

ROBIN E. FIELD

THE WRONG CALL

SHE CRADLED THE RECEIVER BETWEEN HER SHOULDER AND EAR, fiddling with the beige cord, waiting through one ring, two rings, a third. Her fingers hovered over the button to disconnect when the woman's voice filled her ear.

"Hello?" The voice was pleasant, inviting.

"Hello!" Maggie straightened in her seat. She focused upon the page tacked to the wall in front of her and tried for the right combination of confidence and enthusiasm. "Is this Mrs. Allen?"

"Yes?" the voice was quizzical.

"This is Maggie calling from Arthur Abbott Portrait Studio. I'm calling with a special offer: three portraits for just nineteen ninety-five. May I ask how many people are in your family?"

"We're not interested." The voice was curt. "Take our phone number off your list."

The dial tone hummed as Maggie checked the box next to the name on the list in front of her: contact made. Then she dialed the next number.

After two hours of dialing phone numbers and offering the pitch, Maggie had made only one sale. She stifled a yawn as the phone began to ring again.

"All right, people!" Jennifer, the manager, stood behind her desk and held up a bill. "Five dollars cash to the first person to make a sale before the break!"

This meant that the next sale was worth a whole hour's pay. Maggie channelled her hope down the ringing phone line. The girl in the next carrel began to speak with unusual enthusiasm. "Hello, Mrs. Rogers? This is Amber calling from Arthur Abbott Portrait Studio with a special deal just for you!"

Maggie knew that Amber was going off script and that Jennifer would chew her out if she didn't make the sale. "Stay on script!" she had hissed

the previous week at a newly hired telemarketer. When the woman rolled her eyes, Jennifer had narrowed hers. "I can see that this isn't working out. Don't come back tomorrow."

"Hello?"

Maggie snapped to attention. The voice was male—not a good sign.

"Hello, Mr. Ammon?"

"Yes, this is Mr. Ammon. Who is this?"

The voice sounded kind. Maggie felt a surge of hope. "My name is Maggie, and I'm calling from Arthur Abbott Portrait Studio. I'm calling today with a special offer: three portraits for just nineteen ninety-five. May I ask how many people are in your family?"

The man chuckled. "It's just me, honey."

Maggie floundered. The script told her to suggest various combinations of family members: Mom, Dad, and the kids; Mom and Dad; the kids together. "Great," she read, and then improvised. "You could do several different poses, perhaps in different outfits—some casual, some formal. And you don't have to take all three portraits at the same time. Our appointment secretary will schedule dates that are convenient for you over the next year."

Mr. Ammon interrupted her. "Honey, you sound like a nice girl, but I don't need any portraits."

"Portraits are a wonderful gift to give to your loved ones." Maggie read the first option in the script for moving past a refusal.

"I'm sure they are, dear, but I have a big problem."

"What?"

"I'm too ugly to have my picture taken!"

Maggie spoke without thinking. "We have an ugly filter!"

She felt Jennifer's gaze bore into her back. That line was definitely not in the script.

Mr. Ammon's warm laugh filled her ear. "What's your name again, honey?"

"Maggie."

"Where are you calling from, Maggie?"

"The studio on War Memorial Drive."

"Here in Peoria? Really? Usually telemarketers say they're in South Carolina or some other state."

"No, Mr. Ammon. Our studio is conveniently located off War Memorial, and our hours are flexible to accommodate your work schedule." She was

back on script. Jennifer's attention moved elsewhere.

"I don't work anymore, honey. I'm seventy-two years old. That's why I don't need any portraits. Too old, too ugly."

Maggie tried again. He hadn't hung up on her, which was a good sign. "Mr. Ammon, with our ugly filter, we'll get the perfect shot of you to use in this year's Christmas cards. Your friends and family will be delighted to have such a special keepsake."

"Sale!" The telemarketer in the last carrel, Jeremy, stood and waved a completed order form triumphantly. Amber muttered "shit" from the next carrel.

