

An Unexpected Consequence

The two lovers stood side-by-side as they viewed the body in the coffin. They held each other's hand as the woman stared at her dead husband and the man viewed the body of his best friend. Each wondered about the thoughts of the other. Were they mostly of remorse for having betrayed the dead man whom they both had loved? Or were they of relief and hope of a new beginning with each other?

Carl and Paul had been best friends since high school. They attended the same college and roomed together. They were closer than brothers. College was where they had met Margaret. Carl campaigned hard for her love and eventually won it during their junior year. They were married shortly after graduation. All the while Paul secretly loved Margaret, but hid his feelings because he knew how important she was to Carl. Margaret only knew they both were wonderful and Carl loved her more than his next breath. She was flattered and swept off her feet. She hadn't had time to give Paul much of a thought, except as Carl's best friend.

Paul had been the best man at the wedding. He gave a great toast and enjoyed his dance with the bride more than he would ever admit.

Carl's family had always been bankers. So Carl worked in the family bank and became president when he was forty. He and Margaret lived in the house that had been his grandfather's. It was a smaller version of a mansion.

Paul had become a doctor - a radiologist. He never married. He thought Carl's bank had loaned him the money for medical school. But it actually had been a personal loan from Carl. Paul didn't have enough collateral for the bank to lend him the money. Paul never found out the money came directly from Carl.

Carl was everything a husband should be: caring, thoughtful, loving, considerate, hard-working. It was obvious he completely adored Margaret. Not only was he a model husband, but he also was a model son to his parents and a dedicated citizen to their community. He had volunteered to work on several local fundraisers and contributed generously to local charities. In a word, Carl was perfect. Margaret loved him very much. She had the deepest respect for Carl. But, as is the case with those who obtain all their dreams, an ennui set in. Margaret couldn't help but begin to take for granted her husband's love and affection. It was too easy. She longed for a more interesting life.

About five years into Carl and Margaret's marriage, there was a noticeable renewal of affection among the three of them - Carl, Margaret and Paul. Paul started visiting their home more frequently, having dinner with them out at restaurants and doing things like going to the horse races. And, when Carl had to work late, he would ask Paul to look in on Margaret or take her out to dinner. Paul was careful not to accept these assignments every time. He didn't want to seem too eager to spend time with her.

Paul had never stopped being in love with Margaret. And the increased time he spent alone with her only renewed his passion. To amuse herself, as well as to bask in Paul's adoration of her, Margaret began to subtly flirt with Paul on the occasions when they were alone together. And, if she wasn't careful, her mischievousness would manifest itself even when the three of them were together. Soon Paul and Margaret became more affectionate with each other - touching each other more often and even holding hands as they walked together. Then, one night, after Paul had driven her home from one of their intimate dinners, while they were sitting in Paul's car, he put his hand on the back of her head and pulled her face closer to his. He kissed her sweetly, lovingly. Margaret didn't resist. She reveled in Paul's love for her. It excited and satisfied her.

She cared deeply for Paul. She may have even loved him. After the kiss, no words were spoken between them. Margaret opened the passenger door and walked into her house.

From the moment of the kiss forward, a tension existed among Carl, Margaret and Paul. The lovers hoped Carl didn't notice it. They both cared deeply for him. And each of them knew that, if they betrayed him, their own self-esteem would be shattered. Yet the forces of love were alive and well and their yearning for each other didn't wane. They were more desperate to be close, to share intimacy and affection. Paul would visit Margaret on his lunch hour and kiss her before he left her. He began half-kiddingly talking to her about how he had always loved her and Carl had just "gotten there first".

Margaret had begun to depend on Paul's affection and love. It renewed her zest for life and her inner strength. She was falling more and more in love with him. She wanted more of him each day that went by. She was uncertain about how long she could resist his physical magnetism. In the meantime, Paul wondered how long he could resist taking her to bed and making love to her as he had imagined a thousand times. Their love and respect for Carl was the only thing that prevented them from coupling. But for many years it was enough to keep them physically apart. Although dreams of living together and truly

being a couple danced through each of their minds, they both knew that would never be a possibility. So the question became: what would their relationship be? How far would it go?

Margaret was the first to break. After about eight years of increasing affection between her and Paul, one day she went to his apartment, knowing he was at home. He opened his door and was stunned to see his lover standing in front of him. She rushed inside, put her arms around him and kissed him more passionately than ever before. Soon many kisses were exchanged. Margaret took his hand and led him to his bedroom. She began undressing. Paul rubbed his eyes to make certain he wasn't dreaming. "This is long overdue," she said. "I can't go on without you anymore."

Paul was at a crossroads. He desperately wanted to love her as he had dreamed for years. But the thought that they would be shattering Carl's life and his love stopped him from ravishing Margaret. Paul's respect for Carl as a man had no bounds. And he knew Carl was too important to Margaret. Losing him would devastate her. She would never forgive herself. This incendiary passion of theirs would eventually flicker and, perhaps, die. But their love of Carl, their respect for themselves, would always be with them. How Paul could think so rationally at a

time when the love of his life was ready to give herself to him in every imaginable way was a mystery both to him and to her.

"I love you more than life," said Paul to Margaret. "But if we make love here and now, the lives of the three of us will change forever. Is that what you want?"

"I want you. I want you," is all she could say.

"If we do this, will you leave Carl - divorce him?"

She stopped undressing and began thinking. It was the type of thinking that stops passion in its tracks. Finally she looked up at him and said, "I want you. I love you. But it's true that Carl is the best man I've ever known. And you and I are lucky that such a man is in our lives. How can you be so smart at a time like this?" She gave him half a smile.

Paul walked over to her. He had never before seen her in such a naked state. He thought about what a fine body she had and how stupid he was to refuse to take her today. He embraced her and held her close for a long time. He pulled slightly away from her and kissed her long and hard. Then he pulled her close again. "I love you so much," he admitted.

"I know you do," said Margaret. "And I hope you always will."

After that, although the sexual and emotional tension was still there, their kisses and embraces became restrained. They did a lot of smiling at each other, re-affirming their love. But both of them thought they had achieved a higher plane of loving, one which wasn't based on carnal cravings. They were proud, if not fulfilled. It was a type of sweet misery. Margaret had Carl. Paul, to a much lesser degree, had Margaret. It would have to be enough.

When Carl had suddenly died of a heart attack, Paul tried to be the best friend to Margaret he could be. There were no conditions or expectations. It was just his love for her that allowed him to comfort her and help her with the arrangements.

But they both knew that they soon would face a decision that neither of them had thought they would ever have to face. And each of them was afraid of what would or wouldn't happen. They had become comfortable in their guarded love. Would the other want to or be able to ignite the passion to sustain more, now that there was nothing to limit their affection?

So when the lovers turned their countenance away from Carl's dead body to look at each other, each of them knew that, rather than his death settling things between them, Carl had managed to introduce a great deal of uncertainty into their future. They unclasped hands.

