

Present Day

I sit alone in the music tent, in the back, away from any others. Rain pellets the pavilion's roof, dulling the atonal chords of the Schoenberg piano concerto. The dissonant music brings to mind how imperfection can be beautiful. A young cellist rushes in late and squirms into his seat in the orchestra. The change in the conductor's demeanor is barely perceptible, but it is clear he has taken note of the musician's tardiness. Is this a career-changing mistake on the cellist's part? It could well be. Music is a competitive field.

I wonder how many outcomes have hinged on such cringe-worthy moments: how many lives have been indelibly changed as a result of one misstep? Whether by choice or by deflection, the consequences of the alternate path can be dire. I ponder how my life might have turned out if not for my great misstep. Quite differently, I am certain.

There is comfort in knowing I was not directly responsible for Angela's death. Though over a quarter-century has passed since that night, it still creeps into my thoughts with undue frequency. And when I think of how my life turned out in the aftermath, there is always a twinge of guilt.

The rain ceases pounding just as the music comes to a rousing finish. The orchestra stands to thunderous applause, the tardy cellist rising alongside the others. Something about his lateness has appealed to me, and the realization comes in a flash. It is not too late to tell the story. It is never too late to out the truth. I slip from the tent ahead of the crowd and hurry across the parking lot to my car. As I drive home, with the peaks of the majestic Rockies rising to either side of me, I am already composing the words. By the time I arrive home, they are ready to fall into place.

So, if you will, travel back with me to a warm humid Chicago

night in June of 1988. Changes were in play, but no one had any idea how profound they were. Disco was gasping its last breath, both men and women wore their hair long on the sides and short on top, jeans were stonewashed and high-waisted. Cher and people who lived in trailers were the only ones with tattoos. Gays were just coming out of the closet, while AIDS was already an epidemic. Computers were a novelty to anyone outside business, email barely existed, texting was science fiction, and if anyone had a cell phone, it was nearly the size of a shoe. The hottest phone technology was redial. As women, we were the first full generation of career seekers, monetarily and sexually liberated at last. But with our roles still being challenged in a man's world, we often settled for a lot less.

That's a snapshot of Chicago when this story begins. While I can bear witness to my role, you, the reader, must allow for the liberties I will take in assuming voice for the others. Though there may be some inaccuracies in my interpretation of what took place, I suspect in the end my story will ring true.

Margaret Mary Trueheart
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ONE

14 Days Until the Wedding

Saturday, June 11, 1988

I awoke to the sound of the phone ringing and with a sick, sinking feeling that I wasn't alone. As I lay on my side staring at the wall, there was no denying the heat of another body radiating beneath my designer sheets. I remembered that Flynn was out of town. A frantic replay of the night before brought up nothing more than scattered images. I was definitely still drunk.

The phone rang six times before the call went to the answering machine in the living room, and the sound of my voice echoed down the hall. *Hi, this is Maggie. You know what to do and when to do it.* The line went to a dial tone. The phone started ringing again. Once again the sound of my voice was followed by a hang-up. When it happened a third time, I realized the caller wasn't giving up. I rolled reluctantly onto my back to reach for the phone and my hand froze midair. It was the carpenter. The blue work shirt sans work shirt. He was grinning at me, his grin carving dimpled parentheses into his tanned cheeks. Nausea surged from my head to the toes of my all-too-naked body.

'Looks like someone sure wants to talk to you,' he said. Tapping a conspiratorial finger against his lips in a pledge of silence, he plucked the phone from its cradle and held it out to me, the cord cutting a swirling path through his matted chest hair. Horrified, I snatched the phone from him and cupped the mouthpiece next to my face, fearful my visitor might do something to make his presence known such as cough or speak or, God forbid, let loose the noisy emission so common to the male species in the morning hours.

'Hello,' croaked a voice hardly recognizable as my own.

'Maggie, oh Maggie, it's me, Suzanne.' Her words oozed with relief. 'Thank God you made it home OK.'

That, I thought, *is a matter of opinion*. My eyes settled back on my guest. He had made himself quite at home on his side of my bed, his curly head cradled in his hands, his elbows open like wings. He was still wearing a shit-eating grin, not quite the shy New Hampshire carpenter of the night before.

'Of course I made it home OK,' I lied. My eyes flashed to the clock. The digital readout told me it was seven forty-eight. Not super early, but still an uncivilized time for a phone call on a Saturday morning after a late Friday night, even from an early riser like Suzanne. In a lame attempt to sound flip, I asked, 'So what's up with calling at the break of dawn?'