Jennifer marched over to Jeremy with the five-dollar bill and plucked the form from his hand. "Nice work, Jeremy! Start your break a few minutes early."

Mr. Ammon was speaking. Maggie focused again on his voice; she could still make a sale.

"... a sweetheart, you really are. But I don't have family or many friends, so I don't need to have my picture taken."

Her heart sank. "Are you sure, Mr. Ammon?"

"Yes, honey."

"Thank you for your time, and have a nice day."

"You too, Maggie."

Maggie put down the receiver. At the desk behind her, Jennifer was typing a contract, her long pink nails clicking the keys rapidly. She rolled the paper from the typewriter and set it on the desk for the driver, Zack, who would deliver the contract to the house and collect the money. A sale was never confirmed until the driver returned with the money and the signature. Some people refused to answer the door or acted surprised when Zack appeared, denying that they had agreed to the purchase. It was a relief when he returned with a check. Each telemarketer had a tally for the week on the bulletin board behind Jennifer's desk. At the end of the week, the person with the most sales got a bonus. Jennifer varied the amounts—usually it was five dollars, but once it was twenty.

Maggie had yet to win a bonus in the four weeks she had been working at Arthur Abbott Portrait Studio. At sixteen, this was her first job. She had been surprised when Jennifer had hired her, as she had eyed Maggie skeptically during the interview after learning that she had no real work experience. Jennifer has also hovered over her shoulder during her first shift.

“Speak up. Don’t sound nervous. Smile as you read—it will make you sound happy.” Then Maggie made a sale, and Jennifer nodded her approval.

Initially she was anxious about not screwing up: reading the script perfectly, sounding enthusiastic, suggesting the right combination of poses to secure the caller’s interest. Then she worried about the number of sales she was making. Jennifer reminded them regularly that they should be making at least five sales a shift. Maggie didn’t want to be fired, so she dialed the numbers quickly after each hang-up and always maintained a cheerful tone. But by the end of the second week the tedium set in. Most people let her give the introductory pitch before hanging up. Men said “no” brusquely; women said “no, thank you” or asked to be taken off the call list. Some old women sounded personally insulted by the solicitation. Most old men, like Mr. Ammon, were nicer in their refusals. Sales seemed few and far between, even when she made the day’s quota. The four-hour shifts dragged interminably.

Now, four weeks in, Maggie wasn’t as worried about getting fired. She saw how quick the turn-over was in the call room: two women had left for other jobs with better hours. One man had simply stopped showing up, and another woman had been fired for coming to work drunk. Amber and Jeremy were the only ones left who had been there when she started.

Amber was a twenty-two-year-old single mother with dirty blond hair and big blue eyes. She also worked nights at Big Al’s. “Not stripping,” she insisted. “I’m a cocktail waitress. The tips are good.”

Jeremy was a hyper nineteen-year-old who talked constantly about becoming a paramedic. “I can’t wait to see the blood. Paramedics see the best shit.”

On her first day of work, standing outside with Amber and Jeremy and the others as they smoked, Maggie felt wildly out of place. She didn’t smoke. She didn’t have tattoos like her coworkers. Amber had her daughter’s name on her forearm, and Jeremy’s left calf sported a skull. Even Jennifer had a rose etched on her right ankle.

And Maggie was still in school. “You in high school?” Amber inquired on her first day. Maggie nodded. “That’s good. I left my sophomore year to have Kaylee, so I don’t have no diploma.”

“Drop out and you wind up in this shit job forever,” Jeremy said. “Worse than working at McDonald’s, I can tell you that.”

“You try and stay in school,” Amber advised.

Maggie had never considered not graduating from high school. But as she dialed one phone number after another after the break ended that first day, she realized that her summer job was a real job for the other telemarketers. If Amber got fired, she wouldn't make her car payment. Jeremy wouldn't be able to take the paramedic classes at the community college. Even Jennifer, the manager, mentioned saving up for her wedding.

