

Testimony of a Lost Angel

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For my Mother

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Field Notes

Westwood, California, Summer, 1979

Eve is sitting across from me at a sidewalk cafe in the trendy shopping district next to the university. The streets are jammed and this place is so noisy, I'm not sure she can hear anything I say.

She is obviously uncomfortable. She shifts around in her chair, fidgeting with her purse, taking quick sips from her tall cup of coffee. Her big gray eyes keep darting around, as if she is distracted by something going on behind me.

Frankly, I don't know how I will be able to conduct this interview if she is so on edge. But she came all the way up here on this hot afternoon, so I owe it to her not to waste her trip.

I pop a tape in the cassette recorder. "Okay, Eve. Here we go." She just looks at me and doesn't say a thing. I'm starting to feel like this project is turning into a fiasco. I need to break the ice. "So, how are things going for you?"

She picks up a pack of cigarettes, shakes one out and looks around. "You got a light?"

I hesitate. "Uh, no."

She fishes in her purse, almost knocking her coffee cup off the small table. I catch it just in time. "So, can I ask you some questions?"

She finds a book of matches, lights the cigarette, takes a long draw, and shakes out the match. "Isn't that what you're gonna do?"

Poor Eve. She really seems nervous. And her face looks thin and ashen. I wonder if she's sick. "Do you feel okay?"

She frowns. "Is that what you want to ask me?"

So I pull out my notebook and my lists of questions spill out on the table.

Eve flicks off an ash and stares at her cigarette. "You want me to talk about the Home. You want to know what it was like to be a crazy kid in the institution."

I almost stop breathing. I can't think of anything to say to that.

Finally, she looks up at me. "I can't remember, Kit." And then she closes her eyes and puts her hand up to her forehead.

All this time, I'm trying to think of something to say to keep her from getting up and running away. I can't let her get upset. But for some reason, I can't come up with anything that will calm her down.

Suddenly, she's stuffing her pack of cigarettes back in her purse. This interview has already gotten out of control, but I am at a complete loss for words. I can only sit there and watch this train wreck happen.

Eve stands up and throws her purse over her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I just can't do this." And she takes off across the street, her long hair streaking out behind her in a gust of hot wind. She is a

willowy figure fleeing into the crowded afternoon. There is something volatile, yet so vulnerable about Eve. Everyone seems to be watching her.

Images from the Past

It seems like I have known Eve all my life. I even think of her as my sister. But she's not. My mother didn't give birth to her. She wasn't born into my family. Eve had her own.

Or at least, she started her life with a family. But somehow it disintegrated. When she was not yet five years old her life changed so suddenly she didn't know what happened. She thought a dark whirlwind had swept her away from her home and dropped her into a kind of purgatory where damaged children were locked away from their families.

In fact, Eve had been placed in an institution for children with disabilities. Her first years with her family became dim memories as she and the other little inmates of the "Children's Home" were forgotten in time. She felt no peace, only a constant yearning to return to her family.

Fifty years later, in her quest for answers about her past and herself, she began to gather images, to put together a book of memories that would re-create her family and her life. For so many years, she did not even know the questions to ask. And she was intimidated by the piles of letters, photographs, and memorabilia left behind. But she faced her fears, salvaging and cataloging the artifacts stashed away in the old family home.

On Christmas Eve 2011, Eve placed an antique photo album before me on her dead mother's polished dining table. I could tell she was eager for me to open it. The hour was late and she had been preparing for this celebration for weeks. But Eve was not weary at all. In fact, she seemed animated, as if the evening had given her new life. She moved silently about the room, tending to candles burning since sundown, watching me. So I opened the green velvet cover and let my eyes drift over the first page of images. And I was immediately impressed by the care that Eve had given to placing these old pictures in her record of memories.

Eve's album begins with aging portraits excavated from dresser drawers and musty trunks. These images are so old that some are disappearing. It is difficult to identify the smiling children in these pictures taken eighty years ago. In one photo, a scrawny boy in rolled-up blue jeans leans against a red tractor. He is squinting into the sun and his bare feet are covered with dust. In the background, a barren landscape stretches far into the distance. In the picture on the opposite page, a little girl with platinum curls bends over to pick a flower from a spring garden. She is wearing a white frock and anklets trimmed with lace, and she is shaded by a bonnet and the leafy branches of a maple tree. These are Eve's parents. Both photographs were taken in America in the 1920s. But the scenes are so different that they could have been taken in different countries.

The next pages hold portraits of the two children as young adults. The year was 1942. It was the beginning of the Second World War.

In his first Navy photograph, Randall Austin the good-looking sailor who would become Eve's father flashed a winning smile full of youthful energy. He was the eldest of twelve offspring, born soon after his father settled a homestead in the plains. Twenty years later, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Randall left the ranch to join the U.S. Navy. He had grown up herding cattle on a prairie blown away by the winds of the Dust Bowl, and he would spend the next three years on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific Ocean. His final port was on the west coast of the United States where sandy beaches stretched all the way to Mexico. When the war ended, he did not return to his home in the Southwest, but remained at the naval air force station south of Los Angeles,

venturing out on leave with hundreds of other men in uniform to the amusement parks and dance halls of the coastal cities.

On the opposite page is a hand-tinted portrait of a pale goddess with a far-away look and rose-colored lips. This was the girl who would become Eve's mother. She was the only child of a Russian immigrant who arrived in America in 1915, took a room in a boardinghouse in a suburb of Chicago, and married his landlady's daughter. By the end of the decade, he had established a successful grocery store and bought a home in a fashionable neighborhood. In 1925, their only child, Eva Alene was born. "Lena" grew up to be a delicate beauty with talent and a wild imagination. During the early forties, her father's health failed and the family traveled west to a seaside resort on the Pacific coast. By the end of the war, Lena and her widowed mother were living in a tiny apartment close to the naval shipyard.

Lena was twenty years old and, on a quest to find the husband of her dreams, she slipped away every evening to the ocean front pavilion where the sailors congregated. At a USO party in December of 1946, Randall Austin saw Lena across the crowded ballroom and asked her for a dance. And by the spring of 1947, he had placed a diamond engagement ring on her finger.

So, Eve's family began with a romance and marriage like so many others of the post-war era. The photos of her parents' wedding depict a handsome groom and an exquisite bride celebrating a perfect day with all the expected moments—cutting the cake, tossing the bouquet, and dodging a storm of rice from well-wishers. Someone even got a final shot of Randall carrying Lena over the threshold of their new tract house on the outskirts of the city.

Eve was born in 1954, within a decade of the end of World War II and just months after a conflict between North and South Korea came to an uneasy truce. She was the first child of Randall and Lena and one of the thousands of American "baby boomers" born in Southern California. She saw her first day in the crowded maternity ward of a hospital on a hill overlooking a vast stretch of small stucco houses.

Eve and the multitude of other babies born in that hospital were bundled into new American cars and driven down the coast highway to begin their lives in those nearly-identical houses that had sprung up everywhere on the coastal deserts. In Eve's first photo, she is a blanketed baby cradled by her mother in front of a '54 Chevy parked in the driveway of their little house.

The stark real estate development was advertised as "La Plaza de Los Altos." It was a fledgling neighborhood of scrubby lots and wobbly trees as young as the infants, themselves. Thousands of enthusiastic young couples invested in the collective American dream and set up housekeeping in the simple dwellings. By the mid-fifties, the Plaza was teeming with toddlers, and before long, there were so many children that a new school had to be built next to the convent of Our Lady de Los Angelitos at the end of Avenida Way.

On the next page of Eve's album is a hazy black and white snapshot dated "August 1958." And there is Eve, a skinny little girl playing dangerously close to the street with her baby sister. I only caught a glimpse of her on one occasion when my father took me for a ride in his '52 Bel Air. This photo matches my haunting memory of the first time I saw Eve. She had a hungry, windblown look, her sandy hair escaping from her ponytail, and her filmy dress clinging to her spindly limbs. As we drove past, she ran to the gutter and stood there with her toes gripping the edge of the curb. She stared into my window, her eyes like pale gemstones reflecting the color of

the sky and the Jacaranda blossoms. She seemed to be asking, "Who are you and why don't you come out to play around here?"

Sometime in 1959, Eve disappeared from the Plaza. I didn't even notice, for by that time, I was caught up in the predictable life of a primary student. Every morning, after my father drove off to the aircraft factory, I joined hundreds of neighborhood kids, sprinting and skipping along the sidewalks to the school. Our mothers stood on the porches, watching us disappear in the distance before retreating to their quiet routines of cleaning, cooking, and caring for toddlers. The Plaza was so far away from anywhere that the stillness of the day was broken only by the hum of amphibious planes flying out over the ocean. This long siesta lasted until late afternoon when the classroom doors flew open, and we came running down the avenues, returning to our mothers and houses full of siblings. At half past five, a parade of automobiles rolled in off the highway bringing the men home from the long work day. And as the sun set behind Oil Hill, the children climbed into their beds, and the Plaza de Los Altos went to sleep.

Unfortunately, Eve's life did not have such an idyllic beginning. Her father stopped coming home when she was about four years old. He stayed at the base and returned only for brief, random visits with his wife and daughters. Around this time, Eve stopped speaking. No one knew why. But even though she didn't talk, she threw convulsive tantrums every time her father came to the house. Her fits went beyond kicking and screaming. Eve could tear the house apart. She tossed heavy objects against the walls and ripped curtains off the bedroom windows. She threw herself down and banged her head on the hardwood floor. Her mother could not comfort or restrain her.

Eve had not yet seen her fifth birthday when she found herself in an institution for "exceptional" children. That term was a euphemism for "crippled" or "retarded." Eve was not exceptional in those terms. But she certainly was out of control. And because she did not speak, the professionals had no way to assess her true intelligence. That didn't really matter in 1959. At that time, kids who acted crazy could still be sent to the "Children's Home."

Eve lived in the institution for almost three years. She never spoke about her time there, even after she became an adult. And for a long time, no one ever asked. Years later, she told me that she just remembered living in a claustrophobic labyrinth of high walls, locked doors, and hallways that led to nowhere. Early on, she learned to expect defeat and disappointment. She saw herself as defective, obviously different from other children. But she had no idea what she had done to cause her parents to abandon her. She decided that she was rejected because of her faults, irreversible mutations in her character. Life in the Home was her punishment. She made up this story with the imagination of a creative child. But, unlike the fantasies of other little girls, Eve's was a story of guilt and shame, embellished with her trespasses of ignorance, incompetence, and even murderous intent. She put on this unlovable persona and accepted the consequences of her damaged self. There is an empty page in Eve's album dated "1959 to 1960," for there are no photographs taken of her during that period.

It was my mother who finally rescued her from the Home. Eve's story in 1961 was as much about Mom's unrealized dream as it was about Eve's release from captivity. My mother had always wanted to be a teacher but was prevented from going to college by the birth of her children. So as soon as her offspring were all in school, she joined us there as a volunteer in the "special" class. When Eve arrived one day on the little yellow bus from the Children's Home, my mother immediately began telling me about "that smart little girl" who came to her class. She told

me that she knew Eve would start speaking again: "That will be the day everyone sees how bright that little girl is!" And that year, Mom launched her own crusade to have Eve released from the institution. It seemed to me that my mother had found an unclaimed child, akin to a stray cat, and wanted to bring her home. To this day, I'm not sure how she actually accomplished Eve's discharge. But it wasn't long before Eve was living at my family's house, sleeping in my bedroom, eating at our kitchen table, and using the bathroom with the rest of us.

Eve's first color photographs follow on the next pages of her album. These are my mother's snapshots taken with her little "instant" camera, vivid images full of children playing on the blazing sidewalks of the Plaza. The trees are still young in the summer of 1961. It is not hard to spot Eve. She is wearing a bathing suit like the rest of us, but she is not running through the lawn sprinklers or smiling at the camera. Eve is standing in a corner, looking at her feet. She appears bashful, hoping to evade anyone's notice. I always thought she was trying to hide something. It wasn't until we were adults that she revealed to me that she was plagued with guilt and depression. She struggled with fluctuating emotions, plunging from euphoric heights to the depths of despair.

In spite of her internal storm, I don't think Eve knew bitterness when she was a little girl. But it must have taken root, growing insidiously with the years. In the late sixties, she left our house and went back to live with her own family. This was when her dormant rage started to bubble up. At that time, I thought she was just another rebellious teenager. Her dad still wasn't living at home, so it was easy for her to escape her mother's supervision. She took to roaming the Plaza with a crowd of mischievous adolescents. She would do anything they asked of her. She lifted lipstick from the drug store on the way home from school. She snuck into the diner at night to buy cigarettes from vending machines. When she started sweet-talking a liquor clerk into giving her samples of sweet wine, her mother made a frantic call to my mother.

Mom was only too happy to take Eve back under her wing. Every morning she drove her station wagon past Eve's house and picked her up on our way to school. She instructed me to keep an eye on Eve during lunch breaks. And she stood outside the house every afternoon to make sure Eve was with me at the end of the day. Here in the album is a photo dated 1967. I am wearing a very short skirt, pink stockings and an oversized sweater. And there is Eve, standing right beside me, wearing a very short skirt, pink stockings, and of course, a big sweater. I am not smiling. It is obvious that I am ignoring her. I was not gracious to Eve. But I tolerated her imitation. I knew that it was her desperate attempt to pass as "normal."

As she approached adulthood, Eve finally realized that what she had accepted as friendship was really manipulation and a silent form of ridicule. She came to expect rejection and believed she could trust no one. Although she often sought refuge in my mother's kitchen, she rarely talked to me. She seemed to be looking out at the world from a self-imposed solitary confinement. She tried to keep her dark emotions to herself, but I could see she was always troubled.

She did not draw closer to her own mother who herself was prone to long periods of melancholy punctuated by moments of mania. And she simply did not speak to her father when he made short, unannounced visits to the family home. She was convinced that she would lose control of her life if any adult knew she needed help. Her only hope was to leave home and strike out on her own. In the 1970s, it was easy for her to pretend that she was simply an independent young woman. But her passage into adulthood was lonely and treacherous. As the children of the Plaza celebrated rites of passage, Eve withdrew and just seemed to disappear. Soon after her eighteenth

birthday, she took off on a journey through the Southwest. I don't think she ever intended to come back to the neighborhood.

And so her life became a lonely sojourn. She struggled daily with overwhelming urges to destroy herself. She was accustomed to these tempests—they had raged inside her ever since she was a child. But the storms began to take their toll. Eve grew weary, enduring the torment in utter isolation. I imagined Eve wandering in a moon-like landscape of mesas and giant sand dunes. There were few pictures taken of her at that time, but here, forty years later in the pages of her album is a faded color snapshot that preserves a moment in the summer of 1972. She is standing on a desert highway, wearing denim jeans and a suede jacket. Her long, sun-bleached hair is tossed in a whirlwind. She is hitch-hiking, gazing into the distance with an anxious expression, frightened perhaps, by the unfathomable road ahead.

During the seventies, Eve rarely returned to the Plaza. And she never settled down anywhere. She had left her mother's house as soon as she was old enough to flee and worked in all kinds of odd jobs. She pedaled drug paraphernalia in a “head shop” and ice cream at a concession stand on a boardwalk along a Pacific beach. She cleaned hotel rooms and sold chili burgers in hot, tiny desert towns. She dug trenches on archaeological sites in river basins and served drinks in downtown bars. And as a guileless young woman, she collected and lost uncommitted boyfriends like charms on a broken bracelet.

Eve did finally return to the California coast. By the late 1970s, she was living with a man in the deteriorating downtown section of the city west of the Plaza. Halfway through the pages of her album is a dark image of a pale-skinned Eve perched on a tall stool in a cocktail lounge. She is wearing a black satin jacket and holding a long cigarette in a pose reminiscent of *film noir*. During those years, she never came back to her mother's house, although she could have made the trip in less than an hour. She preferred to roam the oldest part of the city, buying food from corner grocers and second hand garments from vintage clothing stores.

Finally, Eve could no longer live among the buildings being demolished all around her. In December of 1984, she left the antique dwelling she had inhabited with her boyfriend for nearly a decade. She rented a small truck and loaded it with sleeping bags and trail mix. And on New Year's Day 1985, she took off up the Pacific highway with her backpack and a fold-out map of the Northwest coast.

She wasn't actually striking out on her own. She had heard that I was beginning a new research project, and within weeks found me in a small university town in Oregon. My mother told Eve exactly where to find me, and although I cannot say I was happy to see her, I could not ignore her. I had to take care of her. Eve had lived with my family for more than a few years and my mother considered her one of her children. She was watchful of Eve and spent hours on the phone with Lena, discussing their wayward girl. But Eve never wanted to be tracked when she wandered from the Plaza, so I could not tell her they expected me to look out for her like a sister, wherever she would go.

The next photos in Eve's album are snowy images of mountain slopes and evergreen forests. I must have taken these pictures the year she arrived in the Northwest. She is wearing a knit cap and bulky parka, skiing down a powdery hillside on a late winter day over twenty-five years ago. She was looking for a woodland cabin to live in for the rest of her life. She never expected to go back to the Plaza.

Eve was thirty years old when she packed up and went north. She had intended to settle down and bake gingerbread and have babies in a home of her own. But before the end of the decade, she was on a train back to California, drawn south to her place of birth by the death of her mother. In 1989, she returned to face her unfinished childhood. There are no pictures in Eve's collection to document that time, and if it had ended here, her album would tell only of her sad wanderings and unrealized dreams. But her story was not over.

Eve suffered great losses before her journey led to grace. I know she would like to share her story with others who need encouragement in their travels on this earth. She has made many attempts over the years to write it all down. Together, we have gathered torn pages from her journals, forgotten letters in crumbling envelopes, and old tapes of her voice as she recalled her earliest memories. Her accounts are intriguing and often compelling—but fragmented. If Eve's story is ever to be told, I guess it is up to me to put it all together. It is a story of transformation from despair to hope, desolation to renewal. It is the testimony of a lost angel

A Legacy of Ashes

Sunday, July 31, 2011

The sun was resting on the horizon at the end of a long late summer day. The sky had that golden California glow. But I found myself feeling edgy. The evening was too long, too lovely. My phone lit up. It was Eve. "Kit. You need to come over." I could hear the panic in her voice.

"What happened?" I grabbed my overnight bag.

"She's not answering the door."

We both knew this was not good.

"I'll be right there." I ran out and opened the garage door. Kurt came out of his darkroom. I jumped in the car. "It's my mother."

"Don't speed!" My husband's voice faded in the distance as I took off toward the Plaza, wrestling with the urge to race through the narrow streets of the old neighborhood—and fighting off the thought that this could be my mother's last day.

Eve was waiting for me on the porch of my mother's house. She looked tall and almost graceful in her faded jeans, her long, sun-kissed hair flying as she ran down the steps to meet me. Her eyes reflected the twilight.

We opened the front door and Eve stepped into the dusky light of the old living room. "Mom?" No answer. I couldn't move. I could only watch Eve to see what she would do. She took a deep breath and disappeared into the small den where my mother spent most evenings since my father's death. I followed slowly. I didn't want to be the first to see—whatever it was we were going to find.

Eve pushed gently on the door of the bathroom. It wouldn't open. She pushed harder and we peeked in. I covered my face. My mother was sprawled on the floor with a blissful expression, as if she had just awakened from a lovely dream. "Well, hello, Eve. So nice of you to visit." I stepped back, shaken.

Eve went in and knelt down beside her. She spoke softly and began to gently move Mom's limbs. She rolled up a towel and placed it under her head, looking intently into her face. My mother smiled. "I'm having such a nice sleep." Her speech was slow and slurred. "Your father just let me sleep here." I put my hands over my eyes. My father had died years ago.

Eve stood up, took my shoulders, and turned me toward the kitchen. "Fix something to eat. I'll get her up."

"Don't you think we need to call...?"

"Oh, don't do that, dear!" Mom's voice echoed in the bathroom.

Eve put her finger to her lips and shook her head. "Go," she whispered.

Hours passed. And finally, they emerged. My mother was clean and dressed, her white hair brushed and styled. She was moving slowly, holding lightly to Eve's right arm as they walked

together into the kitchen. I was witnessing a miracle. But why should I be surprised? I had seen Eve do this kind of thing before.

I pulled out a chair and we helped Mom sit down. She reached for a napkin. "Are we eating?" I put a cheese sandwich on a china plate and placed it before her with a flourish. I had really doubted that she would ever again sit with us at her kitchen table.

I whispered in Eve's ear. "How did you do it?"

She smiled. "I talked her through." Then she closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. "And I prayed every step of the way."

Mom began to doze before she had even finished her late supper. So we put her to bed and went to sit on the back porch. The scent of warm oleanders drifted through the night. We sat on the cool concrete steps, lulled by a mockingbird's aria until a large opossum slipped between our legs. I jumped up as he vanished into the dark. Eve laughed. "Welcome back to the Plaza." She shook off her sandals and let them drop to the ground.

"This place has really changed." I regained my composure and sat down next to Eve. "I mean, we used to see a dead possum in the road once in a while. But now there seems to be so much..."

"Wildlife."

"Doesn't it seem that way?"

"You can hear the coyotes at night. Howling."

"Oh, no."

"They run right along the creek bed." As Eve spoke, a cloud of crows covered the sky, gliding silently over the roof tops to disappear somewhere in the night.

"Where did they come from?"

She plucked a flower from the hibiscus bush and put it to her lips. "The crows have always been here."

"What about the coyotes? And the squirrels? And the raccoons?"

"Hiding, maybe. Somewhere in the foothills."

"You think they were here before the land was razed?"

She took the flower out of her mouth and waved it across our view. "It's like—now everything is coming back."

It did seem like the evicted fauna were returning. Over the last sixty years the neighborhood had evolved from dusty scrub land into a flowering forest. Giant, tangled roots morphed the sidewalks into hilly pathways, and the old houses were sinking like ruins into a jungle. Eve leaned back on one elbow. "Why did they name this place the Plaza de Los Altos?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, anyway, it sounds romantic." She looked up at the stars. "You know, I never wanted to come back here." We fell into silence, listening to the chorus of crickets.

Eve sat up. "What are we going to do about Mom?"

I groaned. "I guess I've got to take her to the hospital. I just hope they let her come home. But after that, I don't know. I don't want to put her in a—"

She cut me off. "Don't even talk about it!"

"But I have to go back to work."

She screwed up her face like she was in pain. Or thinking. "I got it. I'm gonna call Ruby."

"Ruby?"

"You know, when my dad was dying. She was his nurse."

"She could come every day?"

"And I can stay every night."

"Oh, Eve, you can't do that."

"Why not? You think I can't handle it?"

"I just mean—I'd have to pay you."

"I don't want it. She's my mother, too." That wasn't really true. But that was how she felt.

"Well then, what can I do for you, Eve? In exchange."

She thought for a moment. "You could help me clean out my folks' old house."

"Okay." What else could I say?

Eve stood up and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I gotta go feed my cats."

Monday, August 1st

The sun had not even come up, and there was Eve at the back door holding two jam jars full of hot coffee. She had a shopping bag over her shoulder. I held the screen open. "I'm glad you're here. I can't get her up."

She dropped the bag and gave me a jar of coffee. Then she rolled up her sleeves and headed for the den. "Rise and shine, Mom!"

That was the first day of a very long week. Luckily, my mother was out of the emergency ward after six hours of examinations and tests. Whatever made her fall to the bathroom floor would remain a medical mystery. She insisted that it was just a restful nap. The doctors doubted that, but could find no scientific reason to detain her. So I drove home with Eve and Mom in the back seat chatting away like two ladies at tea time. And when the day finally gave up, I was ready to fall asleep, even if Mom was not.

The night rolled into the next morning, and the days became each other in the endless cycle of food and baths and laundry. I was glad my mother was home, but this was one major nursing dilemma. She had a hard time standing and walking. It was difficult to get her to lie down, and once she was down, almost impossible for her stand up. I couldn't come up with anything she wanted to eat, and she resisted my attempts to take her into the bathroom.

Eve could see I needed help and she didn't wait for me to ask. She simply went home, picked up her cats and moved in with us. She slept on the floor beside the bed, ready to calm Mom anytime she awoke and tried to get out. At dawn, as I struggled to consciousness, Eve was already helping my mother to the bathroom. And by nine, the two of them were sitting at the kitchen table, clean and dressed, enjoying waffles and coffee. While they cruised through their day, I took care of solitary chores, washing clothes and floors, amazed that Eve seemed to truly enjoy being Mom's caregiver. I am sure I would not have survived without her help.

By Friday, the two of them were in good spirits. But I was exhausted and even a little disgruntled. We sat at the table, the light in the kitchen growing dim as the sun drifted to the west. Mom's eyelids were at half-mast. Eve stood up. "Movie night!" She winked at me. And she headed for the door. All I could do was sit there, looking out the window. I was beginning to despair that I would ever get home to clean my own house, when Eve burst through the front door carrying her cats and a handful of old movies.

"You can go home, Kit." Sasha and Peter jumped from her arms and settled themselves on the couch.

"I don't know..."

"It's okay. Mom falls asleep when I put on one of these oldies."

"Don't you need my help?"

"You need help." She picked up my purse and handed it to me. "Your husband is waiting for you. And so is his laundry."

Monday, August 15th

By the time Ruby showed up, I was running short of patience and ready to resign. But Eve was breezy and excited to see the friend she had grown so close to over the past few years. Ruby had cared for Eve's father as if he were her own, and the two women hugged like sisters who had not seen each other since the day their dad died.

Ruby was a diminutive woman with creamy cocoa skin and luminous green eyes. She sat down at the table next to Mom, took her hand, and spoke close to her ear. "Hello, Mama." Her voice was soothing. "I am Ruby. How are you?"

Mom looked up. "What a beautiful necklace."

"You like it?" Ruby lifted the string of pearls over her head and placed it in Mom's hands. "I make them. My mother taught me."

I went into the kitchen to eavesdrop and Eve followed me. I poured her a mug of coffee. "I hope Ruby can start right away." Then I put down the pot. "Thanks, Eve."

"We can do this," she said. "Together."

September 2011

My mother liked Ruby from the day she met her. She didn't seem to realize that Ruby was her nurse—she simply looked forward to her daily social visits. I'm not sure why, but I felt I had to stop by every day for the first few weeks. Finally, one afternoon Mom complained. "You don't need to keep checking up on me." Her comment sent Ruby into hysterics.

I picked up my purse and strode to the door. "You sound just like Eve's fourteen-year-old niece." I let the door slam and headed around the block to share the laugh with Eve.

A family of parrots was squabbling in the magnolia tree so I went to the back yard and yelled. "Hey, Eve!" No answer. I pounded on the door. "Are you okay?"

Finally, she answered but didn't open up. "I'm okay."

I was not convinced. "Eve, really. How are you doing?"

"Not so good."

I could tell her emotions were out of whack. That happened if she spent too much time alone. Maybe she was drinking again. "I'm going to go get us a couple of iced mochas. Be ready to open up when I get back." I was certain she would pull herself together for a big cup of sweet Joe.

Eve was at the door when I returned. She was wearing her mother's faded silk kimono. Her face was pale and the rims of her eyes were pink. But she let me in and took a cup. "Do you want a cookie?"

"No, thanks."

"Good, because I don't have any."

"Tell me what's going on, Eve."

She came to the table and sat down. "Oh, you know me."

"That's why I won't let you alone."

"I don't know what's wrong with me."

"You hate cleaning out your parents' house."

"I can't sort through all this stuff." She stared into her cup. "My parents' lives."

I was talking to a woman who had waged a lifelong battle with her emotions, now facing the daunting task of sorting through a half century of stuff—and memories. Her sister Cari lived in another city and wanted no part of the cleaning project, advising her to "call in the junk dealers to shovel out the stuff!" But Eve could not discard the remnants of her family's past, even though she didn't relish the idea of excavating the contents of the old house all by herself. It simply broke her heart to toss pieces of her parents' lives into the landfill. She still had questions about her childhood that needed to be answered. The old house held a trove of artifacts that could provide the missing pieces of her childhood. This was a rough time for her and I couldn't just let her melt down.

I patted her hand. "It's a tough job, Eve."

She drew her arm away. "I feel death in this house. Like I'm cleaning out the ashes." Her voice wavered. "They're gone, now. And I can't do anything to make things right."

I struggled for something to say. "So, what did you find?"

"Some really old photos. Ones of before I was born."

"Why would that make you sad?"

Eve stood up and went to the room where her parents had slept. I followed her and sat down on the bed. A hint of her mother's cologne still lingered in the air. She opened a dresser drawer, pulled out an old cigar box and brought it to the bed. "Look at these." She lifted the lid and took out two stacks of black and white snapshots fastened with rubber bands. "One pile for before I was born and one for after."

"What made you so sad, Eve?"

"Look at the first pictures." She laid them out like playing cards. They were stunning photos of her parents Randall and Lena as newlyweds, eating wedding cake, exchanging Christmas gifts, even lifting glasses of bubbly champagne on their first New Year's Eve together. They looked young and radiant.

Then Eve tossed the second set of photos on the bed. "Now, look at these."

I shuffled through them. "Who is this little bundle of joy?"

"That's me."

I picked up another photo. "And who is this?"

"Granma and me in front of this old house."

"You were about three years old, there?"

She began lining up all the photos with dates from 1954 to 1958. I looked at the pictures. Then I looked at Eve's face.

Tears were welling up in her eyes. "What do you see?"

I looked at the photos again. I pretended I didn't know what she was trying to tell me. "What do you want me to see, Eve?"

"Do you see my dad in any picture there?"

"Tell me why you are upset."

"Not one picture!" Now she was sobbing. "He's not there anywhere. After I was born." She wiped her face with her sleeve. "Why? I would like to know."

"What are you getting at?"

"My parents' marriage went bad the day I was born. Can't you see? I caused all their trouble!"

I knew I couldn't argue with her when she was this worked up. On the other hand, I didn't want to let her crash. I picked up a photo of four-year-old Eve standing with her mother in front of her dad's fifty-four Chevy. Her mother was holding a baby. "Look at you, Eve."

"That's Cari. Her first day home."

"No, look at you. See how happy you are there?"

She took the picture and peered at it.

"Eve, you have a distorted view of history. Everyone on that picture is happy. You're happy, your mom is happy, even baby Cari looks happy! So tell me who do you think was taking this happy picture?"

She took a moment to answer. "My dad."

"And who took all these other pictures that we just looked at? Could that have been your dad?"

"Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not, Eve. But doesn't it just make sense that the reason your dad is absent from the pictures the year you were born is because he was on the other end of the camera?"

Eve looked down at the bed, now spread with a crazy quilt of faded black and white photographs. After a long pause she spoke. But she did not raise her eyes. "I can't make sense of those years."

"You missed out on a few years with your family. But let me tell you, honestly—the fifties were not the good old days."

She was silent.

"Eve, when we were born, our fathers were still shell-shocked. My dad didn't talk about the war ever. Not at all. But listen to this. One night I woke up because my dad was yelling. It was so loud that I jumped up and ran into my parents' room."

"Was he awake?"

"No. My mother told me to go back to bed. But, of course, I could not go back to sleep."

"You must have been scared."

"So the next morning, I asked my mom why he did that. She told me that he had nightmares."

"Your dad?"

"Yes."

"About the war?"

"He was on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific. The ship was attacked and sank and my dad spent a night treading water. He never got over what he saw."

"What did he see?"

"His buddies. Drowning and burning. Eve, all those young men—after the war, don't you think they were suffering? But in those days, men just didn't cry."

Eve looked down at the photos scattered on the bed. "Or smile."

"I had the same impression of my dad."

She looked at me and narrowed her eyes. Then she began to gather up the pictures.

I was not sure she believed me. "Eve, I know you feel like you missed out while you were in the Children's Home."

She placed her stack of photos in the cigar box. "So tell me what I didn't miss."

"Think back. You must remember something from your first years."

She closed her eyes. "I just have images. Like bright sun and hot sidewalks." She took a deep breath. "And those winds."

"The Santanas. What else?"

"I was so young." Then she sighed. "I only remember my mother and grandma and baby sister at home. My dad was never there."

I touched her hand. "I have the same memory."

"About your dad?"

"Every morning, he left with all of the other men in the neighborhood and went to work. My dad went to the aircraft plant. Your dad went to the base. Do you remember that? No cars left in the Plaza?"

"But you have more memories."

"Peanut butter sandwiches."

She rolled her eyes. "I mean..."

"Oh, Eve. It was no Utopia. There were always shadows..."

"Shadows of what?"

"The war."

"But how did kids know?"

"Adults didn't talk about it, but—"

"Then how did you know? If no one ever talked?"

"They didn't have to. It was all around. Old newsreels. And the movies. The first movie I ever saw was about the diary of Anne Frank."

Eve searched my face. "Did it make you sad?"

"I could see that those people were living in a dark world. And the fear and sorrow were real."

She closed her eyes.

"So things were not always so rosy. And, Eve, I was never quite sure my dad wanted to be my father, either."

She wouldn't look at me.

"Eve, you took care of your dad for years before he died. Why didn't you ask him about all this?"

"We never talked. Not about things like that."

"Maybe he didn't think there was anything to talk about. Maybe you should just stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"How do you know how I feel?"

"How could I not know how you feel? You've been telling me for fifty years."

She finally looked at me. I could tell she was shocked. And hurt.

"Eve, listen. All I mean is—you have overcome a lot in your life. Tell me if I'm wrong, but aren't you sober right now?"

She just stared at me.

"You are coping with your parents' house and that's a gargantuan task."

She closed her eyes again.

"You're not taking anything, are you? Not even prescriptions?"

Still no answer.

"Am I right? Tell me if I'm wrong."

She opened her eyes. "I can't believe... Look at me, Kit. What do you think?"

