

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARSHALL
KARP

DON'T
TELL ME HOW TO

LOVE

PROLOGUE
THE ANGEL OF DEATH

ONE

THREE MONTHS BEFORE THE FUNERAL

At six feet eight, 360 pounds, Irv Hollingsworth was not only the biggest TV weatherman in Heartstone, New York; his larger-than-life personality and his flair for showmanship had made him the most popular in the county.

Which is why instead of reporting from a warm, dry studio that watershed June morning, Big Irv, dressed in bright yellow waist-high waders and a matching XXXXL slicker, was broadcasting live from Magic Pond during a torrential downpour.

“I’m here at Heartstone Medical Center,” he said, letting the rain lash his face for effect. “The hospital has been operating on auxiliary power for the last twelve hours. And I do mean operating. I spoke to the chief surgeon, Dr. Alex Dunn, and he told Channel Six that despite this nor’easter, it’s business as usual inside.

“But outside is a whole different story.” The camera panned to take in the rest of the medical center’s campus. Big Irv slogged across the muddy grounds to the swollen edges of Magic Pond, which had crested far beyond its banks.

“Normally, this is where hospital workers and locals would be sitting around enjoying their morning coffee,” he said, stopping at a partially submerged bench, its seat lost beneath the murky waters. “But as you can see, Magic Pond has—”

And then, as if the media gods had come down to help the big man claim his place in broadcasting history, she appeared on camera. A woman. Floating face down on the surface of the pond.

For a second, maybe two, the only sound that could be heard was the white noise of the rain hammering on the water. Then Big Irv regained his composure and heralded her arrival with two words. Probably not the same two that most people would choose, but Irv was a TV pro. He knew what would resonate.

“Good Lord,” he said in a reverent hush.

Within seconds, the internet’s lust for the bizarre kicked into high gear, and the video of the hulking man in a yellow rain slicker gently guiding the sad remains of a woman in a lavender sweat suit to shore spread like a virus on steroids.

Within minutes, Big Irv, a local celebrity here in Heartstone, would be seen by millions of people around the world. I’m the mayor of Heartstone, and I’ll bet that the mayor of Helsinki saw the poignant footage before I did. It’s the curse of social media. Death and bad weather course through the ether with the speed of light.

As Irv’s star was rising, mine was rapidly sinking. Thirty hours of relentless rain had left my town with roads that were submerged, trash pickups that were suspended, power lines that were down, and emergency services that were stretched to the limit.

My inbox was also flooded. The emails were split between my being woefully unprepared or deplorably unresponsive. Either way, I expected the front page of the *Heartstone Crier* to be a photo montage of downed trees, mud-caked basements, and disabled cars in three feet of water. The headline might not say “This Mess Is All Mayor Dunn’s Fault,” but society needs a scapegoat, and I was the obvious front-runner.

And then came the coup de grâce. Chief Vanderbergen called.

“Minna Schultz is dead,” he said. “Her body was found floating in Magic Pond.”

Immediately, my instincts as a former prosecutor for the DA’s office kicked in. “Foul play?” I asked.

“The ME isn’t here yet,” the chief said.

"But *you* are," I said. "What's your take?"

"There's no obvious signs of trauma, but let's face it, the woman had enemies."

Enemies was an understatement. Minna Schultz had destroyed a lot of people's lives over the years. Most of them would probably show up at her wake just to make sure she was really dead.

"Of course we can't rule out suicide," the chief added.

"Absolutely," I said, although I doubted it. Anyone who ever met Minna would know that she wouldn't have the common decency to whack herself.

"One more thing, Mayor Dunn. The Channel Six weather guy discovered the body while he was on the air. The video has gone viral."

"Shit," I muttered. "So we're talking media frenzy."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I said, ending the call.

"Madam Mayor," a familiar voice said.

I looked up, and there she was, standing in my doorway, a dripping-wet pink umbrella in one hand, the tools of her ugly trade in the other.

The Angel of Death.

She was blond, in her early thirties, and still holding on to her kick-ass high school cheerleader body and flawless skin. Her name was Rachel Horton, and like the six other phlebotomists who had come before her, her job was to draw my blood three times a year to make sure I hadn't contracted the same fatal disease that killed my mother.

It had been a medical ritual for me and my sister Lizzie for over a quarter of a century. But this was the first time one of those smiling bloodsuckers ever showed up in my office unannounced.

"Rachel," I said. "Whatever it is, I have no time for you."

She flashed me a perfect smile and held up her blue soft-sided medical tote bag. "I only need a minute, Mayor Dunn," she said, as perky as a Girl Scout delivering a box of Thin Mints. "Dr. Byrne needs some more blood."

"What did he do with the blood I gave him last week?"

"He said the lab screwed up," Rachel said, capping off the ominous

news with yet another sunny smile that was so genuine I realized I'd misjudged her. Rachel was not the Grim Reaper. She was more like one of those lovable yellow Minions, gullible enough to believe that the lab actually bungled a routine blood test.

The lab screwed up. I've been married to a surgeon long enough to know medical malarkey when I hear it. It's a classic doctor ploy. Rather than tell you straight up that your first set of test results looks suspicious, they give you the healthcare equivalent of "the dog ate my homework."

