

The Third Angel

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Extract

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I.

The Heron's Wife

1999

MADÉLINE HELLER KNEW SHE WAS RECK-
less. She had flown to London from New York
two days ahead of schedule and was now
checked into her room at the Lion Park Hotel in
Knightsbridge. The air was still and filled with
dust motes; the windows hadn't been opened
in months. Everything smelled like cedar and
lavender. Maddy felt hot and exhausted from
her travels but she didn't bother to turn on the
air conditioner. She was madly, horribly, ridicu-
lously in love with the wrong man and it made
her want to lie there on the bed, immobilized.

Madeline wasn't stupid; she was an attorney in New York. She was thirty-four years old and had graduated from Oberlin and NYU Law School, a tall woman with long black hair. Many people thought she was beautiful and smart, but none of those people mattered. They didn't know her. They had no idea she was a traitor to her own flesh and blood. They would never have guessed she would throw her life away so easily, without thinking twice.

There was good love and there was bad love. There was the kind that helped raise a person above her failings and there was the desperate sort that struck when someone least wanted or expected it. That was what had happened to Maddy this past spring when she'd come to London to help plan her sister's wedding. Allie hadn't even asked for her help; it was their mother, Lucy, who'd told Maddy she should go to London and assist with the preparations; she was the maid of honor after all. And then when she got there, Allie had already taken care of everything, just as she always did.

Allie was older by thirteen months. She was the good sister, the perfect sister, the one who had everything. She was a writer who had published an extremely popular children's book. When she walked down the street people often recognized her, and she was always willing to sign scraps of paper for someone's child or present a fan with one of the bookplates she carried in her purse. Once a year she came back to the States to give readings for what had become a perennially popular event where children dressed up in bird costumes. There were nine- and ten-year-old cardinals and ducks and crows all waiting on line to have their copy of *The Heron's Wife* signed. Maddy sometimes accompanied her sister on tour. She couldn't believe all the

fuss over a silly children's story, one Allie had pinched from a tale their mother used to tell. Technically, the story belonged to Maddy as much as it did to her sister, not that she'd felt the need to write a book or change it inside out to suit herself.

The story was one Lucy Heller would tell down by the marsh where the girls had grown up. Lucy's own mother, the girls' grandmother, had waded barefoot into a pond in Central Park to talk to a huge blue heron. She didn't care what people thought; she just went right in. She'd asked the heron to watch over Lucy and he always had. Now Lucy had asked him to protect her own girls and he had come to live in their marsh in Connecticut.

"How can a heron watch over a person?" Maddy had whispered to her sister. She didn't have much faith in stories, even though she was only eight years old. In that way, she was very much the skeptic her mother had been.

"He can have two separate lives," Allie was quick to say, as though the answer was simple, if only Maddy could unwind the mysteries of the universe. "He has his heron life up in the sky and his life down here."

"I'm glad he can help us both," Maddy said.

"Don't be ridiculous." Allie was always so definite and sure of herself. "The blue heron only has one true love."

And so it came to be in Allie's book. There was a woman who married a man she loved. The couple lived in a house that resembled the one on the marsh where the sisters had grown up. There were the same tall silver reeds. The same inky black sky. The bride and groom resided in their house made of sticks and stones for nearly a year, in happiness and peace. And then one day, when the man was out fishing for their supper, there

was a knock on the door. The woman answered and there was the groom's other wife, a blue heron come to look for her missing husband.

"How can you stand all these children around?" Maddy had asked at an especially crowded reading. They had runny noses. They were germ filled, noisy, and rude. And did they have to laugh so loudly? It was earsplitting.

In Allie's book, the heron wife was wasting away. Her feathers were falling out. She hadn't eaten a mouthful since her husband had left.

One of us wins and one of us loses, but which will it be? she asked the bride at the door.

"They're my readers. I want them to laugh."

Allie was the one who always came home for visits, but at long last Maddy was to be her sister's guest. Frankly, she'd avoided coming to London; she said she was too busy, but it was more than that. She didn't need to see how perfect Allie's world was. Finally, there was no getting around it; there was a wedding to attend to, after all. A wedding where Maddy would once again be the sidekick, the bad little sister who couldn't follow rules, who even as a grown woman was still afraid of ridiculous things, thunderstorms and mice, traffic jams and airplanes. She would most likely be made to wear a horrible dress of some dreadful synthetic fabric while her sister glowed in white silk or satin. Second-rate, second-best, the dark side of everything. She never believed men who told her she was beautiful and she shied away from friendships. She did her work and kept to herself, the sort of woman who could stand idly by while children removed a butterfly's wings or buried a toad in the mud. What people did on their own time was none of her

business. Cruelty, after all, was a fact of life. It wasn't up to her to set the world right. That sort of thing was her sister's concern.