I studied her. Eve was alright. She was not drugged. Or defeated. "Okay, I'm sorry. Did I sound like a drill sergeant?"

"Yeah." She managed a wan smile. "You did."

"Look, I have to go home. Are you going to be okay?"

She closed the cigar box. "I'll be with your mom tonight."

"Eve, you should never feel guilty about anything."

"But you know why I feel like this."

I knew she had never made sense of the things that happened to her when she was a little girl. Still, I thought by now, half a century later, she would at least have made peace with her parents. Today I realized that, even though she was older and sober, she was still confused. "Eve, do you still have those stories you wrote back in '79?"

"For your loony bin study? I threw 'em away."

"That's just like something you would do."

"But you recorded them. Don't you remember? On tapes."

"You're right. Somewhere I have a shoe box full of old cassettes."

"And somewhere in this old house..." She was already down the hall, pulling things out of the closet and letting them tumble to the floor. "Come here. Help me look."

I climbed over the boxes in the narrow hallway and tried to help her lift old appliances from the shelves.

"Wait!" She reached up and tugged on a dangling cord until a cassette player slid into view.

"Eureka! Dust this thing off and bring it over to Mom's tonight."

"What are we gonna do with it?"

"We're going to listen to the tapes."

"I'm not sure I want to."

"Eve, listen to me. It's been thirty years since you told me your earliest memories. Maybe now your own words can help you make sense of your childhood."

She didn't say anything. But she did not protest.

I went to the kitchen and picked up my purse. "See you tonight"

"See you," she said.

Eve was outside sweeping away the dust that the dry afternoon winds had left on my mother's porch when I arrived that evening with a box of old tapes. She didn't look like the same woman who met me at her back door earlier in the day. Her hair was pulled back in a thick, shiny braid; and she had replaced the old robe with slim jeans and a white shirtwaist. She held the screen door open. "Mom is still awake."

"She's still up?"

"Reading the newspaper. And sleeping." She propped the broom against the kitchen wall and leaned over to whisper into my mother's ear. "Your daughter is here."

Mom opened her eyes. She looked into Eve's face and smiled. "I know you're here, dear."

I sat down across from her. "I'm here, too, Mom."

"Oh, hello, you."

"Do you want to go to bed?"

"I'd like to just stay up with you girls for a while."

"Are you sure? We're just going to listen to some tapes."

"Music, you mean?"

"No. Eve's stories."

"I always liked Evie's stories."

Eve smiled at me and I slipped the first tape into the player. And we sat there in the kitchen, barely breathing as Eve's voice returned to us out of the past.

September 1958

The Day Ashes Fell From Oil Hill

After the long still summer, the winds came—hot ones, dry and electric. They stirred the fields so the Hill could not be seen and threw the sands across the highway, blasting everything in their path.

As the sun began to set, I went out to look toward Oil Hill. I was waiting for the weeds to roll across the highway.

The air was still now. The fields and the trees were silent. There were two empty snails and some dry worms in the gutter. There was nothing moving.

I could feel it when the winds were coming. There was stillness. And then things started to move. Restless birds and sand flying past. Dogs barking and cats running through the yards and along fences.

And then a low noise rose up from all around. I could feel it. The wires above me started to hum. Dandelion down floated by. I could hear my dog scratching at the back gate. I looked out toward the highway. I could barely see Oil Hill. It was strange and gray, the derricks spiking up like hundreds of tiny whiskers. Dust whirled out past the ditch.

The gates blew open and Sparky ran out, chasing the boys as they danced around like crows. Whirlwinds of dust spun out over the highway, coming across the fields, over the ditch, and bouncing down the street. I put my hands over my face. The wind blew up my skirt and threw sand against my legs.

Sparky started to howl. I peeked between my fingers. The boys were circling around a tumbleweed. They were kicking at it and making whooping noises. The tumbleweed sat there stunned, arrested in flight. I turned away so the boys could not see me cry.

The baby was crawling into the street. I tried to grab her. I fell on the grass with her. She started wailing.

And then she stopped, listening.

It was Rosaria. She was calling to the baby, calling her name. She had come out the back gate. To hold Cari. To sit outside on the curb with me and the baby.

Rosaria lifted her to her hip and carried her back to the grass. She patted the baby on the belly. The skin on her hands and arms was the color of dust. And she smelled like the winds that brought the Tumbleweed.

"Jesus love little chil'ren," she said.

I stopped the tape player. For a moment, we were silent. Mom put her hand on Eve's arm. "That takes me back..."

Eve stood up and returned to the table carrying the old cigar box. She began to place the photographs before us. Immediately, my mother reached out and picked one up. "There you are, Evie, with your sister."

"And Sparky, do you remember Sparky, Mom?"

"He was a nice little fellow." Mom pointed with her crooked finger at an elderly lady. "And there's your grandmother. How is your grandmother, Evie?"

"She's with the angels." Eve handed her another snapshot.

Mom held it up to the light, studying every detail. Impulsively, I pressed the *play* button. Again, Eve's voice emerged out of the white noise.

It was the day ashes fell from Oil Hill. It was almost dark when a blast shook the houses. Embers began to float from the sky like clouds of glowing moths landing on the rooftops.

I took Cari to the backyard and climbed up the slide. Cari tried to climb up, too. She kept slipping and screaming. I got down and pushed her baby bottom to the top. We stood there looking out toward the Hill.

It was erupting, spewing up oil and cinders and turning the sky orange. A giant smoke cloud billowed up and moved over the Plaza. Tumbleweeds became balls of fire and rolled across the highway, scorching and searing everything—the fences, the houses, the trees. So nothing would ever be the same.

There was a thud on the grass. I looked down. It was Cari. She was lying there, curled up under the slide. Not moving at all. Lying there completely still.

I had never heard my mother scream before. She was screaming, “My baby, my baby” and walking back and forth with Cari dangling over her arm.

Then my dad’s car rolled into the driveway. I watched him run up the porch. He left the car door open. I had never seen my father run before. He did not look at me.

He came out holding the baby. She was wrapped up in a bundle like the day they brought her home from the hospital. Moma was silent now. She did not look at me.

I stood by the gutter and watched the car roll out to the highway. There was still fire on the Hill.

Rosaria came out holding sweet bread wrapped in a napkin. She gave a piece to me and I began to cry. Rosaria looked at me and dropped her bread on the pavement. She put her hands on my face and watched the tears fall down.

“Jesus loves little chil’ren,” she said. This was something Rosaria knew.

The next day, the fire had died. A fine black veil settled over the houses. It clung to things a long time after—the rooftops, the porches, the fences. They wore it as penance. Or testimony. Of the day the ashes fell from Oil Hill.

Still, no one spoke. Eve placed a photo in my mother's hand.

"Oh, look at your dad’s nice car!"

“Do you see the Hill, Mom?”

My mother studied the faded image. "I saved the newspaper."

I grabbed the photo. "What newspaper?"

"About that day."

I could hardly believe this. "The day the Hill exploded?"

"What, dear?"

Eve jumped in. “What do you remember about Oil Hill, Mom?”

"Oh, I kept the newspaper. The Hill went up in flames, you know."

Eve's eyes widened. "Where is it?"

“Where is what?”

"Where are your old newspapers, Mom?"

"Oh, you know, dear. Somewhere in the garage."

Eve looked at me. "Can we find it?"

"Out in that garage?" I doubted I could find anything out there. But I knew Eve needed to see that headline. So I took a flashlight and went out to scout around. The old garage was still warm with the heat of the afternoon, and the scent of old wood was thick in the air. The shelves were filled with oily tools and dusty relics of all kinds. Nothing had been touched for years, and I could tell right away that it would not be easy to find that newspaper. So I just turned around and went back into the house.

Eve had taken Mom to bed and was drying dishes in the kitchen. "No luck?"

"Not a chance in the dark. You're going to have to help me in the light of day. And it may take all day—if we even find it."

"Let's try tomorrow."

"Eve, why is this old newspaper so important to you?"

She hung the dish towel over the sink and turned around. "When I wrote those stories, I just put down what I remembered. What I thought I remembered."

"But so many years had gone by."

"I don't know what really happened. I was so little. All those stories—maybe I just dreamed them up."

"Cari couldn't help you?"

"She was just a baby. What could she remember?"

"So you never talked to your parents about your childhood?"

"My dad didn't like to talk." She came to the table and sat down. "And, Kit, you knew my mother."

"She did always seem a little..."

"Besides, why would I talk to her? She sent me away."

"Eve, that's over, now. Time to move on."

"Not until I get some answers." She was suddenly defiant. "They must have been hiding something. Maybe they had secrets."

"I think you're making this all too mysterious." I stood up and put my purse over my shoulder. "I've got to go. Will you be alright?"

"Of course I'll be alright!" She was shaking.

I sat down again and hung my purse on the back of my chair. "I'm not going until I'm sure."

"Just go! I don't need you. Or anybody."

"Why are you so angry?"

"I'm not angry!" She put her head on the table. "Go home, Kit. I'm not mad at you."

"Eve, I'm gonna stay with you until you calm down." I took out my cell phone to call my husband And I had an idea. I got on the Web and ran a search: "*Oil Hill explosion CA.*"

And there it was. Like magic, it appeared on the screen—the headline from the local newspaper on September 23, 1958: *Fire on Oil Hill*. "Eve! Look, I found it!"

She lifted her head. "What? Don't wake up Mom!"

I put the phone in front of her.

"You know I can't see that tiny screen."

I enlarged the image. "Look at this headline."

Her face lit up. "There it is! It really happened!"

I put my finger to my lips. "You'll wake Mom!"

She squinted. "Just like I remember it. Like a volcano, ashes and everything."

"It was a refinery fire. People even died."

She was suddenly serious. "Cari almost died."

"What?"

"That's why they sent me away."

I shut off the cell phone. "What are you talking about?"

"I almost killed Cari. They sent me away because I almost killed my baby sister."

"Eve, I'm not going to leave you alone tonight. You're too emotional."

"It's right there. You can see for yourself. I didn't just make it up. It really happened."

"Calm down, Eve. You sound like you're in overdrive."

It was past midnight, but she was wide awake. "Not until I hear the rest of this." And she pressed *play*.

October 1958

Terrible Secrets

In the last days of autumn, fires burned in the east and the sky turned amber. Things fell to the ground. I inspected each old fruit and broken bird that melted into the earth. It was a time of ripening. And a time of decay.

The sky was just pale and Rosaria was there on the curb. I watched her from the front window. It was a silent time. Only Rosaria and I were awake at this time in the world. The Jacaranda leaves did not move. There was not even a tiny breeze.

Rosaria was wearing her dress. Her only one. The one from St. Vincent. Without the sash. She was standing barefoot on the curb. Maybe she had been there all night. Rosaria could do that. Be lost in the shadows.

That was the last time I ever saw her.

Just before the sun went down, I went out to sit on the front porch and watch for Dad. Cari leaned on the screen door until it opened so she could follow me. She wasn't supposed to be crawling around. She still had a bandage on her head.

Finally, Dad's car rolled in off the highway. It came from out by Oil Hill where the sun was going down. He got out. He was tall in his uniform. His face was brown and red. He had been at the Base.

I jumped off the porch and stood on his shiny shoe. He caught Cari just as she rolled down the steps. He opened the screen door and went inside the house with me on his shoe and Cari on his shoulder. There was steam coming from the kitchen where Moma was boiling potatoes.

After dinner, I climbed up and sat on one of Dad's knees. I found his comb in his shirt pocket and started to comb his hair. The baby crawled over and screamed. Dad reached down and picked her up. I threw the comb on the floor and ran into the hallway.

I lay down there on the floor by the heater grate. I could hear Dad's voice and Moma's voice. It sounded like Moma was going to cry.

Before I could move, the door opened and Dad reached down and took my arm. He lifted me to my feet. I let him move me like a doll. I did not look at him. I did not speak. My blood was rushing around in my body. I looked at the floor. At his shoes. They were hard and shiny.

Then he dropped my arm. I knew he was looking down at me. I did not look up. And we stood there, just the two of us. In the hallway by the heater.

I wanted to tell him I was sorry.

But I turned and walked into the bedroom. I climbed under the blanket and lay there. I did not move.

Moma came in and put Cari in the crib. Then she turned my blanket down away from my face. Moma's hands smelled like roses. She kissed me on the cheek. I did not open my eyes. She shuffled out and closed the door.

Then I cried. Without making any sound. With my eyes closed.

I pressed the *pause* button. "It's no wonder Cari took a few falls as a baby. She was perpetually in motion."

Eve picked up one of the old photos of her grandmother holding the baby. "Granma was good at holding on to her. I wasn't. I couldn't control Cari."

"What do you expect? You were barely three years old."

Eve wasn't listening to me. She wanted to hear her story. So she pressed *play*. And it continued into the night.

November 1958

The rain came to the Plaza. The water in the gutters flowed fast, carrying insects and other creatures. The dusty earth became mud and spilled over the sidewalks. And plaster fell from the houses. The spindly trees sank and leaned as the streets became rivers.

All morning there was the smell of rain—in the dust, in the asphalt and the sidewalk cement. I played out by the gutter with the Jacaranda pods. I waited for Rosaria. But she did not come. I wondered about her and if I would ever see her again.

There were heavy clouds over Oil Hill. Moma came to the front door and told me to come inside. The furnace was on and the house smelled like dust burning.

Rosaria's mother was in the kitchen drinking coffee. She was crying.

I ran through the kitchen and opened the heavy door that led to the garage. At the top of the steps, the old smells greeted me. I went down to the giant garbage can and lifted the lid. And there they were. All the old toys of the world, their eyes looking up at me, winking and grinning. They were waiting for me. From the old days. The crumbling little ancient figures. They were Moma's toys, toys that Granma had given to her. They were waiting for me to take them out, up from the old garbage can and into the light.

I reached in and grabbed a little clown. I smoothed his kinky hair. Some of it came out in my fingers. I promised him I would never forget him.

Outside, Sparky started to bark. I put the clown back in the can and ran out to the gate. I lifted the latch and Sparky ran down the street, all the way to the highway. I followed him. The downtown bus was taking off in its big stinky cloud.

And there was Granma. In her black coat, carrying her black shopping bag. Sparky ran up and jumped on her leg. I ran up and put my arms around her, as far as they would go. Granma put down her bag and hugged us. She had big arms and hands. Her face was made of square bones. She had been alive a long time.

Granma had come to help Moma cope. She fed Sparky. She gave Cari her bath. She put things away and made fried bread. She told Moma to eat something.

Moma was having a bad day. She stood up and she sat down. She stared for long times at nothing. Sometimes her fingers moved up and down on the kitchen table. She just sat there when I tried to climb on her lap. Granma told me to leave Moma alone. I went out back where Sparky was rolling around in the mud.

When five o'clock came I went out to wait for Dad's car. Granma came out and sat on the porch and put her arm around me. I just sat there looking at the driveway. I knew something was wrong.

Dad didn't come home that night. Or the night after. Granma stayed and took care of things. Moma got dressed and went out places and came back. She got undressed and sat in the kitchen wearing her bathrobe. She stared and drummed her fingers. Granma worked around the kitchen. The baby followed her and ate everything. I sat on the porch with Sparky and watched for Dad's car to pull up in the driveway.

The old tape had run out. Eve let the machine turn itself off. "I don't blame him for wanting to run away."

"Your dad?"

"Yeah."

"What was he running away from?"

"Me. All the mess I caused."

"Eve, after all these years, do you still believe that a four-year-old could make her father leave home?"

No answer.

"Okay, tell me exactly what you could have done that would break up your parents' marriage."

She spoke without looking at me. "I let Cari climb up the slide. She fell on her head."

"Eve, kids do all kinds of dumb things."

"My mother couldn't control me."

"Maybe that would be because she had some issues of her own."

"I made her nervous. She had to take pills because of me."

"Don't take this wrong, Eve, but that's a crazy idea."

"I gave her a nervous breakdown!"

This conversation was verging on ridiculous. "We're both gonna have nervous breakdowns if we don't get some sleep."

"I'm sorry, Kit."

"Be careful or you'll drive other people crazy."

"But, you know, I did ask my dad. Why did they send me away?"

"What did he say?"

""Your mom couldn't take care of you.""

"Your mom needed help, Eve."

"I screamed and kicked. And threw myself on the floor."

"Eve, here's the story I heard. You were four years old and for some reason, you just quit talking. All the adults thought you were 'mentally retarded,' because you never spoke a word."

"But I had tantrums."

"Most kids do, you know." I decided to change the subject. "Tell me about the lost angels."

She stood up, took the dishes to the sink and looked out the window. "I thought Rosaria was swept away by the wind."

"Did you think that's what happened to you?"

"When I was little, I had this dream. Almost every night. I would stretch out my arms. And the winds lifted me up and carried me over the housetops, higher and higher..."

"So the Santanas took you...?"

"They carried me away." Eve took a long, deep breath as she stared into the night. "I still wonder what happened to Rosaria."

"But you're not lost anymore, Eve."

"Maybe someone was watching over me. Like the sparrow in the song Granma used to sing. To put me to sleep. I could hear the lullaby come out of her belly." Eve turned around to face me. "They didn't tell me when she died."

"You were in the Home, Eve."

"Nobody even told me."

"They didn't want to upset you." I could never forget the night Eve found out about her grandmother. It was just a few days after she came to live at our house. My mother took her into a bedroom and shut the door. And a sound came out of that room like the cry of a wounded animal. It was Eve wailing. And it went on all night long. I remember thinking that everyone in the Plaza, including Eve's mother, could hear her. "I know that was hard for you, Eve."

"It was hard to lose her. And Rosaria, too."

"But at least *you're* not lost."

She came to the table and put my cell phone in my hand. "Go home, Kit!"

I was still uneasy about leaving her.

She chided me. "You still think you need to watch me?"

I picked up my purse. "Just take care of yourself, Eve. Mom needs you."

"Okay." She ushered me out the back door.

It was nearly three in the morning when I pulled into the driveway next to Kurt's car. I could see the light was on in his darkroom. I walked in to find him sitting in front of his computer. "This is the digital age, Kurt. You don't need to work in the dark anymore."

"I was waiting for you to get home."

"Sorry I was so late."

He spun his office chair around to face me. "It's early. It's tomorrow, already."

"I know."

"What were you doing?"

I didn't know what to tell him.

He lowered his voice. "I hope you were behaving."

"Oh, you know, I get worried about Eve."

"Kit, you need to stop that."

We had probably had this discussion a hundred times over the past thirty years. I was too tired to argue with him. "I know."

He slipped his feet into his sandals. "Let's take a walk."

"Right now?"

"Why not?"

"Why not!"

The morning was cool with the first hint of autumn, and the garden sprinklers sent a fine mist around our ankles. "Kurt, I know you think I am too involved with Eve."

"You're right, I do."

"But I think she is close to a breakthrough."

"Don't be too optimistic. She is very unstable."

"How can you say that? You haven't seen her for a long time."

"I know Eve. She's unpredictable. And if you don't watch out, you'll be—"

I interrupted him. "You don't understand."

"Thanks to Eve and your mom, you don't have a life."

I walked ahead of him, letting the gate slam behind me. I knew there was some truth in his warning. But I also knew that Eve was stronger, now. And Kurt knew as well as I did that no one but Eve would help me care for my mother—at least not for free! He walked through the gate and put his arms around me. "We both need some sleep."

As soon as the sun was up, I was back in my mother's kitchen, still drowsy after only a few hours of sleep. Eve and Mom were already at the table. I went to the stove and tasted the coffee. "Wow! That's powerful! Is that why you both look wide awake?"

Mom pointed her spoon at Eve. "That girl hasn't been to bed yet."

I shooed her toward the door. "Go, Eve! Now!"

She grabbed her backpack and sprinted down the back steps. I sat down and poured some dry cereal on the table.

"Take a bowl, dear."

"Mom, did Eve's mother ever tell you why she sent her to the Children's Home?"

"Put it in a bowl, dear and eat it with a spoon."

I had to somehow glean the last of my mother's memories. "What do you remember?"

"About what?"

"About Eve's mother and why she sent Eve to the Home."

"Lena never sent Evie away. Why would you say that?"

"Mom, Eve was sent to live in the Children's Home when she was four years old. You remember that."

"Yes, but her mother didn't send her away."

I didn't know whether to be shocked or annoyed. "Then how did she end up in the Home?"

"They just took her."

"Who just took her?"

"Who? Well, Children's Services, I suppose."

"You're kidding." I said it under my breath.

"So, how is Eve's mother?"

"Fine."

"Mom sipped her coffee. "Lena always felt real bad about the whole thing."

"Hold on a second, Mom." I slipped a blank tape in the cassette recorder. "Why did Eve's mom feel bad?"

"What, dear?"

"When Eve went into the Children's Home?"

"Well, in those days, you know, that's what they did."

"What did they do, Mom?" I knew her thoughts could evaporate at any moment.

"They put children in the Home. Unless someone could take care of them."

"And Eve's mother couldn't take care of her?"

"Oh, no, I think she could have taken care of her."

"So, why did they take Eve away?"

"Because the social workers didn't think Lena was, you know, fit."

"Why did they think she was not fit?"

"What, dear?"

"What made the social workers think Eve's mom was not fit?"

"Well, let's just say, she didn't always use good judgment."

I thought I was going to hyperventilate. "What kinds of things did she do?"

Mom stared at the table.

I was afraid I was losing her, so I grabbed her hand. "Mom."

And then she started talking, as if no time had passed since her last conversation with Eve's mother. "Well, the one time that stands out in my mind was when the baby fell off the slide."

"You mean, when Eve pushed Cari up the slide and she fell off?"

"It wasn't Evie. You know, Cari was such a busy little baby."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. "So, it wasn't..."

"Well, Lena gave in and just put Cari on the top of the slide."

"Eve's mother put Cari on the slide?" I wanted to catch all this on the tape.

"And there, she just turned around, and the baby was lying on the ground." Mom shook her head, and for an instant, tragedy played across her face. "Lena was beside herself."

"Mom, why didn't they take Cari away?"

"Cari?"

"They took Eve away. Why didn't they take Cari, too?"

"Well, I don't know. The grandmother was living there at the time."

"And she took responsibility?"

"She took what?"

"Why didn't her father—where was Eve's father?"

"Her father?" She picked up a spoon. "He could be harsh, you know."

I took the spoon from her. "Is that why they sent Eve to the Home?"

Mom placed a napkin in front of me and looked me in the eyes. "Well, you know, dear. Eve wouldn't talk."

"Wouldn't talk? Or couldn't talk?"

"She was a smart little thing. Don't you think?"

"Yes, Mom. Eve is smart."

"She was so cute. But you know, it's so sad—she was so disturbed."

I checked the recorder to make sure the tape was still moving. "Eve would only talk for you?"

"Yes, she was so shy and she didn't trust anyone."

"But she would talk for you."

"Oh, yes, she would talk for me. She was in my reading group. No one would believe me, but that girl could speak."

I already knew this part of the story. "So you went down to the school psychologist's office..."

"Yes."

"And told her to come to the classroom and see for herself."

"Well, I didn't put it that way."

"Did she come to see Eve?"

"Yes, she did." Mom always enjoyed telling this story.

"So did she hear Eve?"

"Oh, you know, when the lady came in, Eve clammed up."

"So you told the psych to come back and spy on her from the hallway?"

"It was so funny. That little Evie is a smart little thing, don't you think?"

"Yes, Mom."

I picked up my phone. Eve answered immediately. "Hey Kit. What's wrong?"

"I think you should come over here right away."

Within minutes, Eve was at the back door wearing her cats around her shoulders. I put the cassette player in her hands. "There is a tape in this machine. All you have to do is press *play*. Just take it home and listen."

"To what?"

"Take it. And listen."

She turned and ran down the steps.

All morning long, I thought about Eve and that tape. So when Ruby arrived and walked into the kitchen and whispered, "You need to talk to Eve," I grabbed my purse and flew out the front door. And there she was in her father's 1984 Thunderbird convertible, top down, motor running, waving at me from my mother's driveway. "Let's go for a drive!"

"You're nuts, Eve."

"Come on, get in."

"Where are you going?"

"Down the coast. Get in." She swung the passenger door open.

I looked back at the house. My mother was standing with Ruby on the porch. "Go." She shoed me on. "We are fine here."

I leaned on the door. "I don't know, Eve."

"Kit, get a life. Let's go for a ride."

A trip down the coast highway on an autumn morning was too tempting to resist, so I threw my purse in the car and jumped in. "At least put the top up."

Eve grinned as we drove away. "Sorry. This top hasn't been up for years."

Traffic was light as we sped south down the coast and into the warm morning breeze. I had rarely, if ever, seen Eve look so carefree, greeting the sun with her hair flying up into the air. We followed the flat, sandy beach for twenty miles and then the highway began to climb along the sea cliff. As we approached the crest, Eve pulled off in front of a roadside refreshment stand. She jumped out and returned with two ice cream cones. "Here, Kit. Cheers."

"May I ask what this is all about?"

"It's a toast."

"To what?"

"You know."

"Oh, I get it. So you now know you're—"

"Not guilty!" She gave me a jubilant grin. And we sat there eating ice cream as cars whizzed past and waves crashed on the rocks below.

Eve's gaze drifted off into the distance. "I just had a flashback."

"Watch it. You're melting."

"No, really."

"About what? Do I want to know?"

"Kit, let's go down to see where my dad is buried."

"Where is he buried?"

"It's south of here. The naval cemetery, Overlooking the ocean."

"Oh, maybe some other time." I was thinking that this escapade was going too far.

"But we're almost there."

"Why did you suddenly decide you wanted to go there?"

She popped the rest of her cone into her mouth and turned the key in the ignition.

If the highway along the Pacific had not been so beautiful, I would have insisted she turn around and head home. But I let her drive for nearly an hour before I sounded an alarm. "Good heavens, Eve! We're almost in Mexico."

"We're almost there!" She turned off on a ramp that took us toward the coast, winding through a little town and into the cemetery, past rows and rows of white stars and crosses—thousands of them—up to the lighthouse point. She pulled over and parked. "We have to get out and walk."

"Do you even know where his grave is?"

"It's here. Somewhere."

We meandered into the cool ocean breeze. At the cliff's edge, she stopped to look out over the harbor. "When I was little, I thought my dad didn't want to see me. That was why he never came home. Because of me. Because I almost killed my sister. When he did come home, I was so happy—but so mad at the same time. So, one Saturday, I saw his car pull up. And I ran into my room. And I got out my suitcase."

"Like you were running away?"

"Yeah. I stuffed my doll in there. And her clothes. And my underwear."

"And your dad walked in."

"I was trying to close the suitcase."

"Was he...?"

"Nope. He just pushed the top down. And shut it. Then he picked it up. And he walked out to the car."

"Did you follow him?"

"He put the suitcase in the back. And he opened a door. For me. To sit with him—in the front seat. He said we were going to catch the train." Eve stood there for a minute, looking out past the harbor. "So I just got in and sat there. In the front seat with him. It was warm like an oven. And it smelled toasty—like cigarettes in the ashtray."

"Did he take you to Union Station?"

"We headed out. But then he stopped. At the Frosty Creme. At the edge of the Plaza. He parked the car. And he said, 'We have time for ice cream. Before the train leaves.'" Her eyes glittered in the afternoon sun. "So we drove out to the highway. Eating ice cream. And speeding along the coast. Following the ocean. Right beside the railroad tracks." She brushed her hair away from her face. "And then we heard the whistle."

"The train?"

"Charging up behind us." She was smiling. "And we raced with it—just me and my dad in the Chevy. We were chasing the train..." She stood up. "I've got to find his marker."

"So, you've never seen it?"

"I never came here. Until today." She shaded her eyes and scanned the grassy expanse. We began to walk slowly through the sea of white markers. Then Eve dropped to her knees. And there we witnessed together, the unexpected epitaph.

Randall Austin, Chief Petty Officer, USN

And Beloved Wife, Lena.

Eve spoke softly. "*Beloved wife*. He wrote that." And she knelt there in a timeless moment of wind and light.

It was dark when we rolled back to the Plaza and walked into my mother's kitchen with wind burned faces and tangled hair. Mom was at the table, a child in her lap, turning the pages of a picture book. The little girl looked up. "Ebie!" She wiggled off Mom's lap and ran to hug Eve's knees.

Eve lifted her and turned to me. "This is Jade. Ruby's grand doll."

Ruby came to the table and helped Mom stand up. Mom studied Eve's face. "Have you seen a ghost?" She took Ruby's arm and walked into the den.

Ruby looked back at us. "Sit down and eat some food."

Eve put Jade on my lap and filled a bowl with rice. "My dad always said he couldn't eat Asian food. But he loved Ruby's cooking." She went to the stove and put the teapot on.

Jade reached for the picture book and we began to turn the pages together. It was one of my mother's big, beautiful books whose pages had been turned by so many little hands—including Eve's—over the years.

Ruby walked in and sat down next to me. "Your mom is a good teacher." She lifted Jade from my lap. "You went far?"

"We went all the way to the lighthouse point."

"The cemetery?"

"Have you been there, Ruby?"

"Oh, yes. My dad is there. And my mom."

The teapot whistled and Eve brought it to the table. "Ruby's dad was in the Navy."

"World War Two. American boy." Ruby's eyes sparkled in the warm kitchen light. "Very tall."
Eve poured me a cup of tea. "Like my dad."

I took a sip. "So he was stationed in the Philippines? Is that how your parents met?"

"Yes, they met. Not right away." Ruby laughed. "My grandma, she said, 'Marry that one!'"

"So your grandmother picked out your dad?"

"Well, Mama liked him."

Eve sat down next to Ruby. "She was born in Texas."

"I'm American."

"But her mom sent her to a convent school."

It was hard for me to imagine that a parent could do that. "How many years?"

"All of the years." Ruby was subdued, now. "I graduated."

Eve took her hand. "Like weeds pulled out of the garden, Ruby and me."

I didn't want to think about those two as forlorn children. "So that's when you became a nurse?"

Ruby nodded. "Now I have mamas and papas all over." She let Jade climb into Eve's arms. "We are all family."

It was already close to midnight when I finally returned home. As I got out of my car, I could hear Kurt's voice. I listened for a moment. He was in his studio, talking to Scott, one of his military buddies. They still had not shaken off their routine of forty years, working together late into the night. I was tired, so if it had been anyone else but Scott, I would have taken my bags and snuck into the house. But Scott was a genuine and sweet guy. He never seemed to notice bad hair days or moods. So I just walked into the studio, wild hair and all.

Scott turned and put his arm around my shoulder. "Hey, Kit!"

"Hey, Scott. How are you?"

"I'm good." A few silver streaks now gave him a more distinguished look, but he would always seem like a big teddy bear to me.

Kurt was on the floor fuming at cords and computer wires. Scott interpreted for me. "It's the hard drive. I had the same problem. They go out and all you can do is go buy a new one."

"It's too bad you came all the way out here for nothing."

"Oh, that's the way these things go." He didn't seem irritated at all. He launched into a narrative about the last time his hard drive went out. I sat there, enjoying his energy and optimism, even though I wasn't sure what he was talking about. And he didn't even notice that I looked like I had been through a wind tunnel.

Kurt stood up and dusted himself off. "So, you took an excursion with Eve?"

"A road trip in her dad's old T-Bird."

Scott was suddenly very interested. "You saw Eve?"

"So you remember her? It must be more than thirty years since we all went dancing at the Star Dust!"

"Oh, no, it hasn't been that long. I mean, I used to see her a lot when she was taking care of her sister's kids. It's been a few years, now."

How could I have forgotten? She had lived in his neighborhood when she was nanny to her sister's children.

"Lexie made them stop and play every time they walked past our place."

"So..." I was a little embarrassed that I had lost track of the years. "Your daughter must be in college by now?"

"Graduating. In theater arts." He was obviously very proud of her.

"Already?" I was still caught in my time warp.

He shook his head. "It's been a long time..."

"You want a beer, Scott?" Kurt was rolling up the cords.

"No, thanks. So, Kit, is Eve living out here?"

"She's staying at the old family house. Her dad died and she's trying to clean it out. But she's having a really hard time."

"I can relate to that. I just finished clearing out my mom's condo. And she passed away two years ago."

Kurt was ready to turn off the lights. "Are you sure you don't want a beer? Or coffee?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Scott just wanted to hear about Eve. "So, how is she doing?"

I took a moment to consider how much of her story I should share with him. "Did you know about her recovery?"

"Oh, yeah. I know."

"She still goes to a group sometimes."

"And she obviously has her driver's license," Kurt added dryly. "How far did you go on this joyride?"

"Really far south. To see her dad's grave."

"So she's just working on the house?" Scott's interest was endearing.

"She's cleaning out the house, and no, she is not seeing anyone. Are you?"

Kurt had enough. "Scott, if you don't start home now, you'll end up in the Orange Crush."

"Yeah, I gotta go. But Kit, tell Eve..."

"I will, Scott. I promise." I was already making plans for those two to see each other.

Kurt walked Scott to the door. "I'll call you later this week when I get this thing fixed."

I had wanted to ask about his daughter, his travels with his camera, and the renovation of his Victorian home—and how well he really knew Eve. But all that would have to wait for another time.

"Bye, Kit." He called over his shoulder. "Don't forget."

"Oh, I won't."

The Promise

October 2011

It was the Friday before Halloween. The afternoon had been long and hot, and witches were still swarming the school playground. My secretary Teresa was calling the parents of forgotten students, and the custodian was pushing her cart through the hall, a ploy to flush us out of the building. The office phone rang and Teresa picked it up. "Eve! It's been too long! Yes, she's right here."

I took the receiver. "Eve? Is Mom okay?"

"She's okay. Call me back when you have time." She hung up.

