It's free. He said they're in beta testing and they need people to try it out."

Cass was silent for a moment. "Do you want to do this?"

"I don't know, maybe. I'm not sure." Martha twisted the phone cord around her hand.

"Do you think it will make any difference?" Cass's voice unexpectedly sounded like their mother's, putting Martha on edge.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've been miserable for months. You're stuck, and you need to snap out of it. If you think talking to Mom will help, then go for it."

Martha hadn't expected that from Cass. "Wait, you think I should do it?"

"Sure, why not? Maybe this is what you need."

Unable to sleep after the phone call, Martha sat up past midnight, reading and rereading the Serenity forms, which included a waiver and a non-disclosure agreement. The instruction said to mail the signed forms along with a personal item of her loved one in the enclosed prepaid envelope. A separate paper listed examples of personal items: toothbrush, hairbrush, a hat or piece of clothing.

The following morning, she called the number listed on Jeff's business card. He assured her the forms were standard, and the personal item was to provide the departed's DNA. He said once they received everything, he'd be in touch to make an appointment for her.

After the funeral, she had filled boxes with her mother's things but she hadn't been able to take them to Goodwill like Cass kept telling her to do. It hadn't been easy packing up her mother's memory, so she'd stacked the boxes in the basement until she was ready to deal with them.

Now, she rummaged through several boxes until she found a wooden hair brush with boar bristles that still smelled of her mother's perfume. She wrapped it in tissue paper and sealed it in the envelope with the papers.

#

Martha stood in front of a long one-story brick building located in an industrial park full of identical brick buildings. There were no signs on the building's exterior, only a hand-lettered piece of paper taped to the glass entry door. *Serenity Communications*.

She stood in the parking lot for a few minutes, taking deep breaths to slow her racing heart. Someone came out of another door at the end of the building, a middle-aged man who appeared to be crying. He brushed past Martha as if he hadn't seen her, hurried to a parked car and drove away.

She pulled the door open, and a string of bells attached to the handle banged against the glass. The receptionist looked up at the noise.

"Hi, I'm Martha Stevenson. I have an appointment." Martha winced at the way her voice rose. She sounded like a nervous teenage girl.

The receptionist spoke into an intercom. "Hey, there's a Martha Stevenson here. Says she has an appointment." She hung up and waved her hand towards a row of hard plastic chairs, the kind found in school cafeterias. "Take a seat. Someone will be right out."

Martha sat down with her purse on her lap and her feet tucked under the seat. She'd spent the night tossing and turning in bed, and she worried her eyes were puffy from the lack of sleep. She smoothed her hair with one hand and regretted not applying some lipstick. She'd never worn much makeup before but now she worried that she would look too pale on the video screen.

A door opened behind the receptionist and a tall thin man walked out. He was very young, only twenty or so. His pale skin and round eyeglasses reminded her of the Harry Potter books. He shook her hand. "Ms. Stevenson? I'm Ben. I'll be your guide today. Right this way."

She followed him down a hall. Overhead, fluorescent lights flickered and hummed, their light casting odd shadows on the walls.

They entered a cavernous room where exposed pipes crisscrossed the high ceiling. Long plastic tables were arranged around the room, and the place resembled the customer service windows at the DMV. Clear glass partitions divided the tables in two sections, each with its own computer screen. An office chair stood in front of each screen. Several of the tables were occupied.

Ben led her to a table and pulled out a chair for her. He pressed a button on the side of the monitor and the screen blazed with light.

Martha looked at the table, then at Ben. "Um, what is this?"

"This is our video conferencing center."

Martha blinked, uncertain of what to say. "But where's the conference room? In the brochure—"

Ben smiled a thin smile that didn't show any of his teeth. "Yes, I'm sorry, that's the marketing materials." His voice sounded weary, as if he'd answered this question one too many times. "We're still in the beta testing phase. Those rooms haven't been built yet. Jeff should have mentioned it."

He pulled a chair next to her and sat at the keyboard. The *Serenity Communications* logo appeared on the screen. After he typed something, he leaned back in his chair.

"We're waiting for the system to locate your mother, so this could take a few minutes." He gave her a reassuring look. "How are you doing?"

Martha focused on the computer screen, where she could see his reflection. "Okay, I guess. Nervous."

"That's the typical reaction. No matter how much we miss our loved ones, it's always nerve-wracking when you call them for the first time."

"Have you tried this yourself?"