That was another surprise from her first day: Jennifer was engaged to Zack, the driver. Maggie had noticed Zack as he strode in the door with some signed contracts. He was good-looking in a scruffy way: stubble on his chin, dark brown hair sweeping across his eyes, a slight swagger in his walk. He looked older than most of the telemarketers, at least twenty-five. And he looked like trouble. Even Maggie, who had yet to have a real boyfriend, sensed this immediately. He was too confident, his gaze too bold as he scanned the room and settled his eyes upon her. But that didn't stop her heart from jumping when he looked her way.

"Who's the new girl?" Maggie heard him ask Jennifer on that first day. She glanced over her shoulder again as the phone rang in her ear, watching him hand over some signed contracts and sit down in a chair near her desk.

"Maggie," Jennifer replied briskly. "It's her first job."

"That so?" He called over. "Hey, Maggie! Welcome to the working world!"

She hung up the phone and turned to face him. "Thanks."

"I'm Zack." He grinned at her. "I finish things off here."

"That's enough," Jennifer snapped at him. "He's our driver. He gets the signatures and the money. He's hardly ever here, if you all do your job well."

"I like to think I'm a key player." Zack leaned toward Jennifer and tugged one of her blond curls.

"Of course you're important, baby." Jennifer glanced at Maggie. "He's also my fiancé."

Maggie nodded, as surprised by the sudden softness in Jennifer's demeanor as she initially was by Zack's flirtatious gesture to the boss.

Sure enough, when sales were good, Zack was hardly in the office. But when he was, Maggie found herself sneaking a look at him. He had the same smoldering gaze as Charlie Sheen in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*—one of her favourite movies. She'd surreptitiously watch him smoke a cigarette with

the others during the breaks, half-tempted to ask for one for the first time in her life. Instead, she started bringing a can of soda for the break. Since her coworkers immediately headed out the back door to smoke, Maggie felt odd standing outside with them without a purpose. The soda gave her something to fill her hand and lift to her mouth.

Her crush on Zack—was it really a crush?—became a way to fight the tedium of the job. Dialing one phone number after another, reading the pitch again and again, moving steadily down the call list, Maggie felt her mind drifting. The sight of Zack lounging in the chair next to Jennifer's desk kept her attention in the office, if not on the job itself.

The trouble started during a break the following day.

Maggie was leaning against the brick wall of the building when Zack drove up. She pretended to be listening to Amber's chatter as Zack strode across the parking lot.

"It's your lucky day, Maggie." Zack gave her a saucy grin, and Maggie's heart leapt. "All three customers paid up."

"Awesome!" She grinned back. She had been unusually successful that afternoon, making three sales in the first hour. Zack handed her the typed contracts as he took out a pack of cigarettes.

"Yeah, they were basically waiting at their doors with their checkbooks open." Zack cupped his hand around the cigarette and lit it. He inclined his chin and inhaled, then noticed Maggie watching him. "You want one?"

Suddenly she felt reckless. "Sure."

He raised his eyebrows as he extended the pack to her. "You want me to light it?"

"Okay." She set down the can of soda and took a cigarette, placing it between her lips.

He moved closer to her, flicking the lighter. His hand brushed hers. Then he laughed softly. "Honey, you got to inhale."

Maggie flushed. She breathed in quickly and choked. She took the cigarette from her mouth and flicked the end, trying not to cough. Zack looked amused as he pocketed the lighter.

Jeremy called out. "Look at that! Maggie smoking!"

"You start now, you won't stop, Maggie." Amber joined them. "I been smoking for ten years. Wish I could quit."

"Twelve years," Zack said. "It's a bitch."

"Why'd you give her one?" Amber chastised.

He shrugged. "She wanted it."

"Maggie!"

Jennifer glared at her from the doorway, intimidating in her hot-pink suit with padded shoulders. "Get over here!"

"Uh oh!" Jeremy sang out.

Amber took the cigarette from Maggie and frowned sympathetically. "I'll bring in your soda."

Maggie approached Jennifer, extending the contracts. "Everyone paid."