I knew better than to let Eve end a call like that. So I got on my cell phone. "I'm dying to hear why you called."

"I'm having a treasure hunt. Tonight."

"That's a sneaky way to get your house cleaned out."

"Anything you find is yours. If I say so."

"I'll have to bring Mom."

"Well, I should hope so!"

"Since you're going through the old stuff, how about your sister?"

"Cari's coming. And Allie. Get back to work." Click.

I stood there, holding my phone.

Teresa peeked around her monitor. "What's up with Eve? Is she okay?" She had a special place in her heart for Eve. The two had met when Teresa brought her brother Arturo to enroll in my special ed class. It was early in the nineties and Eve was my assistant. Arturo had never been to school and as soon as he entered the classroom, he collapsed and started flailing around on the floor. Teresa was hysterical, screaming "*tienes convulsiones!*" Eve quietly sat down next to the boy and wrapped her arms around his body. She looked into his flickering eyes and spoke gently. "Arturo, you are okay. You don't have to have a seizure." And Arturo stopped shaking—just like that.

That was the day Teresa decided that Eve was a "miracle worker." And it was the beginning of Arturo's metamorphosis. Over the years, Teresa watched Eve break through her brother's cocoon of isolation. Eve spent hours every day working with him, and it was clear that she understood his struggle. We all witnessed his transformation from a withdrawn little boy to an amiable young man. No wonder Teresa believed Eve was sent from heaven.

I went to her desk and picked up her coffee pot. "Eve's having a house cleaning party."

"I wish I could help her out but I've got to catch up on my own housekeeping." Teresa turned off her computer. "We're all clear. Everybody's been picked up."

"Thanks. You get going. I have one more parent conference tonight."

"Ms. K, do you ever go home?"

"If it gets too late, I'll just sleep in my office." I poured the last cup of coffee. "I'll clean out the pot."

She lifted her bag to her shoulder. "Don't party too late. And tell Eve I miss her."

When I arrived that evening with my mother and four hot *lattes*, Cari and her daughter Allie were already sitting on the floor in the sisters' childhood bedroom. Sasha and Peter were purring, comfortably submerged in a pillow. The ceiling light was dim, but a little lamp on a bedside table gave the room a warm glow. Eve had turned on the old gas heater for the first time this year, and the smell of burning dust wafted down the hall. I offered Allie a cup. She looked up from texting and accepted it with a shy "Thank you."

Eve took Mom's arm. "This is fun. I hate doing this alone."

Mom sat on the bed and let Sasha crawl into her lap. "So are you girls finding some treasures?"

I laughed. "I told her this was a treasure hunt."

Eve crouched down and started pulling boxes out from under the bed. "Yes, Mom, we're finding good stuff."

Cari went to the closet. "Allie, look in here. Maybe you can find some costumes for your drama club."

Allie left her phone and coffee on the floor and went over to the closet. She stood on her tiptoes and stretched her arms to reach a large box on the top shelf. A cloud of dust enveloped her as she lifted it from its hiding place. "What's this?"

Cari blew on the lid. "Lena's album.' That's all it says."

"Bring it over here." Eve cleared a place on the rug.

Allie sat on the floor with the box on her lap. "Can I open it?"

"Go ahead."

She lifted the lid and took an antique photo album out of the box. Cari popped the latch and opened the velvet cover to reveal a fading photograph of a girl about Allie's age, dressed in taffeta with flowers in her hair. Cari put on her glasses and read the inscription. "Lena, 1939.' That must be Moma! Why did we never find this before?"

"That's your grandma, Allie." Eve turned the page to find another picture of the beautiful young girl, this time holding a bouquet and curtsying before an audience in a concert hall.

I held up the album so that my mother could see the photo. "Mom, did Lena ever show this to you?"

She squinted in the dim light. "Who is that pretty girl?"

"It says it's Lena. Did she ever perform on stage?"

"She was very popular when she was young." Mom studied the fading image. "She sang on the radio, you know."

Allie reached up and took the album from me. She eagerly turned the pages, fascinated by the hand-tinted images of the young Lena surrounded by garlands of roses and gardenias. After she

had studied every page, she turned back to the box and brought out a shiny black disk, a 78 rpm recording. She had never seen anything like this. "Can we play it?"

Eve stood up and took the record to the old phonograph in the living room. We all followed, Mom holding onto my arm, Allie and Cari bearing the photo album, and Sasha and Peter circling around our ankles. Mom lay down on the couch and the cats jumped up to settle themselves next to her. Eve opened the old console, placed the record on the turntable, and carefully adjusted the needle at the margin of the disk. And the record began to spin.

The first sounds were hisses and pops. Then, out of the noise emerged the clear, soprano voice of a very young Lena. "*His eye is on the sparrow...*" Cari put her hands to her mouth. "Moma used to sing that to put me to sleep!" Allie stared at the record spinning on the turntable; she was meeting her grandmother for the first time. The melody carried us, verse by verse, into another era until the song melted away and my mother whispered, "Oh, that takes me back..."

Allie opened the album of photographs and a tiny envelope slipped out, falling to the floor. She picked it up and we followed her to the dining table. She tore the seal open and a golden wedding band rolled out. Holding it up to the light, she read the engraving. "*Eva 1890.*" And she slipped the ring on her first finger.

Cari read the writing on the envelope. "*Grandmother's ring.* Wait, there's something else." She pulled out a yellowing slip of onion skin. "It looks like a story. About Eva Alene."

Allie grabbed the paper. "That's our name, Aunt Eve!"

"But it's about Moma's grandmother, Allie." And Cari began to read:

Eva Alene

By her granddaughter, Lena

Eva Alene played an important role in my life. She was my namesake and my grandmother. But I never knew her. I don't even know very much about her.

She was small of frame, with light, wavy hair and large hazel eyes. My father told me I resemble her. She was his mother.

She bore my grandfather three sons—Anton, Nicholas, Francis—and a daughter, Marie. The eldest son, Anton, was in the Czar's service and came home infrequently. Nicholas, the second boy, was most like his father, and worked on the land. Marie, the only girl, died—of what cause I have no knowledge.

My father was Francis, the youngest. He was the most like his mother in looks and disposition, always out of step with the rest of the family. He was a gentle boy with golden brown curly hair and fair skin who cherished books and dreamed about America.

My grandfather seems to have been a very domineering husband and father. How he happened to meet and marry the young French girl, Eva Alene, remains a mystery.

At this time, I am just attempting to unravel what I do know about my father's family—putting my thoughts on paper, trying to recall every tiny detail Father ever told me. .

The life of my father's family on their villa seems to have been very much like any other respectable Russian family during the early 1900s. But the turning point for my father came

about when his brother, Anton, home on one of his leaves, wearing his polished boots and handsome uniform, spoke disparagingly of the Czar. Anton's father became enraged, rose from his chair, and slapped his spirited young son across the face—this in the presence of the family. My grandfather then stalked out of the room while everyone sat in stunned silence. Out of respect for the head of the family and the Czar, no one challenged him. But my father later told me he felt his brother's pain and humiliation.

From that time on, Francis, although only thirteen years of age, resolved never to force his will on another person, especially a child. He became even more enamored with his vision of America—a place where one could be free of tyranny of all kinds and at liberty to make one's own life choices. He began to make plans somehow, to immigrate to America.

His mother, was secretly allied with her young son. She was supportive of his dreams and understanding of his alienation from his father. One day Francis came from school and told his mother that a classmate's father was going to America. He spoke again of his dreams and with quiet determination, vowed that one way or another he would go, too. And that next day, Eva Alene went secretly to arrange for her son's passage on that ship bound for the United States.

In the days that followed, Francis and his mother secretly prepared for his journey. He was filled with excitement and joy, yet gripped with fear that something would go awry, that his plan would be found out and foiled. He knew that his father was making arrangements at that very moment for him to begin an apprenticeship as was the custom for a son on the brink of manhood.

The day finally arrived when my father was to leave the home he had known all his life. He could take very little with him and he couldn't say good bye to anyone except his mother. Many years later, he would remember that parting as very painful, especially because of his concern that his father would deal harshly with his mother for her part in his escape. His joy at finally realizing his dream was clouded by fear.

As they said their last good bye, Eva placed a chain with her wedding ring around his neck and told him if he were ever in need he must pawn it. And then she did the unthinkable—she took the coins from her husband's safe box and pressed them into her son's hand. Francis vowed to repay the family as soon as he earned the money in America.

So, three months before his fifteenth birthday, my father was on his way to America. He never returned to Russia, and eventually became a U. S. citizen. Until his death, he remained a true patriot, considering the United States of America the greatest nation on earth.

And what of his mother, Eva Alene? That remains a mystery. There is no doubt that her husband was angered when he found out that she had sent their youngest son across the Atlantic. But my father never knew if she suffered severe sanctions. She died before I was born and as I grew up, my father did not speak about his family. He considered that part of his life a closed book.

Although he never received any messages from Russia, I saw him send money back home to the old country every year during the Christmas season. He did that as long as he lived, so that over the years he sent his family a sum many times greater than the handful of coins that his mother had placed in his hand on the day he sailed for America.

One day, just before he died, my father called me to his bed. He told me that my name was given me in memory not only of my grandmother, but the promise of freedom and the realization of dreams that she helped make possible. Then, he took my hand and placed her ring on my finger. And I vowed to keep it always and pass it on to the daughter I would someday name Eva Alene.

Cari folded the delicate paper, slid it back inside the envelope and gave it to her sister. Allie began to remove the ring from her finger, but Eve stopped her. "Do you want to keep it?"

Allie didn't speak, but glanced eagerly at her mother. Cari tilted her head. "You can't lose it, now after how far it traveled. All these years it was never lost. Or pawned."

Eve placed her hand over Allie's. "It's your treasure, now."

Cari looked at her watch. "We'd better get going. Tell your auntie thank you and pack up." She stood and went back to the bedroom. "Where did I leave my keys?"

Eve held Allie's hand up and the light glinted off the gold band. "Still shining after a hundred years."

"I just have one question, Aunt Eve. How did my grandma die?"

Eve's face froze and I left the table to sit with Mom and the cats.

Eve finally spoke. "Why do you ask that, Allie?"

"Because I think she killed herself."

Eve took a moment to speak. "We don't know for sure, kiddo."

Allie didn't say anything.

"We don't know—no one knows—if Moma she tried to—if she wanted to—"

"Did she take pills?"

Eve couldn't answer.

I knew she was searching for an explanation, not only for Allie, but for herself. Then she grasped her niece's hands. "Do you ever think about doing something like that?"

Allie pulled her hands back and looked at the table.

"Allie, make a pact with me."

Allie looked up. "A pact?"

"If you ever start to think—about taking pills or whatever—pick up your cell phone. And call me."

Allie sat there, motionless.

"I want you to promise me."

For a long moment, she did not answer. The cats purred loudly, filling the silence.

"Will you do that, Allie?"

Allie put her hands over her face. And I held my breath. Then she dropped her hands. "The cats sound like a bathroom fan."

I stood up and came to the table. "And Mom sounds like..."

"She's sawing logs!" Eve grinned at Allie. And they both giggled.

Cari came in from the bedroom. "Collect your booty and let's go, girl." She put Allie's cell phone on the table.

Eve placed the phone in her niece's hand. "Don't forget this."

And as they walked together to the door, Allie whispered to her aunt, "I have you on speed dial."

Eve and I sat late into the night, sipping our cold *lattes*. Finally, she just stared into her cup. "I can't ever let Allie go down." My mother stirred and Eve went to sit on the floor next to the couch. Peter jumped into her lap. She stroked him. "I wish I had been here for my mother."

"You were up north, Eve. You didn't even know she was having problems."

Her gaze wandered across the dimly lit room. "Late at night, this old place brings back memories."

"Of when you were little?"

"Really little. Moma used to stay up late. To watch old movies. Sometimes she woke me up. To watch with her."

"Weren't you too sleepy?"

"Nope. I was happy sitting up all night."

"You stayed awake until dawn?"

"Moma fell asleep."

"You had a unique childhood, Eve."

She lifted Peter to her shoulder, went into her bedroom, and returned with a piece of old notebook paper. "I found this tonight. I forgot I wrote it." We sat together on the floor, trying to make out her handwriting. It seemed to be fading in the dim lamp light, even as we began to read.

Ever the Same Again

The last days of the summer were long and quiet. In the evening, the sky was golden and the air was sweet with the scent of oleanders. Granma was picking dandelion leaves and taking the clothes off the clothesline.

I stood in the backyard and watched her. I was worried that Gram would faint.

Over by the rosebush, a cricket started to sing. There was one red rose. I put my face into its center and named it Rosaria. And I picked the thorns from its stem. Then I climbed up to the top of the slide to see the sun set behind the derricks on Oil Hill.

Then I followed my grandma inside.

The last pink light of the day came in through the bathroom window. Granma sat down on the toilet lid.

I wanted to help her. I knew how to do this. I had seen her do it many nights before. I folded the gauze and held it over the sink and poured the solution over it, soaking it until it was dripping.

Granma unbuttoned her blouse. She did it slowly. I looked at the bandage. I was not afraid. She put her fingers up to her chest. The place over her heart. She slid her fingernail under the bandage. Granma's nails were yellow and her fingers moved slowly, shaking a little. They shook because her hands were old. Because Granma was dying.

She pulled off the bandage. And there it was. The place where the sickness ate into her body.

I knelt down. The tile was cool under my knees. I put the gauze against the wound. And I knelt there, my hand over the place where my grandma's body was opening, letting her spirit escape.

Granma took the gauze and pulled up her blouse. And she reached out to me. I climbed up and put my arms around her and held on. I put my head on her chest.

And she began to sing, from deep down in her body, a song about sailing across the ocean far, far away.

The bathroom curtains fluttered and the soft wind blew in. It touched my forehead as it flew out on its way over the Plaza de Los Altos, the fields and Oil Hill, across the ocean, and far away.

On the night they took Granma away. I woke up to the siren screaming. I jumped out of bed to look through the heater grate. But I could not see what was happening, just the red lights flashing in the front room.

And then the siren screamed away to take Granma to the hospital up on Oil Hill.

I stayed there on the furnace. I sat there until Moma came in and found me. And for the first time in a long time, she sat down with me. She wrapped her bathrobe around me. And we sat there letting the heat rise up around us, not saying anything at all.

When it was light, Moma got Cari out of the crib and went to the kitchen to make coffee. It was Saturday morning.

She started to clean house. She took the Electrolux out of the closet in the hallway. She found a pair of underwear. And she started to dust around the stacks of old magazines on the coffee table. Then she sat on the floor and opened up a Ladies' Journal.

The coffee started to boil. So Moma took her magazine into the kitchen. She got out two cups and poured milk and coffee, one for her and one for me. And I sat there with her looking at the pictures of hairdos and food, and families eating dinner.

When it was dark, Moma threw a blanket on the couch. She turned on the television. I climbed up next to her. And we sat there watching old movies, just Moma and me and Cari in the playpen.

Sometime in the night, I woke up. Moma's arm was dangling over the couch. Her bottle of Sleeping Beauties was open, scattered on the floor. I tried to put her arm back but it kept slipping off. I could not put it back with her body.

So I pushed on her. Her head rolled over. And I saw her face. It was blue in the light of the television. Her eyes were open. But they did not look at me. They stared straight ahead.

This was not my mother, this broken doll with the rolling head, shadows flickering on the porcelain face.

And then someone started screaming. I think it was me.

I tried to make sense of what I had just read. "So you were always worried that your mother would take her own life?"

Eve just stared at the piece of paper.

"And now you are worried about Allie?"

"Sometimes she just shuts down." Eve took the page from my hands and began to fold it. She knew firsthand what it was like to be engulfed in a storm of emotions. I had watched her withdraw as a teenager into that secret world of pain. There were times when she would walk out into the middle of a busy street on the way to school. And she was always trying to hide marks on the inside of her arms, cuts that never seemed to heal. Years later, she confessed to me that she felt compelled to hurt herself. She hadn't really intended to die, but she was so tormented.

"I'm not sure Cari realizes that Allie might..." Eve put her hands over her eyes. "Maybe I shouldn't have said anything."

We both knew that Eve's parents never believed she would harm herself—or that she could have been dead before she turned twenty-one.

"I think you said the right thing, Eve. You have a special understanding of Allie."

She swept her hands over her face. "I was the first person in this world to see her—her funny little face."

I knew that Cari was alone on the day her water broke and Eve had rushed out to take her to the hospital, but I had never heard the entire story of the day Allie was born. "You were in the delivery room?"

"The baby was coming really fast. Everyone was frantic. They forgot about me. So I just stood there. Next to the midwife. So I could see."

"She let you do that?"

"And there came Allie." Eve closed her eyes "At first it was just the top of her head. And then—pop! There was her little face!" She opened her eyes and laughed. "All screwed up. Like a mud wrestler."

I started laughing, too.

"They put her on a little steamer."

"A warming table? Did she like that?"

"Like a gal at the spa." Eve was lit up, back in that moment. "So I sang to her. And she smiled at me."

Sasha jumped onto Eve's shoulder and shocked us back to the late October night. "Sasha, get down!"

"So, Eve, it was a good thing—that pact you made with Allie tonight."

"I made that promise long ago. In the psych ward. To Patricia ClearSky."

"Right after your baby...?"

"I wanted to die."

"You were so young, Eve."

"Patricia saved my life." Eve looked into the darkness. "I told her I was afraid I would die. With my baby. I felt like I should have died." She put her head in her hands. "This is still hard to talk about." She sat there for a few minutes, stroking Sasha. "Patricia was not going to let me die. She asked me to give up my stash. I had stopped the speed. But I was still taking the cramp pills."

"Narcotics?"

"They made me feel—happier. For a little while. And then I'd crash."

"So she took your pills away from you?"

"And she made me promise. Every day. I saw her every day."

"She made you promise not to kill yourself?"

"She told me to call her anytime—day or night. I thought about finding more pills. But I couldn't do that to Patricia. I had to keep that promise."

"So how did you get out of the hospital?"

"It was a long time. Months and months." Sasha stretched out and Eve scratched the cat's tummy. "The doctors said I was schizophrenic." She let Sasha roll off to the floor. "But Patricia told me something. I will never forget it." She looked down at her hands.

I kept silent, knowing she was searching for words.

"She said I did not have to accept that." Eve looked up at me. "I can't just say it." And she pulled her worn wallet out of the pocket of her jeans, found a small card and gave it to me. It was a business card for *Patricia ClearSky, CSW*.

I turned it over and read silently.

Eve,

You have a sound mind.

The One who created you gave you a brave spirit, full of power and love.

Patricia

Flight of the Lost Angel

November 2011

On the first Sunday in November, Eve showed up at my mother's kitchen door carrying a huge pumpkin. Her eyes looked bright green in the burnished afternoon sunlight. "Look what grew on my dad's vine!"

My mother was delighted. "Are you going to carve a jack o' lantern?"

"No, Mom." I didn't have time for Eve's projects. "So, what are you planning to do with that?"

"I thought we could make pie."

Mom was enthusiastic. "Well, that will be fun!"

"Eve, first help me clean out the dresser in Mom's old bedroom."

"Let's do it." She took my mother's hand and helped her up from the chair. "Come on, Mom. Let's go drawer digging."

We walked quietly into the deserted bedroom where my parents had slept for more than fifty years. "I haven't been in here for a long time." Mom sat on the bed. "What are we looking for?"

I opened one of the drawers in the maple dresser. "Just cleaning out."

"Don't throw away my snapshots!"

"We promise." I lifted a drawer out of the dresser, and brought it to the bed.

Eve grabbed a handful of the mustard colored envelopes. "Did you take all these, Mom?"

"You remember my little camera. Where is that camera?"

Eve was getting excited. "Kit, look. These are all from the sixties."

I had a hunch that Eve was looking for pictures of herself, so I flipped through the envelopes and found one dated 1962. "Here you go, Eve. Find yourself in here."

She opened the envelope. "I don't see me. What year is this?"

"That's the year you came to live with us." I reached over her shoulder and picked up a snapshot of five grinning children on a crowded ocean pier. "Here you are." I pointed to a skinny little girl.

"Where?"

"Right there. Don't you recognize yourself?"

"No. That was me?"

Mom peered over Eve's shoulder. "That's you, Eve. And that's your sister standing next to you."

I corrected her. "That's me, Mom. Cari's not on this picture."

She gave me her *don't talk back* look.

Eve was still pondering the image of her childhood self. "My hair was that short?"

Mom smiled. "I used to call you my pixie."

Eve shuffled through the photos on the bed. "Help me, Kit."

"You're in every one of these." I handed her another snapshot. "There's one in our bedroom."

"Looks like a slumber party." She examined the face of each child. "I still can't find myself."

That was when I understood how broken Eve's life had been. So many years were missing from her childhood that she could not even identify herself on an old photograph. I could only try to imagine what it must have been like for her to disappear from her own memory. I pointed to her image. "That's you in the furry slippers. And that's me with the rollers in my hair."

"I remember your rollers."

"Do you recognize your crazy slippers?"

"I remember my slippers. Mom gave me those fuzzy things. She leaned over and hugged my mother. "Now I know why Kit wouldn't loan me her rollers—I didn't have any hair!"

"Sorry, Eve."

"No. I was a pest."

"But you were cute." My thoughts flew back to the day when Mom showed up in our living room holding Eve by one hand and a small flowered suitcase in the other. I was used to my mother bringing home stray kids and cats; but I thought she should at least ask permission to bring Eve into our house. It wasn't easy to fit an extra child into our bedroom, so on the first night Eve shared my bed. This was not a restful experience for either of us, but it was especially distressing for me because Eve tossed and turned violently in her sleep. She did not remember that she shoved me out of bed that night.

Eve silently began to collect the photos and file them back in the envelopes. But Mom was not ready to put her memories away. "Let me see those."

"Do you have any from the Home?" There was an urgency in Eve's voice and I knew she was searching for evidence of the missing chapter in her life. During the years she had lived in the institution there had been few, if any, pictures taken of her.

"Oh, they didn't allow that. I took pictures of you at school."

"Where are they?"

"Well, I'm sure they're in here somewhere. I had that little camera. Do you know where that is?"

Eve began to read the dates on the envelopes. "1961 to 1962."

I sat down next to her. "Try that one."

She began to place each photo on the bed.

Mom was smiling. She picked up a snapshot. "Look at you, Eve, getting off the bus." I was amazed and grateful that my mother could bridge Eve's memory gap, even as a crevasse had begun to form in her own mind.

Eve peered over Mom's shoulder. "Funny looking kid."

"You were so shy, I asked the teacher to put you in my reading group."

"Did I read?"

"Well, you were a good little girl and you followed along."

"How long did it take me? To read?"

"Oh, it was the cutest thing. The last day of school—you were a sharp cookie, you know..." This was the story my mother loved to tell. "See, we were lining up to get on the bus. And you grabbed my hand."

Eve reached over and grasped Mom's arm. "I thought you were sending me away. For good. I thought I would get on that bus—and never come back again."

Mom put Eve's hand under her arm. "You pulled me over to the reading corner and you picked up one of those big picture books. I remember it was animals, all kinds of animals."

"I wanted you to know I could read."

"And you took my finger." Mom lifted Eve's index finger. "Just like that. And you pointed to every little picture and read the name of every animal. Out loud." This episode always delighted my mother. "Even *rhinoceros* and *giraffe*! No one would believe it."

"I didn't want you to send me away."

I nudged her with my elbow. "It worked, didn't it?"

She didn't answer me. She just sat there with my mother, stuck in that moment that had changed her life. Now, almost half a century later, Eve finally seemed ready to remember her lost years in the Children's Home.

I ventured in carefully. "What was it like in the Home, Mom?"

"The Home?"

"The Children's Home, where Eve was staying."

"Well, you know, they were very strict there. I had to get permission to see you." She patted Eve's cheek.

Knowing that this might be the last time my mother would reminisce with us, I pressed her for more details. "What was Eve like when you went to see her there?"

Mom put both arms around Eve. "Oh, she was quiet, you know. But she smiled when she saw me."

"You didn't talk on purpose, Eve?"

"I don't know."

"Eve was like a mama hen. She was such a little elf, but she would round up all those girls when it was time to go down the hall."

"I was afraid someone would get lost." Eve was reliving the angst. She stared into the late afternoon sun glinting off the dresser mirror as if it illuminated the images of her past. Something was breaking through the clouds of amnesia.

I wanted to catch the rays before they faded into dusk. "You remember these kids but everything else is just a blur?"

"The girls in my unit. Some came and some went."

Mom was looking out the window, now. "I can still see those little angels, all lined up, marching along. I wish I had a shot of that." She shuffled through the pictures still scattered on the bed and held one up. "Here you go, Eve. Do you remember this?" There was little Eve with her flowered suitcase, standing beside the tail fins of Mom's '59 Plymouth Fury.

"This I remember!" Eve sat upright. "Look, Mom. Your station wagon!" She grabbed the picture and held it close to Mom's eyes. "Remember? The day you took me home?"

"I'm not blind, dear."

Eve hid her face in the crook of my mother's arm. And for the next ten minutes, she cried—silently. The sun had moved so low that the room was now dim in the twilight. When she lifted her head, I handed her an embroidered handkerchief from my mother's linen drawer. She looked at it. "I can't use this. It's too fancy."

Mom took the hanky and dabbed at Eve's tear-streaked cheeks.

I couldn't think of any way to apologize for stirring up her emotions. "Maybe it's time to make that pumpkin pie."

Mom put the handkerchief in Eve's hand. "Who has a pumpkin?"

How sad and strange that she could remember Eve's childhood, but not the pumpkin in her kitchen. "You do, Mom. Eve brought one for you today."

Eve sat silently on the bed, studying the hanky. She was still that seven year old child, leaning on my mother's shoulder as she recovered from an explosion of emotions. I knew those were healing moments for her, moments of grace as Mom gently guided her into a quiet, more secure realm.

I stood up. "I'm gonna heat the oven. Could you bring Mom?"

Late that evening, I left Eve rolling out pie crust in Mom's kitchen. I should have stayed to make sure everything came out alright. But I had to go home and get some sleep.

Monday morning at the school was frenetic, and I did not have a chance to call Eve, or even send a quick text. Still, I thought about her constantly as the day wore on. She was probably sitting in that house surrounded by boxes of broken memorabilia. Last night's image of Eve crying and clinging to my mother kept coming back to me. I was still in the habit of watching for Eve's trouble signs. When she was little, she would throw herself to the floor, kicking and screaming. As a teenager, she simply refused to talk to me, breaking into tears when I asked her what was wrong. She was like a spinning top as long as she was on fast forward, but the slightest thing could set her wobbling. I knew that she had been overwhelmed by those old snapshots we discovered in my mother's bedroom. And I knew her silent sobbing was a profound expression of grief.

By Monday night, I was so worried about her that I couldn't keep my mind on the most mundane task. Kurt sat in the kitchen, watching me search the refrigerator for leftovers. "You need to quit worrying about Eve. You act like you're her personal guidance counselor. Doesn't she still have friends in her recovery group?"

I found a few frozen tamales and threw them in the oven. "I'm not really worried about her drinking problem. She hasn't had a sip of wine for ten years."

"I find that hard to believe." He took a bottle of beer from the refrigerator. "Addicts will try to put one over on you."

"Eve is not an addict!"

"Kit, why do you feel like you always have to stand up for her? You've been defending Eve ever since your mother brought her home as a kid. And you're still touchy about her."

He was right. I could feel my emotions heat up every time Kurt mentioned her name. "You know, I wasn't very gracious to her when we were little kids. And to tell you the truth, I turned my back on her many times, even when I knew she needed my help."

"Well, excuse me for saying so, but you are behaving like a co-dependent."

"And just where did you learn that term?"

"I'm using your psychobabble." He grinned. "Since I have to listen to it all the time."

"Well, I'm glad you've learned something after all these years. Anyway, Doctor Kurt, I don't think Eve is having a breakdown. In fact, I think she may be on the verge of a breakthrough." I was surprised at how defensive I really was. "Anyway, Mom can always calm Eve down."

"Right, even though she is eighty-five and—"

"Don't say it." I knew he was about to remind me that my mother was, as he said, "senile."

"Don't worry so much, Kit. Ruby will let you know if Eve doesn't show up."

I slid his tamale over to him and picked up the phone. "I'll give Ruby a heads-up."

Tuesday, November 8th

Finally, the next day, I received it—a massive email from Eve. She must have been on a marathon writing jag, as she had sent it at three in the morning, knowing it would be the first message in my inbox that day. I couldn't control myself and I opened it. And the moment I began to read it, I was captivated. But I simply didn't have time to read the whole thing. I had to drag myself away, so I saved it on my laptop and shut the lid. There were students waiting outside my office door.

As usual, the hectic schedule at the school kept my mind off my own life until late in the day. When all the children had finally gone home, I settled myself in and opened Eve's message to embark upon the journey back to her time in the Children's Home. With a little twist of trepidation, I began to read her account, almost afraid to discover the truth behind her brokenness. Her story drew me in, and I could see that as she wrote, her recollections became more and more lucid until she was able to describe splinters of her daily life inside the institution with amazing clarity. How could she have kept all those memories hidden but intact for over fifty years?

This is the email she sent me, unedited—the story of her life in the Home, as only Eve could tell it.

*Kit,
Sorry about Sunday.
I didn't know I could stuff so much,
hide it away.
That time in the Home—
it was like a black hole.
Everything sucked out of my mind.
But now I can't keep it all down.
Images flash into my head all day long.
All day long!
They won't leave me alone.
When I try to write,
then they come,
slipping into view like
frames in a filmstrip.
I want to think
and put it back together.
I don't even know if all these things really happened.
Maybe I'm making it all up.
I don't know.
But I need time.
So, please don't talk to me.
Right now, it's like turning on the television in the middle of a movie.
I can't always figure out what I'm seeing.
The story is disjointed
and I struggle to recognize the characters.
If they are just shadows with no names,
how can I know who is real,
and who is just a figment of my wild imagination?
Maybe I'll never get it all remembered.
But now, I can't stop.
Don't ask me any questions.
I will send you everything I write.*

So here goes...

*One day,
I just woke up in a hollow room,
big
with no windows.
A cold green light
flickered on the faces of
waking children
in rows of cots against the walls.
They rubbed their eyes,
and hid under the sheets.
I sat up in panic.
What was this place?
I went to sleep in my bed.
So what was I doing here?
And where was my little sister?
There were lots of kids, but no Cari.
Maybe she was dead.
So the Workers came in.
And they pulled the sheets and the kids
off the beds
and into the big Bathroom.
It echoed and smelled
of urine and disinfectant—
rows of tiny toilets.
Why would my mother leave me here
in my pajamas?
Maybe she would come and get me
if I did what the Workers wanted.
So I went to the Bathroom.
And then the Workers put us in Line
and walked us down the Hall.*

*It was very long
with rooms on either side,
lots of rooms;
and kids, big and small, waiting at the doors,
some silent and staring,
some crazy, bouncing off the walls.
I just kept on walking.
Maybe this was my first day at School.
If I did everything right, I could survive.
And my parents would come and take me home.
Well, the day went on and on.
My fear just grew and grew.
This was not the first day of School.
It was the first day of something—
something sinister.
I lost track of Time.
Hours passed into themselves.
The days just went on and on.
How could I know when one day ended
and another began?
The long corridors glowed all hours,
a constant, eerie haze.
In the Units,
Workers turned the lights Off and On.
If they turned the lights On it was Day
If they flicked the switch Off, you had Night.
That didn't mean that it was really night.
They could flip the switch back on.
But that didn't mean it was day.
There were no windows
except in the Mess Hall.
But they were smoky and dark.
And no one could see Outside.*

*So who could tell Day from Night?
I started to guess what time it was.
Morning was Oatmeal.
And then Sandwiches.
The long hours went on and on
until it was time for
Something Hot on Mashed Potatoes.
That filled my stomach with dread,
because the Workers would take us back to the Unit.
And they would put us all in our little cots
to make us fall asleep.
I fought the Workers who tried to take my clothes off.
I thought my mother could not take me home if I was stripped.
So I screamed the whole night—
or maybe wailed.
In the morning I hung onto my sheets.
They had to drag me out.
Days and days went by.
And I fought every minute of every one.
I would not talk.
I screamed and no one could touch me.
Finally, I would not even use the Bathroom.
I tried to hold it until my mother came.
Of course, I couldn't.
So the Workers dragged me into the Shower.
And they tried to spray me off.
All the while, I'm screaming.
I was the Terror of the Unit.
I wouldn't do anything they tried to make me do.
I yelled but would not talk.
I made every Worker mad at me,
and never said a word.
And when the lights went out,*

*I did not sleep.
One night, an angel appeared beside my bed.
I could not see her,
but she was there every time I woke up screaming.
So she must have been an angel.
In the middle of the night,
she would hold my hand.
In my mind I called her Night Nurse.
But I never spoke to her.
And I never really saw her.
But I knew her—
it was the way she took my hand
and the sound of her voice
when she sang
"Keep your eyes on Jesus."
And when she sang,
I would remember, like a vision,
this little lamp my grandma had—
I always saw it in my mind—
a little lamp she kept by her bed.
It was always lit,
and the light shone down
on a handsome shepherd
in a long, white robe.
He was holding a staff,
and his flock was gathered around him.
And on his shoulders,
he carried a lamb,
a little white creature,
a lost sheep that he found.
Granma would tell me to look at the shepherd.
"Keep your eyes on Jesus."
That was what she would say.*

*And the Night Nurse
would sing that song,
and I could see the shepherd with his lamb.
And I could hear my grandma say,
"He will never leave you, Evie.
He will send you a Comforter.
Just keep your eyes on Jesus."
And so I lay there on my cot,
in the deep of the night
imagining
that he would wrap me up
in his big white robe—
the Comforter.*

*Very early in the mornings,
the Workers turned on the lights
and yanked the sheets off the beds.
And pulled on our arms to get us out.
I started every day with a fight.
And pretty soon,
all the other girls were fighting, too.
Those poor Workers—
they had to tackle me.
But they still had the entire Unit to control.
I had started a revolution!
I don't know how long this all went on.
But the Workers finally put a stop
to my reign of terror.
I had earned a visit to the Doctor's Office.
He was a Man in White
who asked me questions.
Really, he read the questions and tried not to look at me.
I didn't answer him.*

*He kept asking questions,
and the next question
and the next—
until he was out of questions.
I think I knew the answers, but I couldn't speak.
I was sure he knew the answers,
so why was he asking me?
Of course, he thought I was very Slow.
Or just a brat.
But I couldn't talk.
I was afraid
and angry.
And I was frozen.
Finally, a Worker came and took me back to the Unit.*

*So Time went on.
I was always trying
to fight my way out of that place.
I was scared all the time.
I couldn't eat.
Workers put food in my mouth
but I could not swallow.
I just choked
and spit it out.
Where were my parents?
They must not have known where I was.
I had no idea where I was.
And how did I get there?
I started to make up a story.
A Whirlwind had ripped through the Plaza
and swept me up with the tumbleweeds.
How else could I explain it?
I had been captured by the winds*

and blown out to Oil Hill.
Just like Rosaria—
she was my friend and she had disappeared.
She must be in this place, too!
I began to look for her everywhere.
What had I done?
Cari must have died.
They must have just let me blow away
like Rosaria
with the tumbleweeds.
That was when I gave up.
Inside I was a hollow pit.
And I stopped fighting.
I was weak.
And I was sad.
Fear and rage consumed my spirit.
And I was empty.
I gave myself up to this Purgatory
without Day or Night.
It was punishment for what I had done.
Kit, now that I look back, I'm pretty sure that Doctor put me on Downers.
I was so confused.
Time stood still.
I had no idea how long I had been there.
And I gave up hope of ever getting out.
The Workers moved me around like a rag doll.
There was nothing else I could do.
I sat on my bed.
And I looked at the ceiling lights
and smelled the disinfectant and body wastes.
And I decided that we were all Lost Angels,
kidnapped by the winds,
and damaged when we dropped

*through the roof of the Home.
I felt sorry for these girls.
They looked like broken toys.
I watched them and felt sorry for them.
Then, one day,
I noticed one child who was so tiny
she had to be a Fairy.
Her head was so small
and her legs were spindly
like a bird's.
She was so cute!
But she was so helpless.
So I started to look after her.
I called her "Tiny"
and claimed her as my own.
I combed her wispy hair
and held her hand to walk down the Hall.
I made sure she got her milk
and held the straw to her lips.
And I adopted her.
She was my own living doll.
When I was looking after Tiny, I forgot my own grief.
I think the Workers were amazed.
They didn't have to drag me
out of bed
or to the Bathroom
or down the Hall.
I wanted to keep my eye on Tiny, so I went everywhere they made her go.
If Tiny was washing her hands, they could keep me in the Bathroom.
If Tiny was walking down the Hall, I was right there beside her.
I can't believe they trusted me with that fragile child!
But they must have been so fed up that they thought,
"Whatever works!"*

I heard footsteps in the main office so I quickly shut down my email and put my palms over my eyes. This would be a teacher coming to pull a student's file.