Ben smiled a real smile this time. "Sure did. Talked to my grandma. It was epic. She couldn't stop crying, she was so happy."

The screen changed from the company logo to a pale lavender background. Martha squinted at the background, which resembled blurry lilac blossoms. A figure appeared on the screen and gradually came into focus. Martha gasped and her vision blurred with tears as her mother's face filled the screen. Her mother seemed as close as if she were in the next room. Her gray hair had grown back and once again curled softly around her pale wrinkled face. She looked as she had before the cancer ravaged her body.

Ben stood up. "I'll let you have some privacy. I'll be over at the customer service desk if you need anything." Martha nodded, unable to look away from the screen.

Her mother's face zoomed in close to the screen, and then pulled back. She moved her head this way and that, shifting her eyes from right to left. At last, her eyes met Martha's. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

"Mom? Mom, can you see me?" She reached out to touch the screen as if to touch her mother.

"Martha, is that you? Well, I'll be darned, this thing works after all. Peggy Simpson told me about how she had talked to Paulie, but I thought she was bragging like she always does."

Martha had no idea who her mother was talking about, but it didn't matter. "I can't believe it's you. You look so, so beautiful." She had difficulty speaking; her voice sounded alien to her ears. The shock of talking to her mother erased all the things she'd planned to say.

Her mother seemed to be searching the room behind Martha. "Did Cass come with you?"

"Uh, no, she's in Phoenix."

"Oh." Her mother's voice was thick with disappointment. "I really wanted to see her. How are Hayley and Brian?"

"They're fine."

"And Scott?"

"They're all good. How are you, Mom? God, it's been so long and now I'm really talking to you. I've missed you so much."

Her mother looked perplexed. "But it was only last week when I made the trip."

Martha shook her head. "No, Mom, it's been over a year and a half since you di—" She stopped herself. "I mean, since you passed over."

"Really? I guess I've lost track of the time."

"What's it like, Mom? Is heaven what you expected? Is it like Monsignor Shea described it?" Their pastor's sermons had portrayed heaven as a place of peace and beauty. She pictured her mother sitting quietly in a forest or perhaps in a mountain meadow.

Her mother giggled, a surprisingly girlish sound she'd never made in life. "Oh, no, he got it all wrong. It's kind of like a giant waiting room, with people coming and going all the time. You just get to know someone and, poof, they're gone."

"A waiting room? Where do they go?"

"Oh, you know, here and there. There are lots of places."

This wasn't what she'd expected to hear. "But, I don't understand. Don't you stay there?"

"Oh, it depends. Some people stay for a while, others move on right away. Peggy Simpson's been here as long as I have. We simply refuse to move on."

A man's voice behind her mother asked, "Are you going to be much longer? There're people waiting, you know."

Her mother turned away from the screen and snapped, "I just got here, wait your turn." She turned back to Martha. "Sorry, honey. Some people are so rude."

"Wait, you mean there are other people waiting?" Martha's vision of a pastoral heaven rapidly disappeared, replaced by an image of inmates lined up to use the single prison payphone.

"Oh, everyone wants to do this, but it's really sad because some people's families never call."

"But this is all new. How could they know about it? "

"Oh, you'd be surprised how word travels around here. Like I said, Peggy Simpson's been telling everyone about talking to her son, but I hear it doesn't work for everyone." Her mother blinked several times. "Did Cass come with you?"

"I told you before, she's in Phoenix, Mom."

"How are Hayley and Brian?"

"They're fine."

"I sure do miss those kids. I suppose they've grown since I saw them."

Martha wanted to change the subject, to talk about herself. "Yes, they're bigger now. Oh, did you know I'm still living at home? I've left everything just the way you liked it."

"That's nice, dear, but you didn't have to do that. You really should clean the place out. Maybe Cass can help you. I'm sure she'd like some of my good china and the crystal."

Martha ground her teeth. No, she was sure Cass would not want any of it; in fact, she'd told Martha to donate it all to Goodwill. She changed the subject again. "It's almost spring here. Your tulips are starting to come up. Maybe I can bring some to show you next time."

Her mother shook her head. "Oh, don't bother. They bring in fresh flowers all the time, like a florist shop. If you ask me, it's all a bit much, but the weather's nice."

"Are you happy there?"

Her mother ignored the question. "Where's Cass and her family?"

