

AURORA HOPE LINE

by

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“AURORA HOPE LINE”

CHARACTERS

CALLIE (F), 25-40

GABE (M), 25-40

THE CALLER (O.S.) (M), 40-75

SETTING

A small office set up in a vacant strip mall storefront in Hibbing, MN

TIME

The present, midnight on a cold, clear night in January

NOTE

Hibbing, MN, is roughly a thirty-minute drive from Aurora, MN. Both towns are about two hundred miles from the Canadian border, and both towns' geographic location allow for frequent sightings of the Aurora Borealis (aka “the northern lights.”)

PRODUCTION NOTES

There is no need to use special lighting to represent the northern lights, as they are not visible to the audience. However, if your theater has the ability to project light on a screen behind the actors, it would add a nice touch to project an image suggestive of the northern lights.

During the caller's lines, audible static should be played throughout. The caller's voice may be pre-recorded and played through your sound system, or an actor can read them live via microphone through your sound system. For simplicity, the lines may even be spoken by the actor standing offstage. If pre-recorded, the recorded lines can be pitch-shifted to sound lower and more ominous using an audio program, but this is not necessary.

A small temporary office in a strip mall store in Hibbing, MN. Two desks are set up a few feet apart, each with a cheap rolling office chair. Both desks have a laptop and a wireless headset. At LIGHTS UP, we see CALLIE at her desk, in a warm sweater, typing on her laptop, wearing a wireless headset. On the back of her chair is a heavy winter coat, and there is a coffee mug and a box of store-bought cookies on her desk. She stops typing a moment, and grabs a cookie and takes a bite. Just then, we hear a phone ring. She puts the half-bitten cookie back into the box.

CALLIE

(To herself.) Great timing, caller! *(Chuckles, swallows while pressing a button on her laptop to connect the call. Adjusts her headset.)* Aurora Hope Line. How are you feeling tonight? *(Pause.)* Oh, you don't need *hope* to get into the Hockey Hall of Fame, just pay the eight dollars admission! It's a quick drive from Aurora! *(Pause.)* What do you mean the *real* Hockey Hall of Fame? *(Pause.)* Toronto?! I thought you meant the one here in Minnesota! Well, I guess if you're up for a fourteen hour road trip, sure. *(Pause.)* Oh. Well, I guess there's always hope for *that* kind of "getting into the Hall of Fame," too. You sound kinda young for the NHL. *(Pause.)* Oh. Well, maybe if you make the JV team *next* year, and you work really hard till you're old enough, then...sure, there's hope for that! Why not?

GABE enters, wearing a winter coat, scarf, and gloves. He carries a travel mug full of coffee. He heads to the other desk.

CALLIE (cont'd)

(Beat, to caller.) Of course, no problem, hon! You have a glorious night, okay? *(Presses a key on the laptop to hang up.)* Hey, it's my new work husband!

GABE

(Smiles.) This is so weird. I've never had a job that started at midnight. Not that this is a job, really. *(Puts the mug on his desk. Removes his gloves and scarf, shoves them in the coat.)*

CALLIE

(Smiles teasingly.) It is to you, mister!

GABE

(Smiles. Takes off his coat, puts it on the back of his chair.) At least you get paid!

CALLIE

You're getting paid, in *hours*. Only ninety-six to go.

GABE

Don't remind me. About a month, right?

CALLIE

Six nights a week, four hours each takes us to mid-February.

GABE

I just realized on the way here that I'll be driving into work while it's dark, and driving home while it's *still* dark.

CALLIE

You get used to it. *(Nods to his mug.)* But stay caffeinated. *(Takes a swig from her own mug.)*

GABE

I like a good happy hour after work. Wonder if there's any bars with a happy hour at four AM? *(Smiles. Callie laughs. Sits on the corner of his desk, facing her.)* So...how many calls so far tonight? Any scammers? *(While Callie checks the call log on her laptop, he reaches for a cookie. Picks up the one with the bite out of it. Looks at it, grimaces, puts it back.)*

CALLIE

Two hang ups, one guy who asked if I could bless his ice fishing lure even though I told him I wasn't ordained, and a woman who wanted to know whether *plants* feel hope. I told her they do with consistent watering. She laughed, so I call that a success. *(Beat.)* Then I just had a guy asking if there was hope for him to get into the Hockey Hall of Fame.

