

THE LETTER WAS RED

A comedy about edited lives, second acts, and the surprising stories behind respectable women.

THE SCENE

Margaret Hayes, a respected widow and longtime church volunteer, has received an anonymous red letter reading, “WE KNOW WHO YOU REALLY ARE.” Frightened that someone has uncovered a part of her past she has kept private, Margaret arrives unexpectedly at her friend Linda's alterations shop. Linda presses her to explain what the letter might mean.

CAST IN THIS EXCERPT

MARGARET HAYES — Early sixties. Attractive, composed, widowed, and so accustomed to being respectable that she has gradually edited the more complicated parts of herself out of public view.

LINDA MERCER — Early sixties. Margaret's longtime friend and alterations-shop owner. Warm, irreverent, perceptive, and largely uninterested in other people's rules for respectability.

Amanda J Korth
720-984-8113
amanda@amandapaints.com
amandawrites.co

LINDA

Did Carol Ann say something?

MARGARET

Carol Ann always says something.

LINDA

That is true. Her mouth is community property.

Margaret steps off the platform.

LINDA

Where are you going?

MARGARET

I don't think I can stand still.

LINDA

That makes hemming ambitious.

Margaret walks toward the counter, then back toward the fitting platform.

LINDA

Margaret.

Margaret stops.

LINDA

Tell me what happened.

MARGARET

You'll think it's ridiculous.

LINDA

I already think most things are ridiculous. You won't be lowering the average.

Margaret takes the red envelope from her purse.

Linda sees it.

LINDA

Well. That's cheerful.

Margaret hands it to her.

Linda removes the note and reads it.

LINDA

"We know who you really are."

She looks up.

LINDA

Do we?

MARGARET

This is serious.

LINDA

I'm trying to determine how serious.

Linda reads it again.

LINDA

No demand. No instruction. No signature.

MARGARET

It's implied.

LINDA

What is?

MARGARET

That they'll tell people.

LINDA

Tell people what?

Margaret looks away.

LINDA

Margaret.

MARGARET

Something from before Arthur.

Linda folds the paper carefully.

LINDA

Did you commit a crime?

MARGARET

No.

LINDA

Were you arrested?

MARGARET

No.

LINDA

Did you help someone else commit a crime?

MARGARET

Of course not.

LINDA

Burn down a building?

MARGARET

No.

LINDA

Steal from an employer?

MARGARET

No.

LINDA

Run a pyramid scheme?

MARGARET

No.

LINDA

Join a cult?

MARGARET

No.

LINDA

That sounded less certain.

MARGARET

I did not join a cult.

LINDA

Then we're narrowing it down.

Margaret reaches for the letter.

Linda holds on to it.

LINDA

Tell me.

MARGARET

You don't need to know.

LINDA

Someone put a red envelope in your church and frightened you into trying to dress like a nightstand. I think I need to know.

Margaret releases the letter.

She walks toward the three-way mirror but does not look at herself.

MARGARET

When I was twenty-four, I posed for a magazine.

Linda waits.

LINDA

What kind of magazine?

Margaret says nothing.

Linda looks at her.

LINDA

Oh.

Margaret closes her eyes.

LINDA

Playboy?

MARGARET

Could you say it a little louder? I don't think the bakery heard you.

LINDA

There's nobody here.

MARGARET

The walls are thin.

LINDA

The walls have watched people struggle into shapewear for fifteen years. They're not easily shocked.

Linda places the letter on the counter.

LINDA

When?

MARGARET

Nineteen eighty-six.

LINDA

How did it happen?

MARGARET

It didn't happen to me. I agreed to it.

LINDA

All right.

MARGARET

I needed money. A photographer I knew said I had the right look.

LINDA

What look?

MARGARET

Apparently the kind that did not require wardrobe.

Linda smiles.

Margaret sees it.

MARGARET

This is not funny.

LINDA

That sentence was a little funny.

MARGARET

I knew I shouldn't tell you.

LINDA

I am not laughing at you.

MARGARET

You are laughing.

LINDA

I laugh when I'm surprised. Or interested. Or awake.

MARGARET

It was one photograph.

LINDA

One photograph in Playboy?

MARGARET

They took dozens. They printed one.

LINDA

Were you--

Linda gestures toward Margaret's chest.

MARGARET

Yes.

LINDA

Entirely?

MARGARET

Linda, it was Playboy in 1986. They were not photographing my winter coat.

LINDA

In this county? At least six.

Margaret turns away.

MARGARET

It was published nationally.

LINDA

Forty years ago.

MARGARET

Magazines don't evaporate.

LINDA

Most of them should.

MARGARET

Someone has found it.

LINDA

Maybe.

MARGARET

What else could the letter mean?

A small pause.

LINDA

You tell me.

Margaret looks at her.

LINDA

You said "something from before Arthur," not "the only thing from before Arthur."

MARGARET

There were other things.

LINDA

Criminal?

MARGARET

No.

LINDA

Photographic?

MARGARET

Not that I know of.

LINDA

Then Playboy remains the strongest candidate.

Margaret looks toward the red envelope.

MARGARET

There were men.

LINDA

At twenty-four? Appalling.

MARGARET

Some of them did not react well to me.

LINDA

In what way?

MARGARET

They liked me until I succeeded at something.

Linda listens.

MARGARET

Or until I disagreed with them. Or earned more. Or didn't need whatever they thought they were offering.

LINDA

Ah.

MARGARET

One told me I made him feel unnecessary.

LINDA

Were you supposed to develop a plumbing emergency?

MARGARET

Another said I was intimidating.

LINDA

That usually means a woman has completed a sentence.

MARGARET

They thought confidence was arrogance. Independence was coldness. If I enjoyed attention, I was vain. If I didn't give them enough attention, I was--

She stops.

LINDA

A word they would not use in church?

MARGARET

Several.

Linda looks at her.

LINDA

And Arthur?

Margaret's face changes.

MARGARET

Arthur knew.

LINDA

About the photograph?

MARGARET

Everything.