But I knew the truth. My white blood cells were amassing the troops and were hell-bent on killing me just like they killed my mother.

"Make it fast," I said, sitting back down at my desk.

"You'll feel a little prick," the sweet young thing said to me with a straight face, which never fails to make me wonder if she gets the sexual innuendo. She stuck the needle in my vein, and I closed my eyes.

It was a Thursday. I would have to wait till Monday before my hematologist made it official, but when you have a fatal disease hanging over your head for twenty-six years, you learn to arrive at your own medical conclusions before your doctor has the clinical proof and the balls to tell you what you already figured out.

I was dying.

"What's so funny?" Rachel asked.

I hadn't realized I was grinning, but I had to admit that my entire morning was rife with macabre humor. I was only a few weeks past my forty-third birthday, and I suddenly realized that I was going to be spending my forty-fourth with Minna Schultz. In hell.

Yeah, hell.

I'm a fairly popular mayor and a rather well-liked human being. On paper I look like a shoo-in to be ushered through the Pearly Gates and into the Kingdom of Heaven by St. Peter himself. That's just because I've been able to hide the truth from the rest of world.

But I can't hide from God, so I had no doubt that when my time was up, I was destined to spend eternity burning in hell for my sins.

TWO

Rachel removed the needle, put a piece of gauze over the vein, and taped it to my arm. “There you go,” she said. “You survived another one.”

Survived, I thought. Interesting choice of terms.

She zipped up her bag and gave me a cheery “Have a good one.”

I wasn't having a good one when you got here, and I'm certainly not going to have one now, I thought, but I opted for, “You too. Close the door on your way out.”

Minna Schultz would have to wait. I went to my laptop and typed into the Google search bar: *How often do labs screw up blood tests*. Google, always trying to stay one step ahead of me, immediately gave me some options to finish my question: *in cats, in dogs, in criminal cases, in early pregnancy*.

“This is not a good day to test me, Google,” I said, banging out the words *in humans* on my keyboard.

I got ninety-six million results. I scanned the first few till I found an encouraging number. Labs make twelve million mistakes a year.

Yes, but out of how many, I thought, trying to decide if twelve million was a life raft. I was about to explore Google's credibility quotient by typing in *How many dogs a year actually do eat homework*, when my cell phone rang.

I looked at the caller ID and burst out laughing.

It said JIFFY ESCORT SERVICE.

My husband, Alex, the absolute love of my life, knows how to make me laugh. One of his favorite pranks is to sneak into my phone and change his name in my contacts. Today his timing was off. I stifled the laugh and answered the phone.

"I heard," I said, throwing on my coat. "I'm on my way."

"I'm at the pond," he said. "How are you holding up?"

How was I holding up? I wanted to take him in my arms and say, "You run the damn hospital. Can you find out if some klutz in the lab spilled their Red Bull all over my last blood test, or am I a dead woman walking?"

But nothing sours Alex faster than a whiny patient having an "I know I'm going to die" episode. I let it go.

"It's going to take us at least a week to get back to normal," I said, "but I managed to get the County Environmental Commission to send two generator trucks, so I have the equipment I need to keep our little shitstorm from overflowing into the Hudson River."

"Great. You can play that up when you run for reelection."

Reelection. More dark humor. God was working overtime today.

"What's going on at the pond?" I asked.

"A few dozen people braved the storm in the beginning, but the rain is finally starting to let up, and the crowd behind the yellow tape is starting to build."

"Tell Chief Vanderbergen to take pictures. They're all suspects."

"I doubt it. I saw the body. No sign of trauma. I don't think we're looking at a homicide, Maggie."

"Suicide?" I said.

"Not my call," he said. "That's for the medical examiner to decide."

"Alex . . ."

"What?"

"How are *you* holding up?"

He let out a long exhale. "Minna Schultz has been a roadblock to everything we're trying to do here at the hospital. That's over now, but I would feel a whole lot better if we beat her in court. This . . . this just leaves a stain on the whole project."

"If she did commit suicide, that would be her motive," I said. "She

knew she couldn't win, so rather than lose publicly, she decided to piss all over your victory on her way out."

"You sound like a lawyer."

"A lawyer in desperate need of a hug," I said. "I'll be there in ten. Love you."

"What an incredible coincidence," he said. "I love me too."

It was a tired old line, but it always made me smile.

I hung up, looked down, and it caught my eye. The gauze bandage that Rachel had taped to my arm.

I peeled it off and tossed it. But I couldn't ignore it. It was a graphic reminder that I had been getting ready for this day for more than half my life.

The first time I found out I was a candidate for an early grave, I was seventeen. You'd think it would have destroyed me. Just the opposite. It was the perfect excuse to break away from my poster-child-for-teenage-excellence image. I was still president of my class, snagging straight As, going to church on Sundays, and rocking the SATs with a 1500, but once Dr. Byrne told me I had the markers for a fatal inflammatory blood disease, I developed an instant case of the fuck-its.

Sex, drugs, alcohol, rule-breaking, risk-taking? Fuck it. If I was going to die young, I was going to live life as hard as I can.

Of course, I couldn't compete with my best friend, Misty Sinclair, a one-woman wrecking ball who'd call me and say, "Let's crank shit up to eleven and break off the knob." But I ran a pretty strong second. Because, hey . . . what the hell did I have to lose?