GABE

In Toronto?

CALLIE

(Surprised.) You knew that? I thought *ours* was the only one!

GABE

Does he play for The Wild? Blackhawks?

CALLIE

He's thirteen. Didn't even make his JV team, poor kid.

GABE

(Chuckles.) He'll need *lots* of hope.

CALLIE

(Pointing to his coffee mug.) Freshly brewed? Or from this morning?

GABE

Mom stayed up till almost midnight to make it for me. She insisted. My first day and all.

CALLIE

So, you live with your—?

GABE

(Gets up from sitting on the desk.) No cracks, please. Had to move back after my...*(Beat.)* Just temporary. They weren't exactly happy to hear about...you know.

CALLIE

Anybody can forgive one indiscretion.

GABE

Mom wouldn't even talk to me. But, I finally got her to...have a heart to heart and she...came around. She even talked Dad into letting me move in for a few months.

CALLIE

You should've told me that story when I asked about your people skills!

GABE

(Beat.) Okay, can we just...not talk about...

CALLIE

Sorry. *(Pause.)* Any...questions before your first shift on the phones?

GABE

I think you covered it all in the training yesterday. *(Shivers a bit.)* Always this cold in here?

CALLIE

Thank Ernie, our landlord. Lock on the thermostat. A vacant storefront in an old strip mall was all I could afford. Spirit Halloween almost rented it, but decided it was too creepy.

GABE

(Walks downstage, looks at the windows on the forth wall.) These huge display windows sure don't help with keeping in the heat. *(Points up, at the sky outside the windows.)* At least we can see the show while we work!

CALLIE

(Looks out the windows. Smiles.) Heart-stopping some nights.

GABE

(Still looking up.) They're really dancing tonight.

CALLIE

Helps that Ernie shuts off the lights in the parking lot after ten, so it's totally dark out there.

GABE

Cheap bastard. Remind me to sue him if we get mugged.

The phone rings. Gabe moves back toward his desk.

CALLIE

Duty calls! *(Presses a button on the laptop.)* Aurora Hope Line. How are—. *(She frowns, presses a button on the laptop.)* A hang up. We get lots of those. Don't take it personally. *(Points to his desk.)* Next one's yours.

GABE

So...why'd you call it the *Aurora* Hope Line? We're in Hibbing.

CALLIE

Which sounds more *hopeful*, "Aurora" or "Hibbing?"

GABE

(Thinks.) Good call.

CALLIE

Plus...*(points to window)*...The lights! They're like the word "hope" made visible!

GABE

They didn't name the town after the Aurora Borealis. My uncle told me that "aurora" means "dawn." *That's* what they named the town after.

CALLIE

Even better! A new dawn always feels like hope!

GABE

(Sits at his desk.) So the system logs all the calls? *(Takes another bite of the cookie.)*

CALLIE

Tracks the phone number, date, time, duration, and...cookies consumed per volunteer. *(He looks at her, confused. Looks at his cookie. She laughs. Then he smiles. She points to his laptop screen.)* I taped our disclaimer to your screen till you learn it by heart.

GABE

(Reading it.) "If you're experiencing thoughts of self-harm, please call the crisis hotline. We're happy to hold..." *(Cringes. Beat. To Callie.)* Wow, kinda scary just reading that.

CALLIE

It's never happened in the whole two months so far. Just remember, we're not crisis intervention, just...friendly moral support. *(The phone rings.)* Oh! You're up!

GABE

(He throws on his headset. He gulps, a little nervous. Presses a key to connect the call.) Aurora Hope Line. How are you feeling tonight? *(Pause. Then he gives Callie a confused look. Beat. Into headset.)* Hello? Are you there? *(To Callie.)* It's just...static.