"Are you alright?" It was the voice of Jena, a young kindergarten teacher.

I took my hands down and sighed. "I've just been staring at the computer too long."

She studied my face. "What are you reading?"

"An email. From one of my aides."

"Your aides?"

"I used to be a special ed teacher. Back in the nineties."

"Where did you teach?"

"Oh, a few different places."

"Around here? Do you still see your aide?"

"She's a good friend."

Jena pulled a chair up to my desk. "I had a sister in special ed. She was in a class right here on the west side. For about two years."

"So she must be all grown up, now."

"She died. Before she ever got to high school."

"Oh, Jena, I'm sorry."

"We knew that was going to happen."

"I've gone through that. We knew certain kids were not going to live long, but when they really did die..." We sat there, looking at the file cabinets.

"Can I ask you, Ms. K, why were you crying?"

"Well, this happened over twenty years ago." I took a deep breath. "I had just started teaching. In fact, it was my first day. A bus driver rolled a big wheelchair into my classroom. There was a little girl strapped in with a halo holding up her head. The driver said, 'Angela needs changing.' Then he just turned around and left."

"He meant her diapers?"

"Yep. I could barely figure out the lesson plans. I had no idea how to change the diapers of a sixth grader in a wheelchair."

"What did you do?"

"Luckily, Eve knew what to do."

"That was the name of your aide? Miss Eve?"

"You know her?"

"I know Miss Eve! She was a friend to my sister."

I just shrugged my shoulders. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"Everybody knew Miss Eve." Jena beamed. "So, go on..."

"Well, so Eve just wheeled Angela over to the changing table and released her. This little girl was really fragile and she was all twisted up, so she flailed around."

"It's like she could break apart."

"I was afraid of that. But Eve just put her arms around Angela and lifted her."

Jena leaned over the edge of my desk. "Sounds just like Eve. Was Angela frightened?"

"No! In fact, here's the funny part. Eve just about had her to the changing table when that little girl blurted out, 'How're we doin'?"

Jena covered her mouth and gasped.

"That was my reaction! But Eve didn't drop her. And Angela just smiled right through it all."

"Of course, she didn't have any other choice, did she?"

Jena and I looked at each other. Then we both grabbed tissues and laughed while we cried. She wiped her eyes. "My sister used to shock people all the time. Just like that. One time a nurse was trying to put an IV in her skinny arm. She sat up and screamed at that nurse, 'Be careful!' And that nurse's head just flew back!"

We laughed again, remembering those rare bright moments that lit up the heartbreak.

"Too bad you didn't have phone cameras in those days, Ms. K."

"Eve did take lots of pictures of Angela. She loved that little girl."

"Can I ask...?"

"What happened to Angela? She was moved around."

"To institutions?"

"Nursing facilities, all sorts of places. Her health deteriorated."

"Why didn't her mother take care of her?"

"Her mom had a history of mental illness. The story goes that the meds her mother took during pregnancy probably damaged Angela."

"So her mother was in and out of institutions, too?"

"Right. Anyway, Eve wanted to adopt Angela."

"Did you guys ever find her?"

"Eve searched all over the city and finally..." I couldn't finish this sentence.

"It was too late?"

"By that time, Angela was lying face down on a hospital bed. She was so weak, she couldn't lift her head to talk to Eve." I paused and tried to bring this story to its conclusion. "Eve promised Angela she would get her out of there..."

"But Angela died?"

"Within the week."

"And Eve went crazy?"

"She shut down. I told her to take some time off."

"But she wouldn't."

"She was back the next morning, the same old Eve, full of energy, hugging every kid and bubbling over."

"Does she ever talk about it now?"

"She doesn't talk about Angela."

We sat sharing another long silence filled with our own bittersweet memories. I finally spoke. "It was hard enough for me to lose a student like Angela. It must have been terrible for you to lose a sister."

Jena nodded without looking up. "My mother was devastated. She was already in bad condition when we came here. Kammie's death pretty much tore her apart."

"Your sister's name was Kammie?"

"Yes."

"Where did your family come from?"

"That's a long story." Jena picked up some paperclips and strung them together in a chain. "It kind of explains why my mom was so crazy."

"Jena, if this is too painful, you don't have to—"

"Oh, no. It's painful. But sometimes I think I need to talk about it." She pulled her long black hair away from her face. "I was born in Cambodia." She looked at the ceiling. "But I hardly remember anything about it because I was only four years old when we left."

"You left with your family? When was that?"

"1979. I know the date, but I don't really remember—I just can still see some things. Like little videos in my mind."

"You were escaping?"

"Everybody was leaving. We were walking. I didn't know where, but we had to hurry. And we carried everything."

"Even the little kids?"

"I had to walk. My mother was pregnant."

"So she couldn't carry you."

"And I had to carry my stuff. It was a sack almost as big as me. But we had to keep walking. Everyone walked. There were so many people."

"Did you stop to rest?"

"At night we stopped by a river. And I still remember the water, stinking water. But we had to drink it."

"Did you get sick?"

"Everybody was sick." Jena took a rubber band from her folders and fastened her hair into a bun. "My mother was very sick. I don't know where we were, but we finally came to a place where the jungle had been cleared. And there was a hospital."

"A hospital?"

"A tarp and a thatched roof. And medics. And that's where they took my mother away from me."

"To give birth."

"Yes. I know that now. But then, I screamed."

"Because you thought you'd never see her again."

Jena added a paper clip to her chain. "It seems like it was a long time before they took me back to my mother. When I did finally see her again, she was lying on the ground. And Kammie had been born."

"Do you remember what Kammie looked like?"

"Oh, I remember. I was excited to see her. But she was so tiny. At first I thought she was a toy."

"Did she move or cry?"

"She cried. That was when I knew she was the baby that was born. I wanted to pick her up. But my mother could still barely open her eyes and somehow, I just got taken out of there."

"So you were in a camp?"

"A refugee camp just across the border. In Thailand."

"Kammie was born in Thailand?"

"It didn't matter. She was Khmer. But she was—" Jena hesitated. "'She had something wrong with her. She just looked too little and too jerky. Like she couldn't move right."

"Spasms?"

"That's when the relatives started whispering. My mother was crying. All the time. They said Kammie was cursed."

"Cursed? By what?"

"Nobody knows that. They just say it was a curse. Something somebody did wrong."

"Do your relatives still say that?"

"Oh, Ms. K, to tell you the truth, they say that in the culture. People were staying away from us. Like they were scared."

"Of Kammie? Did anyone try to hurt her?"

"Luckily, she was born in that camp. All those medical people and workers from different countries were there."

"Jena, do you think if Kammie had been born at home in your village—"

"I think I might never have seen her. Yes. I thought of that in later years."

"So many things that a little one wouldn't understand."

"Well, it didn't matter, because before we knew it, we were moving again."

"Where did you go?"

"Here. We came here to America. Kammie was sick, my mom was crazy, we had nothing. But here we were."

"What do you remember?"

A smile crept over Jena's face. "School. I remember after all those months of being terrified and sad, I was suddenly in school."

"Kindergarten?"

"I think so. It was a dream. The teachers were clean and pretty and nice. They gave me books and crayons. And I loved them."

"Is that when you decided you wanted to be a teacher?"

Jena nodded. "I had two plans. One, I would be a teacher. And then, Kammie would go to school."

"When did Kammie go to school?"

"That was so sad. My mother was scared. She was paranoid. She was afraid to come to the school."

"Traumatized by war?"

"Authorities freaked her out. The only reason she let me go to school was because she could send me with my cousins."

"But she wouldn't let Kammie leave the house?"

"How could she anyway? Kammie was just a curled-up little body." Jena pulled another tissue and held it to her nose. "A little body that could talk."

"You really wanted her to enroll."

"Every day when I came home, I played school with her. She couldn't learn a lot. And she could barely see. But I could read to her."

"And she listened?"

"She talked back. She had a little smart mouth."

"How did you finally get her into school?"

"It wasn't until I was in high school. I came to the track to work out on a Saturday and there was a group of special ed students practicing tag relay. So I went up to one of the coaches."

"And that coach was—"

"Miss Eve. I just went up to her and said, 'Do you think I can get my sister into a special class?'"

"What did she say?"

"You know Miss Eve. She just said, 'Of course you can!' And in a couple of weeks, a little yellow bus pulled up in front of our apartment building to take Kammie to school."

"Only Eve could pull that off. So, did that make you think about becoming a special ed teacher?"

"Well, I thought about it, but for a long time I didn't want to face it."

"You mean, seeing the students suffer?"

Jena became solemn. "When I was a teenager, I was infuriated when people stared at Kammie, like she was a freak or something. She couldn't walk, but I knew she could talk. She could boss me around! But people still treated her mean. I remember I brought her to my class one day. This enrollment lady came in and announced, right in front of everybody, 'You need to take that girl out of here.'"

"What did you do?"

"I almost told her she was a silly witch."

"Did you?"

"Of course not! I had the fear of authorities planted in me."

"So, you just took her home."

"And I apologized to Kammie. She was hurt."

"But things have changed now."

"And maybe I've changed my mind."

"I have no doubt you have what it takes, Jena."

Her eyes rested on the thick student file folders on my desk. "I just want to give Kammie's life meaning—like she lived to make the world better."

By the time Jena left, the office was deserted. And even though it was getting late, I went back to reading the email from Eve.

So, Kit,

I can't swear that I know when one year ended and another began.

Maybe this was 1960.

I can't track the years.

But I can count the Christmas trees.

I can tell you, I only remember two trees.

But maybe there were more.

The first time, I wasn't allowed out in the Lobby.

I could only stare through the thick glass doors.

The Workers couldn't trust me.

They knew I'd run away.

So they kept me locked up.

*That was my first year.
The next time the tree went up,
things had changed a bit.
I went out with the Unit Girls
out to the Lobby to see the Tree.
I remember a little excitement.
I got to smell the tree and touch it.
Maybe my spirit was coming back again.
I still felt the fear
when I woke up in the night.
But I didn't scream anymore.
I could not act up if I wanted to see Tiny.
So I didn't make a fuss.
Now Tiny really needed me.
She was more fragile every day.
Sometimes she could not leave the Unit.
And the Workers let me sit by her bed and hold her hand.
Just before the Christmas tree went down
she vanished.
I started to wander the halls looking for her.
That was when Jewel took me under her wing.
She was the lady at the front desk,
the one who unlocked the Lobby doors.
Jewel was plump with a rosy face and red hair.
She looked like she was glowing all the time.
And she was my comfort.
When we filed past her desk, Jewel let me slip over
and sit on the rug beside her feet.
I liked the sound of her typewriter.
And she gave me crackers and stickers.
No one ever noticed I was missing.
Jewel talked to me.
She talked to me like I was her own kid,*

like I could understand everything she said.
And I could.
But I still was too scared to say anything back to her.
One day she put a sticker on my hand.
It was a butterfly with shining wings.
She told me, "God watches over all his little ones."
She said, "Tiny is sitting on His lap."
And I knew what that meant.
But I didn't cry.
I didn't want to believe it was true.
Jewel worked at the Home the whole time I was there.
Maybe that is why I am here, today.
All that time I never saw my parents.
Sometimes I found new pajamas on my bed.
I pretended Moma sent them to me.
But by then I knew that my parents had left me there for good.
I had killed Cari
and I would be in this prison
for the rest of my life.
I believed any story I made up.
All I knew was the world inside the Home.
I never went out into the Real World.

I had to stop reading for a moment. I could only stare at the screen on my laptop. It was my phone that brought me back to the November evening, now growing late. Ruby was calling. "Hello, Kit. Do you know where is Eve?"

I checked my watch. "She's not there yet? It's five o'clock. She should be there!" I stopped and took a breath. "No, Ruby, if Eve's not with you, I don't know where she is. But I will find her. I'll call you back"

I dialed Eve as I turned off the lights in the office and headed toward the parking lot. She didn't answer. I jumped in my car and turned the key in the ignition. Then I froze, staring out the windshield at the empty school grounds. I didn't know where I was going. Eve wasn't answering her phone. I decided to text her. Maybe she still didn't want to talk to anybody. "Where r u?" I continued to sit there, listening to the hum of the engine as warm air from the heater rose up around my legs.

Within seconds, the answer came: "*U know.*"

I released the parking brake and pulled out of the school lot. This was the answer I hoped for. And I was pretty sure I did know where to find her.

It was rush hour and every major street in the city was jammed. So I turned off onto a deserted side street that wound through the old industrial zone. It was a rusty and crumbling area of town, and at that time of the day, it was isolated. I never would have taken this route if I hadn't been in such a hurry to get to the top of Oil Hill. I was certain I would find Eve there.

Still, my anxiety was growing as I navigated the narrow streets, trying to remember the back way up the hill. After an eternity of stop signs and excruciatingly slow speed limits, I finally made my way out of the maze and wound around the hill, up to the highest lookout on the site of the old Star Dust Cafe. Sure enough, there was the gold T-Bird, top down, perched at the edge of the cliff. Eve was sitting in the driver's seat. I pulled up next to her and rolled down my window. "Can I join you?"

She didn't look at me. "Just don't play School Counselor."

I opened the car door and sat down next to her hot pink scarf, knotted up on the passenger seat. She snatched it and held it in her lap. "And don't ask me any questions."

I looked out over the precipice. "I do have one question. You're not planning..."

"On driving this car off this cliff?" She grinned.

We sat there, looking out at the panorama of lights as the night fell. The top of Oil Hill had always been Eve's favorite escape. "Granma called this her jewel box." She paused. "Remember I told you about that dream I used to have? About flying over the Plaza? This is like that dream. I could take off. Like a seagull on an updraft. On my way out over the ocean."

I wondered if she was considering taking flight tonight.

Eve pointed east. "Do you see Our Lady?"

I could make out some landmarks. "The angelus tower?"

"Rosaria's church. She took me there one day. We ran across the street where the Locust trees drop St. John's bread. By the convent. And we snuck inside."

"All by yourselves?"

"That's where I first saw them."

"Saw what?"

"Angels."

"On the stained glass windows?"

"In the air."

Without looking at me, Eve began her story. "Rosaria was kneeling. She was praying. With her beads and the cross. So I got on my knees. It was dark in there. And smoky. And cold. And something started to flutter up high in the rafters. And the bells started clanging. They echoed in my head. And that's when it brushed past my face."

I was almost breathless, myself. "What was it?"

"Something flying past."

"Like a bird?"

"No. Softer, and so big—it seemed it was everywhere." She closed her eyes. "Like the wing of an angel. Like a breath. I felt it on my cheek."

"Were you terrified?"

"I jumped up and ran out of there. It flew down from the rafters. And I thought it was chasing me."

"Maybe to whisk you away."

She threw me a sharp look. "It's not funny, Kit. You know Rosaria disappeared." She snapped her fingers. "Just like that."

I couldn't argue with that. No one knew what had happened to Rosaria. "So that's when you started to imagine whirlwinds sweeping up vulnerable children?"

"I started looking for places to hide. I didn't want to be swept away." She pointed to the roof of a sprawling structure. "See it? I knew I could find it from here."

I followed her gaze. "So that's what the Home looked like to a lost angel." I imagined little Eve soaring over the miles of stucco houses. "And then you fell and landed in the bathroom of the girls' unit."

Eve managed to smile. My phone lit up. Eve answered it. "She found me, Ruby. Thanks. Bye." She handed the phone to me. "She told us to take our time."

I knew that I may never have another chance to hear Eve's story. "So, back to 1959."

Eve leaned forward and rested her chin on the steering wheel. "I think I wrote it all. In the email."

"Yes, but I'd like to hear it in your voice."

She stared out the windshield. "Well, I don't know. Maybe it was a nightmare. But there I was. With all of those kids. All of them, broken. It had to be that we fell from the sky."

"The wind just dropped them?"

"It was Purgatory and we were Lost Angels. I was being punished. For killing my sister." She was still staring into the night. "We would all be waiting there forever—waiting and waiting. For parents who would never come to take us home." Her voice broke and she stopped speaking.

I didn't speak either. I didn't want to interrupt whatever was going on in her mind.

Finally, Eve began talking again, this time much more slowly. "Now I understand why I forgot all of this so long ago." She took a deep breath. "When I start to remember, feelings come back to me—the smells, the sounds. All the things that happened. I can feel these in my body. I can't explain that."

"That's how you know those memories are real, Eve."

"But it really hurts."

"I know." Of course, I couldn't know what it was like to be abandoned in a strange place as a little child.

"I don't think you do, Kit. It was like something terrible was going to happen. All the time. I kept waiting for my parents to take me home. I watched for them day and night. But they never came. And there was nothing I could do to make them come."

"That would make a kid feel hopeless."

"The inside of me was hollow. All the time."

"It was physical pain?"

"Yes, it was here." She put one hand on her stomach. "And here." She put the other hand on her neck.

"Like a lump in your throat?"

"Like I could cry any time. Or throw up. But I never cried. It was too much pain for tears."

I suddenly realized that I found out more about Eve as we sat here in her dad's old car at the edge of Oil Hill, than I had during that entire year of research interviews.

She was still gazing out over the city lights. "Do you want to know what kept me alive? Once I saw a painting of a beautiful angel. She was watching over two little children on a stormy night. I don't know where I saw that. But she stuck in my mind. And I believed she must be somewhere. Around me. Watching over me."

"A guardian angel."

"Even in the night. When I woke up, she sang to me."

"And in the day...?"

"There was Jewel. She had that shining face. And she hid me under her desk." She paused and looked at me. "And then came your mom. Mom took me out of that place. She rescued me."

"My mother, the angel."

"I'm serious!" Eve was adamant. "She was sent to me!"

"Wearing wings and a halo." I couldn't resist that.

Eve didn't speak for a few minutes. When she finally did, her voice was low. "I don't expect you to understand. It's so terrible. I tried to run away from it." She paused. "But I had to turn around. And face it. The memory."

I wanted to reassure her. But I restrained myself.

She looked me in the eyes. "I can see you're just itching. Say it."

"I'm not going to."

"You can never understand. But I had to tell somebody—" Her voice trailed off.

"If you don't tell someone, you'll die." It just came out of my mouth.

She turned and looked at me intently. "How did you know?"

"That's just how I would feel."

"I don't believe you."

I stared back at her. "You think you're so special." That did the trick. Eve tried to hold it back but she fell into hysterics and I joined her until I paused to breathe. "You are extremely immature."

Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She hid her face in the sleeve of her sweater, but when she peeked out at me, her eyes were smiling. Just as I reached over to pat her hand, she bundled up her scarf, jumped out of the car and took off running toward the little park that was once the dance floor of the Star Dust Cafe. I followed her without a clue as to what she was planning to do in the dark on the grassy ruins.

She stopped right in the middle of the green. I ran over and stood next to her, trying to catch my breath.

"Did I scare you, Kit?"

"Did you want to?"

"It's kind of fun." Eve took a deep breath and exhaled. "I kind of scare myself. It's weird to remember things. All of a sudden. Things that happened a long time ago."

"Half a century ago."

"It was painful. To write it all down. But I guess this is my last chance."

"Your last chance to remember?"

"I can't live very much longer."

"Sorry to disagree with you." What else could I say?

"I know you think I'm out of control."

"On the contrary, Eve. I think you are a survivor."

She looked at me. "I am. I feel like I can handle it. Now."

"Like you can dredge up your childhood?"

"Like the memories can't ruin me."

"Maybe you can make sense of it all?"

"And your mom can still help me. For a little while."

I felt a twinge of heartache. "Her memory will fail."

"It's my last chance." She could read the look on my face. "Sorry, Kit. I didn't mean to make you sad—about your mom."

"Well, I know she can't live forever."

We stood there in the crisp, cold air, looking up at the veil of stars over Oil Hill.

Eve started to play with the knot in her scarf. "One thing I'm not sad about. I'm glad the Star Dust is gone."

"But it was a landmark. Didn't your boyfriend bring you here for drinks?"

"Lots of drinks. Lots of times. Before it was torn down." She surveyed the little park. "Well, I like it like this. Green." She turned and looked me straight in the eyes. "You know, I don't miss that time in my life at all."

"Why not? You loved your brandy."

"And Richard was glad when I passed out."

"What do you mean?"

"I talked too much. I made him mad."

"But you stayed with him for almost ten years!"

"I crammed everything down."

"You never told anyone how you felt?"

"I didn't want people to think I was crazy. Especially Richard. If it hadn't been for Patricia—" She looked down at the pink scarf in her hands. "Did I ever tell you about the tests?"

"In the psych ward? They gave you tests in the psych hospital?"

"All kinds of tests. But Patricia only showed me one. It was my IQ. She put a piece of paper in front of me and she said, 'Believe this.'"

"Believe what?"

"She just pointed at the paper and said, 'You are *not retarded*, Eve.' That's what she said."

I was speechless. I had never heard this before.

"Patricia wanted me to get out of there. Out of the psych ward."

In all the years I had known Eve, I never realized how that label had impacted her life. She had been stunted by the 'retarded' sticker slapped on her by cruel kids and ignorant experts. "So, did you think about going back to school?"

"I went to the college." She smirked. "For poetry readings. On Friday nights."

"With Richard."

"The professor. The creative genius."

"He was kind of handsome in a rugged sort of way."

Eve cast me a stormy look.

"Of course, I have nothing good to say about him. After what he did to you."

"I can't believe I spent so long with him." Eve sighed. "All that time I lived with him, I tried to be perfect." Then she took a deep breath. "I never wanted to go back. To being retarded."

"Wait a minute. When were you ever...?"

"From the day they put me in the Home—"

"Until when?"

"I don't know, Kit."

For a moment I drifted back to the first time I saw Eve on the public school playground. She was a little waif with really short hair, hanging around the classroom door, waiting to be let in. She actually did look different from other kids. I didn't want to admit it, but Eve was right. In those days, we labeled the kids from the Home. And Eve was a kid from the Home. She was 'retarded' until my mother brought her to live at our house.

"Eve, no one uses that term anymore, not even the government."

"That doesn't change how I feel." She was defiant. And hurt. "I know even you thought I was weird."

I couldn't let her fall into that trap anymore. "Well I still think you're weird, Eve."

She grinned, looked up to the sky and began to spin around. Like a small child trying to make herself dizzy, Eve twirled and twirled, gazing up at the sky and laughing.

"Don't get hysterical!" I was secretly worried she might get out of control.

Eve was really enjoying herself. "I *am* hysterical!"

"But not 'retarded!'" I yelled back at her.

She stopped spinning and peered at me. "Will you help me throw all those names into the wind?"

"You mean, your labels?" I couldn't quite grasp what she was asking me to do. "You want me to think of them...?"

"You're the expert, aren't you?"

"Well, I guess I do know the acronyms."

She untied the knot from her scarf to reveal a small pile of finely shredded paper.

I was starting to get it. "What's that, Eve? Documents?"

"Records of Admittance. 1959." She announced the title as if she had memorized it for this occasion. "I found 'em. Under my mother's bed."

"Admittance to...?"

"The Children's Home."

"What are you going to do with them?"

She looked back up to the sky and called out, "Toss them away!"

I paused for a second. "Okay, here goes! Let's start with *Developmentally Disabled*. *DD!*"

"*DD!*" She tossed a handful of shreds like confetti into the sky. "What's next? Say it faster!"

"How about *Attention Deficit Disorder*? *ADD!*"

"*ADD!*" She spun around and threw another handful into the air. "Next!"

"Don't forget *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*!"

"Good one! *OCD!*"

I was catching her exuberance. "How about *ODD?*"

She stopped and looked at me. "*ODD?*"

"*Oppositional Defiance Disorder.*"

"OK! *ODD!*"

I took a handful of document confetti and let it fly. "And *Autism Spectrum Disorder!*"

Eve sprinkled shreds above my head. "*ASD!*"

"Okay, Eve, don't forget *SM!*"

"Wait a minute, Madame Expert. What did you just say?"

"*Selective Mutism!*"

We looked at each other and called out together as loud as we could. "*SM!*"

For a few more seconds, she twirled. Then she stopped, lifted her head, and whispered into the night. "I'm free."

We stood there silently, almost reverently, covered by the stars, by Heaven.

Then Eve pulled the collar of her jacket up to her chin and took off sprinting toward the car. She jumped in and slammed the door. "Let's go down to Mom's. I'll make hot chocolate."

I got in my car and my phone rang. Kurt wanted to know where I was. I told him I was with Eve. He could tell that something was up. "Tell Eve that the school counselor is off duty."

"Right, Kurt." I could hear Scott's voice. "Are you with Scott?"

"We're picking up some fast food. Do you want us to bring you some?"

I put my hand over the phone and opened my window. "Eve, Scott and Kurt—"

She shook her head. She was already warming up the T-Bird.

"Not tonight, Kurt. But thanks, anyway."

She revved the motor. "Meet me at your mother's!" And she took off in the old convertible, her scarf and long hair trailing in the wind as she flew down Oil Hill.

Wednesday, November 9th

When I finally got home, it was past midnight. I knew I could not explain to Kurt why I had spent so many hours that night with Eve. So I simply fell into bed. And it seemed I had just fallen asleep when the alarm went off.

I barely made it to work on time, so I dropped my bag in my office and, turning my back on my computer, went out to supervise the playground. But as the day wore on, I could barely contain my curiosity: What would Eve's next message reveal? By the time the students had gone home, I couldn't wait to check my email. And there it was.

Kit,

Finally, it came.

I had almost given up hope.

*It was the year of the Breakout.
One day, with no warning,
a Worker walked me out
to the parking lot.
And I saw the Yellow Bus.
So I panicked like a dog
taken to be put down.
They had to drag me on.
And I just sat there,
staring out the window
as the Bus went over the Hill.
Then it stopped in front of the School.
And I threw up.
I thought the Driver would kill me.
So I prepared to die.
But then, I looked up.
And there was your mom,
with her perfect hair
and high-heeled shoes.
She came to the door
and called my name.
How would she know my name?
I couldn't answer.
So she came up the steps and got on the Bus.
She took me by the hand,
gently.
And she led me around my vomit
and helped me off the bus.
She was not angry
or even surprised
that I had thrown up.
She just cleaned my face with a handful of tissues
and walked with me into the Classroom.*

*I thought she was the Teacher.
There was a man there,
but he didn't speak to me
very much.
And I didn't talk at all.
I thought he was afraid of me,
the kid who got sick on the Bus.
But as the days went on,
I realized that he was the Teacher
and I was in a Special Class.
Suddenly School became my whole world.
I couldn't wait to get on that Bus
and go see your mom.
I wanted to spend every minute with her.
She talked to me
and gave me books
and sat with me
and acted like I understood.
And all the time,
I was listening to her,
speaking to her in my mind.
No one knew it then,
not even me.
But I was learning how to read.
I wished I never had to leave the Classroom.
Anytime I was on the Playground,
the Normal kids followed me.
They laughed and pointed,
and made fun of me.
When I found out I was a Special,
I never wanted to go outside.
The days passed so fast,
I couldn't believe School would end.*

*But one day,
the tacks came off the bulletin boards.
And all the colored letters came down.
The Teacher started to pack things up.
The crayons, the pencils,
the reading books—
they were all being stashed away.
And your mom said Good Bye to me,
like it was for good—
like I would never see her again.
I panicked,
just like on the first day.
But this time I thought I was going back
to die.
I had failed again.
I couldn't let them send me away.
So I grabbed your mom
and dragged her to the Reading Corner.
I picked up Noah's Ark
and pointed to every animal.
I pointed fast as I could
and sounded out their names.
Out loud.
I couldn't let them send me away from your mother.
I didn't want her to think I couldn't learn.
I thought I would never see her again.
I would do anything
to keep from being separated from her.
I clung to her hand.
And I read as fast as I could.
And your mom just looked at me—
I'll never forget her face.
It was a look of pure joy.*

*And she sat there for so long,
letting me hold her hand,
letting me read to her.
So how did she finally get me on the Bus?
It must have been her promise.
She promised she would visit during the Summer
and take me out with her
on Vacation.
Deep in my heart,
I had to believe.
And finally, she did come.
She took me away in her Station Wagon.
And that was the Summer we traveled
up the coast and down the coast,
in that big old tank,
your mom and all us kids.
Remember?
One day,
your mom walked into the Unit.
The girls were lined up
and they went down the Hall to Breakfast.
But your mom sat with me on my bed.
She told me to listen carefully.
She was going to ask me something.
I thought we were taking a Test.
She asked me if I would like to come
to live at her house.
I wasn't sure I understood her.
Maybe I was making this up in my head.
I could have even been dreaming,
because I never knew what was Real in the Home.
Then, she asked if I understood what she said.
I said 'Yes.'*

*She asked me to repeat what I heard her say.
But I couldn't repeat it back to her—
because I didn't believe my ears.
She kind of laughed,
so I thought this was all a joke.
I was afraid if I said anything,
she would laugh even louder.
So I sat there, mute again,
with that same old feeling.
I couldn't answer back.
But my mind had not gone silent.
I suddenly had all these questions.
What if she really did ask me to live with her?
Did she really want to be my Mother?
Would she get mad if I called her 'Mom?'
What would happen to the other kids in my Unit?
I didn't want them to cry.
And then—
what about my parents?
Did they even care about me anymore?
Did they hate me?
Was my little sister alive?
Or had I killed her?
What if they wanted me?
Would they ever be able to find me?
Somehow, I finally got up courage
to ask your mom one question.
I asked her was that Okay with her daughter?
Was it Okay with Kit?
See, I knew you weren't happy.
You had to share a bed with me.
Your mom just looked at me,
and she said,*

"We bought you a Bed. It's just for you."
That was when I knew she wanted me for keeps.
I was so excited, I almost wet my pants.
So Mom packed a little suitcase
and we walked out to the locked doors.
Jewel gave me a big hug.
She knew I was leaving
but she was smiling.
I couldn't figure that out.
Maybe I started to cry,
because she told me
I could come back to visit
anytime.
And she would always be there.
Then, she opened her top drawer
and she took out a butterfly
and stuck it on my hand.
And she said,
"Spread your wings, now, Evie."
Then she kissed me on the forehead and said,
"I will pray for you every day."
And so she pressed the Button
and the big doors opened up.
And your mom took my hand.
And I walked through that Lobby
for the last time.
Anyway, it must have been at the end of Summer,
that day I came to live at your house.
I was so nervous,
worried that you didn't want me to come.
The summer visits had been fun for me.
But I knew that I had not been fun for you.
I could see you didn't like having me around.