Martha wondered if dementia continued after death. "They're in Phoenix, like I said. Mom, don't you want to know how I'm doing?"

"Of course, dear. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I'm still working at the library, at the reference desk."

Her mother looked disappointed. "Oh. I thought you'd be promoted by now. How long did you say it's been since I saw you?"

Almost two years. Martha was beginning to wonder whether this had been a good idea. What could she possibly gain from this? Then she recalled what she'd wanted to ask her mother.

"Do you remember Jimmy, Mom?"

"Jimmy who?"

"You know, Jimmy. We dated after college? He wanted me to move to California?"

"Oh, him. Yes, he was a nice boy. Whatever happened to him?"

"You never liked him, Mom. You said he was bad news."

"Did I? I don't remember that."

"Well, you did. You told me to break it off with him, don't you remember?"

Her mother frowned. "Now why would you bring that up? Here we were having a nice chat and you have to spoil everything."

Martha hesitated, not wishing to anger her mother, but she might not have another opportunity to ask. "Because I want to know why. I've thought about it for a long time, and I don't understand why you made such a fuss. You didn't need me to look after Cass anymore."

Her mother's voice was less angry, and her eyes glistened with tears. "But I did need you. Everyone else had left." Her voice trembled. "What would I have done on my own? I gave you girls everything, but your sister ran off to Arizona. I couldn't have you leave too."

The screen flickered and her mother's image started to shrink and waver as the picture broke into pixels; then the screen went blank. "Mom, are you still there?" She didn't hear any response, so Martha stood up and looked around for Ben. He walked over and examined the monitor.

"Let me call IT. It's probably a glitch in the system. We'll have it back up in a few minutes. Just hold tight." He walked back to the service desk.

At the table closest to Martha, an elderly man sat, holding the hand of a young girl who looked like she was his granddaughter. They stared at the image of a silver-haired woman sobbing and hiccupping on the screen. The man and young girl shifted uncomfortably in their seats as the woman wept.

"Why did you come back?" the woman asked, between sobs. "Don't you know how hard this is?"

The man's face registered shock and sadness. "I'm, I'm sorry, but I thought you'd want to see Chloe. I didn't think, I mean, we thought you'd be happy to see us again."

The woman wiped the tears from her face. "Well, I am, or at least I was. But I was settling in here, and this makes me miss you all over again." Her image on the screen blurred and flickered.

Embarrassed, Martha turned away, feeling like an intruder. Everywhere she looked, people argued and pleaded with the dead, the conversations bouncing off the room's walls and ceiling.

"What's happened to you? You look terrible."

"Why haven't you called?"

"Dad, where did you hide your will?"

"You've never loved me."

All around her, voices rose and fell with echoes of anger and grief, sounds of recrimination and regret. The din swelled until she had to cover her ears as she resisted the scream forming in her chest.

To her relief, Ben reappeared, holding a clipboard. He waved her over to another table.

"No one from IT can come down right now, so we'll set you up here and try to reestablish the connection." He started the computer, but her mother didn't appear on the screen. Instead, a burly tattooed man faced her.

"Hey, you're not Sugar. What is this?" the man demanded.

Ben pressed a key and the image disappeared. "Sorry about that. Sometimes with these beta visits the wires get crossed." He tapped a few more keys and the lavender background appeared, but her mother had vanished. "Hmm. She probably thought the visit was over. Would you like to try again?"

She picked up her purse. "No, that's okay. We didn't have much to talk about, anyway." Ben nodded. "Yeah, I get that. Sometimes, it's hard to start these conversations when someone you loved has been gone for a while. Hold on, I have a couple of forms for you to fill out before you leave, so we can set up another visit. Be right back."

Martha sat in the chair, spinning from side to side as she waited for him to return. A scrawny blonde woman at the table to her left shoved her chair back.

"You bastard," she screamed at her computer screen. "I can't believe you slept with my sister." She grabbed the chair and hoisted it over her head. A Serenity employee rushed over and grabbed the woman by her shoulders before she could smash the chair down on the monitor. Ben ran to assist the other employee in accompanying the woman from the room, as she continued to scream obscenities at the man on the screen. Martha recognized him as the tattooed man who'd asked for Sugar.

Ben returned. "I apologize for that. Sometimes, these calls can get emotional. Oh, forgot the forms. Just a sec—"

Martha shook her head. "No, thanks, don't bother." She'd seen enough.

She stood and walked to the exit, knowing she would not return.

END