

Part One: The Murder

“New York and, I suppose Los Angeles are cities where people come to fulfill their dreams. People come here from other nearby cities. They come from rural America. They even come from foreign countries: All for the purposes of success, whether it be in the arts as actors, as musicians, as painters, as businessmen. They come to Manhattan because this is one of those places where you can find wealth and success and fame.

“The evidence will show that Catherine Woods was one such dreamer.”

■ *Manhattan Assistant D A. Peter Casolaro.*

One

The Last Phone Call

Megan Wilkins will never forget the time of that last phone call. Cell phones are like that. They make it easy to go back and see exactly when you spoke to someone and for how long. On this night, November 27, 2005, Megan, a pretty blonde with long, straight hair, was in a coffee shop in Columbus, Ohio when her best friend, Catherine Woods, called.

It was 5:41 p.m. and, neither woman knew it but 21-year-old Catherine Woods had barely an hour left to live.

Catherine was one of Megan's friends from high school. They'd both graduated in January 2002, six months early. But while Megan and her classmates from the Worthington Kilbourne High School were still making post-graduation plans, Catherine was already off and running to New York City, determined to become a professional dancer, a dream her parents said she'd had since was three years old. She wanted to dance on the Broadway stage -- or as close as she could get.

"She just wanted to be a star, the light on the stage," Megan said. "She wasn't the background person or the second person. She wanted to be the person that everybody went to see."

No doubt, Catherine looked like a star. She was five feet, seven inches tall and was obviously in tip-top shape. But it was not her body that made all the men stare -- it was her gorgeous face. She was the epitome of the Girl Next Door, if only the girl next door was a stunning brunette. Catherine didn't really look as exotic as Angelina Jolie, her

favorite actress, but Catherine loved when people said she reminded her of Jolie. Katie Miller, another longtime friend from Columbus, had been in Ohio dance productions with Catherine and had noticed the effect Catherine had on those who watched her perform. All eyes were drawn to her, so much so that the other dancers on stage felt they were fading into the scenery. Katie, pretty in a clean-cut Midwestern way, admitted to being jealous but not in a mean-spirited way. “I wanted to say, ‘Hey, I’m here too,’” she joked.

Catherine’s clear blue eyes were almond shaped, giving her that doe-eyed, sexy-but-innocent look that cannot be manufactured with all the makeup in the world. And her lips, Catherine’s lips were something else, curvy and full and, as the expression goes, just waiting to be kissed. She had it all going on and she knew it.

“You’re talking about somebody who was very comfortable in her own skin,” Megan said. “She knew she was pretty. Every time she passed by a mirror – and she was always looking in a mirror — she’d be like, ‘Oh, I’m so cute.’”

It was not unusual for Megan and Catherine to talk on the phone a lot, sometimes as often as several times a day. That Sunday night, Catherine was on a high, “happy and cheery,” was how Megan described her. It was the weekend after Thanksgiving and Catherine had chosen to spend the holiday in New York with her roommate and on-again, off-again boyfriend David Haughn, who was then 23 years old. They’d been living together for nearly three years. David, a tall, aspiring hip-hop artist, was also from Columbus. On first meeting, he can come off a bit strange. He has a sweet-but-dumb nature and brings to mind Lenny from the John Steinbeck classic “Of Mice and Men.” David is 5’10” but appears bigger and it was probably no accident that he had recently scored a job as a New York doorman at an upscale Manhattan apartment building. It’s

also one of the things Catherine liked about David: He looked like he could provide protection.

Catherine's introduction to New York was rough and, maybe subconsciously, she was looking for someone to take care of her. She had just turned 18 years old in July 2002 when she moved to the city, didn't know a lot of people and, after winning acclaim for her dancing in Columbus, her life in the Big Apple was filled with rejection, as it is for any young performer. It was not surprising that, for all her talent, she was getting cut at one audition after another. In New York, there are thousands of young, talented, beautiful dancers chasing the very same dream as Catherine. "It was a wake-up call for sure," said Mary Rose Bushroe, one of Catherine's dance teachers from Columbus.

On a visit home back in the summer of 2002, Catherine, Megan and some friends were approached by David Haughn, who knew Megan's boyfriend Zach. David was then selling home-produced rap CD's in the parking lot of a pool hall called Quarter Flash in east Columbus. He was immediately taken with Catherine. "She just seemed real nice. And I was like, 'Wow,' you know? I'd never seen this girl before. You know? She's beautiful," David said. "I knew she wasn't from around here but I definitely knew, like she's beautiful and, you know, I didn't know her as a person then."

He got her phone number and two bonded over their respective dreams, seeing in each other a kindred creative spirit. It wasn't long before David began driving to New York on weekends to visit Catherine and, in September 2002, he just blurted out that he wanted to move to the city fulltime to be with her and try to make it in the world of rap music. Megan remembers when Catherine gave her the news: "She was like, 'I'm so

happy.’ And I remember the phone conversation. She was like, ‘He’s going to live with me. He’s moving. He’s giving up everything. I’m so excited!’”

So was David, who said: “I just kinda gave my boss the two weeks notice, rode that out, saved up a little bit of money, packed my stuff up in this car I had. Just crammed it, packed full. I really didn’t know what was gonna happen. But I knew, you know, I knew she was there. That she was worth it.”