*So I knew you wouldn't be happy
on the day I showed up with my little suitcase.
I almost dropped that suitcase
and ran back to the Home!
But Mom kept me busy
putting away my underwear.
And she hung up my clothes.
And you were nowhere to be found.
So I just sat in the kitchen,
watching Mom fix dinner.
It seemed a long time
before I was at home in your house.
I was so shy.
My face was stiff and I couldn't even smile.
I couldn't eat.
And I was too embarrassed
to go to the bathroom.
So I hung around your mother
and helped with the little kids,
or picked dandelions in the yard.
I could tell
you didn't want me for a Friend.
But finally, one day,
I just walked into the bathroom
and used it.
I couldn't go on holding everything in.
I had to start going to the bathroom.
That was what it took
for me to be at home.
And one day, Kit—
do you remember the day?
We were sitting at the kitchen table
with the Hair Gel and Bobby Pins.*

Mom was putting pin curls in your little sister's hair.

You picked up a comb

and asked if you could set my hair.

Mom just said, "Why don't you ask Evie?"

So you looked me in the eye, Kit,

and you said, "Can I set your hair?"

I couldn't believe it.

I knew you liked making pin curls.

But I wanted to believe you liked me.

I blurted out "Yes, please."

Do you remember that?

Even I knew that was a funny answer.

But you spent a long time,

twisting and pinning my hair.

And I felt pretty silly,

all those pins sticking out of my head.

But I was just so happy to be there

with you fussing over me.

I wanted to pretend I was Normal,

just like you.

I was still staring at that sentence when Jocelyn pushed her custodian's cart into my office. She looked me over. "You look like you got a bad case of gas."

Teresa was on her way to wash out the coffee pot. "Ms. K, are you alright?"

Jocelyn took a mug from my shelf and polished it. "She's solving the world's problems."

I just sighed. "Sit down, you two."

Teresa poured us the last drops of the day. "Well, here we are. Another after school conference. Ms. K, you stay here way too late."

Jocelyn snorted. "Tell me about it. I can't get this office cleaned."

"Well, ladies, I confess I was just reading an email from Eve." I knew that would pique their interest.

Teresa pulled up a chair and settled herself. "How is she?"

Jocelyn gave me a knowing look. "So you're feeling guilty?"

"Jocelyn, you're just too—"

"I know all about you and Eve. I know what that's all about."

I didn't doubt that. We had grown up together. Eve and Jocelyn's sister, Debbie, had both been in the "special room" in the 1960s. They were an odd couple—Debbie, a little cherub with sparkling eyes, and Eve, the pale waif who rarely smiled. But they were the best of friends and chatted all the way home, while the rest of us wondered what they were talking about.

"Well, you know what, Jocelyn, I think Eve is coming to terms with those years in the—"

Jocelyn frowned. "Poor kid. My mom would'a never let Debbie be put away in that place."

"Your mom was one of the activists."

"They was a force to be reckoned with."

"Well, they had to band together. No one was going to do it for them."

Teresa was lost. "Do what?"

"Advocate for their children." I finished my coffee and gave the cup to Teresa. "They refused to put their babies away."

"The doctor told my mom to stick Debbie in the Home the day she was born." Jocelyn shook her head and almost laughed. "She just came apart and yelled, 'Nothin' doin'!'"

"I remember that. Your Mom could set the experts straight."

"On the other hand, she didn't cut us kids any slack. If you wanted to live in her house, you had to pull your weight."

"Did Debbie do her chores?"

"We had cat fights in the bedroom when it was time to make the bed."

Teresa was trying to follow the conversation. "Did you share a room with Eve, Ms. K?"

"We even shared a bed for a little while. But that didn't make Eve feel accepted. She always felt she was different. But I think Debbie saw everyone as her friend."

Jocelyn nodded. "She was a little pistol, if you know what I mean."

"Debbie was fun. She even went to Friday night dances when we were teenagers."

Jocelyn chuckled. "The Belle of the Ball."

Teresa leaned toward me. "Didn't Eve go places with you?"

"Not really. By the time we were teenagers..."

"You hung out with a different crowd?"

I wasn't sure how much I should tell Teresa about Eve's past. "She tried to hide away. I think she felt like she didn't fit in."

Jocelyn grinned. "Debbie had no problem with that. She was always going to school or church or some such thing."

Teresa twisted a lock of her auburn hair. "Didn't you ever just want to do things without Debbie? Go have your own life?"

“Oh, yeah. I could’ve gone off and been ‘normal’ any time I wanted.”

“But,” I reminded her, “we would always ask, ‘Where’s Debbie?’”

“Oh, yeah. Debbie liked to party.”

“Is Debbie still...?” Teresa was afraid to ask the question.

“No.” Jocelyn intercepted. “She died in ’89.”

I added up the years in my head. “Twenty years later than her doctors predicted.”

Jocelyn turned to me. “Do you remember Eve at the funeral?”

“Yeah. I do.” I had gone with Eve to Debbie's service at Our Lady. She could not control her tears. That was the day she told me Debbie was the “most real” friend she ever had.

Teresa gathered our empty cups and lined them up on the desk. “Eve was a good friend to my little brother. She was the only person in the world he would listen to. He wouldn't listen to anyone else, not even to me.”

“I think Eve understands what it's like to be—” I caught myself.

“Special.” Jocelyn tossed her rag onto her cart. “She understands what it's like to be 'special' because she was.”

Teresa narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean, ‘special?’”

I wasn't sure how much Teresa knew about Eve. “You know, Eve lived for a few years in an institution.”

“What? No way!”

“I thought you knew.” I had said too much.

“Eve is smart!” Teresa protested. “She was the only one who knew how to talk to my brother.”

Jocelyn flipped her feather duster around my desk. “Well, there you go. Eve grew up with kids like your brother.”

Teresa stood up. “That was why my mother brought us here—so we could get help for Arturo. So he could live with us and go to school.”

Jocelyn stacked the mugs on her cart. “That must’a been a tough move for y'all.”

“We got a place right over here, just off the freeway. Mama cleaned office buildings, so she wasn't home most of the time.” She sat down again, caught up in her own memories. “I was supposed to take care of Arturo. So I dressed him up in his church pants and I walked him down to the school to meet Ms. K.”

“You had to drag him through the door.” I could still see Teresa tugging on his little hand the day she brought him to my classroom. “You came up to me and said, 'Teacher, this is my brother Arturo. He doesn't talk. But I think he can learn.'”

Teresa covered her eyes and shook her head. “Ms. K, you remember all that?”

“And I remember Arturo didn't look at me. He was busy flapping his fingers in front of his face.”

“Did you think I was crazy? I mean, did you believe you could teach him anything?”

"I just knew we had to somehow make contact with him. And if he wouldn't even look at you, well, that would be a challenge."

Teresa looked down at her hands. "I feel bad, now. Before he went to school, I had to scold him and yell at him all the time." She moved the pencils around on my desk. "I was so mad for such a long time. Mad at Arturo. Mad at my mom for putting me in charge."

"But you saved your brother, Teresa, when you got him into our school."

"Oh, I didn't save him. It was Eve who saved Arturo. She was his *maestra*." Teresa would always remember that Eve opened up the world for Arturo. Even I had been amazed that Eve could communicate with the pale, wan boy who spoke to no one. Every day she sat next to him, listening to his voice and the seemingly random sounds that came from his mouth. But Eve wanted to hear what Arturo had to say. And the only way to do that was to keep listening—and to try to answer him—in his own language.

Day after day, Eve sat beside Arturo. And day after day, Arturo rocked, flapped his hands, and made his sounds. Then, after endless hours of patient listening, Eve spoke to him. She did not speak in English or even Spanish. She did not use any words that I, or anyone, recognized. Even the tone of her voice was not her own. Eve spoke to Arturo in his language.

Teresa and I witnessed an amazing moment of discovery for Arturo on the day Eve spoke to him. A smile spread across his face and he became completely silent. He stopped flapping his hands and cocked his head slightly. He was listening to Eve. And he understood. I don't know what he understood. But he knew that Miss Eve was talking to him. And that moment changed his life forever.

During that year, Eve and Arturo held their conversations daily. Eve continued to listen to him and to "answer" him but she was beginning to shape his sounds into words. He stared, spellbound, at her mouth as she spoke. Then he reached for her hand, using it to point to objects around the room. And he listened intently as she labeled each item, tirelessly repeating herself as long as he wanted to play the game. And as Arturo tried to imitate Eve's words, he began to "talk" to her.

As the year progressed, Eve made another miraculous discovery. She found an old computer in a storage closet and she set it up as Arturo watched, entranced by the bright letters and images that flashed across the screen. He let Eve use his fingers to tap the keyboard, and soon the computer was speaking for Arturo, making monotone announcements at unexpected moments, sometimes provoking the class into laughter. And he began to search the faces of the other children, relishing their gleeful reactions. By the end of that year, thanks to Eve's ingenuity and the old computer, Arturo was being transformed into a "real boy."

He had been in our class for nearly three years before Eve was able to convince administrators to provide Arturo with communication devices. The district officials hemmed and hawed, but finally agreed to buy him special speech software. And with Eve as his personal aide, Arturo finally graduated from high school.

"So that's been, what, fifteen years?" Jocelyn was rubbing out the fingerprints on the office windows. "How's he doing, now?"

Teresa broke into a smile. "Can you believe he got a job? Checking software at a place where that's all they do. It's not like he needs to talk much, you know. But he's working."

"Nerds are in demand nowadays." Jocelyn had a funny way of handing out a compliment.

"You know, now when I look back on it, I think his differentness is what saved him. The boys in the hood made fun of him. But when they couldn't get him to carry their drugs, they just let him go. They didn't even try to jump him—into a gang, I mean."

Jocelyn looked out over the streets of the west side neighborhood. "Most of them boys ended up in camp—or just plain dead."

Teresa sat quietly for a moment. "Thanks to Eve, we made it through those years."

Jocelyn turned around and put her hands on her hips. "Now that we've had our little trip down memory lane, will you all please go home so I can finish my work?"

I felt much better after the conference with Jocelyn and Teresa. But I was drained after the long day at the school. So when my phone rang and it was Kurt letting me know that he was down at the boat, I headed to the marina. The November fog had already settled over the water and the only sign of life was the dim glow of lamplight emanating from cabins of live-aboards. I found a parking place near the dock, threw my backpack over my shoulder, and ventured down the gangway into the salty mist.

Kurt was on the deck of his sailboat polishing the teak. He stood up, gave me his hand as I boarded and took me down into the warm cabin. I sat down and he presented me with a chunk of aged cheddar and a baguette. And I settled into the cushions for a gourmet supper with my husband. Exhausted, but content, I soon found it hard to keep my eyes open. Kurt went back up to finish his work, and I lay down on the bunk, the gentle movement of the waves rocking me to sleep.

Thursday, November 10th

I cruised up the coast highway under a pastel sunrise, drawing in deep breaths of morning ocean air. But all too soon I was driving back into reality and dashing from the parking lot to the playground before even setting foot in my office. It was Veterans' Day eve and the campus was gripped with pre-holiday mania. The children were beyond excited as the teachers scrambled to finish lessons and embark on a blessed three-day weekend.

Finally, the last bell rang and everyone fled the campus. So I turned on my computer and in the eerie blue light of the empty office, began to read the final chapter of Eve's forgotten years.

Hey, Kit.

This is the last memory I will write.

It is about living with your family,

living in the Real World—

playing outside until the sun went down,

and waking up to dawn breaking

*through the bedroom windows.
I never wanted to go back—
I was so scared that someone would find a reason
to send me back to the Home.
I tried to prove I was Normal,
or at least pass myself off like that.
But the first day of School loomed like a dark cloud
and I was engulfed in silent terror.
For so long, the halls of the institution had been my world.
Now I was living Outside in a an unfathomable expanse
of Earth.
Was I supposed to walk out there
alone?
Somehow your mom read my mind.
She knew I was frozen with fright.
And I heard her tell you
in no uncertain terms
to walk with me
every step of the way
and not let me out of your sight.
I don't know what you thought,
but you did what she said.
You walked me all the way.
And when we crossed the street in front of the School,
you took my hand.
I thought that was something a Sister would do—
even though I knew you didn't really like me.
The kids at School scared me.
They were always watching me.
So I hung out by the classroom door
hoping they wouldn't see me.
I knew they were just waiting to make fun of me.
They followed me.*

*They yelled, "Keep away, Retardo."
They were mean to me.
Or maybe they were afraid of me.
Which is worse?
But there was one time I will never forget.
Some girls were waiting by the restroom,
and when I came out,
they circled around me
chanting "Crazy Kid!"
They shouted really loud
over and over.
I thought they were going to kill me.
Then, out of somewhere,
you showed up.
You came to me and took my hand.
And you just walked away
with me.
You didn't smile at me,
and you didn't smile at them.
You didn't look at anybody.
You just walked away with me.
And I pretended you were my Sister—
even if you didn't really like me.*

I slapped my laptop shut, threw it in my briefcase, snapped out the office lights and let the heavy security doors slam behind me. It was already dark outside and a police copter was circling over the playground. I must have taken off on automatic pilot, because before I knew it, I was in the Plaza. I could not get Eve's words out of my mind: "*I pretended you were my sister—even if you didn't really like me.*" I needed to talk to her. I had to ask her to forgive me.

I found her with my mother in the kitchen making cookies for the Navy Vets. The table was covered with familiar old baking tools—the wooden spoon, a rubber spatula, and the giant glass mixing bowl. Eve was shelling walnuts.

I sat down next to her. "This is cozy."

She did not look up.

I made a feeble attempt at conversation. "Mom, do you remember baking cookies on the night Eve came to stay?"

Eve stood up and my mother watched her walk across the kitchen to the pantry. "Evie, I hope you brought your suitcase." She was talking about the little valise with the bright pink flowers that she bought for Eve.

I cracked a nut. "On the day you came here, everything you owned fit into that little case. But when you left..."

Eve turned around with a sack of flour in her hand. "Some of that junk was yours."

"Mom, do you remember when Eve moved out?"

"Evie? What do you mean? Here she is, right here."

"Oh, that's right, she never really moved."

"Well, I'm sorry." Eve sat down and let the flour sack plop on the table. "You didn't mind me coming to visit you, did you Mom?"

"You're as welcome as the flowers in May, dear."

Eve looked at me. "So there."

Mom picked up the wooden spoon and tapped the table top. "I thought you girls were going to bake cookies!"

I glanced at Eve and she almost smiled. "Kit is right, Mom. I was always here." She started to sift the flour. "Moma couldn't handle me."

I watched the fine powder fall. "Wasn't your Dad ever at home?"

"He was on the base. Usually." She stopped sifting.

"But didn't he...?"

"He picked me up and took me to school. For a while, at least." She cracked an egg into the bowl. "But he gave up." She turned on the mixer.

After a minute, she flipped it off. "He tried to give me advice."

"Like what?"

"He told me that going to school should be a habit. Like putting on your shoes." She loosened the beaters. "Then he told me to join a club."

"Some advice! He thought you should get down and party!"

Eve picked up the wooden spoon. I decided not to ask her any more questions. Those were rough years for her. She was always bouncing between euphoria and despair. The poor kid was on the verge of self-destruction. Day after day, she just wandered away from school, showing up in Mom's kitchen after the sun had set. Who knew what she was doing all those hours adrift in the city?

Maybe it was that attendance clerk who turned the tide, the one who discovered that Eve had forged her mother's signature on the absence excuse, and escorted her to the office hot seat. When Lena finally answered the phone call from the principal, she covered for her daughter with

a dramatic apology: "Sir, I was so busy this morning that I just told Evie to go ahead and write that note." The principal didn't buy that story, but he let Eve off with the warning that he would be watching her every minute until the day she graduated.

That brief disciplinary run-in had an immediate impact on Eve's life, as she discovered the next day when she was about to escape through the back gate. Alerted that this girl was a flight risk, her English teacher intercepted her. "Hello Eve. Are you leaving already? Let me give you a ride home." Eve, of course, declined the lift and went straight to class with Ms. Wilson.

Margaret Ebony Wilson was a fresh graduate of teachers' college who still wore turtleneck sweaters and penny loafers. She was young enough to remember her own adolescence, yet mature enough to know how to encourage an introverted student. Before Eve left class that afternoon, Ms. Wilson gave her a gift, a book of empty pages. "This is a journal, Eve. I would like you to write an entry every day. And I will look forward to reading about your life."

Eve was too stunned to speak. No one had ever asked her to write about herself, and it had never occurred to her that her pain and her dreams mattered to anyone. Something was sparked inside her; and instead of slinking away from campus, Eve became a prolific diarist, leaving a new chapter on her English teacher's desk at the end of each day. That encounter with Ms. Wilson kept her in school not only until the end of that day, but the rest of the year.

On this night, as I watched Eve put a sheet of cookies into the oven, it was hard for me to conjure up my memory of that young girl with the sad eyes. She was so different, now, her hair pulled back in a smooth, high ponytail and a satisfied little smile perched on her lips. During those last years of childhood, I had avoided her because she seemed so needy. Yet, despite the way I treated her, she remained a loyal friend to me. She had even saved my mother's life. I was just about to say all that when Mom slumped to the table. I jumped up.

Eve leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Are you tired, Mom?"

My mother lifted her head and smiled. "I could sleep for a little while."

Eve helped her walk into the den and left me sitting there, full of silent emotion. I knew it would not be long before my mother would not be with us. And I would only have Eve to sit with me in this kitchen, remembering our years together.

In a few minutes, Eve came back and went to the oven to take out the first batch. Without turning around, she started to talk. "Don't try and say you're sorry. No one ever asked you if you wanted me in your house. Or in your bed."

I tugged at a bag of chocolate chips and it burst. "You needed a real home, Eve."

She sat down next to me. "Even if it wasn't my own."

I scooped up some chips. "Hold out your hand."

"Anyway, Kit, I would'a kicked you out. If it was my house."

I tossed a chip at her. And we sat there, eating chocolate, like kids celebrating something. It was our own little sorority party. Eve finally was at home with me.

Friday, November 11, 2011

Early the next morning, I drove out to the Plaza. A gang of crows was quarreling in the branches of a tall eucalyptus tree as Eve got in the car. "That'll wake Mom up."

"Is she still asleep?"

"Ruby gives her breakfast in bed."

"I hope I grow old with such luxuries." I drove down the avenue toward the highway. "Is Cari going to meet you there?"

"With the kids. They've never been."

"How old is Justin?"

"Eighteen."

"Is he planning for college?"

"No one talks about plans."

"You don't think Justin talks to his parents?"

"I know he doesn't."

"Not very talkative?"

"Nobody is, really."

"Kind of like your dad."

"Too much like my Dad."

"Well, it will be fun for your sister's kids to go to Vets' Day."

"I can't remember much about it. When I was a kid, I mean."

"But when your dad got old, you took him to the base all the time."

"They saluted when we drove through the gate." Eve looked out the window and smiled. "He liked that."

We approached the air station and I pulled over. "This is as close as I can get without a pass."

She adjusted the lid on the box of cookies. "I never been here without him." And she got out and walked slowly toward the main gate.

The flag furled out over the air field, just as it had every day for the past fifty years. Today, its display was dignified, sustained by the morning breeze. But on the hot afternoons of my childhood when the Santanas blew, it went as crazy as the windsocks. In those days, we came by the thousands to gaze into the sun and be thrilled by the spins and dives of fighter jets and stunt planes. Everything was wind and sky stretching to infinity. Here, Earth was a planet.

Eve could barely recall visiting the base before she was sent to the Children's Home, and I knew she imagined that she had missed a carefree decade of family life. She never believed me when I told her that we grew up uneasy about trouble brewing somewhere in the world, and that we were startled into vigilance weekly by the squall of air raid sirens. On this early November morning fifty years later, as the sun warmed my face through the windshield, I marveled that all of this was still here.

My daydream was interrupted by someone pounding on the car window. It was Eve's youngest nephew, Jonathan, smiling and waving at me. I rolled down the window. "What's up?"

"We're goin' to the beach!"

Eve ran up behind him and opened the door. Her face was flushed and she looked as excited as Jonathan. "Let's go down to the pier for burgers."

I put the key in the ignition and Jonathan climbed in the back seat.

The palm trees along the beach boulevard had started to sway in the onshore gusts. Eve opened her window. "I bet you got bored. Just sitting there."

"I spent the morning reminiscing."

She let the wind blow into her face. "I hardly remember anything. About those days."

"Aunt Eve." Jonathan chimed in. "You know about the rocket animals!"

"Really, Eve? Tell us about the Space Race."

Jonathan grabbed the back of my seat and whispered in my ear. "The Russian dog who went into orbit was the same age as Aunt Eve!"

I almost laughed—until I caught a glimpse of Eve's face. She turned to me, dead serious. "What do you think ever happened to Laika?"

I couldn't bring myself to tell her that the canine cosmonaut of 1957 never returned to earth.

When we reached the beach, Jonathan took off running with his siblings to the hamburger joint at the end of the pier. And so did Eve. Cari watched her sister. "My kids still don't know Eve is a grown-up."

We spent the day in a roomy red leather booth near a picture window. The marine layer had burned away and we could see far out over the sparkling ocean. We let the hours pass, content to watch the sailboats and ferries travel back and forth between the Island and the harbor. Finally, when the sun was low on the horizon, Cari and her kids headed back toward the shore. Eve and I strolled to the furthest point of the pier and sat down with the sea birds perched along the railing. The wind slapped our faces.

Eve reached in her back pocket and pulled out a yellowing envelope. It was postmarked *August 1942* and addressed to *Austin Ranch, Moses, New Mexico*. She offered it to me. "I found this in my dad's papers. He sent this to his folks. Before he shipped out."

I opened it gingerly, hoping the letter would not crumble before I could read it.

Dear Folk,

Well, I got orders to head for the East Coast. I'll be getting some training, but I don't know of what kind. So I am to be ready to go at 07:30 Monday.

I have seen no kin that I ever heard of since I left home. Haven't had time to search out folk from these parts.

Just one 12 hour leave in San Diego. I guess I'll go down to the beach and loaf.

The climate is fine here. I might think of coming back to settle. When this is all over.

I will close now.

Won't be here much longer so don't bother to write.

Can't say when we'll be shipping out.

Your son,

Randall.

Eve's dad had not yet seen combat when he wrote that letter, and a full decade would pass before his first daughter would be born. Eve took the letter. "His mother read that." She began to fold it with great care. "And then she died." She tried to fit the letter back into the aging envelope.

"Oh, Eve! She couldn't have been very old."

"'Bout my age." The envelope crumbled in her hands. "The age I am now."

"Well, it was a hard life out there on the plains. How many babies did she have?"

"A dozen."

"Whew!"

"In a dugout."

"Eve!"

"That's what my dad told me. He was born. And then he helped build the house."

"In the meantime, his mother is giving birth under the ground." I could not imagine living that way.

"Granddad was stubborn."

"They all survived? All the kids? And the cattle?"

"The dust almost snuffed them out."

"Did your dad tell you all that?"

"Yeah. In the car. On the way to school."

"He wanted you to know—"

"That I was spoiled." She forced the broken envelope back in her pocket. "My dad never knew this—" Eve brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "But he was my hero."

I tried to keep it light. "Our dads were handsome guys. Especially in full dress uniform."

"He was a cowboy, too."

"You went with your dad out to the ranch?"

"When I was little." She scanned the horizon. "I didn't know he had any feelings."

"Men were like that in those days. Strong and Silent."

"We didn't talk much." She leaned on the railing. "Even when he was old."

"But you stayed with him. All that time, you two still didn't talk?"

"I didn't know what to say. Even on the day he died."

"But you were there with him. You held his hand."

"No, Kit. He held *my* hand." She turned around and grasped my hand. "Like that. His hand was curled around my hand. And it all came back to me..."

"What came back, Eve?"

"That day at the park. The day my dad was teaching me to walk. On that little path." She looked up at me. "He was teaching me how to walk. I remembered that."

I believed her. I believed Eve could remember that day.

She let my hand drop. "The night he died—I kissed his forehead. I didn't know what to say." She sighed. "All I could think of was what he used to say to me. Every morning before he left the house." She looked toward the sun sinking into the ocean. "'See you *mañana*, little gal.' That's what he used to say to me. 'See you tomorrow.'"

A large white seagull spread its wings and took flight high above us. It caught an updraft and soared into the sky to fly away, out over the Pacific.

Journey through the Desert

Monday, November 21st

The afternoon was fading quickly. It was almost dusk and I was still in the office behind the front counter. A half dozen forlorn students were seated on a bench, waiting for someone to claim them. As I reached for the school phone, my cell rang. I ran to my desk and picked it up.

It was Eve. "It's not your mom, Kit. It's Allie."

"What happened to Allie?"

"I told her to ring me if she ever—"

"Is she in trouble?"

"Oh, Kit, I missed her call. And now she doesn't answer. I keep calling back."

"How long ago did she call?"

"I don't know. I tried Cari's. But she's not answering, either."

"Eve, see if Ruby can stay with Mom. I'll pick you up and take you out to Allie's house." I grabbed my briefcase and rushed to the door.

Teresa looked up from the counter. "Is your mom okay?"

"Teresa, yes. It's a kid emergency."

Eve was already running down her porch steps with her backpack hanging on one shoulder when I pulled up in front of her house. She got in the car and started talking. "I didn't hear my phone ring. I walked by to throw out the trash. That's when I saw she called."

"She didn't leave a message?"

"No message." Eve put her hand up to her forehead and closed her eyes. "I called her back right away. I keep trying and trying. But she won't answer."

"Did you get ahold of Cari?"

"Finally."

"Was she working at the hospital today?"

"It takes her a couple hours to get home."

"Did Allie call her?"

"No. The counselor did. From the high school. Can you drive a little faster?"

"Eve, I don't want to get stopped for speeding." The cars ahead of me were slowing down in the rush hour. "Why did the counselor call Allie's mom?"

"She had Allie in her office. And Allie just escaped."

"Wait a minute. She was holding Allie? In her office? I only do that if I call for a psych eval."

"That's serious, isn't it?" Eve didn't wait for me to answer. "Oh, this is terrible!"

"Eve, you have to stay calm. Answer some questions for me. Did anyone see Allie leave?"

"Some kids did."

"Did the counselor send out school security?"

"I don't know."

Eve's cell phone rang. "Cari? Did you find her?" She raised the volume so I could hear the conversation.

"Not yet." Cari sounded desperate. "But I've got the counselor on conference call. Hold on."

Eve sat there, staring at her phone. I tried to keep my eyes on the freeway and resisted the temptation to tailgate.

Cari came back on. "Eve, are you there?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'm gonna let the school counselor talk."

"Hello. So I'm speaking to Allie's aunt?" The counselor spoke very slowly. That meant she was as worried as we were.

"Yes. We're headed to the house. Right now." Eve looked at me. "How long before you think we'll get there?"

"So, who is there with you, ma'am?"

"I have a school counselor. In the car."

"May I have your name, please?"

I gave it to her and invited her to look it up on the state website. She asked me to spell it.

Eve looked puzzled. I put my finger to my lips. We drove on, counting the miles to our exit.

The counselor finally came back on the phone. "How many minutes before you reach the house?"

Eve looked out the window. "Almost there."

Cari was still frantic. "Kit, will you call me as soon as you get there?"

"We will." I pulled off the freeway and headed into the center of the town.

"Don't go that way." Eve shut her phone. "Here, turn here, through the park." She opened her car door before I had even stopped in the driveway. And then she cocked her head, listening. "Okay. I'm pretty sure Allie's here."

"How do you know that?"

"The dogs are in the house." She jumped out and headed for the back door.

I followed. "Eve, do you have your phone?"

"Yes. Stay with me." She opened the back door into the kitchen. In a flash, Max and Calli bounded out, yipping and wailing, greeting Eve like a long-lost friend. "Hi, kids." They jumped on her and she rubbed their heads. "Where's Allie?" And with that, they charged ahead of us and into Allie's bedroom. We followed them and stopped in the doorway.

The dogs were bouncing on a mound of bedclothes, pulling back the comforter with their teeth. And there was Allie, curled up in fetal position, her head bent under her arms.

She didn't move and my heart almost stopped.

Eve ran to the bed and took the thin body in her arms. And as the dogs pressed in, slathering Allie's face with their tongues she suddenly sat up, tangled in blankets and dogs. "Yuck! Maxwell and Calli, get down!"

Eve let out an audible sigh of relief. I moved closer to the bed to check for sharp objects or blood. Eve had wrapped herself around her niece. "She's okay, Kit." She knew I was looking for wounds. Allie pulled her sweater up over her face.

"No pills, Allie?" I had to ask.

She let Eve pull the sweater away from her eyes. Aside from cheeks full of puppy saliva and tear stains, Allie looked aware and alert. But her suffering was real, and I knew Eve could not bear to see her tormented.

I went back into the kitchen to let Cari know we found her daughter.

"Oh, thank God. Where was she?"

"In bed. We need to make a plan."

"I don't want her to have to deal with her brothers tonight."

"How about we take her to spend the night with Eve?"

"Do you think that's...?"

"Cari, of course it's alright. Eve will love the idea. You can come out later."

"Thanks a million."

"And call the school counselor to tell her we'll watch Allie for the next few days."

Eve was already packing Allie's overnight bag. Allie was sitting up on the bed, watching her. Eve looked around the room. "Where is your cell phone, Allie?"

Allie reached under her sweater.

Eve put out her hand. "I need to keep it. For you."

"What if my best friend calls?"

"Then you can talk to her."

Allie still wouldn't hand it over. I sat down on the bed next to her. "Allie, we don't want you to see any trash texts."

"Can I have it back? Later?"

Eve crossed her heart. "Promise."

Allie slid off the bed and gave the phone to Eve. "Are we gonna go, now?"

Eve lifted the big bag. "You got all your stuff?"

"Can I bring the dogs?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Why not?"

So off they went. By the time I reached the car, Max and Calli had jumped into the back seat with Allie and her overstuffed travel bag. Eve sat down next to me and flashed a grin. "We'll have a sleep over!" She was still a teenager.

It was already dark when I dropped the troupe off at Eve's house. I drove over to Mom's and found her and Ruby in the den.

"Good night, girls." My mother settled herself slowly onto her little sofa bed.

Ruby made sure Mom was tucked in and then crooked her finger so I would follow her into the kitchen. She opened the oven. "I made this. Everybody can eat." It was a huge casserole bubbling with cheese on macaroni. "Eat it all." She gathered up her bags.

"Thanks for everything, Ruby."

"No problem." The night air burst in as she let herself out the back door. "Be warm,"

It was late when Eve and Allie finally showed up, cradling Sasha and Peter. Allie let Peter jump from her arms. "We made a doggy bedroom in the garage. But the cats are hungry."

I pulled open the oven door. "I hope they like mac and cheese."

"Cool!"

Sasha joined Peter, weaving around Eve's feet as she carried the hot casserole out to the hearth. "Let's eat out here, Allie." She was already guiding her niece out of the storm.

We sat nestled in the couch for hours in front of the fireplace, eating comfort food and gazing at the flaming logs. Eve slid off the couch, gathered up the empty dishes and carried them away, returning with a bag of marshmallows and a wire clothes hanger.

Allie jumped up and grabbed the marshmallows. "Can we roast 'em? In the fireplace?"

Eve began to unwind the hanger hook. "Where else?"

Allie popped the bag. As Eve skewered a marshmallow, the doorbell rang. Allie did not look up.

Cari came into the family room, dragging a bag of dog food. "I'm guessing you brought the dogs." She knelt beside her daughter. "Hey. Are you okay?"

Allie kept her eyes on the roasting marshmallow in the fireplace. "I'm okay."

Cari smoothed her daughter's long hair. Then she stood up and took off her parka.

Allie pointed the skewer at her. "Here, Mom. You can have the first one."

I went into the kitchen. Those three needed to talk. But no one spoke for several minutes.

Allie held another marshmallow over the fire. "Aunt Eve, can I have my cell phone back?"

"Do you want to see if your best friend called?"

Cari raised her eyebrows. "Allie, since when do you have a best friend?"

I could tell something was up. The only best friend I knew of had been washed off the rocks into the Pacific Ocean over a year ago. The marshmallow caught fire and dropped into the flames.

Eve reached in her pocket. "Okay, Allie. Let's check your messages."

Cari did not try to hide her suspicion. "What is your best friend's name?"

Allie didn't answer. I went back and sat down next to her. "Allie, do you understand why it's not good for you to keep texting your friends right now?"

As I expected, she still didn't answer. She looked at the phone for a moment. "When can I have it back?"

"Here's a plan. Tomorrow, we'll all sit down and go through your inbox. You can delete all the mean messages and we'll block whoever sent them. Forever."

Allie wasn't going to give in easily. "Then can I have my phone back?"

Eve put her hand on Allie's shoulder. "We're not punishing you."

"Fine. So don't make me go back to school."

Cari gave me a sideways glance.

Allie was insistent. "There's only a couple of days left before winter break."

Eve jumped in. "You can stay here!"

Allie finally looked at her mother. "Okay, Mom?"

"I don't know Allie. Your aunt is busy cleaning the old house for the holidays."

Eve had that solved, too. "I can use the help!"

Allie gave her mother another marshmallow. "Okay, Mom?"

Cari stared at it as it melted on her fingers. "Okay, you win."

Tuesday

The next morning we gathered around Eve's kitchen table. Cari surveyed the room. "You've done a pretty good job of scourging this place."

Eve poured her a cup of coffee. "There's still lots of stuff hiding."

"Moma never threw anything away." Cari rested her head in her hands. "And poor Dad. His solution was to pile everything in boxes and tie them up with twine."