Jennifer took the contracts without a glance. "What did you say to that man yesterday?" she demanded, pointing inside.

Maggie was perplexed. "What man?"

"There's a man in the lobby who wants to talk to you. He said you called him yesterday."

Maggie shook her head. "I don't know who you're talking about."

Jennifer marched her through the call room to the hallway leading to the lobby. "Well, figure it out. And apologize, or you're done here."

Maggie's heart sank. She was going to get fired after all.

She entered the lobby, where the appointment secretary, Traycee, was standing with an elderly man. Traycee waved her over. "Here's Maggie."

She had never seen the man before. His hair was snowy white and he wore a neat grey suit. He didn't look angry.

"So this is the young lady!"

She recognized the voice. "Oh, hello, Mr. . . ."

He beamed at her. "Mr. Ammon. You called me yesterday, and we had the most delightful conversation." He chuckled, turning to Traycee and Jennifer. "Maggie asked whether I would like to buy some portraits. Now, I live alone and don't really need any pictures of myself. But she was such a pleasant young lady, I thought I'd come tell her in person that I'll buy those portraits."

Maggie felt a wave of relief. "Thank you so much, Mr. Ammon!"

Jennifer was taken aback. "Well," she said. "Let me get you a contract."

The phone rang, and Traycee went to her desk to answer it. Mr. Ammon turned back Maggie. "Aren't you a pretty girl! As pretty as your voice."

Maggie smiled reflexively. "Thank you."

"You looked nervous when you came in."

"I thought I was in trouble. People don't usually come in person to sign up."

"If they knew how pretty you are, they'd all come in." He took her hand and squeezed it.

Jennifer returned, raising an eyebrow when she saw Mr. Ammon holding Maggie's hand. "Mr. Ammon, I'll help you from here. Maggie, you can get back to work."

Mr. Ammon protested. "Can't Maggie do the paperwork for me? I came in to see her."

"No." Jennifer steered him away. She shot a look over her shoulder. "That's all, Maggie."

Maggie returned to the call room. From her carrel Amber glanced over her shoulder. "So? What happened?"

"Nothing bad," Maggie sank into her chair. "A customer wanted to meet me. And he's buying a package, so I got a sale!"

Amber looked at the bulletin board. "That's four sales today, Maggie. You're tied with Jeremy for the lead."

Jeremy sprang to his feet. "No! She will not succeed! I will sell more!" The other telemarketers erupted with laughter as he leapt onto his chair and threw his arms into a victory sign.

Zack was lounging in Jennifer's chair. "You putting that sale on the board?"

"Yes!" She walked around Jennifer's desk to the bulletin board, brushing by Zack. She was reaching toward her row with a pin when Jeremy wolf-whistled. She glanced over to see him smirking at Zack, who was openly admiring her butt. She flushed.

"You're hot today." Zack arched an eyebrow. "Four sales."

"Hey!" Jennifer stood in the doorway, her face stormy. She looked at Maggie at the bulletin board with a pin in her hand, Zack smirking at her, and Jeremy still standing on his chair. No one was making calls. "What's going on here? I leave for five minutes and there's chaos!"

Jeremy hopped down. "Sorry, boss."

Jennifer glared at Maggie. "What are you doing at my desk?"

Maggie backed away. "Sorry. I was just putting a pin up for that sale."

"What sale?"

"Mr. Ammon. From the lobby."

"No. I closed that sale." Jennifer brushed by her and turned to Zack. "I

need my chair.”

“But Mr. Ammon came here because I called him.” Maggie flushed in confusion.

Jennifer’s gaze was steely. “You’re arguing with me? Really?”

From her carrel Amber shook her head. Maggie put down the pin. “No. Sorry.”

“Back to work. All of you.” Jennifer turned to Zack. “Take out these contracts.”

“Sure thing.” He winked at her and strode toward the back door.

Maggie sank into her chair, trying to focus on the list of phone numbers. She felt Jennifer’s gaze on her back as she picked up the phone.