CALLIE

Give it a sec. Sometimes the person doesn't know how to word their—

GABE

(Covers the mouthpiece on his headset.) No, this isn't silence, it's...static.

CALLIE

(Glances at the windows.) The solar storm...? The lights are crazy tonight.

GABE

(Studies the laptop.) Maybe our Bluetooth is crapping out?

CALLIE

Might be the line. Or...bad reception, maybe?

GABE

It's not cutting in and out, it's just static. *(Uncovers mouthpiece.)* Hello?...Are you there?

CALLIE

Give your name, if you're comfortable. It's easier for people to talk if they know a name.

GABE

Hi, my name is Gabe, and I'm here to listen. *(Beat, then shakes his head to Callie.)*

CALLIE

Still just static? *(Gabe nods. Beat.)* Oh! Patch me in! We can try that for the first time!

GABE

(Looks at his keyboard.) I don't remember which function key I assigned yesterday.

CALLIE

It's F10. Thanks for programming that!

Gabe hits the key on his laptop. We can now hear the static, which continues throughout the call.

CALLIE (cont'd)

(She listens.) Aurora Hope Line. How are you feeling tonight?...*(Beat.)* My name is Callie... would you like to talk? *(Pause.)* If you're experiencing thoughts of self-harm, please call the crisis hotline. We're happy to hold on the line while you do that, or we can call for you. *(She waits, a bit nervously. She looks at Gabe, shakes head, presses key to end the call.)* If they don't respond, give the disclaimer just in case.

GABE

Your procedure manual said "never hang up on a suicidal caller." What if...we just did?

CALLIE

(Nervous.)...Sometimes people need to...rehearse asking for help. They might call back. What's the number?

GABE

(Looks at his screen.) It says, "Not available."

CALLIE

(Looks at Gabe's screen.) Huh...never seen that before. A blocked number usually comes up as "Private" or "Unknown." *(Grabs her mug, takes a swig of coffee.)*

GABE

So...what do we do?

CALLIE

...We...wait for the next caller.

GABE

(Half-shrugs.)... You're the boss. *(Beat.)* So...you...started this line all by yourself?

CALLIE

Worked for the crisis hotline, but I wanted one that would be there even if nobody was in danger. "Someone to talk through the mundane daily despair of life." That's what I put on my grant proposal.

GABE

You actually wrote a grant for a "hope hotline?" *(Grabs another cookie and takes a bite.)*

CALLIE

I pitched it as a "proof of concept"...that if it worked, maybe all towns could have their own.

GABE

Why'd you stop working the other one?

CALLIE

(Uneasy, shakes head.) I...I didn't want the...weight of it anymore, you know?...Our callers here say, "I had a bad day," and we say "That stinks." We offer a sympathetic ear, a few minutes of company. And some hope, if we can. Safe. For them *and* us. *That* I can live with.

The phone rings. Callie nods. Gabe presses the key to connect.

GABE

Aurora Hope Line. How are you doing tonight? *(Pause. Looks at Callie.)* More static. *(To caller:)* My name is Gabe...you're on the line. Hello? *(Pause. His face jumps from confused to alarmed.)* Hold please. *(Looks at Callie.)* It's a man's voice. He asked for you, by name.

CALLIE

(Beat. Unsettled. Quietly:) Patch me in, stay on. *(Gabe presses the key to patch her in.)* This is Callie. Hello?

We hear the static again. Then a low, slowly paced voice:

THE CALLER (O.S.)

You don't sound like you used to.

CALLIE

(Blinks, gulps a bit in fear.) Who is this?

Static, then the call disconnects with a click. Pause.

GABE

What the...? That was...*(Beat. Notices her face.)* Hey, you okay?...Cause you look...

CALLIE

I'm fine.

GABE

(Pause.) So...how do we...log that? "Possible stalker?"

CALLIE

Write "Static only. Likely cosmic storm-related."

GABE

"Static only?" Nothing about what he said?