Peter jumped into Eve's lap. She stroked his head. "I find crazy things in those boxes."

Allie picked up Sasha. "I hope we find more jewelry."

Cari finished her coffee and set her cup on the table.

Allie let Sasha bounce to the floor. "Are we gonna decorate?"

Eve put Peter in Allie's lap and gathered the dishes. "There must be a ton of ornaments. In the garage."

Cari took Peter from Allie's arms. "You can't go out there in your pajamas. Go put your jeans on."

When Allie left the room, I leaned toward Cari. "Do you still have her cell phone?"

Eve dried her hands and sat down at the table. "Don't look at her messages."

"Kit, you know that her best friend died last year." Cari pulled the cell phone out of her pocket. "Only thirteen years old. I can't even imagine what her parents are going through."

"Does Allie ever mention her?"

Cari shook her head. "Never a word. She cried for three days and then shut down."

I looked at Eve. She stood up and pulled a big poncho over her head. "I'm goin' out to the garage."

Cari waited until she heard the dogs greet Eve on the back steps. Then she spoke in a low tone. "Kit, to tell you the truth, we don't know how to talk about those things in this family."

"I know. I've seen Eve react that way."

"Do you think you could talk to Allie?"

"You can do it, Cari. Just find the right moment."

"I don't know, Kit."

"Start with good memories. Spend the day together decorating this old house. When she's ready to talk, she will. Mostly, just be there for her."

Cari pushed her chair away from the table. "I'll go light a fire under the princess. We'll meet you in the garage."

I pulled on my jacket and I headed out the door. The dogs ambushed me as I approached the garage. "Eve! Call off your dogs!"

Eve turned around. She had strung holiday lights around her neck

I almost broke up at the sight of her. "You look like a Christmas tree."

"I'm trying to find all the lights. In this mess." She was untangling a string of large colored bulbs. "Look at these. These big ones. From the fifties."

The old garage was filled with the scent of decaying wood and lit by a single incandescent lamp dangling from the center rafter. Everything was everywhere—boxes and bags piled along the walls and strewn across the cement slab. I was sure if we searched deep enough, we would discover someone's skeleton.

Eve bent over and plugged in her necklace of lights. "There!"

The dogs suddenly dashed out and returned, dragging Allie into the garage. Cari followed and sat down on an old trunk. "I see you found the decorations."

Eve lifted the lights over her head and hung them on a nail. Allie began to weave through the maze of boxes, trolling for treasures. She knelt down to read the label on an old cardboard box. "This one says 1972. Can I open it?" She pulled out a notebook. The cover came off in her hands. She held it up to the light and read the title. "*Journey Through The Desert.*" Several colorful envelopes drifted to the floor.

Cari jumped up and stuffed them into her pocket. "Another one of your old journals."

Eve did not move. She just stood there, surrounded by holiday lights.

Allie flipped through the pages, reading the titles of the entries.

66 Blues

Gallup is raining

Cañoncito

Taostown

Ode to Larimer Street

We waited for Eve to say something. After all, these were her memories of unexpected destinations on her travels through the Southwest. But she just sat down next to Cari and stared at a handful of light bulbs.

Allie broke the silence. "When did you go to all these places?"

Eve was vague. "It was after I graduated. From high school. That year."

"So, did you go alone?"

Eve still seemed distracted. "Some of the time." She took the journal from Allie. "It's a long story."

"Were you alone?"

"Not always. It started off as a dig."

"A what?"

"Archaeology."

"To dig up bones?"

"Bones." Eve looked at the notebook. "And other things."

"Were you an archaeologist?"

"No."

"So why did you go?"

"I had a friend..."

"He was your boyfriend? What was his name?"

"Evan. His dad was the archaeologist." Eve bit her lower lip. "Evan called me. From Albuquerque. He forgot some things."

"Like what? What did he forget?"

"Oh, trowels, maybe. And his guitar."

"Why did he want...?"

Cari shook her head. "Don't ask, Allie. Evan's mother told Eve she was crazy."

Eve covered her face with her hands.

"Aunt Eve, then how did you get there?"

"By bus."

"Bus?" That was an archaic concept for Allie.

Eve put her hands in her lap. "You could catch a bus from downtown to anywhere. In those days."

Allie was wide-eyed. "How long did it take?"

"To get to Albuquerque? It seemed like a day. And a night. And most of the next day."

"You sat on a bus for two days?"

"We stopped in little towns."

"These little towns?" Allie sat down next to Eve and studied the next page of the notebook. "What's Highway 66?" And we silently read the words Eve had scribbled almost forty years ago while rolling through the desert on a Greyhound bus.

fiftycent hamburgers

cereal pyramids

flies on the sugarbowl

between june and september

the afternoon highway

pretends to be hell

the wilting traveler's yesterday's enthusiasm

has fled into dust

and endless asphalt snaking on

salted water with melted ice

the weary take refuge in leather cafe booths

the highway languishes outside the window

seducing with her mocking challenge

"try me, try me"

Allie turned another page. "Gallup? That was a town?" She held it up so we could share Eve's experience, another stop on the highway into the desert.

Gallup is raining

a broken billboard along the highway

the dusty Santa Fe rolls in, a great tired bull resting a little

raindrops bouncing off his back

wooden benches carved with memoirs of a lonesome traveler

a dog and an Indian boy eating an ice cream sandwich

Eve started to untangle the strings of lights. "I got off in Albuquerque."

"Was Evan waiting for you?" Allie was following Eve's story like the plot of an old movie.

"He picked me up. In the crew truck." Eve didn't look up, but she was smiling. "And we drove through town. The dust devils were blowing down Central."

"Where did you go?"

"We went up toward the mountains. The crew was camped up there."

Allie turned a page and silently read the next entry.

Child nestled in your mother's cedared bosom

A white chapel with cross among the hills

Clotheslines and a schoolbus without wheels

"Was that Cañoncito?"

"It was on the way. We stayed in a trailer."

"What's a trailer?"

Her mother translated. "RV. Mobile home."

"It was a trailer." Eve was firm.

Allie was still full of questions. "Did you find any artifacts?"

"No."

"Then why did you go up there?"

"We were headed up to the mountains."

"To take drugs?"

"Indigenous medicines."

"That's what I said. Drugs."

Eve picked up the journal and began to fan herself. "They were plants."

"Like what? Mushrooms?"

"Mushrooms. And cactus buttons. And flowers off a weed that grew along the highway."

"Did anyone get sick?"

Eve stopped fanning herself. "Everybody got sick. One kid died."

Allie was silent.

"We shouldn't have done it, Allie. We didn't know what we were doing."

Allie took the journal from Eve's hand and turned a few pages. "Did you stay very long up there?"

Eve shook her head. "Evan and some guys went up to Santa Fe. They took the pickup."

"Did he leave you in the trailer all by yourself?"

"To guard the camp site."

"That was—"

"Stupid." Eve finished for Allie.

"So what happened then? Did you just stay there?"

Eve sighed. "I hiked down the road to find a gas station. To make a phone call. But I found this little chili stand."

"That's all they sold? Chili?"

"Red and green. Lots of things. And they had a "Help Wanted" sign in the window."

"So did you get a job?"

"I asked the lady if I could make enough money to go north. I wanted to go see my Uncle Clay. And Granddad's ranch."

"Did they hire you, Aunt Eve?"

"They gave me a job. And a place to stay."

"Who paid them to do that?"

Cari shook her head. "How did my daughter get so cynical?"

Allie was already on to the next episode. "So, did you finally get to your grandfather's ranch?"

"Uncle Clay came down to Famous Chili and took me up to his house. To visit my cousins. But I didn't go to Granddad's."

"Why not?"

"Granddad had a shotgun. He probably would've shot me if he saw me coming up the road."

Allie's eyes widened.

Eve crossed her heart. "It's true, Allie."

"So where did you go?"

"I stayed at Clay's."

"How long?"

"Oh, a long time. My cousins were little. And their mother was in a hospital."

"So you took care of them?"

"For a little while. But I wanted to travel. So Uncle Clay let me borrow his old car. And I drove on up north. Into Colorado."

Allie flipped through the pages of the journal. I could see her lips moving as she read to herself.

*Raton spends summer nights
pacing the highway in coke bottles and shorts
shuttered eyes,
sleeping main street dreams
its frontier childhood—
squeaking saddles,
Stetsoned cowboys,
fancy boots.
Raton spends summer nights
beneath the glow of a fluorescent gas station
swatting mosquitoes.*

"How far did you go?"

"Farther north—" Eve stopped short. "But the car broke down. So I went back to Uncle Clay's."

Allie eyed her. "I think you're leaving something out."

Eve took the journal from Allie. "Some other time. I'll tell you."

We sat there for a moment in the dim light of the gray December morning.

"Aunt Eve, would you do it again?"

Eve was caught off guard. "Well, I wouldn't—"

"You wouldn't go with some dumb boy."

Eve flicked a long strand of blond hair over her shoulder. And I caught a glimpse of that teenager in denim jeans with a pack on her back, hiking along the dusty desert highway, alone.

"So, Aunt Eve, why aren't you an archaeologist now?"

Eve brushed off the cover of the journal. "I don't know, Allie. Maybe I like people to be alive. Better than dry bones."

Cari stood up and stretched her long legs. "Well, story time is over."

Allie gathered as many strings of holiday lights as she could carry and left the garage with Max and Calli following at her heels.

Eve sat there on the old trunk staring at her handful of crumbling papers. "I think I'll use these to start a fire."

I put out my hand. "Can I have them?"

Without a word, Eve gave me the pages of the journal, all that was left of her journey through the desert nearly four decades ago.

Cari patted her sister's knee. "You did good."

Eve didn't look up.

"You made it through the desert. You did alright."

Eve picked up a string of colored lights and walked out.

Cari then pulled the envelopes out of her pocket. "So, Kit, do you want to hear the real story?"

"Are those letters from Eve?"

"I didn't want Allie to read them."

"Are they...?"

"Well, you saw how fast I grabbed those envelopes."

"So your daughter wouldn't get hold of them."

"Before Allie was ever born, Eve told me to tear them up."

"Why?"

"I think she just didn't want them floating around."

"But you didn't..."

"I finally gave them back to her. But she didn't get around to shredding them, either."

"I'm sorry to be so nosy, but—"

"Here, take a look at this one." Cari sat down on the trunk and took a letter out of an envelope.

"This was probably the first one she sent."

July 1972

Dear Carita,

When the bus rolled into Albuquerque, Evan was there to pick me up. He's brown and strong from digging in the trenches all summer long.

The wind was blowing tumbleweeds right down Central Avenue. We drove through the town and up into the hills, miles and miles from anywhere.

By afternoon the heat was harrowing. And we could smell the incense cedar and juniper and sagebrush baking in the sun. We were the only travelers on the road to nowhere.

Can you remember road trips to Granddad's? The world is stark and full of wonders. And the air crackles with electricity all around.

Carita, will you keep this to yourself? The first night, I put my sleeping bag outside in the crew tent. But Evan said to come sleep inside in the bed in the trailer. It's strange to sleep with a kid I used to run with in the Plaza.

Last night was the Fourth. But the pickup had a flat. So we had no way to go to see fireworks. We were lying outside on blankets smoking stuff and looking at the sky. And—Flash! A silver arrow pierced the clouds. Then—Crash! It was wild! Everyone was stoked. Fireworks by the Great Spirit.

Anyway, days of enchantment on the edge of the earth—how long can this last? The days come and go like thunderstorms over the desert...

XOXO

Your crazy sister.

PS: Now rip this up into tiny pieces!

Cari sighed and tore up the letter. "I should fill you in on what happened to Eve at the end of July."

"She got the job at the chili stand?"

"There's more to it than that. Evan and his buddies wanted to take off to Santa Fe. But he knew his dad expected someone to watch the site. So he convinced Eve to stay in the trailer."

"Eve was supposed to scare off vandals?"

"Crazy, huh?"

"So how long did she last up there?"

"She stayed awake two nights, too scared to sleep. Then, on the second dawn, she put on her backpack and hitch-hiked to the nearest gas station."

"Looking for a pay phone?"

Cari nodded. "But she found the chili stand."

"So she called home."

"And I answered. I was the only one up so early."

"Was she upset? I mean, did she..."

"She was bawling. She told me about her nights alone in the trailer and the packs of coyotes howling in the hills. All night long. And all she had to eat was raw oats. I couldn't understand everything she was saying. She was sobbing so hard."

"Right there at the window of the chili stand?"

"In front of Ray and Inez. Kit, you know, I think that's what made them offer her a job. They could see that she was in trouble. Besides, their counter girl had taken off down to Juarez."

"Eve must have seemed like a kid to them."

"That's probably why they asked her for Clay's phone number. They must have been thinking 'this girl is too young to be out here by herself.'"

"So they hired her right then and there? On Uncle Clay's recommendation?"

"It wasn't exactly as easy as that. There are some things I never told Eve." Cari took a moment to consider how much of this story she should reveal to me. "The part I never told Eve is that the minute I hung up, I called Dad at the base. He was so mad he couldn't talk."

"So your dad got on the phone with his brother Clay?"

"Years later, Clay told me that Dad said to him, 'That girl is in trouble. I told her she didn't want to make that trip.' So Clay told Dad he would watch out for Eve."

"Your dad just let it go at that?"

"What else could he do? He was headed to Okinawa. He couldn't go out to rescue her."

"Can you imagine getting a call like that from your daughter?"

"Yeah." Cari covered her face with her hands and shook her head. "No. Please, let's not think about that!" She selected another envelope and gave it to me.

I opened the letter.

August, 1972

Howdy Carita,

Sorry about the collect call. I was spooked. With all those stars in the sky, the desert night was still so black, I freaked out.

And I had no idea when Evan was coming back.

Everything I search for always escapes. Nothing ever lasts.

Who could want me, anyway? I should know better.

So I got a job at the Famous Chili. They had a "Help Wanted" sign, so I asked the owner's wife if I could work there. Inez wanted to know if I had 'kin' in New Mexico. And she went in the back and called Uncle Clay. When she came out, she gave me an apron. And she took me to the pantry to peel potatoes.

Ray said their counter girl just went down to Mexico to see her mother. He said I could work until she came back, or forever if she didn't. He showed me how to bag the cash and put it in the safe. And he gave me his revolver to use if there is trouble. (I didn't tell him I never touched a gun before.)

Inez made up a cot in the pantry, where I can stay as long as I work here. I had my backpack so I just went to bed.

And here I am ever since.

They are always feeding me. Ray gives me his chili. And Inez bakes pinto bean cake that might as well be gingerbread. They cook and I eat, as much as I want.

Carita, if Evan calls, don't tell him anything. Nothing! Okay? And don't tell Moma. And never tell Dad. You know what he would say. "It's your own damn fault." And he would be right.

But now here I am. I'm just so busy I don't have time to think. I get up when the first light shines through the ceiling vent. I put on my apron. And I set up for the morning. I have so much to do, I don't have time to hate myself.

The counter is open from dawn to midnight. Lunch is long and the orders non-stop, and the sun blasts right through the window. I sweat like a pig on a spit. But Inez is happy with me. And Ray says that Famous Chili is more famous now the highway crew comes down to see the new girl at the window.

After noon, thunder clouds billow up over the hills. Belligerent, they collide. And I walk in the rain. Then the winds kick up and chase the storms away. They blow up from the canyon, leaving insects in their wake.

It is the year of the Cicadas. Every tree is humming, every tree for miles around. I lie there on my cot, listening to the sound, falling into dreams. The nights are full of stars—a heaven of light through the vent above my bed. I can sleep here, Carita. I am safe in my pantry.

I don't know why Ray and Inez are watching out for me. They know I will be leaving soon. Why should they even care? But they do.

XOXO

Your missing sister.

PS: Don't forget to rip this up!

I started to fold the letter. "So, did you keep all this to yourself?"

"No, I didn't keep it to myself." She took the letter and put it in its envelope. "I'm not sure I should even be telling you this."

"Cari, I think after all this time, it would be good for Eve to know how much you cared about her."

"That day I took that collect call from Eve, I didn't just call my dad. I told my mom, too."

"Good for you."

Cari shook her head. "But Eve thought I was keeping it all to myself."

"If you had kept everything to yourself, do you think she would have made it back home alive?"

She didn't say anything.

"Let me answer that for you. No, Cari. I don't think she would have made it home alive."

She still did not speak.

"Cari, I think Eve called you because she was crying out for help."

"When I woke up Moma, guess what she did."

"What?"

"She called Evan's mother!"

"What did she say?"

"Poor Moma. She got on the phone and she screamed something like 'Your boy just left my daughter alone in the desert!'"

"Whoa! What did Evan's mom say?"

"Evan's mother was already mad and she blamed her husband for the entire fiasco."

"So the mothers became sisters in their wrath."

"Well, Evan's mom was wise to her son. She figured out that he and his friends were dodging the draft."

"So Evan was running away from Vietnam."

"Typical teenager." Cari shrugged. "Anyway, Evan's mom talked her husband into getting Eve a field job on a dig in California."

"Eve never knew who arranged these things?"

"Maybe she figured everything out. But she never wanted to talk about it. So I'm not sure I need to talk about it, either."

"Cari, it's been—how many years since all this went down? I think she should know just how many people cared enough to save her life."

"I thought she'd be mad at me for squealing on her."

"You really sound like a little sister."

She shuffled through the envelopes. "One thing I really feel bad about. All these letters she sent me—I never answered a single one." Then she selected another letter for me to read.

September, 1972.

Howdy, Carita—

Here I am at Uncle Clay's. Been here a month with him and the girls. We are in town on Cherry Street. But if you drive a half mile to the east, there is a road that leads out of town. Well, you know, it goes out to the old ranch where Granddad still lives.

I told Uncle Clay's housekeeper Dani I wanted to go out to the ranch. Dani said before I go, I should talk to her great aunt, Mrs. Crocker, who lives in town with Dani now. She used to live out there on a homestead ranch. And she knew Granddad years ago.

So, Dani took me to meet Aunt Maggie. Left a widow with two sons and a herd of cattle, she lived out there since '29. She's almost as old as Granddad. First thing Maggie said to me, "I can tell you stories you won't believe!" And then, "Let me give you some advice. If you don't have a man, you need to get yourself a gun." She said she never shot a human. But she scared a few away. She said her rifle was her friend and the best companion her boys could have. They learned to shoot and bring back supper. Whatever ran out on the ranch, Maggie could make it taste real good. She told me how to skin a hare and fry up snake like chicken meat.

*Maggie and I had a good old time. I asked her, "Would you do it again?" "H*** yes!" she said. "You bet I would!"*

I know Dani hoped those stories would scare me straight. But her plan backfired because I'm thinking, "If Maggie could do it, why can't I?" But I'll do it without a gun.

So I asked Clay if I could borrow his old car, the one he calls Bess because she moos in reverse. I want to go ahead up the highway and find an old house somewhere on a country road, maybe with a garden, where no one else would want to live.

XOXOX!

PS Maggie said it was sad our grandma died so young.

And that I shouldn't try to go see Granddad.

Cari tore the letter in half and reached for another envelope.

“Okay, I want you to read this one, but let me fill you in before you do.”

And Cari told me the story of Eve's journey north out of New Mexico. It began on a frosty morning early in October, with still, dark clouds hanging low over the plains. She was awakened by the farm report blaring from the radio in the kitchen. Clay had gone out to the ranch to dig post holes before the ground froze. Eve got dressed silently and rolled up her extra clothes in her sleeping bag without waking her cousins.

She tiptoed to the kitchen, poured herself a cup of Clay's coffee, and made a dozen peanut butter sandwiches for her trip. Then she snapped off the radio and carried her bags out to the driveway where Bess was waiting for her. With a charge of carefree energy, she tossed them into the trunk of the '64 Rambler and headed up Main Street to hit the highway at the end of town.

Eve and Bess cruised for miles through sleepy grasslands before joining the interstate stretching north into infinity. Eve was full of heady independence as Bess flew along on all eight cylinders, and the morning never seemed to end. Over a hundred miles they traveled, through small towns and over high passes.

But as the hours wore on, Eve's euphoria began to wane and a hand-drawn sign announcing "Farm Produce" caught her attention. Its arrow pointed west, off the interstate and on a whim, Eve turned down the bumpy county road. She drove for several minutes, winding deeper into muddy pasture land with no departures, no way to turn around. Bess crawled over the mounds of water-logged clay scarred with potholes. Finally, barns and small houses appeared in the distance and a group of hippies carrying backpacks and woven bags emerged along the road. A young woman wearing a tapestry skirt flagged Eve down. “I'm Lila. Where're ya headed?”

Eve told her she was just looking for the fresh fruit.

“We've got apples at the co-op. I'll show you where.” Lila got in and flung her pale brown hair over her shoulders. “Just follow this road.”

Eve drove on, curious about the companion who had suddenly joined her. Lila was pretty, but her placid expression never changed, even as the car bounced over the road. And her big chestnut eyes gave Eve the impression that Lila was high—on something.

In a few minutes, they arrived at a dirt lot filled with old trucks and produce crates. “Here we are.” Lila started to open the car door, but stopped and looked at Eve. “So where are you staying tonight?”

When Eve confessed that she did not know where she would stay on this first night of her journey, Lila settled herself back in the seat. "Look, honey. I know a place. There's a little house right up here." She shut the car door. "Let me show it to you. Take this road until I tell you to stop."

Eve had no idea what to expect, so she just drove on, excited and a little afraid. Maybe she would find the home she was looking for.

"Here, pull off here." Lila rolled down her window and nodded toward a muddy path.

Eve cautiously drove into the pasture. Bess mooed in protest, spinning her wheels. Lila sprang out and a flock of redwing blackbirds flew up from the posts of a barbed wire fence. She lifted a section of wire, ducked under, and held it up so Eve could follow.

They trudged over the wet earth to a small stand of scrub oaks. And Eve stopped to catch her breath. A crumbling adobe structure was nestled among the trees. Lila ran up and pushed on the old wooden door. It swung open noisily, and she beckoned Eve to come inside. Eve was in love with the little house even before she went through the door. It was rustic and charming, furnished with a pot-bellied stove, a small sofa, a wooden table, and a kitchen cabinet with basin and pitcher.

Lila lifted a teapot from the top of the stove. "You can boil water. There's a well house outside. And an outhouse."

Eve could not believe her good luck. She asked Lila if she was sure she could stay without paying rent.

Lila had a quick response. "If no one knows you're here, why not? But don't worry. The landowner is pretty nice. You are cute, so he will probably let you stay." She put the teapot down. "Maybe he'll just ask you to do some favors for him." Then she went to the door, took off her sandals and padded barefoot over the pasture toward the road, leaving Eve to ponder their conversation.

But her eagerness to move in overshadowed her misgivings. So she carried in her few possessions and her left-over peanut butter sandwiches. She cleaned the basin and filled the teapot. She beat the sofa pillows and swept the floor. As darkness fell, she shut the door and struggled with the rusty bolt. Then she lay down on the couch and wrapped herself in her sleeping bag. She looked around the room and felt as happy as a child in a new playhouse. And she fell asleep before she had a chance to be afraid.

Eve later sent her sister a letter rich with descriptions of her life in the little farming community.

Fall, 1972

Sister Carita,

It's been raining and hailing the past few days. The corn is shredded, but the pumpkins and squash will pull through.

I am writing this knowing that thunder and lightning will be here soon. I'd love to get to the post office before the storm, but I think I'll end up right in the middle of it.

Oh, yeah, there's the thunder.

This morning I washed my hair. I took a big basin down to the irrigation ditch and filled it and dunked my head. A good way to start the day.

I am content here in the country.

Last Friday, Lila took me up Creek Pass Road. It is paradise—the most beautiful land I've ever seen—mountains, rocks, pinon, and apple trees—and green, green meadows. We got out and walked around. There was a crooked frame of a house, filled with redwings and vines flowing over the wooden ruins.

A small stream runs winding, winding, all below the mountains that rise in the background.

(I send you the spirit—words don't say enough. If you close your eyes you know the place.)

But now someone is selling 2 to 3 acre plots for expensive estates. I cried when I saw the signs.

The locals say this Fall has been a blessing. The last few summers were so dry and dusty they couldn't see across the valley. Now it's clear and wet and cool. And the leaves are turning golden.

But Winter will hit soon. And with it comes the ice wind.

Right now I feel the breath of solitude. It calms my heart.

The wind blows, the horses wander and I sit at the kitchen table.

It is good to be the lone keeper of a house—to wake up to just you alone.

Times change and so do feelings. I used to love to wake up next to Evan (even though we didn't have much chance to sleep together).

But now at night, I'm almost ecstatic with the freedom of being alone. I feel like a little kid as I climb into bed. My dreams are mine. And the night and the awakening are all without intrusion.

Now, Carita, I have written so much and said nothing.

But I wanted to send you good wishes

and love.

XOXO

I handed the letter back to Cari. “She sounds like she’s writing from another world.”

Cari nodded. “Like her mind was in another world. Like maybe she was on something.”

“How long before she wrote to you again?”

Cari folded her hands around the letters. “She didn't write for a few weeks. Maybe it was more than a month. Anything I know about that time, Eve told me by phone.”

“Another collect call?”

“It was probably November before I heard from her. By that time she was already back at Clay's.”

“So, was she crying again?”

“How did you guess?”

"Did anything bad happen to Eve at the adobe?"

Cari looked down at the envelopes. "Well, eventually the landowner did show up to visit his new squatter."

"That would be Eve."

"Right. So, he is a rancher from Texas. He drives up in a big, shiny pickup and Eve knows from talking to Lila that this must be the owner. So she goes out to meet him. He was nice and polite. He called her "Miss" and shook her hand."

"What did he look like?"

"Eve didn't really describe him. A man about Dad's age. Nice looking."

"Like Clark Gable? In *The Misfits*?"

"Yeah." Cari frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Sorry."

"Well, anyway, Lila had told Eve to expect this guy. So, even though she's a little uneasy about a visit from the landlord, she invites him into the house. And they have a conversation."

"A conversation?" I caught myself and pretended to zip my lips. "Sorry."

"Yes, Kit. He notices she cleaned up the house and even cleared a little plot for a garden. Then he asks her how long she's planning to stay. Eve doesn't know how to answer, so she just says something like, 'As long as it's alright with you.'" Cari paused and I could barely keep myself quiet. She looked at me. "You want to know what he said?"

"What?"

"He just tells her he will be back to check on her."

"And that was that?"

"No, not really. A few days go by and he drives up again. This time, he comes out carrying a box of groceries."

"Groceries?"

"Kit, you're just as dense as Eve."

Suddenly I understood. "How long did it take Eve to figure this out?"

"I will never know. She was pretty happy to get all that nice food—expensive stuff like honey and almond butter. She never could afford luxuries like that."

"So how long did he hang around this time?"

"He didn't. He just let her know he was taking care of her."

"And that he would be back to check up on her?"

"On another day. But he wouldn't say when."

"Cari, did Eve tell you she really didn't know what was going to happen?"

"She just told me she was grateful. I think she felt like he was looking out for her."

I thought maybe Cari wouldn't go on with this story, so I decided to help her. "Anyway, he came back to see Eve?"

"Yes. One day, late in the afternoon."

"And he brought more goodies."

"Yes."

"Oh, no."

"By this time, she was in over her head."

"But Cari, do you think Eve really understood what was happening—I mean, what he expected of her?"

"No. And yes. Lila told her that kind of thing happened all the time."

"But I just think Eve was still so naive."

"Maybe so." Cari was staring at the envelopes again. "Anyway, she told me he was a really nice man."

"Uh huh." That was all I could say. "What did he say to her?"

"Well, again, Kit, she didn't tell me much. I just gathered that she invited him into the house and made him a cup of coffee or tea or something. And he sat down on her couch—her bed—and suggested they have an arrangement."

"An arrangement? So Eve could live there for free?"

Cari studied the envelopes in her hand. "By the time she called me, she was full of remorse. But more than a few of the hippies out there had worked something like that out with their landlords."

"Exchange of services?"

"I guess you could put it like that."

Cari seemed to be stalling, so I cut to the chase. "So on that late afternoon, Eve consented to her landlord's advances."

Cari nodded.

"And she lived in the adobe, rent free, showered by gifts of food?"

Cari nodded again.

"How long could that go on?"

"Eve never said how long she stayed out there. But she did tell me that finally one night..." Cari sat up straight and searched through the envelopes. "Well, I don't know exactly what happened. Eve just told me that all of a sudden she felt paranoid. And she just snapped awake."

"Like coming out of a bad dream?"

"Well, she asked herself, 'What am I doing?' And she took the weed Lila had given her and tossed it in the field."

"She had been smoking dope?"

"I guess so. Then she just packed up the car and headed for the highway."

"Back to Uncle Clay's?"

"Back to Clay's." Cari unfolded a sheet of yellow paper. It was a page out of Eve's journal.

End of November 1972.

I left my adobe on a freezing night.

Bess almost got stuck on the country road.

I was afraid we would not make it back to Uncle Clay's.

I hit the highway and drove real fast,

going crazy with my thoughts

and turned on the radio to take away the fear.

I was searching for the Wildman blasting across the badlands.

But on this night

I could find only the hum of sound waves

bouncing over the desert.

I was desperate.

I kept searching,

spinning the dial from end to end.

Every frequency was lost.

I almost had given up

when I heard a voice,

coming from the sky,

speaking directly into my ear.

He was so clear that I almost turned him off.

I was afraid to hear what he had to say.

I did not want him to bawl me out.

I was so full of guilt and shame.

How could I live that way?

Why did I do what I had done?

I had given myself away

without really a thought.

And that could never be undone.

His was the only voice I could reach.

*So I let the preacher talk,
expecting to be condemned.
But the miles passed,
and I began to cry—
not because he yelled at me,
or told me I was bad.
I cried because he told that story
of the boy who took his father's gifts
and ran away to squander everything
and ended living with the pigs.
Finally he returned home,
broken and ashamed,
expecting to be chastised for his ways.
But his father ran to meet him.
And he put his arms around him
and cried with joy.
And he took his son back into his home.
I can't remember all the story
or the words that filled the miles.
It was a long drive back to Clay's.
And the road was icy,
so I kept skidding across the lanes.
But by the time I got there,
I was not afraid.
I had been given a message,
a message of mercy.
And it took away my pain.
I finally made it into town
after dark, as sleet began to fall.
The girls and Clay ran out to meet me.
They gave me hugs and brought me in.
The house was warm and Uncle Clay said to me,
"Welcome home, Evie.*

Welcome home."

Cari took the page from me. "Clay really was glad to have Eve back."

"Did Eve tell him anything?"

"She told him Bess had a pretty rough time on that trip."

"The car had a rough time?"

"Clay tried some repairs on the old Rambler, but he never got Bess fixed up so she could travel again. Maybe he was just stalling, trying to keep Eve in town with him and the girls."

"So Eve settled in and took care of her cousins?"

"For a while. Of course, all the locals noticed her and thought she was a hippie. Every time she went out the door, she felt the eyes of the entire town watching her." Cari only had a few envelopes left. "Here's one from November of '72" She took out the letter and began to read out loud.

Dear Carita,

Here we are, deep into Autumn.

And I am here at Uncle Clay's,

standing at the kitchen window

looking east, out over the prairie.

It seems like time has stopped.

The clouds hang there and never move.

The land stretches further than I can see.

And it never changes.

It is still morning.

The girls have gone to school,

Clay is out at the ranch.

And I am here with the country music and the storm report.

Did you know that Clay's wife is still in a hospital?

It's been three years since the accident!

She is all the way in Amarillo.

What can be wrong that she never gets out?

The girls really miss their mom,

and here they are, growing up.

Shawna has just turned teenager.

*She is pretty and has lots of pretty friends.
They want to style my hair and cruise down Main
in Clay's big car.
Clay lets them go as long as I drive.
But they will be getting into trouble soon.
Stacey is only six and barely coping.
You can't see it, 'cause she is so cute.
She laughs and plays and bounces on the bed.
But I know something is going on inside of her.
She can't stop and sometimes wets her pants.
At night she wants to sleep with me,
she is so scared.
Why do I know just how she feels?
I love the girls and Uncle Clay.
I wish I could stay.
But you know I can't.*

XOXO

Every day when Dani came to clean the house, she found Eve sitting alone at the kitchen table. So, hoping to give her a little social life, Dani introduced her to her son Russell, a young cowboy on leave from the Navy. Russ was a slim, ruddy-cheeked nineteen year old who almost seemed too young to be a cowboy or a sailor. His good manners and gentle sense of humor put Eve at ease, and she started to look forward to spending time with him whenever he came into town.

Russ offered to take Eve anywhere she wanted to go. He seemed to enjoy driving around his family's ranch in his new truck, checking fences and moving livestock through the pastures. Knowing that Eve would like to see the old homestead, he invited her to ride with him out into the countryside late one afternoon. She climbed into the cab and Russ wrapped one of his mother's comforters around her, cranked the heat up high and took off down the highway. Cozy and content, Eve imagined herself a princess, gliding through her kingdom as Russ guided the big pick-up, like a royal carriage along winding roads through gently rolling hills.

Eventually, Russ turned off the main road and followed tire tracks in the pasture. A crowd of cows gathered to greet the truck. "This here is your granddad's herd." He set the brake and Eve jumped out. Russ followed her. "Easy, easy."

She looked out over the broad purple expanse, remembering this place and the long, dusty road that led to her grandfather's ranch. But the old house was so far away that Eve could barely see it in the distance.

Russ pushed back the brim of his hat. "Sorry, kid. I can't take you to see your granddad."

Eve shrugged her shoulders and climbed back in the truck. Russ got in, too and they sat there staring out the windshield at the still, dark clouds that almost touched the ground. They listened to the hum of the high tension wires and the gentle conversation of the cattle.