There was a brief hesitation and then, 'I don't know how else to say this, Maggie. It's Angie. She's dead.'

The words cracked through my addled brain like a tamer's whip, causing me to bolt upright in the bed, my bare breasts exposed as the sheets fell away. I tugged the sheets back to my chin with delinquent modesty. That horse had already left the barn. 'This is a joke, right?' But even as the question fell from my lips, I knew its futility. Suzanne Lundgren was the least likely person on the planet to pull a prank of any kind, much less one so dark.

'I wish it were a joke.' The distress in her voice was evident. 'Kelly just called from the police station. Angie's been murdered. They found her body in Lincoln Park earlier this morning.'

'Kelly?' This didn't make sense. Scores of questions were forming in my head, but in my compromised state, the logical ones weren't surfacing. Instead of asking about Angie, I said, 'What does Kelly have to do with this?'

'Evidently, she was out for her morning run and she came across the crime scene,' Suzanne replied. 'She's at Area Three headquarters. They took her there to ask her questions about Angie, I guess.'

'But this is impossible. We were just together . . .' I glanced back at the clock. '. . . what, five, six hours ago? Didn't you take her home?'

This time Suzanne lost it, her words coming in breathy gasps. 'Maggie. Of course I took her home. After we left you, I poured her into a cab and took her straight to her house. I

made the driver sit and wait until she went inside. I watched her close the door.'

Fragments of the night started coming back in a jigsaw-like jumble: Angie on the dance floor in black pants and a low-cut red top, her thick black hair sheeting her face in a dark curtain, her ample hips swaying teasingly over a pair of red stilettos. Angie propped against the neon bar, her tongue in an empty shot glass. Angie trying to stand up straight on Jello legs.

'Listen, I can't really talk anymore. I've told you all I know,' Suzanne said, her voice constricted in pain. 'Kelly promised to call as soon as she gets home with the rest of the details. In the meantime, will you call Carol Anne? I just can't do it.'

'Yes, of course,' I whispered. The line went dead.

Staring at the phone in my hand as if it was a foreign object, I fought to come to terms what had just happened. Surely I wasn't facing the finality of a friend's death. This had to be some kind of weird nightmare. Just like this stranger staring at me. He was part of the nightmare too. I would close my eyes and the world would go back to yesterday's normal. Angie would be alive, and I would be alone in my bed, and the worst thing anyone would suffer was the mother of all hangovers.

I pressed my eyes shut.

But when I reopened them he was still there, his presence nearly as disturbing as Angie's murder. His smile had disappeared, and his face was filled with genuine concern. He reached up and gently brushed my cheek. 'Is everything all right?'

'There was an accident,' I said, too dazed for tears, unwilling to share my personal grief with this stranger. 'You have to go now.'

Choosing to ignore my request, he reached out and stroked my face, brushing the back of his hand the length of my jawline. I fought back an involuntary shiver. There was a certain power in his hands, and I remembered being obsessed with them last night. They were large and strong with well-defined joints and hard-earned calluses that testified to hours of honest, physical labor. Hands so unlike Flynn's. Flynn's hands were silky and smooth with long tapered fingers and cuticle-free nails, hands that might carry a golf club or tennis racket, hands from an entirely different social strata.

'You are so beautiful,' he was saying, his caress migrating to the sensitive skin of my neck. 'So beautiful.'

Missing pieces began to emerge from the vodka cloud. Dancing to Cyndi Lauper at The Overhang, climbing into a white truck, the two of us bathed in yellow beneath the street-lamp outside my building. Still much of the jigsaw remained empty. With the dreamlike trance of the alcohol fading, and the protective cover of night gone, I was naked in the naked morning light. Eve staring at the apple. I thought of Flynn and my heart plummeted to the pit of my stomach. Then I thought about Angie, and my heart fell further still.

Apparently oblivious to my conflict, the carpenter brought his face to mine and kissed me lightly on the lips. 'No,' I protested, pulling away. Paying no attention to my attempted virtue, he slipped a hand to the small of my back and pulled me closer. So close I could feel the heat rising off the flat surface of his torso. He pressed his lips to my chin, to my nose, to my mouth. 'No,' I repeated, trying to summon some conviction as his lips continued their pilgrimage to behind my ear.

In a perfect world, the good me would have been repulsed by his very presence. In a perfect world, the good me would have slapped him hard and leapt from the bed. In a really perfect world, this man wouldn't have been there in the first place.

It's an imperfect world.