At five the shift changed. Amber put a hand on her arm once they were outside. “Maggie, you gotta watch out.”

Maggie squinted at her, the July sunlight fierce after the dim lighting in the call room. “What do you mean?”

“Stay away from Zack,” Amber replied. She fished in her purse for her car keys. “Jennifer don’t like it when other girls talk to him.”

“He talked to me first!” Maggie protested.

“Oh, I know. He flirts with all the girls.” Amber shook her head. “He was always talking to me when I first started. Jennifer nearly fired me.”

“What should I do if he talks to me?”

“Stick by me during the breaks. I’ll make sure you’re too busy.” Amber looked at her sympathetically. “Look, I know it’s not fair. But if you want to keep your job, you got to stay on Jennifer’s good side.”

Maggie felt tears welling. “Okay.”

Amber noticed her distress. “Don’t cry. You’re a sweet girl, so Zack’s just seeing what he can get away with.”

Maggie’s mother pulled into the parking lot in their burgundy Ford. Maggie smiled weakly at Amber. “Thanks.”

“No problem, honey.”

Maggie’s mother was watching Amber cross the parking lot as Maggie got into the passenger seat. “Is she the one who works at Big Al’s?”

Maggie saw Amber from her mother’s perspective: blond hair cascading down her back, hips swinging, breasts bouncing under a tight t-shirt. She snapped, “She’s a waitress, Mom, not a stripper.”

She was tired of misjudgments.

Amber buzzed around Maggie during the next few days, chatting about movies she wanted to see or cute things her daughter had said. Zack joined Jeremy during the cigarette breaks. Jennifer, too, seemed to be keeping Zack busy, sending him out for iced tea or office supplies when he wasn't delivering contracts. Jennifer's attention shifted to the new employee, who wasn't making the daily quota. Greta was an older woman who read the script in a slow monotone. In the next carrel, Maggie heard Greta stop speaking midway through the opening pitch, press the disconnect button, and begin dialing again. People were hanging up on her. Not a good sign.

Maggie had just dialed a number when Traycee, the appointment secretary, appeared in the doorway. "Maggie? Mr. Ammon is here and wants to see you."

Maggie turned to Jennifer. "Is it all right?"

"I guess." Jennifer shook her head. "He's a customer, so we got to keep him happy. But make it quick, or you'll have to skip your break."

Mr. Ammon beamed at Maggie as she entered the lobby. "There's my girl!"

"Hello, Mr. Ammon." She smiled back. "How are you today?"

"Oh, just peachy, my dear." He gestured to his navy blue suit. "I have my first sitting this afternoon."

Maggie noticed that his white hair was carefully combed. "You look very nice."

"Why, thank you! You're a charmer, aren't you."

Traycee approached. "Our photographer is ready for you now, Mr. Ammon."

Mr. Ammon patted his suit jacket. "Is my tie straight, Maggie?"

She shook her head. "It's a little crooked."

He fussed in front of the mirror on the wall, making it worse. "I'm so bad with ties. Could you straighten it?"

Maggie moved closer. Mr. Ammon's breath smelled of peppermint. She adjusted the tie and stepped back. "That's better."

Mr. Ammon chuckled again. "I'm a little nervous! I haven't had a portrait taken in years." He paused. "How about a kiss for luck?"

Maggie hesitated but then leaned forward and pecked the old man's cheek quickly. "Good luck! You'll do great."

Traycee ushered him forward. "Right this way."

Maggie returned to her carrel. She reached for her sweater, feeling

chilled. Mr. Ammon was just a nice old man, who was maybe a bit lonely. She began to dial the phone.

On break Jeremy heckled her. "Maggie's got a boyfriend!"

"No!" But she was flustered, and Jeremy and Zack noticed. They boxed her against the brick wall, laughing. Amber was inside calling her daughter, and the other telemarketers had walked across the parking lot to McDonald's. There was no one to help her.

Zack leered at her. "So you do like older men?"

"Much older men!" Jeremy laughed. "We're way too young for her."

