

Remembrance Falls

By Cynthia Ivers

Digging through frozen layers of dirt beneath snow and ice proved harder than I imagined.

A steel-enforced shovel, the one his boss gave him on his twentieth anniversary, snapped like a rotting twig upon impact with the rock-hard soil. The Japanese chainsaw fared better, its jagged teeth carving out enough chunks of earth to form a shallow depression before the engine overheated and belched charcoal smoke into the sky.

Still, the hole wasn't nearly big enough for a human body.

Not an adult-sized one anyway.

"Frost line's too deep." His words come in short, sharp rasps. Five hours of laboring in sub-zero temperatures has a way of snatching the breath from even the most seasoned Alaskan grave-diggers. "Gotta wait until it thaws."

"And when exactly will that be?" I gulp down the remaining purple liquid masquerading as vintage Merlot. It does nothing to stop the rising panic in my chest.

"Hard to say, Miss Mara." I strain to hear him above the deafening wind on his end of the line and the din of drunken bush pilots on mine. "Could be three days. Or three months."

"Three months?" My voice rises an octave. "What am I supposed to do with her body until then?" The panic inside me grows. "I have to be back in Los Angeles next week for an audition. Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Cold –" His voice cuts out as static engulfs the line, leaving nothing but dead air whistling in my ear.

“Cold what?” I press the Redial button until the tip of my index finger aches. “Hello?” I want to smash the phone up against the knotty pine walls of Hades Lounge and scream at the top of my lungs. But I’ve barely slept in three days, and my calves ache from trudging nine blocks in thigh-high snow searching for a cell signal. I just want to go home to the beach and the sun and out of this place I never wanted to come back to. I cover my mouth to stifle a sob.

“Cold storage.” The bartender says, as he walks toward me with a liquor bottle the shape of a human skull in his hand.

“What?” My throat is so tight I can hardly speak.

“A refrigerated locker.” He pours a thimbleful of amber liquid into a shot glass and sets it down before me. “Local mortuary has one, but rumor is it’s never been used. People in these parts tend to put off dying ‘til summer, when the dirt’s so soft, you can dig your own grave with a spoon.” He motions me to drink up. “Don’t worry. Maggie will be in good hands until then.”

I tilt my head back and let the liquor forge its own path down my throat. It tastes like a burning hospital but has an immediate effect; the muscles in my shoulders and neck relax for the first time since the medical examiner called to tell me my mother had died. “Hit me again.” I tap the side of my glass but the bartender’s too busy rifling through a pile of papers to hear me.

“Found it,” he shouts, and hands me an 8 x 10 Manilla envelope.

“What’s this?” I give it a quick once-over before setting it aside.

“It’s Maggie’s.” He pours me another thimbleful. “Every day for as long as I can remember, she would sit exactly where you’re sitting now, order a cup of my strongest black coffee, and sort through the stack of mail she brought in with her. But three days ago –”

“The day of her accident?”

He nods. “She comes in all red in the face, clutching that envelope to her chest. Then she orders a bottle of my best vodka and just sits there staring at it, mumbling something about God and forgiveness. Doesn’t touch a drop. Next thing I know, she runs out, leaving it behind.”

“That’s odd.” My eyes drift to the upper right-hand corner of the envelope. “There’s no stamp.” I run my fingers across the top. It’s been slit open seam to seam.

I thread the top apart with my thumb and forefinger and pull out a single piece of white paper. It’s a grainy photocopy of a young girl. She stares out at me with broody eyes the color of mud puddles. Her lips are parted in neither a smile nor a frown. The dress she wears is the color of a Tiffany box and is a size too big for her tiny frame. She can’t be more than six or seven years old.

A single bolded word is printed above her forehead.

REWARD

The inside of my mouth turns to chalk. I fold the piece of paper in half and ease it into the inside pocket of my jacket. I motion the bartender for my tab and begin to slowly slide off of the barstool. I can’t feel my legs.