Because Maddy was only in London for a long weekend that April, arriving on a Thursday and departing late Monday, she and Allie had raced directly from the airport to the dress-maker's so that Maddy could have her fitting. They'd been close as children, but had grown apart, and were now as different as sisters could be. Allie, however, had done her best to try and choose a dress that would suit Maddy: blue silk, flattering, showing off Maddy's figure. As for Maddy, she hated the dress, but she kept her mouth shut. She had decided she would try to be the agreeable sister for once in her life. She even agreed to taste potential wedding cakes when they were done with the dresses. That was why she was here. To help her sister.

They went to the baker's and tasted half a dozen confections, but the buttercream frostings were too heavy and the chocolates were too rich. Allie hadn't seemed satisfied with anything. She said she thought wedding preparations were a waste of time. In the end, she chose a plain yellow cake that had been made from her own recipe. She hadn't really needed Maddy after all.

Maddy was still in her compliant mode. "Good decision," she said. "Plain is the way to go. Less chance for anything to go wrong."

Not that she believed in that particular philosophy when it came to herself. Plain was good for Allie, not Maddy. Maddy was greedy and she always had been. She used to steal from her sister, headbands, jewelry, T-shirts. If this had been her wedding cake, she would have wanted mousse and jam and chocolate and brandied apricots and spun sugar. There was no

such thing as too much for a girl who always thought she was second-best.

The day after the cake-tasting adventure, both sisters were curled up in bed with stomachaches under a comforter. They wore pajamas and socks. When they were children, they hadn't needed anyone but each other; it felt that way again for an hour or two as they sipped cups of tea. But there was no way to regain what Allie had ruined when she'd left home. When it came down to it, they really had nothing in common anymore. It had been seventeen years since Allie had gone to college in Boston. She went off to London in her junior year, returning only for a week or so at a time. She'd deserted Madeline, left her alone in the big house in Connecticut with their parents, who had reunited after several years of leading separate lives. The Hellers had no close neighbors and Maddy had no friends. She was standoffish in the way that lonely people often are. After her sister left, Maddy grew more isolated. Even when she went off to Oberlin, she was the only one who came home for Winter Term or spring break. When Allie's letters arrived, Maddy refused to read them. Instead, she went out to sit in the reeds. On days when the sky was clear she would sometimes see the blue heron who lived there. She had read that most herons live in pairs, the larger male and the more delicate female, coupled for life, but this one was alone. He was far off, across the water. She often called to him, but he didn't seem to hear her. He never once looked her way.

ALLIE'S FLAT IN Bayswater was airy but nondescript, not at all Maddy's style. Nothing to envy. Simplicity once again. Allie's

wardrobe was full of wool and cashmere in shades of gray and navy and black. Practical clothes that were well tailored. Maddy knew this because she'd sneaked a look in the closet while Allie was in the shower. She felt as though there was a mystery about her sister, some essential detail that would explain her superhuman abilities to do the right thing. She didn't find any clues in all her searching, although she did discover that the single splash of color in the closet was a sheer pink blouse, a birthday present sent by Maddy last fall from Barneys. She couldn't help but notice that the store's tag was still attached.

The day after the wedding cake fiasco, they went out to lunch with the bridesmaids, even though they still had stomach-aches. There was Georgia, Allie's best friend, who was the art director of the publishing company that had published Allie's book. Suzy, a transplanted Texan who had been a student along with Allie during junior year and had married an Englishman. She was now the mother of nine-year-old twin girls, so ensconced in her adopted city that she had a lilting British accent. The third friend, Hannah, taught hatha yoga and lived in the same building as Allie. Allie had been one of her students, and still took a class once a week. Hannah was very tall, and she wore white for nearly every occasion. She looked like a cat, as if she could stretch out and bend in two.