CALLIE

(Pause.)...No. Same "not available?" *(Gabe consults the screen, nods. More nervous:)* Let's just...let it go. *(Grabs a cookie and starts eating it. She's shaken, but tries not to show it.)*

GABE

(He looks at her, a bit worried for her. Pause. Changes subject.) Did you...see 'em last night?

CALLIE

...Oh, were The Wild playing?

GABE

(Points to windows on fourth wall.) No, the lights! They were amazing! Really bright green. Like somebody turned up the saturation on the sky.

CALLIE

Oh, right, yeah. Saw them when I drove in. They're supposed to be even stronger tonight.

GABE

My uncle used to say the Ojibwe ("oh-JIB-way") believed the northern lights were spirits. The ancestors dancing.

CALLIE

That's beautiful.

GABE

He said they believed that on really strong nights like this, the veil between worlds gets thinner. *(Beat. Chuckles.)* Sorry, didn't mean to make things weirder after that creepy call.

CALLIE

(Forcing a smile.) No, it's...it's kinda nice. *(Beat.)* Your uncle live up here?

GABE

Did, in Aurora. Passed a few years back. *(Beat. Notices that Callie is still shaken.)* Are you sure you're...

CALLIE

I'm fine! We can't let every strange call freak us out, or we'll never make it through the night!

GABE

...“You don't sound like you used to?”

CALLIE

Can we just...move on? Please?!

Pause. Gabe nods. The phone rings. They both tense. Another ring. Beat. Callie presses the button to connect.

CALLIE (cont'd)

Aurora Hope Line, how are you tonight? *(Pause. Her face relaxes, then she nods to Gabe that all is okay.)* Well, nice to meet you Barbara, my name's Callie! What's on your mind? *(She listens longer, then lights up.)* Oh, that's funny, my colleague and I were just talking about—! Do you mind if I patch him into our call? *(Covers her mouthpiece. To Gabe:)* She's asking about talking to her mom. Wanna take it with me? *(Gabe nods, she hits F10.)*

GABE

Hi, this is Gabe. I'd just...suck up the courage and talk to her, heart to heart. Worked for me.

CALLIE

(Covers mouthpiece.) No, the lights! *(To caller.)* We're so sorry for the loss of your mother.

GABE

(Nods, gets it. Feels stupid.) Oh, sorry, I didn't...

CALLIE

(To Gabe, and the caller.) Her mom passed a year ago, Gabe. She heard that some people believe the northern lights are spirits, right, Barbara? So you're calling about the aurora? *(Gestures for Gabe to join in to talk about his previous story.)*

GABE

Oh! *(To the caller.)* Yeah, actually, my uncle used to tell me that. The Ojibwe and other Indigenous peoples up here have stories about the aurora being spirits of ancestors. They believed that on nights like tonight, when the lights are really strong, there's a bridge between the physical and spirit worlds, and the ancestors can hear us.

CALLIE

(Listens a beat. To caller:) And you wanted to tell her something you never got to say? If you...want to say something out loud, to us...maybe she'll...hear it somehow. *(Pause as she listens. Her expression softens.)* Oh, that's really lovely. That you forgive her.

GABE

"She wasn't perfect but did her best." Guess that's all moms.

CALLIE

(Pause as she listens.) And that you love her. Aww! With the lights this strong, I'm going to assume she heard all of that, Barbara. *(Beat.)* Thank you for sharing that with us. *(Beat.)* You're welcome! You have a glorious night! *(Readies to disconnect. Hears one more thing.)*

GABE

(Smiles at Callie. To caller:) We will, I promise.

Callie disconnects the call. Pause. They look at each other.

GABE (cont'd)

(Smiles.) "Keep helping people." That's a nice compliment to you.

CALLIE

And you.

GABE

I meant your...idea for the line. *(Pause.)* Do you...believe in that stuff? Spirits and...all that?

CALLIE

...Not sure, maybe. *(Beat.)* You?

GABE

...Don't know. Hope so.

CALLIE

(Smiles.) My Pop-Pop used to say "hope is just faith wearing a different hat."

GABE

You two were close?