On the surface, they seemed an unlikely couple. The energetic and outgoing Catherine was from a middle-class home in Worthington, a leafy suburb north of Columbus, while David, introspective and socially awkward, spent a lot of his youth in foster homes after his mother was convicted of solicitation, child endangerment and trafficking in cocaine. He and his younger sister were reunited years later by their father, who unfortunately died of natural causes not long after giving them a taste of what a stable life could be like. For David, it was a cruel reality check, and he seemed to be searching for someone else to love when he and Catherine crossed paths in that parking lot. David readily admits that Catherine became his whole world. “I looked up to her, almost like a parent,” he said.

But Catherine leaned on David too. He became her best buddy and confidant in New York, someone who would not judge her and someone she could trust to do almost anything she needed. “I felt real comfortable around her,” David said. “She felt real comfortable around me. I could speak to her about anything and really be myself. And I think that’s what I liked about her the most, that she accepted me for who I was.”

Catherine could have attracted better-looking guys with more money but that wasn’t the point. She knew that she’d never find anyone more dedicated to her than

David. He doted on her, running errands at a moment's notice. Whatever she wanted – a Starbucks cappuccino, an apple, a frozen dinner – she'd ask David and he'd go fetch, almost literally. He also would often drive her to work in the beat-up silver '87 Olds Cutlass that he somehow managed to keep in Manhattan, a city notoriously unfriendly to cars. Catherine's friends loved him like a big Teddy bear. "We all loved David," Catherine once said to Megan. "He's like a brother to me."

With David and Josie the Chihuahua, Catherine built a secure little family for herself in the big city, at least for a time. She was happy, and even though she wasn't getting any jobs on or off Broadway, she was at least honing her craft. She took advanced jazz and ballet classes at the Broadway Dance Center on W. 57th Street, taught dance classes to children and blended into city life, working out at the various gyms and drinking coffee non-stop. "It was her one drug," said Megan. Her parents, Jon and Donna Woods, joked that they knew she'd become a real New Yorker when she began to wear all black and started yelling at cab drivers.

But as symbiotic as Catherine's relationship was with David, it wasn't perfect. After two years of living with him in typically cramped New York apartments, Catherine began complaining to friends that she still was paying most of the bills. She was teaching dance, working at a spa, and getting a \$1,000 a month stipend from her parents but, until he got his doorman job, David wasn't contributing much at all. Sometime in the fall of 2005, David moved out at Catherine's urging, but he didn't have a lot of options. He stayed with a friend in Suffern, about 40 minutes north of the city, but there were days when he was practically living in his car. He was depressed and Catherine knew it. She told friends she still loved him and felt responsible for him and, after two weeks, she

welcomed him back into her one-bedroom apartment at 355 E. 86th Street, a safe Upper East Side neighborhood.

They agreed to be friends, not lovers. That arrangement seemed to work better for Catherine, and David, thanks to his new doorman job, began contributing more money for rent and expenses. He also began earning extra money, dog-walking for people who lived in the apartment building where he worked and, when those residents went out of town, David would keep their dogs in the apartment he shared with Catherine. In fact, that Thanksgiving weekend, he was taking care of a black Labrador.

After he moved back in, David spent his nights on the futon in the living room while Catherine slept by herself in her bedroom. He thought she may have been dating other men but he seemed to ignore it, so long as he could be a part of her life.

“She never brought nobody home if she was datin’ somebody,” David said. “I think she respected me. She wouldn’t of done that. I knew the way we were going about it wasn’t a bad thing. We were best friends and that’s pretty much it.”

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On the phone that November 27, Catherine told Megan how David had prepared her a Thanksgiving feast in their small kitchen. It was a good time but Catherine definitely wanted to spend Christmas back home with her friends and family in Columbus and was already making plans. She said things were better with David and then began talking about how she’d spent that day, a Sunday. Catherine and a friend and co-worker Christina Dupont had explored alternative religions. They went to a service at small independent church called the Creative Light Church on Lafayette Street in downtown New York and then later went to a Spiritual Expo.

As Catherine kept talking, Megan was driving, having left the coffee shop to meet her sister at her sister's boyfriend's house. Megan pictured Catherine "sitting on the floor of her living room right in front of her huge mirror and doing her makeup and getting ready for work."

Megan knew the drill because she'd spent the previous summer living with Catherine and David. "It was tiny and cramped," Megan said. "It was a little overbearing at times but I bought an air mattress and slept on the floor." Maybe it was the close quarters or maybe it was just seeing how Catherine was living in New York but the two friends seemed to grow closer than ever. Megan even worked with Catherine in the job that Catherine euphemistically referred to as "the restaurant" when speaking to her mother Donna.

"Are you working tonight?" Megan asked.

"Yeah, I'm going to work but I wished I didn't have to," Catherine said.

"Wouldn't it be great if you could just sit at home, watch TV and get paid?"

"I wish," Megan said.

"Yeah, me too."

The two friends talked a bit more but, back in Columbus, Megan had arrived at her destination. She told Catherine she had to say sign off but promised to call her back.

The time was 6:03 p.m. The clock on Catherine's life was winding down. There were only minutes left.

While she'd been on that 22-minute phone with Megan, someone had been calling Catherine's cell phone and she had a pretty good idea of who it was. A friend named Paul Cortez had wanted to get together with her that day but it never happened. She took 45

seconds to check her voice mail and then hung up. She didn't call Paul back and that was the last time she'd ever use her cell phone.

David, who had been "messing around with my beat machine" says he was still in the apartment at that point. He'd told Catherine previously that he would drive her to work.

"I'll go get the car while you're getting ready," he said.

"Okay, that's fine," she said before turning back to her mirror to apply the final touches of makeup. She was wearing a brown top and a pair of gray sweatpants. She would change into her uniform once got to her job.

Her shift was to begin at 7 p.m.