This was wrong, all wrong. How could I betray my fiancé like this? How could I even think of sex when I should be mourning the death of a friend? But something primal had sparked deep within me, overwhelming grief and guilt and sadness, taking my rational self as prisoner. My body was willing itself in his direction. I didn't even want to pretend to put up a fight. I wanted to be held by him, to bury my face in his chest, to allow him to bury himself in me.

I kissed him back hesitantly at first, and then in earnest, opening my mouth to accept his. He pushed me to the mattress and in no time we were rolling on my bed, our bodies pressed together. The movements grew more intense, and we were just shy of the inevitable when an unwelcome glimmer flickered in the recesses of my brain. I grabbed him by the hips and stopped

him short of entering me. His breath came in desperate gasps as his coffee-colored eyes met mine.

‘I don’t suppose I used my diaphragm last night?’ I panted.

His empty look answered the question. I sighed and pushed him from me. If there was any time to stop this insanity, the moment had presented itself. But sanity was not to prevail. I was a woman possessed.

I reached into the nightstand and pulled out my diaphragm, quickly slipping the trusted dome where it needed to be at the given moment, exorcising thoughts of where it should have been the night before. And then, as if there had been no break in activity, he was alongside me again. There was no sense of time, no awareness of the past, no fear of the future. The present was the only thing to consider, a very compelling present. I surrendered to him, leaving this consciousness for that arena where there is nothing else save you, and another body, and millions upon millions of greedy nerve endings vying for attention.

TWO

When I awoke an hour later the carpenter was sleeping soundly beside me, one arm draped across my shoulder. I had sobered up somewhat, though the residual alcohol in my system would still have qualified me for a DUI. The raging hormones that had rendered me certifiable earlier had retreated, and the morning's events hit home squarely. I stared at my ceiling and tried to digest the new reality. I was a whore and Angie was dead.

Careful not to wake my guest, I extricated myself from under his arm and went into the bathroom. One look in the mirror served to confirm my self-assessment. My hair was matted tufts of auburn poking in all directions like a clown's wig, my green eyes were ringed in the ghoulish black of yesterday's mascara, and my face was raw with whisker burn. I painfully peeled off the contact lenses I had neglected to take out the night before and threw them in the trash. Then I sat down on the toilet and buried my head in my hands, trying to deal with the monster headache pulsing in my right temple. An image of Angie lying on a slab caused me to whimper aloud, filling my bloodshot eyes with tears. I thought about her parents and brothers, people I had known the better part of my life. If the loss of Angie was painful for me, it would be insufferable for them. I sat like that for a while before my thoughts jumped back to the stranger sleeping in my bed. What in hell had I been thinking? What if Flynn came back to town early? I had to get him out of my house. Right away. I grabbed my terry-cloth bathrobe from the hook and drew it around me, cinching it tightly at the waist.

He had awakened and dressed and was sitting at my kitchen table, flipping through a copy of the *Chicagoan*, his curls brushing the wire rims of his glasses. He looked up and his lips curved

in an intimate smile, carving those dimpled parentheses back into his cheeks. He tipped his head down the hall towards the open bathroom door.

‘Do you mind?’ he asked.

‘Mind what?’

‘If I use your bathroom.’

As the door closed behind him, my mind raced with possibilities. Surely, he wasn’t thinking of taking a shower. He needed to be gone, the sooner the better. The sound of a flush was followed by the sound of the tap running, and then, to my great relief, the door opened and he walked out. He came to me, still frozen in the middle of the living room, and bent to give me a kiss. I pulled away.

Hurt clouded the brown eyes behind the wire-rimmed glasses. ‘I want you to know I really enjoyed being with you. I want to see you again,’ he stated.

‘What?’ The word came out a gasp. Was he kidding? Here was a man responsible for me betraying my fiancé, albeit with a little cooperation on my part, and he was asking me for a date? Where was the one-nighter who couldn’t get out the door fast enough? Who leaves saying, ‘I’ll call you,’ but never does. Where was *that* guy? ‘Are you crazy? You know I’m getting married.’

‘You might want to rethink that, Maggie. All I know is I’ve never met anyone like you, and I want to see you again.’

‘You don’t know me, and you haven’t met me. You met my drunken alter-ego last night and she’s leaving town. I’ve made a big mistake. I love someone very much and I am going to marry him and what I did was wrong, very wrong.’

‘You sure weren’t acting like it was wrong last night. Or this morning. You were an animal in there,’ he said, his eyes traveling down the hall to the bedroom door.