Russ reached over and took her hand. "Would you mind if—would it be okay with you...?"

Eve knew he wanted to kiss her. Caught up in the moment, she almost let him. Then she reminded herself of what she had been doing the past month in the adobe up in Colorado. She drew her hand away and asked him to take her back to Clay's. She couldn't let Russ get involved with her. He deserved a good girl, someone who was young and pure. At the age of eighteen, Eve felt she already had a past.

Russ shipped out the next week, so Eve never saw him again. But he sent her a letter from the aircraft carrier in the Pacific. She saved it and pressed it into the pages of her journal. Cari and I unfolded that letter written four decades ago, and read it together.

Howdy Kid,

I have been thinking of you, even on the ship.

We have spent some days in the Philippine Islands. Now we will be going on to Vietnam. I expect we will be there a couple of months. And then, maybe some R & R in Hong Kong. Or maybe on to Japan, our home port. We never know exactly.

Eight hours of the day and night I spend in two to four hour shifts on watch. I stand engineering watches. I started as an "oiler" for the engines keeping the two main engines filled. Then I was moved to operating the ship's evaporators making fresh water from salt water. I now stand Sound and Security Watches looking for possible troubles and repairing them.

Firing missions are anytime we are called upon day or night. We have spare time for sleeping, eating, and more sleeping. And of course we have our regular working day from 8 AM to 4 PM.

(It's not as bad as it sounds. We do have a movie that is showed each night and music on the radio over the ship's entertainment speakers.)

I think about you all the time. I just wanted to write and say that I was happy I got to spend a few days meeting you. I know you will probably travel on and when I get home, you won't be there. But it was good to know you.

And I just want to say that wherever you go in your life, I will think of you.

Your Friend,

Russell

Cari slid the letter back into the journal. "I hate to throw this one away. He seemed like a nice guy."

"Did Eve ever see him again?"

“Never again. While she was waiting for Uncle Clay to fix the car, Evan’s dad called to offer her a job in California.”

“So she just took off?”

“Just like Russell predicted. As soon as she had a chance, she hit the road.”

“So she let Russ get away.”

“I never told her this, Kit, but I think Eve sold herself short. She just never thought she was good enough for anybody.”

We both knew that was true, so there was nothing I could say.

Cari sighed. “Well, anyway, she talked Clay into driving her to the edge of town where she could catch a bus headed west to the coast.”

“Didn’t he try to talk her out of leaving?”

“Of course he did. While they were sitting in the car waiting for the bus, Uncle Clay told Eve that Russ was a lot like her father—a quiet man but dependable, and a hard worker. And that she might consider staying around to get to know him.”

“I bet Eve didn't want to hear that.”

“I don’t imagine she did. Eve didn't want to talk about Daddy. She had it in her mind that he didn’t like her. But, you know, that was because he had trouble expressing his emotions—to anybody.”

“Was Uncle Clay better with words?”

“Not really. In fact, the whole family didn’t talk much. But I gotta hand it to him. I really think Clay made a valiant effort to keep Eve in town. He knew she would go away and be lost out in the world somewhere.”

“But what could he do?”

“Just as she was climbing on the bus, he invited her to come live with him and the girls. He told her she could stay as long as she wanted.”

“Did she even consider that?”

Cari shook her head and looked down at the folded letter in her hands.

"So Eve just got on?" I imagined how helpless Clay must have felt watching Eve disappear on that bus.

“Yep. And she was on her way.”

Almost Winter 1972

Carita,

I'm on my way to Denver, heading north from Uncle Clay's and Granddad's ranch.

On to a dig in California. But maybe that's just an excuse to get back on the road.

There's only a few people on this bus, every one a silent soul, carrying some private sorrow.

*I stare out the window and the gray world flies by. Sitting in this tiny space my backpack and me,
I sail through time.*

This is the best place in the universe. My mind races fast with the scenes outside the glass.

I don't eat, I don't sleep. I never want to get off.

Outside is rugged country and desolate. Far away from anywhere, it is isolated and free.

The day is almost night, now. As we climb the highway into a cloud of snow, darkness falls.

XOXOX

*PS Midnight. When the bus stopped in Denver, I took a walk to find the pawn shops. I found a
place in the city that will be gone if I ever come this way again.*

So here is the epitaph.

Ode to Larimer Street

old song in the heart of Denver

a darkened memory

you haunt the growth of your seed.

mile high history in a hock shop window

a violin

a hundred turquoise rings

and a mandolin's mother of pearl butterfly

singing some sad song for the past.

*It was almost spring before Cari received another letter from her sister. It was dated February
1973.*

Hey, Cari!

Damp weather this season here in the center of California.

Light rain and overnight fog so thick it hides the highway.

So we spent last month in the lab tent sorting artifacts.

*Things have dried up, now. The site survey is complete and we have started to dig, hours and
hours, every day,*

We are only down a few levels and we have hit hard clay.

*Painful digging and painstaking scraping, every layer another era, exposing bits of life from a
distant past.*

*Evan is my trench mate. We spend hours together every day down there digging and tossing tons
of dirt. The deeper we go, the higher we must throw it.*

But when the soil is sifted the earth gives up its secrets—treasures of tiny fragments, stone and bone.

What to make of all these broken artifacts? The secrets are lost, along with their makers. The real remembrance persists in nature's sentinels—the old live oaks, the constant river, and giant outcroppings of stone cratered over the centuries.

By afternoon, the fog over the flatlands has burned off, and steam rises from the yellow basin. There is the smell of warm weeds and dry grass. And the reeds rustle by the river's edge.

Just before the sun gets brutal it sinks to the horizon and the valley glows golden into twilight.

As we pack up the gear and head back to the highway I wonder that this remote place was once so full of life.

And I wonder why I feel so lonely.

Why do I search for the remnants of others, as if my own life is not to be found?

I had barely finished reading that letter when Cari handed me another. "It was months before I heard from her again. And this one—well, you read it, Kit and tell me what you think."

I took the letter. Eve had dated it *Summer 1973*.

Dear Cari,

*The days pass, the sun rises higher
and the hot winds toss the dust into our faces.*

We are threatened by Valley Fever.

And the long blazing days beat us up.

Still, I'm pretty tough. I haven't missed one day of work.

The labor is grueling, but I love discovery.

So I am charged up all day long and I am hardly ever tired.

We dig from dawn to dusk, too proud to complain about the brutal day.

There is a tent to provide shade for students who sit and sort the artifacts.

All through the seasons, we dig and sift the earth.

But when those spoiled kids show up, they sit in the tent and pretend to analyze bones.

Maybe I should go to school myself and be a real archeologist.

At the end of the long days when we get back to the site house the guys go off to party.

I like to be alone, unless I am with Evan.

We've been together all the time for almost half a year!

We are so close that sometimes—well, we are close.

But the guys go out for beer every night and so goes Evan, too.

I know he flirts with barmaids, and college girls, and the gal who cleans the Laundromat.

He's holding to his freedom.

Well, I've been thinking—he can have it!

I'll show him.

Two can play that crazy game.

Why should I be faithful while he runs around?

I am the only girl on the trench team and all his buddies like me, I know. Maybe I can stir things up and get him back again.

What is wrong with me, Cari?

Why am I never enough?

I offered the letter to Cari. She let it drift to the floor. I picked it up. "This one gives me a bad feeling."

"It didn't end well." Cari gave me the last envelope.

I could barely make out the faded postmark. "*December '73*. So you didn't hear from her until winter?"

"Almost six months. Not a word."

"What was happening with her? Was she still working?"

"Yeah. She was still in the trenches, digging away. But she shouldn't have been. Her periods had stopped."

"When?"

"During the summer."

"She didn't think anything about that?"

"As long as her female organs weren't making a fuss—no cramps or anything. It was probably near the end of summer when she started to bleed—just a tiny bit, off and on."

"And she kept working?"

"Sure she did. She kept working for months. But in November she really started to bleed."

"Flooding?"

"Not quite. Just enough to make it hard for her to keep up with the guys." Cari ran her fingers through her short, dark bangs. "But she was starting to show."

"Oh, no. Did anyone notice?"

"Not really. You know, Eve was wearing sweat shirts and overalls. And she wasn't sleeping with Evan anymore. Or any of the other guys:"

"The other guys?"

"She had been trying to make Evan jealous."

I had to admit I was shocked. "Poor, crazy Eve."

"So she kept it to herself."

"That she was pregnant?"

"Well, even Eve didn't know for sure."

I knew how this story ended. I had just never heard the bitter details. "I don't suppose she went to a doctor."

"Finally, the bleeding was constant. And she got terrible cramps. There was no way she could keep shoveling that heavy dirt." Cari stared at the letter I was holding. "So just before Christmas, she packed up and hitched a ride to the bus station."

"And caught a bus back to Los Angeles?"

"Headed south down 101. She told me the stretch along the coast was so beautiful that if she had not been in so much pain and so afraid...." Cari had been traumatized by her big sister's experience—maybe even more than Eve, herself. "Well, Kit, I've told you this much. I might as well tell you the rest. The bus got in to L.A. sometime in the early hours of the next day—and I mean, really early, like three or so in the morning. She went to the restroom in the station and she was bleeding so much, it was profuse. She stuffed paper towels in her pants and caught the last crosstown. And she just sat on that bus for two hours while it stopped at every red curb in the county. She was hoping she would find a free clinic along that route. But the bus just kept going and going and there was nothing. Every clinic was closed for the night."

"Didn't she panic?"

"Of course! But what do you do? Stop the bus driver and tell him you think you are bleeding to death?"

"Poor Eve."

"So, she kept riding until she realized the bus was on the coast highway where it goes over Oil Hill."

"Where the hospital is? Overlooking the Plaza?"

"So she pulled the buzzer. The bus stopped. And she walked into Emergency." Cari cleared her throat. "And she went to the front desk."

I could see Cari was getting emotional, but I couldn't help her with this. I just sat there, looking at that last letter in my hand.

Finally Cari spoke. "Eve was going into shock by this time. The clerk took one look at the fresh blood on those baggy jeans and called for the doctor on duty."

"And they wheeled her away?"

"Well, of course they needed some sort of identification. And Eve couldn't talk, so they had to grab her driver's license when they took off her clothes. She was having a miscarriage." Cari tipped her head toward the letter that I was holding. "Go ahead, Kit. Read what she wrote."

I opened it with dread—even after all these years. The first page of the letter Eve sent to her sister in December 1973 was missing. I could only dive right into the middle of her desperate account.

I had started to scream.

The pain was excruciating, but I was mostly so scared.

And then I just blacked out.

They must have given me sedatives because the next thing I knew,

I was struggling to see.

Everything was a blur.

The hospital room was shadowy, unreal,

like some place in a dream.

I could make out two ghostly figures standing away from my bed.

I didn't think I could talk.

But I managed to cry out, "I want my baby!"

One of the shadows waved his arm.

The other silently brought something to my bedside.

I grasped the rails of the bed.

I struggled to pull myself up.

I clung to the bars and tried desperately to peer between them.

By some miracle, my sight cleared.

And there I saw her—my baby—lying naked in a pan,

a perfect doll-like bit of humanity

with a round little face and tiny fingers.

No words can describe how I felt.

Anguish just swept over me.

I struggled to reach out and touch her.

But I was overcome by weakness and emotion.

I watched in horror as the first ghost waved his arm again.

And the other swiftly whisked my baby away.

The drugs overwhelmed me

and I sank back into oblivion.

I don't remember how long I slept in this drugged state.

*But I remember that I slowly became conscious of light.
And I was lying in a bed with side rails up.
As my eyes began to focus,
I saw a nurse dressed all in white
sitting across the room.
She got up and came to my bedside.
She fed me and talked with me.
She shared my sorrow.
Over the days, she became my angel of mercy.
She told me about my baby daughter.
She said the baby weighed three pounds,
the most beautiful “premie” she had ever seen.
The details she shared about the little body comforted me.
I wanted her to talk to me, to tell me everything about my baby.
I told my angel friend the baby's name was Debbie—Debbie Joy.
She told me Debbie Joy was perfect.
My friend was with me so many days.
And now I don't even know her name.
I think it was on the fourth day that my milk came in
and my breasts became full and heavy.
As milk dripped from my nipples, I was sad.*

That was all that was left of the letter. Maybe that was all Eve wrote. I held the old paper in my lap. I already knew the rest of the story. After the stillbirth, Eve refused to see her parents. She wouldn't even speak to the hospital staff, except to ask for painkillers. Just before she was to be discharged, a nurse became suspicious when Eve requested a prescription for codeine. And so she was admitted to the psychiatric unit for observation.

On the night Eve was brought down to the psych ward, she was agitated, flashing back to those nights waking up in the Children's Home. Like a trapped animal, she struggled to break free from the straps that bound her to the gurney. But a social worker named Patricia ClearSky was waiting for her when the elevator opened and she held Eve's hand as she was wheeled through the dimly-lit corridors. There was something so strong, yet gentle, in the presence of the young woman with the dark eyes and dusky skin that Eve immediately grew calmer. She studied Patricia's jet black braid and the ring on her first finger, a mother-of-pearl egg cradled in a nest of silver feathers. And she fell asleep wondering where this comforting woman had come from. And why did she have lines of wisdom etched into her forehead?

Patricia was assigned to oversee Eve's care in the hospital. But as the days passed, she became much more than simply a case manager. Every morning, to escape the syringes and little paper pill cups, she brought Eve down to the courtyard where they could talk, sheltered by palm trees in the mist of early spring. Patricia listened to Eve pour out her stories of abandonment and isolation, and the painful journey that was her life. She understood all of that, for she was born in the desert and had herself been taken from her family and sent to a boarding school. But she counseled Eve to break free from the captivity of past sorrows. Patricia knew that could be done—she had proven it with her own life.

It was a warm day in July when Eve was to be released from the hospital. As she packed her belongings and prepared to face the world outside, Patricia took her hand as she had on that first night so many months before. And she spoke these words of encouragement:

Always walk in the Spirit, Eve. And the wounds in your soul will be healed.

Now, after all those years, Eve was still with us. Cari took the last letter from my hand and was about to rip it up, but I pulled it back. "Let me keep that.

"You can have it. Just keep it to yourself."

I put it in my pocket and we sat there in the old garage, surrounded by the immense accumulation of stuff coated with decades of dust.

"You know, Kit, I told Eve we should just bring in a big truck and toss all this stuff. But she went ballistic. She wants to go through everything before it's trashed."

"Maybe she needs to study the artifacts. To make sense of her past."

"I finally told her to go ahead. I just didn't want any part of it."

I felt a twinge of loyalty to Eve. "She spent so many years away from home that this may be her last chance to find the missing pieces of her life."

"You don't need to defend her, Kit. No one knows this, but I kind of envied Eve when I was a kid. I wished I could have escaped from this place, too."

"Cari! I always thought you were a well-adjusted child."

"If things got too heavy around here, I just saddled up my old Schwinn and took off."

"Too heavy?"

"Eve probably told you about Moma, that she was, I don't know, melancholy. But it was more than that. It was unpredictable, like trouble brewing—always just below the surface. The only way I can describe it is like a pot of thick soup that is reaching the boiling point. But you can't see it."

"Because it's heating up down at the bottom?"

"Way down at the bottom. And then when you least expect it—bam!"

"That must have been rough on you."

Cari hooked the zipper on her jacket. "My poor Moma. She struggled all her life. She was always haunted by something."

"She was afraid?"

"More like anxious, I think. Something was always lurking in background."

"Eve tried to explain that to me."

Cari pulled her zipper up to her neck. "So, I think it was good that she didn't spend all of her childhood here with Moma."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she had that same sort of torment that my mother had. But she also has something my mother didn't have. I'm not sure what it is. I used to feel so sorry for Moma. But with Eve it's different. I don't feel sorry for her."

"That's 'cause you don't have to."

"Right. You can't keep her down. On the other hand, Moma seemed hopeless."

"Well, women weren't supposed to be so spunky in those days, just after the war."

Cari stood up. "Whatever. I can only say that my sister is a survivor."

"She is," I agreed. "Eve definitely has Spirit."

Discover the Spirit

Wednesday, December 7th

The sun had set when I left the office so I hurried out to my car. I put the key in the ignition and was about to pull out when I noticed a text from Eve. "*Meet me @ mom's.*" My heart stopped—was this an emergency? Why didn't Ruby call me? Holding down the panic, I drove off over the Hill. And then it hit me—of course—Pearl Harbor Day. How could I have forgotten?

Eve held the screen door open. "Don't let the cats out."

I stepped inside, right into one of those simple, precious moments—my mother sitting in the amber glow of her dining room, the house filled with the rich scent of Ruby's cooking. I sat down next to Mom and patted her hand.

"Hello, dear." She slid her bowl over to me. "Have some. It's very good."

Ruby came to the table with a big ladle. "Tell your husband to come."

Eve turned on the old television and my mother looked up just in time to see the black and white footage of the 1941 attack. "Is it Pearl Harbor Day?" She put down her spoon. "I was with my father." She looked at me. "You remember we lived in that little apartment on Third."

"Yes, Mom." I had not yet been born, but I didn't correct her.

The years were jumbled in her mind. "I used to bring him his coffee and sit with him. He had the radio by the bed. He was so sick, but he always wanted to know..." She stared at the images on the screen. "All the boys went to war."

No one said anything. We all knew her older brother had been stationed in Hawaii and he did not come home. Mom never seemed to relinquish the anguish and loss. It seemed every year her memory of December 7th became more poignant. "In those days, it took so long..."

I knew we had to lighten up. "Mom was a USO girl."

"Ooo!" Ruby reached across the table to wipe a drop of soup from her chin. "You entertained the boys?"

"Well, we liked to dance. We were good girls in those days." Mom dabbed at her eyes with her napkin. "We never knew..." Then she looked at us. "We were shelled, you know." She was remembering the night in 1942 when the sky over Los Angeles exploded in artillery fire. "We went dancing that night." Her voice trembled. "On the way home, there went the sirens. And everything went black."

My mother had come of age in those days when an evening of fun could turn into a night of terror. Time, like everything else, seemed to be running out. The simple pleasures of daily life like sugar and stockings were in short supply, and the future was clouded by uncertainty. Young women on the home front wandered past the windows of the downtown department stores, dreaming of wedding gowns and diamond rings and the day the boys would come home. And at the end of every week, they gathered at the drug stores to share sodas and fantasies of the peaceful world they hoped would come.

Ruby finally broke the silence. "You were lucky, Mom. All of our mamas were lucky."

Mom shook her head. "It wasn't luck, dear."

That was true. It had to have been more than luck. By the summer of 1942, all three of our fathers were somewhere out in the Pacific, and our mothers were working in aircraft factories all along the coast. Something way more powerful kept our parents safe during those turbulent years. Mom studied her wedding ring. The diamond sparkled in the golden light. "It was the hand of God."

Ruby stood up and took off her necklace, a single strand of iridescent pearls. "For you, Mom." She placed it around my mother's neck. "My Nana gave it to my Mama. And I give it to you. Because you are our mama now."

Eve took Mom's hands. "I'm glad you are still here, Mom."

My mother looked up at us. "You were all miracle babies." She smiled at Eve. "Especially you, Evie."

"Why especially me?"

"Well, you know that story."

"What story?"

"Oh, you remember that. Your mother wanted a baby."

"I don't think she can remember that, Mom." Ruby stifled a smile. "That was Korean War."

I had no idea what Ruby was talking about. "Ruby! What do you know about that?"

"Eve, your dad told me. Just before he died. I think his mind was good."

Eve stared at her but didn't speak.

Ruby poured some tea into her cup. "Your Moma, she had lost first baby. She wanted to be pregnant. Again." She sighed. "But your dad, he got his orders."

"To Korea?"

She nodded. "Your dad went to the base. His buddy—his good friend—they have beer. And they talk."

Eve was beginning to put this together. "About my mother's baby?"

"About the first baby born dead. About your Moma kind of..."

"Crazy?"

"So this guy..."

We waited for Ruby to finish the story. Finally, Eve did it for her. "He took my dad's duty." She seemed to be saying this to herself.

Mom patted Eve's cheek. "So you could be born, girl."

Saturday, December 17th

In the second week of December, holiday hysteria took over the school. I was swept in and barely had time to breathe. So more than a week went by before I noticed that I had not heard a

word from Eve. Saturday morning dawned late and I stayed lazy until noon when my phone squealed from the bedroom. Somehow, I knew it was Eve and I ran in to search through the blankets until I finally found it hidden deep beneath the pillows.

She spoke before I could say anything. "Hey, Kit?"

"What's up? Are you cleaning the house for your party?"

"Yeah."

"Is everything okay?"

"Can you come over?"

I could tell she had something on her mind. "Alright, Eve, just spill it. What's bothering you?"

"I'm sorry. This is kind of weird. But I found something."

"What? A dead rat?"

Suddenly her voice was strong and quick. "Oh, Kit. Give me a break. I found some letters and I just don't want to open them by myself. I know you think I'm crazy—"

"No, Eve. I get it. Give me half an hour. And call your sister."

Cari and Allie met us at the old house late that afternoon. Allie went into the bedroom to play with the cats, and Cari and I sat down in the kitchen. Eve placed a large cookie jar before us on the table. "This morning, I was cleaning. Clearing out the cupboards. And I found this."

As soon as Cari saw the chubby ceramic sailor boy, she drew him closer to her. "I remember this guy!" She caressed his belly. "Granma used to bake cookies and put 'em in here." She lifted it and shook it gently. "Do you think there's a petrified batch in there?"

Eve sat down across from us. "So I found him this morning. And I looked inside."

Cari stood up. "Okay, let's see..." And she took off his head.

We all peered in, and there, deep inside—a stash of letters bound with twine. Cari lifted the fragile envelopes from their hiding place. They were tied with her father's tight military knots. Eve watched intently as her sister struggled to loosen them. Then she reached for the twine and began to weave it around her fingers.

Cari studied the handwriting. "Moma wrote these. To Daddy."

Eve dropped the twine and picked up an envelope. "Nineteen fifty nine." Her hands trembled.

Cari and I were silent. We knew that was the year Eve was sent to the Home. She placed the letters on the kitchen table in the order of their postmark dates. These letters had been written while Eve was in the institution.

"Want me to read them? Out loud?" Cari reached for the first letter and unfolded the thin stationery. She scanned the page. None of us was breathing. We were opening up secrets, messages not meant for us, discovering a private past that until this time had been shared only by Lena and her husband.

Cari's voice was low, almost reverent, as she began to read.

January 1959

Dear Husband,

I am writing to you because I cannot find the words, I cannot speak outright when I stand before you.

I am overcome by anguish since the day they took my Evie away. I have not slept.

How can they be so cruel? I am consumed with worry. Is my little girl cowering somewhere, wondering why her mother abandoned her, why she was sent away?

Oh, Randall, I have failed. I have failed to be a good wife and mother. I have let them take my first child from my arms.

And I cannot forgive myself for that.

Lena

May 1959

Randall,

Please forgive my outbursts. I struggle to control myself, but I fall apart when you come to the house.

I know I cannot bring Evie home, but I rail against the injustice. Why am I barred from seeing my child, or even sending her gifts? How do they know what is right for her? Only I know my daughter: her bright humor, her fear of loneliness, and her intense love for her family.

Randall, she craves your affection. How can you let her be taken?

I am sorry. I have said too much. But even in my weakness, even as you and those people at the Home despise me, I must advocate for my child.

I cannot give up the fight. I will find a way to bring her home.

With all my love,

Your Lena

October 1959

My Dear,

It has been almost a year now that Evie has been gone. And I still cry every day and every night. I beseech you: don't let them keep our daughter!

I worry over her constantly. Is she alone and frightened? Worst of all, does she believe I sent her away?

No one will let me speak to her when I call. And the staff will not talk with me. If it were not for the receptionist who answers the phone, I would know nothing of my daughter's well-being.

What can I do but beg you to bring her home?

I am beside myself, distraught. I depend on Mum to keep Caroline free of this turmoil. And I require "sleeping beauties" for composure all day long.

Randall, if nothing else, please come to the house and pick up the birthday gifts I bought for Evie. I want her to have the pink pajamas. I want her to know I love her.

Earnestly,

Your Wife

January 1960

My dear husband,

It is a year now, since Evie has been gone and I have no knowledge that she has received any schooling. I don't care if they are experts at that Home, they could not know how smart my Evie is!

But I have discovered one ray of sunshine in that dreadful place. Her name is Julie and every time I call, I pray that I will hear her cheery voice on the other end of the line. She knows our Evie! And she understands my concern that a child with so much promise could wilt, imprisoned in that place.

My talks with Julie keep me alive. She tells me that the children have good food and activities, and clean beds at night. And I know she is there in the front office, putting in a good word for my daughter, nurturing her in my absence. And I have hope that Evie will not be lost, forgotten as her childhood years slip away.

Randall, have you considered coming home for more than a visit? Perhaps to stay?

I have been thinking, maybe they would let us keep Evie if you came home, too.

Your Fond Wife,

August 1960

Randall,

Thank you for your support in my time of mourning.

Mum was my right hand, and I do not know how I will go on without her.

I comfort myself with little memories. When I look out the window, I can still see her in the yard with a basket of laundry, clothes pins in her mouth, hanging the sheets to dry.

Caroline is quiet these days, and may be grieving, too. But she is so young, I cannot discern her thoughts, and I dare not say too much to hurt her.

Thank you for taking over the final arrangements. And thank you for telling me Mum looked to be at peace.

I have only one more request. Please help me find a way to let our Evie know her grandmother has passed. It is unfair to keep the news from her, that her Granma is in Heaven.

Your Grateful Wife

January 1961

Dear Randall,

Have you heard? I am ecstatic! Julie told me of the plans to send Evie to public school for day classes!

This means our daughter will be here in the Plaza almost every day!

I was so excited, I went shopping and bought her a pretty jumper and stockings so she will be pretty on her first day.

Thank God our Evie will have a real education!

And I thank God for Julie. She must be our guardian angel.

But I will continue to pray that our daughter will come home. That I will do until the day I die.

Sincerely,

Lena

The missives read like a novel of Lena's struggles. Unrealized dreams, self-doubts, and free-floating anxiety—those were the demons that vexed her. Yet the pages of pale-flowered stationery also conveyed a mother's love and a desperate hope to be reunited with the child that had been taken from her. It was clear that Lena's heart had been broken when Eve was placed in the Children's Home.

Cari slid the last letter into its envelope. Then she placed it on the table with the other letters. "Moma always did seem, I don't know—wistful, I guess."

I started to stack the letters. "All the time?"

"Except when she was a whirling dervish. It was scary sometimes."

Eve looked up. "Do you remember her Sleeping Beauties?"

Cari shook her head. "Granma kept those hidden." She reached over and took the twine from Eve's fingers. "I'm sorry, Eve. You went through way more than I ever did."

Eve watched her bind up the envelopes. "I'm glad I never saw those before." And she put her head in her hands. I kept quiet, knowing that she needed time to gather her words. For a few moments, we all sat staring at those delicate slips of onion skin that held so many revelations about those lost years. Finally, she folded her hands on the table and took a deep breath. "I was always afraid. That I was crazy. Then I came back here. And I saw Moma. She was like me." Eve paused. "Somehow Cari wasn't."

Cari looked up. There were tears in her eyes. She reached for the cookie jar. "I'll put this guy back—."

Eve took her hand. "But, no, Cari. I'm not mad at you." She stood up and lifted the jar. "Wait. There's something else in there. I can hear it."

Cari took the sailor from her sister. She carefully removed the smiling head and upended the stout body. A tiny white package fell into Eve's hands. It was inscribed with a message written in her father's meticulous script.

For Evie. Your mother wanted you to have this.

Eve fumbled and almost dropped it. Cari reached over to help her break the seal. Then she drew back as a platinum ring flew out and rolled across the table. It was exquisite, set with white diamonds, sparkling in the light of the kitchen lamp. She caught it before it fell to the floor. "Moma's wedding ring." Her voice was hushed. "She left it for you, Eve."

Eve didn't seem to be breathing.

Cari slid the ring on her sister's finger. "Maybe now you can make peace with her."

Eve was very still, contemplating the precious gift. "Maybe now I understand her heart."

Sunday, December 18th

The next afternoon was brisk and dry. But a few days earlier, a light, steady rain had found its way through the old roof and saturated the ceiling in Eve's bedroom closet. So Cari and Allie stayed to help with the impossible task of moving years of clothing out onto dry ground.

I brought Mom over and settled her on the bed with the cats. And I began to stuff giant garbage bags with whatever Cari and Eve tossed out of the closet.

Allie intercepted several collections before they left the bedroom, confiscating things that a teenager from any generation would covet—exotic bead necklaces, denim jeans, and a suede jacket. "Can I have these, Auntie Eve?"

Eve stopped foraging. She caressed the fringe on the jacket sleeves. "So long, Davy Crockett."

Cari laughed. "That was your auntie's body guard out there in the desert."

Allie put it on. "Cool!"

Eve shook out a pair of jeans. "You can have these, too. They're small."

"Why did you have so many different sizes, Aunt Eve? Did you binge and purge?"

"Yikes!" Cari tossed a pair of blousey shorts into the air. "I forgot about these things!"

Allie caught them. "What's this?"

"Bloomers!" Cari laughed.

Allie held them up. "They made you wear these? In gym class?"

Eve grabbed them and stuffed them in a bag. "I never want to see those again."

I had no doubt that Eve ditched classes regularly just to avoid putting on those shorts. This whole piece of her history was probably too painful for her to explain. But I knew that as she grew out of childhood, she was uncomfortable—even obsessed—with her changing body. She wanted to hide herself, so how could she go to school if she was expected to trot around in those things?

During that struggle, in a vain attempt to stay slim, she became locked in a cycle of indulgence and fasting. This ritual insulated Eve from the random cruelty of the outside world until

suddenly, near the end of the school year, she lost weight—lots of it. She had gotten hold of some kind of pills that almost killed her along with her appetite. She became strung out and hyper.

I truly believe she would have destroyed herself if someone had not intervened, interrupting that course of disaster. It was her English teacher who, realizing just in time that Eve was in a silent state of desperation, gave her a journal, a voice to tell the world how she felt. That little diary kept Eve in school, maybe even alive; and I had always been curious about what she wrote in it. "Eve, do you still have...?"

She shook her head. "I gave it back to Ms. Wilson." I could see she didn't want to say anything more about that.

Allie was already salvaging strings of beads. "Can I have these?"

Eve picked up the entire collection and placed it around her niece's neck. "All for you."

By the time the sun was ready to set, we had Cari's minivan packed like Santa's sleigh. All of us, including the dogs, piled in to deliver the goods to Our Lady. Eve and Allie tossed the bags into the Sacred Child donation bin, and we all sat there in the van, exhausted and exhilarated while Cari took off toward the ocean, for supper on the bay.

As we passed our high school campus, standing stark and gray like a mausoleum in the dusk, Allie stared out the window and asked, "Is it haunted?"

"I think so." Eve was serious.

"Is this how you used to walk home, Aunt Eve?"

Cari looked at her sister in the rear view mirror. "Do you want to answer that?"

Eve rolled down her window. "You can smell the ocean here."

Cari cleared her throat. "Yes, Allie. I suppose you noticed—"

Allie interrupted her. "This is not the way home." The streets were damp and the neon lights of the cocktail lounges reflected in her eyes. "Aunt Eve, were you a hippie?"

Cari answered for her sister. "No one knew what your aunt was up to in those days."

"What about you, Mom?"

"I stayed out of trouble. Only once did I get called in." She cast a wry grin into the rear view. "But the principal just wanted to know, 'What's wrong with your sister?'"

"So what did you say?"

"I told him, 'I don't know.' Because I really didn't know what Eve was up to!"

I could see the look on Eve's face. Her lips were drawn and she was staring straight down at her hands. Allie rested her head on her aunt's shoulder.

I had seen Eve look that way so often when we were growing up. It reminded me of the painful disintegration of our relationship during those years. I didn't think about Eve at all when I went on to high school, but when she showed up on campus the next fall, I noticed that she was even more withdrawn than when she was a little girl. Like all of us, she was growing up, but she

appeared timid and disoriented, lurking in the hallways and staring at the floor during passing periods.

Day after day, she wore the same dark skirt and black stockings, her hair disheveled. She only averaged one or two days a week at school, so I assumed that she would probably just drop out. I was too busy planning for graduation and living my own life to worry about Eve.

But, on a warm spring afternoon in 1972, she walked into the health food store where I was working, and back into my life. She had bleached her hair and she was wearing pink suede shorts—and she was dangerously skinny. I was shocked when I finally recognized her. But Eve wasn't surprised to see me at all. She already knew everything about me because she still visited my mom, probably more often than I did in those days. Eve was eager to tell me about her job selling drug paraphernalia at the "head shop" across the street. She hadn't even finished high school, but the owner of the shop didn't care about her age or other details. He simply hired her on the spot because she wore a mini skirt to the interview.

My first thought was, "Oh, Eve, what have you gotten yourself into?"

But she was so enthusiastic. "Kit, we get discounts on everything in the store!"

All I could manage was "Neat." I was also a little dismayed that I would be seeing her so often, now that she worked in the Shore. It would be like the good old days when we lived in the same house. The whole situation made me uneasy: Eve was too thin and too talkative. I was worried about her but I didn't want to get involved. And here she was, too close for comfort.

During the next few weeks, Eve came across the street every afternoon to buy her lunch—a few pieces of dried pineapple and something else in a small paper bag. When I asked her what was in the sack she showed me the little white pills she purchased from the girl at the cash register. She told me she took them so she would not be hungry—she had to stay slim to keep her job.

One evening, Eve came by the store just as I was getting off work. She was upset and had quit her job because her boss wanted her to "prostitute" herself. "He says that to all the girls," she explained.