"Stop it." She felt tears building.

"You got a real boyfriend, Maggie?" Zack asked.

She didn't. "Yes. From my high school."

Zack raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? What's his name?"

"Nick," she improvised.

Zack laughed. "Shit. I bet you've never kissed anyone."

"We could fix that for her," Jeremy suggested.

"Stop it!" Maggie pushed past them to the door and stumbled over to her carrel. Amber was still on the phone. Jennifer was nowhere in sight.

Amber glanced over and saw Maggie's face. "Gotta go, sweetie. Bye." She hung up and turned to Maggie. "What's wrong?"

"Zack and Jeremy!" Maggie felt a tear trickle down her cheek.

"What'd they do?"

"They called Mr. Ammon my boyfriend, and then they asked if I had a real boyfriend, and then they said they would kiss me if I didn't . . ." The tears flowed freely now.

"Bastards!" Amber marched over to the door and yanked it open. "Hey, assholes! Yeah, I'm talking to you!"

Jennifer came into the call room as Amber was yelling out the back door.

"You leave Maggie alone! She's just a kid!"

Jeremy's voice floated inside. "Don't be a bitch, Amber. We were just messing with her."

"I wish I could mess with her." Zack's voice was quieter—he was speaking to Jeremy, not Amber—but still audible. Jeremy laughed.

Amber pointed a finger at the two outside, unaware of Jennifer's presence. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Zack. You're engaged!"

"Yeah, engaged—not dead." Zack appeared in the doorway to confront

Amber when he saw Jennifer, her hands on her hips.

"Let me guess." Jennifer strode to the door. "You're harassing a sixteen-year-old. Get over here, Jeremy—I'm talking to you too."

Jeremy stood sheepishly next to Zack.

"This is a workplace," Jennifer hissed. "Enough with the drama. No more comments. No more jacking around." She looked at Maggie. "No more crying."

Jeremy protested. "It was no big deal."

"I decide what is a big deal. And if you can't get your act together, you're done here." Jennifer nodded at Jeremy's shock. "I don't care how good you are at making sales."

"Sorry, boss," Jeremy said, swallowing. "Won't happen again."

Jennifer turned to Zack. "That goes for you too."

Zack put up his hands. "All right."

The other telemarketers trooped through the door. Greta held up a McDonalds bag. "I got extra fries if anyone wants them." She paused, noticing the tension. "What's going on?"

Jennifer clapped her hands. "Back to work!"

Maggie turned to her phone, her stomach churning. She jumped when a hand touched her shoulder.

Jennifer leaned down. "I need to know if you can handle this."

Maggie hesitated. Jennifer raised her eyebrows, and Maggie nodded.

"Good. Because you gotta take care of yourself, Maggie. Me and Amber won't be around all the time."

The murmur of voices rose from the carrels around her. Maggie took a breath, lifted the receiver, and started to dial.

Mr. Ammon was back the next week to pick up his portrait. Jennifer just shrugged when Traycee gestured to Maggie from the doorway of the call room. Maggie felt trepidation as she stood, but Jeremy was speaking eagerly with a prospective buyer and Zack was delivering contracts, so she left the call room without attracting attention.

"Maggie! How's my girl?" Mr. Ammon leaned over to kiss her cheek, his moustache tickling her face. "Look at that pretty blue skirt."

"Hi, Mr. Ammon," Maggie replied. "Nice to see you again."

"My portrait was ready, so I came right over. Now, tell me what you think, and be honest!" Mr. Ammon slid an eight-by-ten out of its folder.

He had chosen the library background with the book prop in his right hand. His lips were curved in a slight smile, his eyes sparkling. It was a good portrait: he looked dignified, respectable.

"It turned out really well!" She passed it back to him.

He tucked the photograph back into its folder. "I'll have to wear something more casual for the next one, as you suggested. A golf shirt, perhaps."

"Yes, good idea." Mr. Ammon kept smiling at her. Maggie wondered if she could excuse herself to return to the call room.