And then I met Alex Dunn, and suddenly I had an anchor in the insanity of my life. Three years later, when I gave birth to Kevin and Katie, my Mommy genes kicked in, and I found a purpose beyond the adrenaline rush of survival.

Dying young was no longer all about me. It was about them. What would happen to them if I died?

The more I ruminated about it, the more obsessed I became with their lives after my death. It was not a random obsession. My shrink confirmed what I already knew. It was PTSD.

When my mother died, I watched in horror as women circled my grieving father like hammerheads on a feeding frenzy. And when the wrong woman stepped in to take my mother's place, the consequences were devastating.

I refused to let the same thing happen to Alex and my kids. I know it sounds insane, but the idea I'd buried in the darkest recesses of my brain became a priority as soon as the Angel of Death with her little pink umbrella showed up at my door.

I was going to spend my last remaining days on earth searching for the next Mrs. Dunn. I might not find her, but I would die trying.

PART ONE
WOMEN WITH CASSEROLES

CHAPTER 1

TWENTY-SIX YEARS BEFORE THE FUNERAL

I've had twenty-six years to contemplate the fact that a ripe old age might not be in the cards for me. But my mother was caught completely by surprise. She thought she still had half her life ahead of her when the doctor blindsided her with the diagnosis—hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis. They call it HLH because it's impossible to pronounce. It's also impossible to cure. But they don't tell you that.

"There are new advances in chemotherapy every day," Dr. Byrne told her. "They may not be the wonder drug we're hoping for, Kate, but they can slow down the spread. They can buy you time."

Time. That was the magic word. Time to impart more of her life skills to her teenage daughters, time to allow her husband to come to grips with his impending loss, time to savor the familiar warmth of her countless friends.

She knew that the ravages of chemotherapy could steal the very time it was supposed to deliver. But her doctor was optimistic, her 24/7-support group was deep and unwavering, and she knew that everyone at St. Cecilia's parish would be praying for a miracle.

"I've decided to go ahead with the chemo," she told us at dinner that snowy December night. Six months later, she told us how much she regretted that decision.

I remember that day vividly. It was the start of the summer between

my junior and senior year in high school, and I was in the kitchen of our family restaurant cracking lobster claws for the lunch special.

It was a mindless job, which gave me the opportunity to use my brain to focus on something much more important—coming up with a killer essay for my college applications. Would it be better, I mused, to write about something global like the technology revolution, or should I stick to the tried and true—a personal challenge I’ve overcome, and how it shaped my—

“Yo, Maggie, what the hell are you doing?”

I looked up. It was my sister Lizzie.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I said. “I’m prepping for Chef Tommy.”

“Sure you are. I’m tempted to tell Grandpa Mike to change the blackboard from creamy lobster bisque to extra crunchy, but I don’t want to spend the whole day giving the Heimlich maneuver to people who are choking on soup.”

She reached down into the bowl of lobster meat I’d been filling and started picking out the shells I’d been absentmindedly tossing in.

“Sorry. I was deep in thought.”

“You daydreaming about Van again?” Lizzie asked.

“No. My *Vantasies* are strictly a bedtime thing. I was trying to work out an idea for a college essay.”

“Well, you better work fast. Applications are due by December thirty-first, and—oh my God—it’s June twenty-fourth already. You’re running out of time!”

Lizzie is my Irish twin, born 314 days after me. She’s also my fiercest competitor, my biggest pain in the ass, and my dearest friend. I love her beyond words, which is appropriate since I hardly ever come right out and say it. She, in turn, expresses her affection for me by busting my chops on a regular basis.

She clutched her throat with both hands and began to gag. “I can feel the pressure building. If only you had been elected president of next year’s senior class. Oh, wait—you were,” she said, relaxing the choke hold. “Problem solved.”

“You know how many class presidents apply to college?” I said, picking out the last of the rogue shells. “I’m not that unique.”

“You could be if you wrote about how you miraculously managed to get elected despite living your entire life in your younger sister’s shadow.”

I was working on a comeback line when we both heard the throaty growl of the Harley Electra Glide as it barreled up Pine Street.

“Here comes Dad,” I said.

“Sucking the serenity right out of the neighborhood,” Lizzie added.

Dad’s motorcycle roared into the parking lot and stopped at the reserved space next to the kitchen door.

Chef Tommy banged a metal spoon on an empty soup pot three times, and everyone in the kitchen—me and Lizzie included—yelled out in unison, “God bless Black Monday.”

It’s the standard homage whenever my father arrives at the restaurant—kind of like playing “Hail to the Chief” for the president. There’s a long story behind that ritual, and it gets recounted every year at the Thanksgiving feast for our employees and their families.

The back door swung open, and Finn McCormick charged into the room. He’s a big man, six feet four, barrel-chested, with a full head of thick hair that shook loose when he removed his helmet. He peeled off his leather jacket and yelled, “What’s cooking?” to the kitchen crew.

It’s a far cry from his past life with his preppy haircut, conservative suits, and monthly commuter ticket to his job as a stockbroker on Wall Street. That’s the life that ended eleven years ago when the market crashed.

“Good news, girls,” he said, spreading his arms wide. “You are done. Get out of here.”

“Are we fired?” Lizzie said. “Or did Child Protective Services finally catch up with you?”