His words struck a nerve. Not because they were cruel, but because they rang true. So perhaps I had crossed the line into the animal kingdom. The problem was now that animal was back in its cage, and it needed to be in its cage alone. I had to get rid of the carpenter quickly, and as smoothly as possible. I decided to try rationalizing with him.

‘Look, Steven. Last night, this morning, was fantastic. But that’s beside the point. I’ve made a mistake. I’ve done something

terribly wrong and now I'm scared, scared of what I did, scared of you. Scared that my actions of one night will blow something that I've invested a year of my life into. My fiancé is more important to me than anyone in the world. He is a wonderful, caring man, and I don't want to lose him. Because my libido clouded my brain, I've risked ruining everything. This can never, never happen again. You have to understand that.'

He shook his head. 'Maggie, you are making a big mistake if you go through with this wedding. The woman in that bed this morning sure wasn't madly in love with someone else.'

I wanted to scream, but I kept my cool. 'That's enough. I'd like you to leave now, please.'

He crossed the room to my desk where he picked up a pen and scribbled something on the pad sitting on the polished surface. He turned back toward me. 'This is the number for the job I'm working on. You can reach me there during the day.'

I walked up behind him and tore the sheet of paper from the pad, crumpling it in my fist. 'Don't you get it? I'll never call you.' For emphasis I stormed to the door and threw it open, taking a position on the threshold with my arms crossed.

'Then this is it?'

'This is it.'

Before leaving, he caught me by surprise, leaning down and brushing my lips gently with his. Then he stepped past me onto the landing. I shut the door behind him and turned the deadbolt, my ear pressed to the wood as his boots thumped down the flight of stairs. Relief flooded me upon hearing the entrance door squeak closed – as if that closure might shut out what had happened. Peeking from behind the white sheers in the living room, I watched him cross the street and climb into his truck. As he drove away, I hoped that he hadn't noted my address so that he could never find me again.

I went into the kitchen where a lonely bottle of Jameson sat on the counter beside two overturned shot glasses. More memory surfaced. His truck pulling up in front of my building. Inviting him in for one last drink seemed innocent enough. What could I have been thinking?

'To marriage,' I had toasted.

'To marriage,' he'd responded, drinking the whisky in one

gulp before placing the empty shot glass face down on the counter. And then he had buried his face in the soft skin of my neck. The sensation of him had been both disarming and familiar. Any resolve I may have had melted as he kissed along my collarbone and unbuttoned my blouse, slipping a rough hand under my bra. My last recollection was of him leading me to the bedroom, and the two of us pulling at each other's clothes. The rest was a blur.

Except for this morning. That was no blur.

I went back into the bedroom and stared at the scene of my transgression, wishing there was some cosmic way of turning back time, like hitting rewind on my VCR. The scrap of paper with his phone number was still clenched in my hand, and I hurled it into the wastebasket. I threw the windows open to clear the stale smell of lovemaking from the air and tore the sheets from the bed, shoving them into the washing machine. Then I showered in the hottest water I could stand, lathering myself over and over as if soap could wash him off me, thinking about Flynn the entire time and how hurt he would be if he ever found out about my unfaithfulness. But he could never find out. Never.

As I stepped from the shower, my tormented thoughts turned to Angie and the call I had yet to make. I wrapped myself back in my terrycloth bathrobe and went into the living room, picking up the phone to dial a number so familiar that I could dial it with my eyes closed. Carol Anne's chirpy hello rang out a minute later. Hers was the voice of yesterday, of ignorant bliss, the voice I trusted more than any other in the world. She was most likely sitting in her palatial kitchen making out her menus for the week and the grocery list to go along with it.

'It's me. I have some bad news.' My words sounded bland in light of the bomb to be delivered. In a trembling voice, I told her of Angie's death. There was an audible intake of breath, followed by utterances of disbelief.

'This just isn't possible,' she lamented. 'It can't be true.'

'I'm afraid it is.'

'Murdered?'

'That's what Kelly told Suzanne.'

'But I don't understand. If Suzanne dropped her off at home, how did she get to the park? It doesn't make any sense.'

'Nothing makes any sense,' I said, bursting into tears. 'Carol Anne, there's something else. Something else really bad has happened.'

'Worse than Angie being murdered?'

'Not worse, but bad.' My voice dropped to a level usually reserved for the confessional. Then I realized this was one confession that couldn't be delivered over the phone. It had to be delivered in person. 'Carol Anne, can I come over?'

'Of course,' she said, tossing me a much needed lifeline.