CALLIE

Died when I was twelve, but...yeah. *(Pause.)* He was the one who always told me I could do anything if I just believed in it hard enough.

GABE

That why you started this place?

CALLIE

(Smiles.) He would've liked the idea of a hope line. He used to tell me "humans are not meant for perfection, they're meant for trying." Most optimistic person I knew.

The phone rings. They both tense again. Gabe looks at Callie. She nods. He presses the button to connect.

GABE

Aurora Hope Line, this is Gabe.

Looks at Callie, nods and holds up a finger...wait. He hits F10 to patch her in. Static. Louder this time.

THE CALLER (O.S.)

...You're *both* listening. That's good.

GABE

How did you know that?! *(Covers his mouthpiece. To Callie, glancing around.)* Does Ernie have cameras in here?! *(Callie shakes her head no.)*

THE CALLER (O.S.)

...Gabe. You're very...clever, aren't you?

GABE

(Freezes. Beat.) Who is this?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

You know what you did. Does Callie?

CALLIE

(Firmly.) This is Callie. Identify yourself, please.

THE CALLER (O.S.)

Little early in the call to ask my name, Callie...you forget your training? Names make it harder to let things go. Don't you think?

CALLIE

You have something you need to let go? *(Beat.)* Talk to us.

Static. The line clicks dead. Long pause. Callie stares at Gabe.

CALLIE (cont'd)

What did that mean...“You're very clever”?

GABE

I...I don't know.

CALLIE

Gabe...he knew something about you. What is it?

GABE

I said I don't know! He clearly knows something about you, too! About your training!

CALLIE

(Takes off headset.) We're alone in this office in the middle of the night with some psycho calling and saying weird things about both of us, and you...you won't tell me what—?

GABE

(Takes off headset. Stands up, paces.) They warned me about this...that there's a built-in bias that some people have about—. *(Beat.)* What, you think I'm some kind of crime boss? That I've got gangs stalking me? I don't!

CALLIE

(Stands, goes to confront him.) You're here doing court-ordered community service! Obviously you did *something*!

GABE

And you're not allowed to ask me *what*! That's the whole point of the system!

CALLIE

Well maybe I *should* know, if your past is bringing creeps to my hope line!

GABE

Callie, maybe you're...overworked. You're on this line six days a week for ten hour shifts, then spend your Sundays doing administrative work for the hope line all day!

CALLIE

...How did you...?! Who *told* you that? What else do you know about me?! Do you know who the caller is?! Is he one of your friends?!

GABE

No! What makes you so sure this is about *me*? That first call, he asked for *you* by name!

CALLIE

...I...I run a legitimate operation helping people!

GABE

...Why would you even say that?...*(Off her uneasy look:)* Wait, *is* it?...*Is* it legitimate?!

CALLIE

(Defensive.) I started this hope line to help people. That's all!

GABE

Then why do you look terrified?

She heads downstage and looks out the window. Long pause.

CALLIE

Theft of services.

GABE

(Heads downstage to the window, looks at her.)...You...you stole services?

CALLIE

It's the most common misdemeanor for community service in this county, I looked it up.
(Turns to him. Beat.) That was your charge, wasn't it?

GABE

(Pause. Looks down, with some shame:) Yeah.

CALLIE

What did you steal?

GABE

(Sighs. Pause.) Cable TV. *(Beat.)* At first.

CALLIE

At first?

GABE

(Beat. Sighs.) Then...electric, cell phone service. I'm...pretty handy with tech stuff, and I... figured out how to...*(Pause. Shakes his head, half-chuckles to himself.)* Wasn't even for me. My ex...she was struggling with bills and I...I did what I thought a good boyfriend would do to...*(Beat.)* Then she dumped me for another guy. When the cable company went after her, she...turned *me* in to try to save herself. *(Pause.)* So, yeah. That's my crime. I'm a fool who thought he was...helping someone he loved. *(Beat.)* I know, really foolish.