That got a belly laugh. “You wish,” he said. “But alas, it’s only a brief reprieve. Your mom wants me to give you the rest of the day off and send you home.”

“Is she okay?” I said.

“Hard to say. What woman in her right mind wants to spend the

day with her teenage daughters?” He flashed us a wide grin. “Just kidding. She seemed downright chipper all morning. Oh yeah—she’s fixing lunch, so she told me to tell you not to eat here.”

“Don’t eat at McCormick’s,” Lizzie said. “Good advice.”

Another big laugh from my father. Which of course was Lizzie’s mission in life. Early on she had decided she wanted to be a doctor, and ever since she read about the healing powers of laughter she became the family stand-up comic commando, bombarding us with one-liners every time any of us had so much as a snuffle.

My mother, of course, had a lot more than a snuffle.

“Dad, are you sure she’s okay?” I asked again.

“She looks better than she’s looked in months,” he said. “Besides, you know your mom. If she wasn’t okay, she wouldn’t want you guys around.”

“That’s great news, Dad,” Lizzie said. Then she turned to me. “Especially for you, Lobster Girl.”

“What do you mean especially for me?”

“*How My Mother Beat a Rare Blood Disease*,” she said. “It’s got all the makings of a great college essay.”

CHAPTER 2

Lizzie got her driver's license when she turned sixteen in March, and the four-year-old Acura Integra that had been all mine for ten months now belonged to both of us. We can barely share a bathroom, so we politicked for another car. But our parents' logic, which basically boiled down to "you go to the same school—just work it out," prevailed.

"I'm driving," Lizzie said when we got to the parking lot.

"Fine," I said. "But that means I'm in charge of the radio."

"Oh, God, you're going to play that annoying shitkicker music, aren't you?"

"I won't know till I'm on the road. Make a decision," I said, jangling the keys in front of her.

"This is why we each should have our own car," she said, snapping the keys out of my hand.

She got behind the wheel, and I started rifling through the CDs.

I pulled out a Garth Brooks album, popped it into the CD player, and turned up the volume.

The pub is only three miles from our house, but it was enough time to make her sit through four annoying shitkicker songs.

There was a lime-green Honda Civic hatchback with a mashed right rear fender parked in front of our house.

"Nurse Demmick is here," I said as Lizzie pulled into the driveway.

Marjorie Demmick is the school nurse at Heartstone High, a friend of my mother's from church, and one of a small platoon of women who have been there for her during her illness.

We were just getting out of the car when Marjorie, who always looks like she's in a hurry, bustled out of the front door of the house.

She's short, plump, with beautiful ivory skin, and a head full of tight red ringlets. "Hello, girls," she called out in a squeaky voice that would be adorable for a character in an animated movie, but is extremely grating in real life. "Enjoying your summer vacation?"

"We are indentured servants at an Irish pub," Lizzie said. "Can't wait till September. How's Mom?"

"Well, I just spent some time with her, and this is the best I've seen her in months. She even put on some makeup today. I couldn't stop telling her how beautiful she looked. And now she's puttering around the kitchen like . . . like . . . like . . ." She pursed her lips and looked up at the sky, grasping for an analogy.

"Julia Child? Martha Stewart? Betty Crocker?" Lizzie ventured.

"Oh, that's so funny," Marjorie squealed. "You girls are so smart."

"But you think she's doing well," I said.

"Oh yes. Look, I'm only a school nurse, but I think her treatment is working. And I'll bet now that you two are here, she is going to get even better."

Nurse Demmick was like a walking, breathing Hallmark card. I've never seen her anything but upbeat and positive.

We thanked her for stopping in, said goodbye, and opened the front door. The intoxicating aroma hit me immediately.

"In the kitchen," my mother called out in a singsong voice. "I hope you're hungry."

The kitchen smelled like the inside of a Cinnabon. Mom was just taking a pan out of the oven. She set it down and turned around.

Nurse Demmick was right. My mother looked beautiful. She was wearing a flowery pink summer dress, her strawberry blond hair was tied back in a ponytail, and her face, which had been drawn and tired for months, had a rosy glow. I didn't know if it was from the makeup or the medical treatment,

but I didn't care. I hadn't seen my mother looking this good in a long time.

Lizzie inhaled the sweet fragrance that had hit us when we walked in and would seduce passersby on the street if we left the windows open. "Cinnamon swirl raisin bread," she said. "What's the occasion?"

My mother, who has never been the type to pull any punches, smiled. "I'm vertical—an occasion definitely worth celebrating. When was the last time we had a mother-daughters picnic?"

If she had asked that question when we were seven and eight years old, the answer probably would have been last weekend. But once we became teenagers, picnics at the park were replaced by volleyball team practice, homework, babysitting, and talking incessantly with other girls about boys.

"Everything is packed and ready to go," she said, pointing to an ancient handwoven picnic basket that was sitting on the countertop. "All I need is ten minutes to make the Monkey Paws. Then we're going to Magic Pond."

"I'm driving," Lizzie said.

"*I'm* driving," my mother corrected. "We're taking the Mustang."

The 1996 red Mustang GT convertible was my father's gift to my mother on her fortieth birthday the year before. It had less than two thousand miles on it when she got sick and couldn't leave the house. Dad started it every week and would drive Mom to her doctor appointments in it, but Lizzie and I had never been behind the wheel. It was *Mom's Wheels*.