Across the bar, a customer struggles to open the heavy wooden entrance door. A gust of arctic air rushes in, blasting me in squarely the face. I lurch backward, shifting my weight onto the hind legs of the stool. My arms flailing, I claw for the rounded edge of the bar top to steady me. But I’m too off-balance to do anything but let gravity take its course.

My head hits the wood plank floor hard and everything goes silent. A bright halo of light from the florescent bulbs overhead warms my face. I’m back in L.A., lying on Zuma Beach, watching the tide roll onto the shore. I close my eyes and surrender to the water.

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“I always said I’d get you on your back someday.”

I don’t open my eyes all at once. I don’t have to. I could never forget his voice. The one that tormented me every day as I walked to school. “Keep dreaming.” I prop myself onto one elbow. “And just how did you get in? I made sure to lock all the doors and the windows.” I don’t flash him a smile.

“With this.” Neil Brasher holds up a house key. “Maggie gave me a spare, in case of an emergency. That’s what sheriffs do in these parts, remember?” He’s staring at me, his steel-blue eyes scanning my body from head to toe, lingering at the skimpy lace bra peeking out from beneath my low-cut sweater. Not a lascivious gaze, a disapproving one.

“It’s my house now, and you’re trespassing.” I push myself into a sitting position and tuck my bra strap back under my sweater.

“I rang the doorbell.” He walks toward me, his alligator cowboy boots making a clacking sound on the hardwood floor. “When you didn’t answer, I thought maybe you had another,” he pats the top of his felt Stetson, “accident.” His words are jovial, but there’s something about his expression: the furrowed brows, the downturned corners of his mouth.

“Sorry to disappoint.” I stretch my arms, still feeling a twinge from the strained muscles in my neck. “But I just was taking a much-needed nap before my flight home tonight. Doc Ryan cleared me to travel.”

“What’s the rush, Angela?” He says my name with a sharp edge to his voice. “Little Remembrance Falls just doesn’t cut it anymore? I guess ten years in Hollyweird does that to a person.” His tone darkens. “And I thought we could talk about Maggie.”

“Ah.” I set my jaw. “You stopped by to play amateur therapist.” I rise from the couch, walk to the hallway closet, and retrieve an armful of sweaters hanging on wire hangars. “Thank

you, but I've already paid countless *real* shrinks to talk to me about my mother. How she spent my childhood jacked up on oxycodone and vodka tonics." I feel heat behind my eyeballs. "I'm almost not sorry she's –" I bite down hard on my lower lip to stop the tears now threatening to blaze a trail down my cheeks.

"Don't you want to know how Maggie died?"

"I already know how she died." I begin folding clothes and placing them in my hand luggage. "It's right there on the death certificate; she tripped and fell down the basement stairs. Probably drunk and high."

He shakes his head.

I stop packing. "What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you, but first you have to answer one question."

My cheeks flame hot. "Remember? I don't play your –"

"How long have you known Maggie was a killer?"

Blood surges through my veins, pulsating in my ears. "What did you say?"

"Evelyn Edwards. 2004. Run over, stripped of her clothes, and then buried in a shallow grave."

"I don't know what you're –"

"Stop it, Angela." He rushes up to me and leans his face close in to mine. "I already know. *Everything.*"

I want to turn my head away but my neck won't budge. "You know nothing."

"Maggie drove to a party that night, didn't she? Got drunk as a skunk and then got back in her car." He's so close now, his nose almost touches mine. "She got lost. Drove onto a private road where Evelyn Edwards was playing hide and seek with her imaginary friends. She thought

she had hit a fox or a deer. But she didn't, did she, Angela?"

My fingernails dig into my palms and I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping he'll just disappear.

"Then she came home and told you to burn something."

"That's not true. Not one word." The words barely escape my lips.

"Stop covering for her, Angela. Maggie's dead." He grabs ahold of both of my wrists.