"So, do you like making these sales calls, Maggie?"

Traycee was pretending to be busy at her desk. Maggie replied carefully. "Oh, yes. I never know what people will say when I call."

"And what about school? Do you go to community college or the university?"

Maggie shook her head. "I'm still in high school."

"High school! You look at least twenty-five."

She smiled at his reaction. "No, I'm sixteen."

"Sweet sixteen." He touched one of her brown curls.

Maggie stepped back. "I have to go, Mr. Ammon. I'm in the middle of my shift."

He frowned. "So soon?"

Traycee called over from her desk. "Maggie doesn't get a break until three."

Mr. Ammon perked up. "Oh, you get a break at three? I'll come back then."

"Um." Maggie glanced at Traycee. "All right."

Mr. Ammon gestured to his car parked out front. "I'll take you to McDonalds!"

"I only get fifteen minutes, Mr. Ammon."

"We'll go through the drive-thru!" He nodded, pleased. "Three o'clock. I'll see you then."

Traycee shook her head as they watched Mr. Ammon drive away in a Lincoln Town Car. "I thought I was helping. Persistent, isn't he?"

Maggie glanced at the clock. It was two-fifteen.

Jennifer called the break at five minutes before three. Maggie sat in her carrel as Amber and the others stood. Amber looked quizzical. "You coming out?"

"No." As the others filed out the back door, Maggie spoke quietly. "Mr.

Ammon is coming back to talk to me.”

Amber took a pack of cigarettes from her purse and started tapping the end. “He sure likes you. Maybe you remind him of his granddaughter.”

“He told me he doesn’t have any family.” Maggie shrugged. “He reminds me of this little old man who used to live in my neighbourhood. He was really nice, but he lived alone except for his dog, so he must have been lonely.”

Traycee poked her head in. “Mr. Ammon’s here, Maggie.”

Maggie entered the lobby with Traycee. Mr. Ammon was standing by the front door, tapping his foot. He smiled broadly at her, and she pushed away a pang of mistrust. Just smile and be nice, she told herself.

Mr. Ammon opened the car door for her, tucking her into the passenger seat carefully. “Watch your arm, now.”

The air conditioner roared on once he started the engine, blowing frigid air into her face. Mr. Ammon pushed a button, and the locks clicked into place. “So, we’ll go to McDonalds? Are you hungry?”

“Sure, a little.” She was determined to be agreeable.

“I can’t tell you how nice it is to have you here, Maggie! That woman in the lobby wouldn’t give us a moment’s peace.”

McDonalds was only two buildings away. They entered the drive-thru lane, and Mr. Ammon looked over at her. “What would you like? My treat, of course.”

He smiled and placed his hand on her thigh.

Maggie felt a rise of panic. Mr. Ammon’s smile did not waver as he waited for her response.

“Um, a Coke?” She shifted toward the door, hoping he would remove his hand.

“That can’t be all!” He squeezed her leg.

“Fries. And a hamburger.” Please let go, she thought.

Mr. Ammon lowered his window to order, leaving his hand where it was. Maggie closed her eyes, trying to think. What was she supposed to do?

“I ordered you a diet Coke. I know how you girls watch your figures!”

Mr. Ammon lifted his hand to put the car back into gear. He drove toward the pick-up window and stopped the car. Immediately his hand was back on her thigh. The fabric of her skirt began to creep up her leg as his hand massaged her. She panicked. “Mr. Ammon, please . . .”

He gazed at her innocently. “What’s the matter?”

"Your hand!"

"I'm just being friendly, Maggie," he chided. "Don't get worked up."

He lifted his hand to get his wallet out of his pocket. Maggie's mind whirled. Should she get out of the car while they were stopped? Or was she overreacting?

Mr. Ammon handed her the drink and bag of food, then drove the car to a shaded corner of the parking lot. "You have another ten minutes left in your break, I believe?"

Maggie put the bag of food on her lap and held the drink in her left hand, blocking his access. Just a few more minutes, she thought, and this will be over. And I'll never get in a car with him again.