"Chop, chop," Mom said. "Wash up, so we can get this show on the road."

"I've got the bathroom first," Lizzie said, bolting toward the stairs.

"You look fantastic," I said to my mother, giving her a gentle hug.

"You should have seen me when I was your age. Boys were dropping like flies."

She turned back to the oven, popped the golden-brown loaf out of the pan, and expertly drew a knife across the center. Steam lofted up from the fresh-baked bread.

"Perfect," she said. "I've had a wonderful morning, and it's going to be a glorious afternoon."

And it was.

Until the four words.

CHAPTER 3

During my mother's illness, my father had lovingly washed and waxed the Mustang, so when Mom backed it out of the garage for the first time in months, the bright red car gleamed in the afternoon sun like one of those vintage fire engines that roll up Waterfront Avenue every Fourth of July.

The top was down, the shiny black boot snapped snugly in place, and with her mixtape already queued up in the cassette player, Mom made it clear that she was not only behind the wheel; she was also in charge of the music.

While Mom was packing the picnic basket, Lizzie and I had tried to guess what the first song on the tape would be.

"Slam dunk," Lizzie said. "'Love Will Keep Us Together.' The Captain and Tennille. It's Mom's go-to song."

"Too predictable," I said. "That first song is not going to be about the music. I know Mom. We're on our way to Magic Pond for the first time since we went ice-skating in December just before she got sick. She's going to want to come up with something that's totally about the moment."

"Spare me the logic," Lizzie said, "and cough up a song title."

"'Teddy Bear's Picnic.'"

"From when we were in *kindergarten*?" Lizzie said, like it was the dumbest idea in the world. But then she shrugged because, on second

thought, it was just the kind of crazy sentimental thing my mother might do.

Lizzie and I played Rock-Paper-Scissors to see who would ride shotgun. I won. She climbed in back, and I settled into the soft leather bucket seat up front.

Mom pulled the Mustang onto the street, and the moment we'd been waiting for arrived. She tapped a button on the cassette player, and the warm whiskey voice of a Texas shitkicker erupted from the speaker.

Lizzie clapped both hands to her cheeks, looked up at the sky, and yelled, "Oh my God." Not because it was the country music she hated but because the choice was so inspired. She leaned over and kissed Mom on the back of the neck.

And as we drove down Crystal Avenue on that glorious summer afternoon, the four of us—Lizzie, me, Mom, and Willie Nelson—sang about the joys of being on the road again.

Ten minutes later we arrived at Magic Pond, found a quiet shady spot to spread our blanket, and walked over to the water's edge.

The pond is large by city standards, a two-acre freshwater ecosystem where birds, frogs, plants, bugs, and people coexist in quiet harmony. I inhaled deeply, and a sense of serenity washed over me as I studied the reflections in the water—the trees, the clouds, and of course, the seven-story hospital complex that loomed above it all.

Magic Pond is not part of a city park. It is the centerpiece of Heartstone Medical Center. The story of how that came to be is a hodgepodge of fact, fiction, and folklore.

This is what I know to be true. In 1872 Elias Majek, a young brick-maker from Germany, immigrated to America and settled in the Hudson Valley, where the soil was rich in clay deposits.

His timing was perfect. As immigrants teemed into New York City by the hundreds of thousands, the demand for bricks to raise the metropolis to new heights skyrocketed. And by the dawn of the twentieth century, Elias and Eleanor Majek were the wealthiest couple in the county, living in a forty-two-room mansion looking out at lush gardens, abundant fruit orchards, and their magnificent freshwater pond.

In 1912, at the age of seventy, Elias sold the brickyard and celebrated his retirement by taking Eleanor on a long-overdue vacation. They sailed across the Atlantic aboard the luxurious ocean liner *Mauretania*. It was a far cry from the passage he had made forty years earlier, when he came to America in the steerage compartment of an ancient steamer out of Hamburg.

They spent the next month touring Europe in grand style, but Elias was saving the best for last. He had a special surprise planned for their trip back to New York, and on April 10, 1912, the happy couple arrived in Southampton on the southern coast of England for the maiden voyage of the world's largest ocean liner, White Star's queen of the seas—*Titanic*.

Five days later Elias perished in the frigid waters of the North Atlantic when the unsinkable ship hit an immovable iceberg.

Eleanor was one of 705 passengers rescued from their lifeboats by the RMS *Carpathia*. A year later she contracted tuberculosis. It's at this point that the story of the Majek legacy becomes shrouded in mystery.

It's been said that Eleanor's doctor gave her less than six months to live. She spent much of that time sitting by the pond, reading, drawing, or writing in her diary. But instead of dying, her health improved, and she survived for another nine years.

When she died in 1923, she bequeathed her property to the people of Heartstone with the stipulation that her home be converted into a hospital. She also requested in her will that the pond not be reconfigured or altered in any way in order to preserve its magical restorative powers.

Over the decades the hospital doubled and tripled in size, and then doubled again. And Majek Pond became Magic Pond as generations of people trekked to its banks to pray for speedy recoveries, healthy babies, or medical miracles.