CALLIE

(Pause. Still angry, but sympathetic.) Thanks for telling me. How did you know about...the hours I'm working? Did you hack my computer? Get onto my Wi-Fi?

GABE

(Half-chuckles.) My reentry case manager. *You* told her all of that when you called looking for a second hope line person.

CALLIE

(Thinks, then nods and smiles.) Oh. That's right. She was a good listener.

GABE

(Smiles.) Takes one to know one.

CALLIE

I'm sorry for...(Beat.) Let's get back to work.

Callie goes back to her desk. Gabe looks out at the sky. The phone rings. They look at each other. Gabe runs to look at his screen.

GABE

Are we taking it?

Another ring as Callie thinks a moment, then puts on her headset.

CALLIE

We should. Might be a different caller.

GABE

(Checks the screen.) "Not available." Probably him. Maybe we...shouldn't engage?

Another ring as Callie thinks.

CALLIE

(Decisively.) We're both answering all calls till the end of the shift. *(Gabe sits, puts on his headset. Callie presses the key to answer, then F10. Static.)* Aurora Hope Line.

THE CALLER (O.S.)

Callie...would your Pop-Pop be proud of you?

GABE

(They both look shocked. Covers his mouthpiece. Softly:) He's listening in somehow!

CALLIE

(Nervous, to caller:) How do you know...? Why would you care if he's proud of me?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

Grants can be very difficult to get.

CALLIE

(More scared.) Who are...?! Where are you calling from?! *(Static. Beat.)* Why did you say I don't sound like I used to?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

...More fear.

CALLIE

Don't you think *your calls* might have something to do with that?! *(Pause.)* How did you know my Pop-Pop?

Static. The line clicks dead. Callie takes off her headset and slams it on the desk. Long pause. She's too nervous to sit. She gets up, heads downstage to look out the windows.

CALLIE (cont'd)

(Pause.) The *clever* guy doesn't happen to know any way to trace a call, does he?

GABE

Not a blocked number. Probably a burner phone. *(Looks around room.)* How's he hearing us?

CALLIE

(Watches the lights. Long silence.) They *are* beautiful tonight. Look at the violet there above the green.

Pause. Gabe takes off his headset and puts it on his desk. He joins her at the windows, looks up to the sky.

GABE

Wow. They're really shimmering. *(Beat. Turns to her. Softer.)* I'm sorry for...lashing out. We're...both jumpy.

CALLIE

(Beat. Still looking out the windows.) I...I don't have nonprofit status.

GABE

...What?

CALLIE

I thought...once I got the grant money, I'd make it official. But it wasn't enough to cover the legal fees to form the...and I...*(Beat. More frantic:)*...I lied in my grant proposal! I said I had not-for-profit status! If they audit me, I could lose the funding, the hope line...they might even charge me with fraud! *(Looks at him apologetically.)* I just...wanted to help people! That's all I *ever* wanted. *(Beat.)* So...we're...*both* criminals.

GABE

(Beat.) And...you think the caller knows?

CALLIE

I don't know how he could.

GABE

Maybe it's my ex. She could've found out I'm here, and she's trying to mess with me...

CALLIE

Why would she do that? *You're* the one who got the hundred hours of community service.

GABE

(Smiles.)...She got forty. But she couldn't even figure out how to steal Wi-Fi, so I don't think she could CSI your grant thing. And how would the caller know about your Pop-Pop?

CALLIE

(Beat.) You're...not gonna...roast me about what I did, after...how I just treated you?

GABE

(Smiles. Beat.) Anybody can forgive one indiscretion.

CALLIE

(Smiles. Pause. Looks out the window.) The lights should be at their peak soon.

The phone rings. They both freeze, look at each other. It continues to ring. Callie runs to her desk, puts on her headset.

CALLIE (cont'd)

I'll take it, and patch you in.

GABE

(Runs to his desk, puts on headset. Doesn't sit. Takes out his cell phone from his pants pocket.) Should I call the police on my cell? Let them listen in?