Mr. Ammon parked the car but left the engine idling, allowing the air conditioning to continue blowing. "Such a hot day! It's good to sit in a cool car."

"Yes," Maggie agreed automatically. She put the drink in the cup holder and opened the bag, taking out the hamburger. If she was eating, she thought, she wouldn't have to look at him or talk to him. She forced herself to take a bite.

"So, sixteen. You'll be a senior in high school?"

"A junior."

"Really? Younger than I thought."

Maggie took another bite. She had to find a way to keep him distracted. "So, Mr. Ammon, are you retired? Where did you work?"

"I was an accountant for forty years. Not very interesting, I'm afraid. I've led a quiet life. Never married. Never found the right girl." He shook his head ruefully. "I met you too late!"

Maggie forced herself to laugh. "I'm young enough to be your granddaughter."

"I don't think of you as a granddaughter, Maggie." He put his hand on her leg again and squeezed. "You're a beautiful young lady."

Her heart pounded. "Thank you, Mr. Ammon, but I really need to get back to work now. Could we please go?"

Mr. Ammon's smile was frozen on his face. Maggie saw he was breathing hard through his mouth. He unsnapped his seat belt and twisted to face her. Then she saw the bulge in his pants.

"I think we can wait a few more minutes."

He lunged toward her. His mouth was on hers, his tongue working furi-

ously against her lips and teeth. One hand pushed her back against the seat; the other covered her breast, fingers pinching and probing.

Maggie pushed at him, and he fell back against the dashboard, panting. She fumbled for the seatbelt buckle, but he jerked her hands away. "Just a minute . . ."

"Stop it!"

He was unbuttoning his pants. "Just help me . . ."

She got the seatbelt off and yanked on the car door. It remained locked.

"Maggie, wait a minute . . ."

Her left hand was touching warm, rubbery flesh.

"Stop it!"

"Just help me a minute . . ."

His other hand encircled her right wrist and pinned her arm against the car door.

"Yes, that's it . . ."

"Stop!"

"Just a little more . . ."

Maggie closed her eyes, tears trickling down her face. Mr. Ammon groaned, working her hand up and down. His nails dug into her. Then she felt wetness dribble down her left hand and onto her leg.

He released her. She kept her eyes closed, not breathing.

"That's a good girl, Maggie. Very good. You really helped me."

She heard rustling and opened her eyes. Mr. Ammon was wiping his hands with paper napkins. He offered her one. "I'm afraid we made a mess of your skirt."

She took the napkin and dabbed at her skirt and leg.

"Maggie, give me a smile. You were such a good girl, such a help."

The hamburger was on the floor at her feet, ketchup and onion smearing the mat.

She found the button and unlocked the passenger door. She was scrambling out of the car as Mr. Ammon said, "Wait, Maggie. I'll drive you back."

She stumbled across the parking lot toward Arthur Abbott Portrait Studio. The heat of the July afternoon burned her face. She couldn't stop crying.

There was no one outside; the break had already ended. Maggie leaned against the brick wall and wiped her face. She had to calm down. She had to

stop crying. She had to go inside, or she would get fired. Then her parents would ask her why, and she'd have to explain why she'd been late getting back to work. She didn't want anyone to know what had happened.

She had managed to stop crying by the time Zack drove up a few minutes later. She didn't look at him as he leaned against the wall next to her, lighting a cigarette. Wordlessly he offered her one. She took it. The smoke burned her mouth, erasing the sour taste on her tongue.

"What's your boyfriend's name again?"

Confused, Maggie looked up at him. Zack raised an eyebrow and then looked pointedly at her skirt. A milky white splotch stained the blue fabric near her knee.

He shook his head, laughing. "You're not who I thought you were."

Maggie looked away. Zack flicked his cigarette onto the sidewalk and went inside.

Her hands were shaking. She took one last drag from the cigarette and pressed the red tip against her left palm until the pain left her breathless.