And now my mother, my sister, and I stood on the shore, ready to entrust our most fervent desires to God, Jesus, and the ghost of Eleanor Majek.

Mom unsnapped the brass clasp on the cracked leather change purse that had belonged to her mother. She plucked three pennies from the pouch and gave one to each of us. One by one we closed our eyes and tossed the coins into the water.

“Now let’s eat, drink, and be silly,” my mother said.

We sprawled out on the blanket; Mom opened the picnic basket and passed out the Monkey Paws. It’s the name Grandpa Mike gave to Grandma Caroline’s peanut butter, honey, and banana sandwiches on fresh-baked cinnamon swirl raisin bread.

I was starved and attacked the gooey, chewy treat. Lizzie began wolfing hers down as well. Mom poured three cups of strawberry lemonade from a Thermos and nibbled at her sandwich.

“I have a surprise,” she said. “You know all those pictures I have in shoeboxes that I’ve been threatening to sort through one of these years?”

I stopped eating as she reached into the picnic basket and pulled out a thick photo album bound in bright green fabric. *The McCormick Family* had been carefully inked on the cover in Mom’s perfect Catholic schoolgirl handwriting.

“Ta-da!” she said, setting it down on the blanket.

Lizzie opened it to the first page, and there were four black-and-white shots of Mom, Dad, and the Harley Electra Glide, each one taken in a different location.

“These are from 1979,” Mom said. “Your father and I went to the biker rally in Sturgis, South Dakota. It was our last big road trip—thirty-five hundred miles—and I was pregnant with Maggie at the time. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Sounds like the poor kid got bounced around a little,” Lizzie said.

“More than a little. It was almost all interstate, but I had to make a lot of pee stops, and some of those side roads were bumpy as washboards.”

Lizzie drummed on the side of her head with both fists and smirked at me. “Well, that explains a lot,” she said.

Mom turned the page, and there was an artfully arranged cluster of pictures of me as a baby.

“Oh, there’s the little darling now,” Lizzie said.

I put my hand over the pictures. “Stop,” I said. “What’s going on?” They both stared at me.

“What are you talking about?” Lizzie said.

I ignored her, closed the album, and slid it to the side. “Mom . . . what’s going on?”

She kept staring at me, stone-faced.

“Maggie, what the hell are you doing?” Lizzie said. “Mom’s finally having a good day, and you’re ruining it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not used to Mom having good days lately, and I’m trying to ask her if it’s real.”

“I don’t get it,” Lizzie said.

“She got sick in December, and she kept getting sicker, and then she wakes up one day in June, and like Cinderella, she’s all dressed, and her hair is done, and we drive to Magic Pond for a picnic, and now all of a sudden there’s a family photo album, which has been on her bucket list for years, and I just want to know what’s going on. Is this real, or does the Mustang turn into a pumpkin at midnight?”

Lizzie didn’t say a word. She was wrestling with my logic, and I could see in her eyes that my questions were starting to make sense.

She turned to my mother for answers.

Mom just looked at us. Well, she didn’t exactly look. She kind of squared off, sizing us up, like we were about to get in the ring and go fifteen rounds.

And then she said them.

Four simple words that she uttered only once. Yet of all the hundreds of millions of words I have heard before or since, those are the four that will forever be burned into my soul.

I have written them in the margins of countless notebooks, screamed them into caves and canyons so I could hear their taunting echoes, traced them onto frosty car windows and steamy shower doors, and ached as I watched them trickle down into trails of tears.

Four words.

How strong are you?

CHAPTER 4

Life is filled with defining moments—those pivotal points in time where your entire world can change in a heartbeat.

By the age of seventeen I'd had a few, but none that I couldn't handle. It's not just that I was lucky or blessed, which admittedly I was, it's more that when things don't go my way, I have this unique ability to turn them around.

My father calls it Irish grit. Mom said it was a gift. Lizzie has a different take. She says, "The only reason everything works out exactly the way Maggie wants is because she's an obsessively compulsive micromanaging control freak."

Harsh. But not without merit.

This time was different. I knew from the look in my mother's eyes that this would not be something I could fix. I didn't know exactly what she'd say next, but I knew that this picnic in the park would not have a happy ending.

How strong was I?

"Very," I lied, my mouth dry, my breathing shallow.

"And I'm stronger than Maggie," Lizzie said. "Ask anybody."

Mom smiled. She'd always been so proud of Lizzie's bravado. She took a deep breath. "It's not working," she said.

"What?" Lizzie said. "What's not working?"

“The transfusions, the new chemo, the brilliant doctors . . . hundreds of people praying for me . . . nothing is working.”

“Don’t give up,” Lizzie said. “It’s only been a few months. The next round of transfusions is going to do it.”

“There is no next round. This past one was a Hail Mary. It didn’t work, and there’s nothing left to try. Dr. Byrne had a long talk with me yesterday. I’m out of options . . . and I’m almost out of time.”

“I don’t understand. You seem so healthy,” Lizzie said, her fists clenched, her body taut, determined to reverse Mom’s news with irrefutable logic. “You’re baking bread. You’re driving the car. You look fantastic.”

“It’s all smoke and mirrors. Dr. Byrne put together some kind of concoction with vitamin B-12, antioxidants, and God knows what else, and Marjorie Demmick came over this morning, gave me a shot in the ass, touched up the outside with a little blush, added some pink lipstick, and presto change-o, I look like a million bucks. But Maggie was on the right track. The Mustang won’t turn into a pumpkin, but by tomorrow morning I’ll look like two cents.”