"At last, the little sister!" Georgia cried when Allie and Maddy arrived at the luncheon. Allie's friends gathered around to greet Maddy. It was a nicer restaurant than Maddy had expected; small vases of flowers with name tags marked their places at the table. The other bridesmaids told Maddy that they were jealous because she was the only one wearing sky blue silk—they were all in almond-colored linen.

“Yes, but you’ll be able to wear those suits for other occasions,” Allie explained when her friends complained. “That’s why I chose them. Maddy likes extravagant things.”

True enough. The other women had noticed that Madeline was overdressed for the occasion; she was wearing a peacock-colored silk blouse and long silver and opal earrings. Well, people could think she was vain if they wanted to; it wasn’t a crime to have good taste, after all.

“Maybe that’s why she’s never come here to see you before,” Georgia guessed. “She’s been waiting for the big dress-up occasion so she can show off.”

“I haven’t come because I work,” Maddy said.

“And the rest of us don’t?” Georgia wasn’t one to back down.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. So what is it you do that keeps you so busy?”

“I’m an attorney,” Maddy said.

The other women exchanged a look.

“Is there something wrong with that?” Maddy asked. “Some comment you’d like to make?”

“Well, she’s here now,” Allie said to her friends. “That’s what’s important.”

All the same, there was a chill at lunch after that. Allie’s friends were polite to Maddy, but no more. They discussed things she didn’t understand, television series she’d never heard of, books she’d never read. She was once again, by choice or design, the outsider in her sister’s life.

When she went to the lavatory, Georgia and Suzy were there. Maddy swore they shut up as soon as they saw her.

“So what’s Paul like?” Maddy asked of the bridegroom-to-be as she washed her hands.

She definitely wasn’t imagining it: Georgia and Suzy exchanged an odd glance in the mirror.

“Decide for yourself,” Suzy said. She sounded extremely Texan, someone you wouldn’t want to cross.

“You’re her sister,” Georgia added as she reapplied some lip gloss. “I’m sure you can make your own judgments.”

“THEY DIDN’T LIKE me,” Maddy said to Allie after lunch. Not that it mattered. She didn’t care what people thought of her. She was like her grandmother in that way. She did as she pleased, no matter the consequences. She would have waded into a pond in Central Park if need be. Maddy and Allie had decided to walk home from the restaurant. It was spring after all. They cut through Hyde Park, which was so green they couldn’t help but think of home, all of those reeds in the marsh, all those places to hide.

“Of course they liked you,” Allie said. “Don’t be so insecure.”

No one else would have guessed Maddy was insecure. But Allie knew she had been a thumb sucker, a blanket holder, a little girl who had been frightened of spiders, afraid of the dark, terrified of mice. Allie would often have to crawl into bed beside Maddy and tell her a story before she could fall asleep. It was their story, the one about the heron, the one they had shared before Allie claimed it for herself and put it into a book.

“Paul will probably hate me, too.”

“You always expect the worst. Let’s try to be positive. Let’s expect the best.”

By now Maddy knew the entire story of Allie and Paul's meeting. They'd come across each other purely by chance at Kensington Palace; that was why the wedding reception was to be held on the palace grounds at the Orangery, which had once been Queen Anne's greenhouse. Both Allie and Paul had gone there to leave flowers in Princess Diana's memory the day after the accident in Paris. Allie had brought along a bouquet of white roses. She had chosen each individual rose at her local greengrocer's, making certain there were no blemishes, no browning petals.

The whole Diana affair had made her feel so hopeless; it was as though love was impossible in such a bleak, cruel world. But then she had taken the white roses to Kensington Palace, where the bouquets reached out for hundreds of yards, and there was Paul, who had decided to come at the very last moment. His visit hadn't been planned; in fact, he'd torn up some flowers from his neighbor's garden, red things he didn't even know the name of, to lay at the palace gates, mostly because his mother was such a fan of Diana's. Paul's mum, who lived in a village near Reading, had been utterly broken up by the news and Paul thought she'd be pleased to know that he had stopped to pay his respects on her behalf.

Allie had confided to her sister that she'd been crying when she first saw Paul; she'd literally felt dizzy when she looked at him. He'd come over to ask if she was all right; she'd shaken her head no, then had been unable to speak. They went out for coffee, and that was that. It was unbelievably romantic. Love strikes when you least expect it. That's what Allie had told her. It struck and it went right through you, as invisible as ether.