CALLIE

(Half-smiles.) You really think either of us should be calling the police?! (Gabe puts his cell phone away. She hits the button to connect, then F10 to patch Gabe in. Static. Nervously:) Aurora Hope Line.

THE CALLER (O.S.)

You promised to watch over her.

CALLIE

Watch over who?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

She was counting on you, Gabe. *(Callie looks at him.)* So was he.

GABE

I don't...get...? Who was I supposed to...?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

Look out the window. Her name's across the sky.

GABE

(A realization. Shaken:)...Uncle...Uncle Dan?! Is that you...?!

Static. The call disconnects with a click. Gabe freaks out a bit, throwing off his headset and onto the desk, and paces.

GABE (cont'd)

There's no way anyone knew that! We were alone! It was the last thing he said to me!

CALLIE

Who?

GABE

My Uncle Dan! How could he...?!

CALLIE

Didn't you say he...passed?

GABE

No one else could possibly know!

CALLIE

Know *what*?

GABE

His dog! Waawaate ("wah-WAH-tay"). Right before he died, he made me promise I'd take her in after he passed! Waawaate means "northern lights" in Ojibwe. *(Callie looks confused.)* "Her name is...*(points outside.)*... 'across the sky'...?!"

CALLIE

(Covers her mouth in shock.) Gabe...! Did you...you didn't take her in?

GABE

I tried it for a few weeks, but it wasn't like my uncle's cabin...she was cooped up in my apartment all day while I was working! So I...I took her to the shelter. Told myself someone would adopt her, give her a better home...

CALLIE

Oh, no, don't tell me she was...!

GABE

No, no, but I...still broke my promise! To Uncle Dan. *(Pause.)* A family here in Hibbing with two young girls adopted her. I see Waawaate playing in the yard. She looks happy.

CALLIE

Doesn't sound so horrible.

GABE

...They renamed her "Princess Rainbow Sparkles."

CALLIE

(Smiles.) That is horrible.

The phone rings. Gabe runs back and puts on his headset. She hits the button to connect, then F10 to patch Gabe in. Static.

GABE

Uncle Dan...?!

CALLIE

(Shakes her head disapprovingly at his not following procedure.) Aurora Hope Line.

THE CALLER (O.S.)

You told the man to breathe and count the stars.

Static. The call ends with a click. Callie looks dumbfounded.

GABE

(Disconnects the call. Looks at Callie. Beat.) I've never told anyone to count stars...you?

CALLIE

(Pause. She breaks, distraught. Takes off her headset.) Years ago, the other hotline! He told me he wanted to go to the lake to...“finally be free.” He was on his porch when he called, about to walk there. I told him to breathe and count the stars. *(Near tears.)* I stayed on with him for hours. He calmed. I finished my shift thinking he'd made it through the night. Next morning on the news...a drowning in the lake. A male, possible self-inflicted...they never knew for sure. But the caller didn't give me his name, so I never...

GABE

Then don't assume it was him...!

CALLIE

(Breaking.) I...I hung up first! We're not supposed to do that! But...but, he said he was okay!

GABE

You can't blame yourself for—

CALLIE

(Frantic, crying.) I didn't call back! I should have called back!

The phone rings. They look at each other. She throws on her headset, hits the key to connect, then patches Gabe in. She's too breathless to give her standard greeting, so says nothing. Static.

THE CALLER (O.S.)

Not everything that breaks is because of one person.

GABE

(Beat. Looking at Callie. To caller:)...Which of us are you addressing?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

She knows. *(Beat.)* You stayed until the sky brightened. You kept on the line for many hours after your shift ended. You were kind, then tired. You hung up. It happens. People hang up.

CALLIE

...I...I wasn't there when he needed me!

THE CALLER (O.S.)

People fall through cracks for reasons that have nothing to do with you. Sometimes, they're intent on going to the lake, no matter what you say.

CALLIE

But I can't seem to...forget that night! How do I forget it?!

THE CALLER (O.S.)

You don't. But you remember all the nights you stayed. *(Beat.)* Your kindness mattered, Callie.

CALLIE

(A small sound of relief through tears.) Are you...are you *him*?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

...Must I be *one* person only?