I felt the tears welling up. “Why would you do this?” I said. “This whole . . . charade? Why did you get our hopes up?”

“I made a big mistake.” She reached across the blanket and put one hand on my knee, the other on Lizzie’s arm. “I never should have put myself through all those medical procedures hoping for a miracle. I should have spent these past six months with you. I can’t get any of that precious time back, so I asked Dr. Byrne if there was anything he could do to give me one more joyful day with my daughters. This was supposed to be it, but you caught me. I am so, so sorry. I wasn’t trying to get your hopes up. I was trying to give you one last final happy memory.”

“Dad came into the restaurant all excited this morning,” I said. “He was going on like you’d turned the corner. He really thinks you’re getting better, doesn’t he?”

Mom nodded. “Your father is the world’s worst poker player. If I told him the truth, you’d have read it in his face, and I wanted one last sunny afternoon with you before you found out. I’ll tell him tonight. The big man is going to crumble. He’s going to need you to help him

get through this.” She shook her head. “No, it’s more than that. You’re all going to need to help each other.”

Lizzie got to her feet. “But first I need a group hug.”

We helped Mom get up, and the three of us embraced for a solid minute. No tears, just silence, each of us wrestling with her own thoughts.

“I’m writing you each a letter,” my mother said when we finally let go. She lowered herself to the blanket, and Lizzie and I dropped down next to her. “I started writing them back in February. You know what they say—‘hope for the best, but plan for the worst.’”

“I’m glad I started when I did, because I didn’t realize how much I have to tell you. I’d been planning to spread it out over the next forty or fifty years, but now the best I can do is a crash course. I tried to think about all the important advice a mother can give her daughters. Things you can’t learn in books. Or worse yet, there are dozens of books on the subject, every one of them with their own point of view, and I wanted to make sure you had the wit and wisdom of Kate McCormick before you made any life-altering decisions.”

“I hate to break it to you, Mom,” Lizzie said, “but if your letter to Maggie has any good advice on the virtues of remaining a virgin till her wedding night, you’re too late.”

That broke the ice. Mom howled in laughter. I poked Lizzie in the arm, but I didn’t care. I was pretty sure my mother had already figured it out. And I was also confident that she hadn’t shared her suspicions with my overprotective father.

I have no idea how many times the three of us have been to Magic Pond together, but the next two hours were the best ever. First, we went through the photo album, and page by page, with Mom giving us a hilarious running narrative, we watched ourselves grow up.

And then we talked. No subject was off-limits. Thinking back, I realize that we asked my mother a lot of questions about her past—her childhood, her achievements in school, and of course, everything she could possibly tell us about her relationship with my dad from the first day she met him.

Her questions to us focused on the future. She asked about our plans, our dreams, and so many of the other parts of our lives she knew

she wouldn't be here to watch unfold. To this day, I wish we could relive that moment, and give Mom better answers. Lizzie knew she wanted to become a doctor, and eventually she did. But all I could tell my dying mother at the age of seventeen was that the University of Pennsylvania was my first-choice college.

I never got the chance to tell her that I married a wonderful man; had two beautiful, intelligent, healthy children; found a challenging career that brought me joy and would make her proud; and that my life was purposeful, productive, and relevant.

But there are times, especially when I'm alone in my private little attic hideaway rereading her handwritten eighteen-page letter to the teenage me, that I feel she is up there with me, and she not only knows what I've accomplished but she also knows I couldn't have done it without her inspiration.

At about three o'clock that afternoon, Mom started to fade. The magic elixir Nurse Demmick had given her was starting to wear off.

"You're looking tired," I said. "Why don't we pack up and go. We can talk more later. Dad's going to bring home dinner."

"Okay, but let's stay five more minutes," Mom said. "There's one more thing on my mind, and I can't talk about it at home."

"Lay it on us," Lizzie said.

And then my mother dropped the second bomb.

CHAPTER 5

“This is about your father,” my mother said. A smile bloomed on her face at the mere mention of him. “He’s only forty-three years old, and that man is tough as nails. He’s going to live at least another forty-three years—probably more.

“But . . .” she said, and then paused, choosing her words carefully. “But he’s not going to want to spend all that time alone.”

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Lizzie said. “Maggie and I will be there for him. We promise.” She turned to me for confirmation.

“I don’t think that’s what she’s saying, Liz.” I looked at my mother. “You know we’ll be there for him, but that’s not what you’re talking about. Right?”

“Right. Let me try it again. Lizzie, your father will grieve when I’m gone. You all will,” she added quickly. “I know how difficult it will be, but when the initial pain lifts, and I promise you it will, you and Maggie will move forward in the very same direction you were headed—college, a career, marriage, a family . . .”

We nodded, still not sure where this was going.

“It won’t be the same for your father,” she said. “Years ago, he and I charted a course from our twenties all the way into old age. We had plans; we had dreams. Nothing exotic. Just the simple things most married couples think about—retirement, a house on a lake, travel. But

when I die, a lot of those dreams will die with me, and with the path to his future gone, I'm afraid he'll be rudderless . . . lost at sea."