"Dead people can't be arrested. But you can. For obstruction of justice. Maybe even accessory after the fact." His grip tightens. "And you can kiss your precious acting career goodbye.

Unless," his tone softens, "you tell me the truth."

Seconds tick away like years before I open my eyes and look straight into his. "The *truth?*"

He nods his head and encloses one of my trembling hands between both of his.

I take a deep breath and then exhale slowly . . . carefully. "I begged her not to drive. Said I could take her. I had my permit. But she wouldn't listen." I try to swallow the basketball-sized lump in my throat. "She never listened." Tears now stream down my cheeks, seeping onto my sweater. "She was drunk and high. Another boyfriend dumped her because she had a kid. Too much baggage, I guess." Now the words come in a rush. "Told me not to wait up. That she was going to some party in Hopeville. She was gone for hours. Next thing I know she's standing in my bedroom doorway, her dress covered in mud, like she'd been digging in the dirt, and telling me to start up the fire pit in the backyard. The she gave me a dress and told me to burn it.

Something about DNA."

"This one?" He pulls a plastic bag containing a faded turquoise dress out of the pocket of his sheepskin coat.

I nod, wiping tears from my cheeks. "How did you find that?"

“Digging through one of Maggie’s old cardboard boxes at the flea market last week. But she grabbed it back and said it wasn’t for sale. I know this dress like I know the back of my own hand, Angela. Been staring at it for eight years. On the reward flyer taped on the wall above my desk at work. I knew right then what I had to do.”

“You sent Maggie the envelope?”

He nods. “Delivered it straight to her mailbox. To coax her out. Get her to do the right thing.”

“And did she?”

“She called and told me to come and get her. That she wanted to turn herself in. But when I got here, she was standing over by the basement stairs, hugging the dress like it was a newborn baby.”

“But how did she die? You didn’t –”

“Push her?” He shakes his head. “Part of me wanted to, for what she did to Evelyn. But she needed answer for her crime before a proper judge and jury. Maggie, however, was hell-bent on making sure that didn’t happen. All the time she was confessing, she was backing up until her heels hung over the edge of the top step. I didn’t realize it until she leaned back like she was settling down to sleep. I tried to stop her, but it was too late.”

A strangled sound rises in my throat. The sound a wounded animal makes right before it dies.

“Angela, there’s one thing I don’t understand. Why didn’t you burn the dress?”

But I don’t answer as sobs, all at once, overtake me and I crumple to the floor at Brasher’s feet.

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There, in Maggie's shag-carpeted living room, on the sagging patchwork couch, Brasher and I made a deal. A pact with the devil, perhaps, to bury the dead – both of them – once and for all. I vowed to cooperate fully in any police investigation, and he promised to keep my name out of the newspaper. In return, Evelyn's parents would learn the truth about their daughter's death and Brasher could finally retire that reward flyer from the bulletin board above his desk.

But the truth, like everything else in Remembrance Falls, lies hidden beneath layers of snow and ice, perfectly preserved, if you can break through the rock-hard surface and dig down deep enough to find it.

Perhaps one summer, long after I've given Maggie the burial she deserves, when the Alaskan snow and ice have given way to prickly roses and wild geraniums, I'll tell Brasher the *real* truth about what happened on that private road so many years ago. The one with me in the lead role, behind the wheel of Maggie's car, too drunk to know where I was headed and too high to care. Thinking I had struck a deer, not a girl. Strangely fascinated, watching her body twitch until it surrendered to death. And her little dress. So delicate and rich. I just had to take it. Maybe as a keepsake of the event, or a reminder of my guilt.

That was the truth I tried telling Brasher. But he refused hear. That Maggie was a martyr not a murderer. That she sacrificed her life so I could go on living mine in a land of tinsel and Technicolor. Maybe it was her way of atoning for her own sins. But perhaps, somewhere deep, beneath the layers, where the truth lies in all of us, Brasher already knows.