CALLIE

(Pause.) Are you calling us for...is there...any way we can *help* you?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

Some calls are not for giving help, they're for getting it. *(Pause.)* You've both been holding much. *(Beat.)* Let them go.

GABE

Let...*what* go?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

The shame. You both made mistakes. *(Pause.)* Callie, your grandfather didn't raise you to believe in perfection. He raised you to believe in trying.

CALLIE

(Her breath catches. Her hand goes to her mouth.) How do you...?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

And, Gabe...love makes us do foolish things. But that doesn't make the act of loving foolish.

GABE

(Shaken.) How did...?! How...how are you...doing this?!

THE CALLER (O.S.)

The lights are very bright. The veil is thin. *(Beat.)* Look outside, Callie. Hope wears many hats.

CALLIE

(Beat. Voice breaking.) Pop-Pop?

THE CALLER (O.S.)

Tonight, it's wearing green and dancing in the sky. Sometimes we need to speak our truths out loud before we can be free.

CALLIE

Are you...Pop-Pop? Or...the man who went to the lake?

GABE

Or Uncle Dan?!

THE CALLER (O.S.)

Many...are dancing. (Callie and Gabe look at each other, stunned. Pause.) Keep answering. But not without rest. And never stop looking up. That's what hope is all about. *(Long pause.)* Have a glorious night.

Static, then a click. The call ends. Callie begins crying. Gabe stares out, stunned.

GABE

(Barely audible.) What just...?

CALLIE

I don't know. *(Wiping her eyes, she chuckles a little.)* I don't know *what* that was.

GABE

(Pause.) How do we...even...log all this?

CALLIE

(Half-chuckles.)...We don't.

GABE

(Pause.) The lights. We should...look at the lights. *(Takes off headset, stands up slowly.)*

CALLIE

(Nods, stands, takes off headset, puts it on the desk.) Yeah.

They both move downstage to the window. They stand side by side, looking out. If there are lighting effects on the backdrop, they are most vibrant now...largely green, with violet and blue. They are both awe-struck by the beauty...almost without words. Pause.

Callie...!
GABE

I know...
CALLIE

I've *never* seen them this bright.
GABE

Me neither.
CALLIE

They stand in silence a moment, staring at the aurora in awe.

They're...!
GABE

They're beautiful.
CALLIE

Pause. They continue, not taking their eyes off the lights.

CALLIE (cont'd)
(Still watching the lights.) I'm going to make it right. Come clean with the grant people.

GABE
They might shut you down.

CALLIE
Probably. Maybe not. I can...*(Smiles, looks at him.)...hope. (Beat.)* What about you?

GABE
(Looks at her.) What about me?

CALLIE
You've still got ninety-six hours left. I'm sorry.

GABE
Aah, I can always get them with the thrift store. *(Smiles. Beat.)* And it's ninety-two hours, because I'm finishing this shift! We both are. *(Beat.)* I'm...I'm glad I'm here.

CALLIE

Me too.

They look out again at the lights in silence for another moment.

GABE

Do you think that was really our...?

CALLIE

I don't know. *(Beat.)* Does it matter?

GABE

(Thinks.) No, I guess not.

CALLIE

Whoever, *whatever* it was...it was right. We were carrying too much.

GABE

(Nods. Beat.) Yeah.

The phone rings. They turn to look each other. Callie smiles.

CALLIE

Shall we? *(They walk back to the desks, put on their headsets. She presses the button to answer the call, then F10. Into her headset, warm.)* Aurora Hope Line. How are you feeling tonight? *(Sits on the desk. Gabe sits on his.)*

The lights begin to fade slowly.

CALLIE (cont'd)

(Beat.) Hi, Jan! I'm Callie, and I'm on the line with Gabe. What's on your mind tonight?
(Beat. They both listen, then look toward the window.) I know, they're amazing, right?!

The lights fade out slowly as they listen, nodding and smiling. The aurora in the background stays bright for another brief moment.

Fade to blackout.