Lizzie looked lost herself. I knew Mom had something important to say, but she was treading so lightly that it was hard to connect the dots.

"I spoke to Father Connelly," she said. "The church has support groups to help people get through their loss. There's one specifically for teens."

"We'll be okay, Mom," Lizzie said. "Maggie and I have each other."

"That's your choice, but tonight when I talk to your father, I'm going to ask him to please go to some of the meetings for widows and widowers. Father Connelly told me it's the best way for him to cope with his loss. I know he will miss me something fierce, but eventually I know he'll come out on the other side and be ready to find a life partner to share the second half of his life."

"*A life partner?*" Lizzie said. "You mean a *stepmother*?"

We were no longer treading lightly.

"No. You're not five years old. You don't need another mother to take my place, but your father will need another woman to make him feel whole again, and I want you to promise me that you'll support him, maybe even help him choose the right person."

"Eww," Lizzie said. "You want us to find Dad a girlfriend?"

My mother laughed. "Trust me, sweetie, the girlfriends will find him. I know you think of him as Daddy, but in the grown-up world, Finn McCormick is a successful, funny, lovable, sweet hunk of a man. He goes to church, volunteers for school functions, and he's the magnet that draws people into the restaurant. I guarantee you that once he is single, women will flock to him like stray cats to an overturned milk truck. The problem is, he's not going to know how to handle it."

"Mom, women flirt with him all the time," I said. "They see the wedding ring, but they have a couple of glasses of wine, and they get all playful. Don't worry. Dad knows how to handle them."

"He won't once I'm not there to come home to. And they won't be *playful*. They will know that he's lonely and vulnerable, and let me tell you, some of these women are predators. I know. I've seen it firsthand."

"You've seen women hitting on Dad?" I said.

“No, nothing like that. Forget it.” She waved me off.

“No. I’m not forgetting anything. What did you see?”

Mom sat there organizing her thoughts. Finally, she said, “Did you know Bernadette Brennan? She used to come into the restaurant all the time.”

“Yes!” Lizzie said. “Didn’t she die?”

Mom nodded and crossed herself. “Last year just before Thanksgiving. I went to her wake. I never told anyone this story before, but I was standing on the receiving line, and Rita Walsh was in front of me. She was wearing a flower print dress with a Queen Anne neckline, which struck me as a little bit out of season for November and maybe not the most delicate choice for a wake. But, hey, she works in the women’s clothing department at Macy’s, so who am I to tell her how to dress?”

“Anyway, when she gets up to the front of the line, she kind of sidles up to Leon Brennan—that was Bernadette’s husband—and she flashes him more than a little bit of cleavage. And the poor man—his wife is dead, but he isn’t, and he can’t help it. He takes a good look. And then Rita starts in with, ‘Oh, Leon, I’m so sorry about Bernie. She was so wonderful. After this is all over, I’m stopping by, and I’m bringing you a nice, hot home-cooked dinner.’ And then he said something, and I couldn’t hear him, but Rita gives him a little laugh and strokes his hand, and says, ‘Oh, Leon.’”

“Can you imagine? Right there in the funeral home with Bernadette laid out in a box, not even in the ground yet, and that . . . that tramp is coming on to the poor dead woman’s husband. It was none of my business, so I forgot all about it until four o’clock this morning when I woke up with my mind racing.

“I always knew that recovering from this disease was a long shot, but I kept telling myself I could beat it. Now that I know I can’t, I woke up thinking about your father standing there at the wake, shaking people’s hands, thanking them for coming, and there’s Rita Walsh flashing her tits and offering to come over with a pan of baked ziti.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Lizzie said. “Mrs. DiMarco told me that Rita and Mr. Brennan are getting married.”

“Married?” Mom said. “That’s insane. The woman is practically the same age as his daughter.”

“The daughter is four years younger,” Lizzie said. “Mrs. DiMarco told me. Then she said Rita’s a gold-digging bitch, and she feels terrible for her friend Bernadette, and she wishes she could talk some sense into Mr. Brennan’s head, but she doesn’t think he’ll listen. Then she asked me what I would do.”

“What did you say?”

“What I said to her was I don’t know. But what I said to myself is I wonder if Mrs. DiMarco, who is divorced, feels sorry for her dead friend, or does she feel sorry for herself because she has the hots for Mr. Brennan, and Rita beat her to the punch.”

Mom leaned over and hugged Lizzie. “Child, you are wise beyond your years.”

“I guess we know why you couldn’t talk about this at home,” I said.

“Oh, God, please don’t tell your father about this. I realize it’s a terrible burden to put on you girls, but if I can’t be around, I’ll die happier knowing the two of you will be there to love him, and watch over him, and . . . and . . .”

Lizzie finished the sentence for her. “Keep the bitches from digging their claws into him.”

The words hit my mother like a gut punch. But they were exactly what she needed to hear. I could see the tension visibly drain from her body. A smile crossed her lips, and her eyes welled up. “Thank you,” she said.

It was a moment I will never forget. Twenty-six years later, I would relive it. Only this time, I would be the woman who was dying, and the thought that I would be leaving the man I loved to the mercy of a calculating band of ziti-baking, husband-hungry predators would make my imminent death all that more difficult to accept.

From the author, Marshall Karp

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