I asked her if she was scared of him.

"I'm scared. But not of him. It's the weirdos at night." She fidgeted with her earrings. "I close up shop. Alone. At night."

"Eve, I think you did the right thing."

"It's just, well, now I don't have a job."

I knew what she wanted to ask next. She wanted me to invite her to stay in my apartment. I was wary of letting her into my life again, so I deflected her request. "Maybe you'll find another one." I sensed she was losing control of her life, but I didn't offer her any help. I let her wander off that night and didn't even ask where she was going. It was getting dark and I just let her walk out the door.

Cari pulled off the road onto a grassy knoll above the beach. The old snack shack was shuttered, but Allie went ahead and slid open the doors of the van and the dogs jumped out, racing to the water's edge. Cari rolled down her window. "Get them before they jump in."

As she rounded up the dogs, Allie passed a dilapidated bungalow. She climbed back in the car and pointed out the window. "Mom, what's that?" The doors were covered with boards and a chain link fence blocked the porch steps, but some fine Craftsman wood trim was still intact.

"That was Ximeno's. Your aunt used to hang out there with her hippie friends."

"They played music." Eve was suddenly defensive. "They were good."

"They were guys." Cari teased her. "Looking for girls."

Allie searched her aunt's face. "Is that why you went there?"

"I came to get away." Eve's gazed into the fog as it enveloped the crumbling structure.

"From what?"

"From everything."

Eve spent many nights at Ximeno's during those years. She was escaping not only her childhood in the Plaza—she was running from life, itself. In those days, her mind was plagued by shocking media images of dying children in war-torn rice paddies and assassinated idealists splayed out in public places. They were stark and brutal scenes that turned over and over in her mind like pages of a magazine, and she struggled through adolescence tangled in confusion and dread. In the midst of that bewildering landscape, Ximeno's was her refuge. Hidden in the smoky haze and distracted by the wandering ballads of steel string guitars, she could forget the dangers around her, even if only for a few hours on a Friday night.

As we sat there in the deepening fog, Allie mumbled a confession. "I wish I had somewhere like that. To get away."

Cari frowned. "What are you running away from?"

"I don't know." Allie brushed a grain of sand from her shoe. "Maybe you and dad. Fighting."

"But you know that's not your problem."

She was close to tears. "It makes me nervous."

Just as we were about to have an awkward moment, Mom woke up. "Let's go home, girls." She tapped Cari on the head. "It's past bedtime."

Cari turned on the headlights and drove away down the deserted street, back to the Plaza. Eve rolled up her window. She shared a little smile with Allie, and they hooked arms.

Celebration of the Light

Monday, December 19th

"Hey, Eve. I don't know if you remember me—Richard's brother...? I'm here cleaning out the apartment and I just called to let you know—maybe you heard—we're having a little memorial for him. So I'm getting in touch with some of his old friends. If you want to come over, we'll just go up on the roof and watch the sun go down..."

It was the week before Christmas. Eve was in a happy frenzy, cleaning and decorating the old house. It was not until late afternoon that she finally noticed a missed call from a number so familiar—she stood there puzzling over it. And then she lost her breath. How could she have forgotten that? It was etched into her memory; the telephone number she shared with Richard for nearly a decade. Her throat tightened. The last time she talked to him, her life had shattered. For a moment she considered deleting it.

She still had her phone in her hand when I called her. "Eve, why don't you come with us?"

She didn't answer.

"For Richard's—did you get a call, Eve?"

"I heard."

"You must be in shock."

"No. I'm not."

"You expected this?"

"I lived with him."

"What was wrong with him?"

"He was an old grenade." Eve spoke slowly, but her voice was steady. "Always on the verge."

She was so right on. We all knew Richard had been broken by what he saw in Vietnam. It had just been a matter of time.

Wednesday, December 21st

Scott drove out to take us all downtown for Richard's remembrance gathering. He pulled to the curb in front of Eve's house and went to her door to escort her to the car. She was strangely cheerful, as if she were going on a date, all the way into the city. But as we approached the old apartment building where she had lived with Richard she stiffened up and her face lost color.

"I am sorry." She was whispering. "I just can't go in there."

Scott put his arm around her shoulders. "You don't have to." He spoke close to her ear. "Meet us up in the Sky View later. I'll buy dinner."

Eve's lips relaxed and she almost smiled.

As soon as Kurt and Scott walked into the lobby, she turned to me. "Let's go."

And we took off into the soft winter twilight. It had been many years since she had come down to the city. She avoided all the places that reminded her of her life with Richard. Now, she was walking so fast that we couldn't speak. We veered into an alley that took us past the darkened windows of an old pub. In the seventies, this place was "The Galley," and local artists and writers gathered here. Eve peered into the windows of the deserted bar. "This is where I met him."

"Not at the college?"

She walked on ahead of me. "It was a poetry reading."

I caught up with her on the boulevard.

"I can't believe this!" She sat down on a damp bus bench. "Granma's stop is still here!"

I sat down next to her. "You came all the way from the Plaza on the bus with your grandmother?"

"To stay in her apartment."

"She was a brave soul, Eve."

"Moma couldn't cope. With me."

"But I bet you loved going to the city."

"I still feel it." She shivered and looked off into the distance, toward the ocean front.

"So, go Eve—I'll follow you."

She jumped up and jogged across Ocean and down the steep hill toward the site of the old amusement park. I knew this place as a child, too, a nightmarish world of tattoo parlors and bizarre sideshows. The Promenade was already deteriorating by the time Eve was four years old, but it was the highlight of her downtown adventures. Fascinated and terrified, she would cling to her grandmother's hand as they hurried up the hill and through the city after dark.

Now, fifty years later, all those aging and dangerous attractions had vanished. The waterfront was rehabilitated, and we strolled with a light crowd of tourists past gift boutiques and ice cream shops. The carousel was the only remaining attraction, fully restored and spinning slowly under a canopy of lights. We stopped to watch children climb onto fanciful ponies, embarking on the same musical journey we had taken so many decades ago.

After a few minutes, Eve took a sudden detour and cut across a stretch of asphalt to the beach. She paused there and swept away a layer of sand, revealing broken chunks of a concrete path. We followed this last remnant of the old seaside resort as a bank of thick clouds crept over the beach. Gulls cried overhead, and the waves lapped the shore so gently that they almost could not be heard. Eve had drifted easily back in time, leading me to a rickety wooden staircase that climbed precariously up the side of a steep cliff.

The fog followed us up the craggy precipice and down a tree-lined walkway into the central city park. A host of pigeons flew up before us as Eve searched the green for landmarks of her childhood. "Everything's gone." The birds gathered around our ankles, hundreds of them. "Except for these guys. Always begging." She shuffled her feet and we were lost in a storm of flapping wings.

The end of the park path led us into the womb of the city, lit only by the amber haze of a few surviving antique lamps. Eve wandered on to an empty lot where filmy waves of sand shifted in an imperceptible breeze over slabs of cracked concrete. "Grandma's place," she whispered. And she stood quietly there, lost to time. There were no artifacts, not even a shard of teacup as a testament to the community of widows who once inhabited this place.

But Eve would not rest there long enough to mourn. She turned abruptly and headed east on Third where a golden glow emanated from the stained glass of a stately brick church in the distance. This sanctuary had seen a century of weddings and funerals, and it was still alive and welcoming on this night in the advent season. She ran up the stone steps, pulled open a heavy mahogany door and led me to a hidden chapel.

We slipped inside and sat down on a pew near the door. I leaned over to speak into her ear. "Is this place supposed to be open? Anyone could come in."

She answered me softly. "It was a promise. A long time ago. To keep the doors open." And there it was, the candles still burning, a refuge in the center of the city on a cold December night. I wondered if Eve had not herself found solace at this place during the years she lived downtown with Richard.

As the fog horn sounded, Eve took flight again. She still knew these streets and with homing instinct sought out her customary perch at the top of the City Bank in the heart of the business district. The imposing facade was cold and aged, but the warmth of a bustling cafe radiated through the heavy glass doors, as *baristas* brewed steaming cups of coffee at the long counter where tellers once counted bills. Eve glided across the marble floor as if in a ballroom, finding her way to the antique lift that would take us on a slow, clattering climb to what had once been the apex of downtown.

The top floor was deserted, and Eve went quietly to the east-facing window. This was her bird's-eye view, there on the clock tower where winged creatures kept watch over the city. "I can see it from here. Our little nest." She was so intent that I thought she might take off into the sky. "It's still there. Everything else went down. All around."

"Oh, Eve, you're so dramatic."

She was remembering those days when the wrecking ball swung, scattering everywhere the debris of its destruction. "That was my life. A war zone."

"Don't be so morose. Your little apartment had some nice touches."

"Like what?"

"Well..." I had to think. "The pull-down bed."

"And don't forget the nosy landlord."

"That's the price you pay for vintage real estate."

"It was okay. The view from the roof was worth it."

So many times I had joined Eve up there to bask in the sun or track the planets. We could see all the way from the ocean to the mountains on a clear day. And on sultry nights when tropical storms blew up from Mexico, we would run up there to catch a shower of warm rain. She

searched the deepening fog along the shoreline. "I could see the hot flashes over the Island." Then she looked down and ran her fingers along the smooth oak sill. "Let's go back to the cafe."

She turned and took to the stairs, almost floating ten flights down to the lobby where a little table near a window was waiting for us. Outside, the street was festive, but Eve's face reflected her memory of a dark time. I wanted to lift her spirits. "Look how this city has risen out of ashes. Like the phoenix."

"Like what?"

"Like you, Eve."

"You mean—I flew the coop?"

"And just in time."

"It was too crazy down here."

"Richard was crazy."

"We were happy, Kit. Sometimes."

I never thought of them as "happy." But there was no denying that Richard and Eve had a unique relationship. It all started one night in 1974 at a poetry reading at the Galley. Eve had finished her shift as a waitress and was sitting alone at the bar, silently daring herself to read even one of her verses in front of the crowd of poets. A young army vet just back from the jungles of Southeast Asia sat down next to her and asked if he could read her "work."

Eve swooned. She recognized this charismatic professor and knew he had a following of university coeds who found his rugged masculinity irresistible. Richard, on the other hand, knew Eve only as a barmaid. But he must have been intrigued by her childlike vulnerability, for he pursued her for weeks, visiting her at the Galley night after night until she finally consented to spend a weekend with him.

It was an unlikely union that began on dubious terms. But the weeks passed into months and soon Eve was living with Richard in his downtown apartment, swept up in a lifestyle she could have only imagined in her dreams. Richard took her to seminars and galleries, transporting her into fascinating worlds of art and literature. He was her unwitting mentor, and Eve was his consort. She traveled with him, listened to his ideas, typed his lecture notes—and, of course, maintained his household.

But before the year was over, Eve sensed trouble in her paradise. Richard had a disconsolate nature and it was inevitable that he would fall into a habit of bombarding her with accounts of her failings. She slipped into pervasive self-consciousness and attempted to imitate his sophisticated colleagues, smoking cigarettes, drinking brandy, and making up her eyes with dark liner. Still, she knew she could never please Richard, and she felt herself to be but a minor accoutrement to his lifestyle.

He spent his days at the university, stopped for happy hour on his way home; and late in the evenings, invited a cadre of artists and writers to the apartment for esoteric socializing far into the night. Eve suffered under his eccentricities and was exhausted by his expectations. One night, during a long *soirée*, she fell asleep; and when Richard found her, he dragged her out of bed, leaving a bruise on her arm. Eve did not know how to react to that rampage. So she simply hid the bruise and resolved never again to do or say anything that would upset Richard.

Even so, she found it increasingly difficult to fake obeisance; and Richard had a volatile personality, so the couple erupted in arguments every day. To add to the drama, he thought that they could easily make up by just making love. But Eve could not relinquish her resentment and while she would never admit that she was afraid of him, she came to avoid any physical contact with Richard. She was perpetually ill at ease, worried that if she made a fuss about anything, he would blow up and send her away—or worse.

In spite of their tumultuous and fragmented association, Eve and Richard lived together for so many years that they were as good as married—at least, in her mind. Only now would Eve concede that Richard was not committed to their relationship. She closed her eyes. “I can’t believe I was so naive.”

Our conversation drifted to the winter morning in 1985 when she finally left the city. She rented a little truck, packed it with her worldly possessions, and embarked on a slow journey north along the Pacific coast. And by the time she showed up on the campus of the Oregon university where I was beginning a research project, she was a pathetic sight.

"I felt so sorry for you, Eve."

“So why didn’t you hire me?”

“You know why. You didn’t qualify.”

"I wasn't 'retarded' enough?"

"Anyway, you found something better.”

She was hired as the night supervisor in a group home for women just released from state institutions. It was the perfect job for her, as Eve understood how it felt to be "just dumped out there in the real world.”

"You taught them everything they needed to know—and then some.”

She didn't say anything, and I sensed that she still regretted that her career had been ruined, cut short by a phone call. She had expected it to be just another one of those long distance conversations with Richard. She called him every month to persuade him to come visit her in the Willamette Valley. She had it all planned out—they would hike up mountain trails, raft the white waters of the McKenzie, and maybe even find a cabin in the forest where they could live together happily ever after. Little did she know that even as she was dreaming of their life together in the Northwest, Richard was doing just what he pleased in Southern California. Even after all these years, I found it difficult to consider the pain she must have endured on that cold night. The fateful call had thrust her into the harsh reality that Richard had never been faithful to her. It took less than five minutes to destroy her dreams. Richard's neighbor, Tamara answered his phone that night. Eve considered her a friend, so she chatted with her and then asked the inevitable question. "Is Richard around?"

"Of course he's here!" Tamara blurted out. "We're living together!"

Eve could only answer with silence as Richard grabbed the receiver. "Eve, are you there? Listen to me." He started talking, but she could not follow what he was saying. It didn’t make sense, and it didn’t matter. Everything was becoming clear to her at that moment. She knew he was just giving her excuses or telling her lies. And she hung up, overwhelmed by what she had just heard.

Swept away by her emotions, she swallowed a sedative. It didn't make her feel better, so she took another. She fell asleep only to wake up in the middle of the night, groggy but still upset. So she took more pills. Just before she drifted off into a deadly sleep, she was struck with a surge of panic. And she struggled to call me.

It was after midnight when I was awakened by my telephone. I stumbled down the hallway, trying to guess who might be calling at that hour. I considered not even answering. But I picked up the receiver and, without speaking, held it to my ear.

"Kit?" It was the voice of a frightened child.

Instantly, I knew it was Eve, and I could tell she was in some sort of trouble. "Eve, are you okay?" I tried to see my watch in the dark.

I will always remember her words. "I'm sorry, Kit. It's too much pain. I'm sorry."

I was suddenly awake. "Eve, what's the matter with you?"

"I tried to keep on. All my life. People threw me away..." Her voice quivered. "Like trash. A piece of..." Her words broke into sobs.

"What happened?" I was starting to suspect she had taken something. "What are you trying to say?"

"I called." She spoke between sobs. "Long distance."

"To Richard?"

She was gulping air.

I wanted to keep her talking. "Did you talk to him?"

Silence.

"Eve, talk to me!" I heard the receiver drop. "Okay, Eve, I'm coming over." I threw on a jacket, jumped into my car and rushed through the streets of the sleeping town.

Eve was barely conscious when I got to her. She took a few steps and collapsed in the driveway. I got behind her, put my arms around her chest, and shuffled her right up to my truck. Somehow I got her into the cab and sped through town, squealing into the hospital lot so recklessly that two orderlies rushed out with a gurney.

They lifted Eve out of the car—and I broke down. Her body was limp and her skin was gray. She looked to me like she had already died. I stood there in the empty parking lot, watching her being wheeled away. I was furious and full of questions: How could that male chauvinist pig and that coke-snorting wh**e do this to her? Eve had always been so sensitive to the suffering of others; but no one seemed to care if she was in pain.

And then I realized that I was guilty, too. I had taken her for granted, sometimes even ignoring her if I didn't have the time. As I watched her disappear beyond the steel doors of the emergency ward, I vowed that if she survived, I would tell her how much she meant to me. And I dropped all my spiteful thoughts and began to pray for her, begging God to keep her alive.

As I looked at Eve across the little table in the City Bank Cafe, I considered telling her how grateful I was that she was still alive, and that we were here together on this bright December

evening. But perhaps it had all been so painful that she would not want to talk about it—even after so many years had passed. I was struggling with my conscience when Eve reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of notebook paper folded into quarters.

"Oh, Eve. Did you write about that night?"

She offered it to me. "I almost threw it away. But I saved it. For you."

I eagerly unfolded the paper like a precious gift.

December 1988

"All Thoughts Go Flying Away..."

It was a dream of panic and futility.

I was mute, motionless.

Unable to speak, to respond.

Helpless.

Silent terror.

And no escape.

A woman of no honor,

I had no kin—

my childhood family dispersed,

my infant miscarried,

my marriage a sham.

I had no shelter.

I had been abandoned.

Again.

Too shocked for blame or retribution,

resigned to loneliness.

My surrender to despair was an act of will.

And I succumbed to the desperation that always lurked

in the clutter of my days.

This was a quest to confront my solitary self

and the malingering specter of separation—

disintegration.

It was dead midnight.

He barked into miles of darkness,

"Listen to me!"
I did not answer.
There was nothing to say.
He was demanding something.
Didn't he know that I was struggling to get words out?
It was hard to believe I had lived with this man.
How long could this suffering go on?
It would be better if he would just disappear—
or let me disappear.
I hung up.
The figures on the television moved in slow motion,
a cartoon dream.
I drifted back to the mid-days
of the Plaza de Los Altos.
And I started to cry.
My vision drowned, I could see it all more clearly—
the creatures of the airwaves
dancing
in my mother's living room.

I hadn't thought of Moma for so long,
how she had been so gentle,
her hands like pale roses.
It was too late now.
Where did this panic come from?
Remorse. Loss.
Irrevocable time.
Incredible emptiness.
Why could I not scream?
My body shaking.
churning inside,
I tried to be still.
But I trembled more furiously.

*Utterly alone
in despair
and rage...
No, not in rage—
Wounded.
He deserted me.
He had done it before.
I went into the kitchen.
Outside the window,
the relentless hum of insects—
or telephone wires.
The faucet dripping, also relentless.
And the darkness was heavy.
The prospect of this night without end
filled me with dread.
Why should I be courageous?
I opened the cupboard and found the bottle.
It was already open.
Maybe I should try to remember.
Should I take another?
But I was no longer making decisions.
Now, I was simply doing it,
dropping them—
all of them—
into the sugar bowl.
Water.
A spoon.
Crystalline mush.
I began to eat,
ceremoniously, as if in sacrament.
The first bites stung.
But I fed myself,
my lips curved around the spoon*

*until the movements slowed
into eternity.
And I closed my eyes.
The spoon slipped from my hand.
This was no shallow ritual,
but a desperate act.
It occurred to me that someone should try to stop me.
Where had he gone?
He should have been here.
He should have been there.
He deserted us both.
Then, confusion
like a still-frame,
a frozen image on the living room wall:
Summer 1958.
Moma lying across the bed.
Gone.
My mother was gone.
It had been a secret moment,
a final rite of hopelessness,
shared only with me.
There was no child in the still-frame summer afternoon bedroom.
There was only the hollow-faced woman, smooth and lifeless across the bed.
Now I was this woman.
I was running, racing with the thoughts,
chased by a voice in the distance—
an insistent crow?
Taunting, cajoling,
the call became shrill
like a whirlwind whistling in my skull.
I careened upward with the sound.
It happened suddenly.
I lost the earth beneath my feet*

*and flew,
propelled on a course of imminent impact.
My one thought as I soared spread-eagle was devastating and familiar:
"Nothing will ever be the same."
At that instant, I hit concrete.
Intense white light flashed in my head.
Should I struggle to get up?
But a rushing sensation soothed me
and I could not resist its seduction.
I sank with it and let myself go down—
even if I were dying.
Pressure grew behind my eyeballs.
The bright light diffused
and subtle images pulsed with the sound of flowing water.
The fluctuating visions merged and emerged.
And I watched with my whole body,
as if in a dance.
I was caught in pounding surf,
thunderous blasts against a rocky sea floor,
showers of pebbles and sand.
The destruction tore at my flesh.
I could feel the blood rush through the wreckage of my body.
Its molten tongues seared my insides.
My eyelids moved slowly, then flickered.
A green-masked woman leaned over
to insert a needle into my arm.
Her movements decisive and dispassionate,
it was this woman's duty to keep me alive.
I had no hope of protest to this treatment.
Waylaid in a liminal realm,
I peered through the bars,
a head with rolling eyes.
The nurse removed her mask and began to speak.*

*Her mouth moved like wet clay,
the tongue peeking between shiny rows of even teeth.
I thought those teeth remarkable.
The mouth stopped.
It quivered, expectant.
And I realized I heard nothing—
no sound reached my ears—
only the rushing inside my head—
the surge of a rip tide pulling me out to sea.
I closed my eyes.
I did not struggle against the current.
It carried me swiftly and I tumbled with it.
I could not swim against it.
Then, from out of the ceaseless roll and crash—a touch.
Isolated in my anguish, I reached out.
It grasped me, a strong hand holding onto me.
I must have been a long time drifting, tossed on the waves of my nightmare.
But that powerful touch brought me up from the tempest.
And I opened my eyes.
I saw your face and instantly, I knew I was alive.
I was not an orphan.
You would not give me up.
You wanted me to live.
And I began to breathe.*

I folded the paper but did not look up. I had no idea Eve could write like that. All I could do was stare at the steam rising from my cup. No words came to my mind.

She took a sip of coffee. "Do you remember that morning? Just before they let me out? You came into my room?"

"You wanted me to make you presentable."

"So you gave me a mirror. You were brushing my hair. I looked at myself. And the sun was behind me. Like a halo of white light around my head." She looked into her cup. "I vowed at that moment that if I lived to be old..." Eve went on to describe how, as the years went by, she celebrated each silver strand of hair as a promise of personal power, a token of transformation.

On that morning, Eve was comforted by the projection of her future self—a woman who had triumphed over death and would go on to live many more years.

Then she looked at me across the table. “Thank you for saving my life.”

"Eve, you know that it wasn't me—I didn't save your life."

"You answered my call."

I didn't say anything. I was remembering how close I had come to not picking up the phone that night.

Eve spun her cup on the table top and spoke, almost to herself. "For a long time I felt guilty. Like I left Richard behind. In this city."

"What?"

"Maybe that was why..."

"You don't still believe that."

"I couldn't shake it off."

"Well, Eve, I'm sure you accused yourself of all sorts of things. But don't ever forget, you wanted to start a new life."

Her plans had been dashed by that phone call to Richard. Not only was her heart broken—her suicide attempt had cost her job. And once again, she was in need of a place to live. But she refused to move in with me. She wanted solitude, a place to heal and find her bearings. So I arranged for her to house-sit for one of my colleagues in a cedar wood cabin located just off the single lane road that led into the mountains. Eve appreciated the little retreat, but I was keenly aware of its isolation in the forest.

Even as she settled into seclusion, she could not avoid more bad news from California. Since no phone lines reached the cabin in the woods, I received the call about Eve's mother: Lena had been found dead, alone in the house in the Plaza. It was up to me to drive up to the cabin and deliver the message to Eve. And I dreaded this duty, especially since she was already so fragile.

There was no easy way to break it to her. I simply told Eve that her mother had passed away—and then I stood there and watched her shatter before my eyes. Nothing I said would calm her down, and she began to wail, pacing from room to room, throughout the little cabin. I stayed with her all night until the break of day. Then I drove off down the winding road, knowing that I was leaving her alone in a storm of emotion.

Eve passed most of the next day consumed with grief until she could no longer bear the confines of the house. And she took off running down the wooded hillside. She wore no jacket and her feet were covered only by a pair of slippers. Tangled moss hung low from the branches of the trees, and shadows were deepening as the late winter sun sank behind the mountains. She raced across the roadway and skid on a sheet of black ice into a vicious patch of thorns. And there she lay, stunned and defeated.

But, like so many other times of crisis in her life, a force more powerful than her disaster seemed to cover Eve. For at that cold hour as night fell at the foot of the coast range, Celia Nevia-Garcia had ventured out to check on the south pasture of her llama ranch. She was on her way back to the barn when she discovered Eve lying beside the barbed wire that ran along the country road.

Celia got out of her Jeep, introduced herself, and gently helped Eve out of the brambles and into the car. As they bounced over the muddy pasture, Eve wondered how this motherly woman just happened to appear on the frozen path at nightfall. In her pointed knit cap and woolen poncho, she looked as if she had just descended from the *Altiplano*. But Eve was too weak to ask questions, and could only let herself be jostled along as her matronly chauffeur maneuvered the old vehicle through the mud and over the stony terrain, finally bringing it to rest in front of a sprawling ranch house.

Celia helped Eve to walk into the gathering room and settled her into an overstuffed chair in front of the fireplace, draping her with a large blanket made of white alpaca wool. She hung a pot over the fire, brewed a cup of chamomile tea, and offered it to Eve. Then she sat down on the hearth and stirred the fire. But Celia did not try to talk to Eve. She just sat with her in front of the fragrant blaze of Douglas fir as the night grew late.

Several hours passed before Eve stopped trembling and color came back to her face. Celia offered to take her home and bundled her, still wrapped in the blanket, back into the Jeep. She knew the location of Eve's cabin and drove right through the pasture to the road with nothing more than her high beams to light the way. As they climbed the hill, Eve studied Celia's twinkling green eyes and bronze tendrils peeking out from that crazy little cap. She still had no idea how this odd little lady came to be on this country road just in time to lift her out of the blackberry vine.

When they reached the cabin, Celia set the parking brake and let the engine run so heat filled the car. "Keep the blanket around you tonight, Eve. Be still. And know you are protected." Then she winked. "When you feel better, come back down to see me and the gals."

Eve could only manage a weak "Thank you." And she hobbled into the cabin.

She collapsed on the couch and pulled the heavy blanket up around her cheeks. And she lay there, gazing out the clerestories as the clouds and the stars drifted through the sky. She let the night pass like this, on into the next day, and then nights and days, losing track of time. In the midnight, the wind sang through the pines and the creek rushed down the hill. When sunlight filled the cabin, jays darted between the trees, gathering twigs for their nests. And on quiet afternoons, young squirrels chased each other around the pine trees, while deer browsed in the clearing. The forest embraced Eve, every quiet moment a divine gift of comfort for her wounded soul. This little world around the cabin was her place of peace.

Eve really didn't know how many days had passed when she finally felt a strong urge to visit Celia. Emerging like a chrysalis, she drifted down the hillside with the cool breeze of early spring. As the sun sank behind the slopes of the coast range, Eve found Celia with her five llamas in the southwest pasture enjoying their last meal of the day. Celia introduced each "gal" to Eve by name and then invited her to come to the house and eat supper by the hearth. Eve gratefully accepted and walked with Celia as she guided her little herd back to the barn.

Inside the gathering room, Celia brought out a loaf of freshly baked bread and bowls of steaming broth. Eve broke off a chunk of hot bread and dipped it in her soup. And before she could stop herself, she was recounting her life story, her collection of memories darkened with despair. She told of the abandonment she felt when her father left the family home and the panic and emptiness of her years in the institution. She relived the rejection of her peers in school, the loneliness of her journey through the desert, and her despair over the death of her baby girl.

Her story culminated in the betrayal by the man whose home she had shared for nearly a decade and the death of the woman who had given birth to her and then sent her away. In the throes of her conflict between love and rage, Eve could only see her life as a tragedy. Or maybe it had been nothing more than a cruel sham.

Celia let Eve talk until she ran out of stories. When Eve was finally quiet, staring into her empty bowl Celia went to the fireplace, lifted the tea pot from its hook and brewed two mugs of *maté*. She gave one to Eve and sat down on the hearth. "Sounds to me like you've been around this mountain more than a few times."

Eve was bewildered by those words.

Celia took a deep breath. "Eve, you should know that you're not the only girl who's ever seen a storm. In fact, I once went through a season very much like what you are facing right now." She stirred her tea. "I was in my first year of college when I got involved with my Spanish professor. I was flattered by his attention. But, to make a long story short, I wound up pregnant. So I did what girls did in the fifties. I got married—before anyone could tell. And I quit school." She chuckled. "That was probably about the year you were born! Can't you just see me walking down the aisle with a bouquet of gardenias?" She shook her head. "Well, it only lasted long enough for me to race to the maternity ward five times. Then he wanted a divorce." She paused and took a sip of tea. "He was quite a few years older—and very traditional. What I mean is, when he came home from work, he expected to find his wife waiting for him with the dinner on the table, napkins pressed, and kids neatly tucked into bed."

She picked up a poker and stirred the fire. In the flash of the flying cinders, Eve could see the gleam in Celia's eyes. "But I had a mind of my own. I wanted to see the world. I took the kids on excursions all the way from Tijuana to Santa Cruz. I didn't clean the house and I wasn't there at dinner time. I talked back to my husband. And I never went to the beauty parlor—ever. Men didn't tolerate women like me in those days."

She let the poker drop beneath the flames. "But when everything came down and he actually left me, I have to admit it—I was scared. There I was with five *pepitas* to raise all by myself." Celia gazed into the fireplace, looking back. "So I went running to my mother. I called her late one night and woke her up. Remember those heavy phones from the sixties? I was crying and the cord was getting tangled up around my feet. Well, my mother didn't want to hear any of it. She simply couldn't understand why I had failed in marriage. I just dropped the phone..." She picked up the poker. "And it crashed into pieces. On my foot." She placed the poker back on the hearth. "I guess I wanted her to tell me she loved me."

For several minutes Celia was silent, composing the next chapter of her story. She took another sip of tea and began to speak again. "So, for the next few months, I sat in the house with my kids, waiting for the child support to arrive. I started to worry that I would never see that money. So, one day—it was one of those sweltering California afternoons—I asked my neighbor to watch the kids and I hiked up the hill to the university. I was scared and I was sweating, but I walked the halls of every building and propositioned every professor I met, offering to do the only thing I knew how to do at that time—type papers. For a small fee."

Celia set her mug on the mantle and put her hands to her cheeks, laughing. "I managed to get three jobs on that one day! And when I went back to deliver, word had gotten around and there were more manuscripts waiting for me. Can you believe it? I never imagined it would take off

like that! So I set up my Smith Corona on the kitchen table and typed away all hours of the day and night. And never missed a beat of life with my kids."

She took off her spectacles and polished them with her muffler. "Well, you would think a girl like me would get bored copying all those papers day after day." She glanced sideways at Eve. "Quite the contrary. I could not resist reading those manuscripts, and the more I typed, the more I read. I couldn't stop reading..." Her voice trailed off and she put on her glasses. "Well, anyway, whenever I went up to the university to make my deliveries, I cornered professors and asked them questions about human consciousness and the universe. I think they were just amused enough to sit and talk to me. Or maybe I just wore them out. Because finally, one afternoon, a department head stopped me in the office and asked me why I was typing papers and not going to college myself. Well, I spilled my entire story, every sorry detail—and even cried a little along the way. And I must have broken his heart because he made me an offer I could not refuse." She winked at Eve. "Not that kind of offer! He told me that if I wanted to become an anthropology student, the department would waive my tuition in exchange for my typing services. I was so excited, Eve. I literally ran down the hill to the registrar's office."

Celia stretched her legs and let her clogs fall to the floor. "And so, in September of '65, I went back to college. And soon I was publishing my own papers." She picked up her shoes and put them on the hearth. "And in five years, I was lecturing in the department where I had started out as a typist." She pulled her knees up to her chin. "One night I went to a faculty party and guess who I ran into—my ex!" She laughed. "He didn't recognize me at first and he put the make on me! Can you believe it? And when he realized who I was, he tried to woo me back." Celia leaned toward Eve. "I know you want to ask if I went back to him. No, Eve, by that time, I was not interested in him at all. My children were growing up and I was planning my first trip to South America. I never saw him again. But I realized I held no grudge against him. I had let the past go and I was looking forward to the future."

She stood up and placed a small log in the fireplace. The flames flickered up around it. "I have had a good life. But I can tell you this from my own experience—if you hold on to the anger, it will fester inside you. And over time, like a cancer it will consume you." Celia turned around and wiped her hands on her skirt. "I have studied all the religions in the world, and believe me, there is nothing—no ritual, no mantra, no ceremony—nothing that will take away the pain. There is only one way to healing, Eve: you must be willing to let your heart be washed clean. You must seek forgiveness—for yourself and for all those who have hurt you."

Eve glared into the fire, grappling with those words.

Celia sat down and folded her hands in her lap. "Eve, I'm going to give you a prayer—"

Eve shook her head and looked at her feet.

Celia put her hand on her shoulder. "I know you feel like that. But I also know you are a prisoner right now. You are being held captive by your own thoughts. And your fear and your anger."

Eve remained silent.

"Eve, do you want to be free?"

Without raising her eyes, she nodded.

"Okay. So I want you to go home tonight and look up past the stars. And thank God for His mercy." She took Eve's hand and looked deep into her eyes. "And then be still and accept the forgiveness."

Eve did not speak to Celia all the way home that night. She simply got out of the Jeep and went into the cabin. And again she lay down on the couch and looked out into the night. Indignant that Celia would even suggest she ask for forgiveness, Eve could only lie there full of dark rage, thinking about the wasteland of her life. She searched the clear moonlit sky, unwilling to believe that even if there were a God, He would want to hear from her.

And that was when her tears began to flow, a flood of shameful memories filling her with remorse. These were the terrible secrets she had never revealed to anyone, misdeeds she tried to hide even from herself. Her personal demon of guilt accused her until she could no longer bear the condemnation. And she heard herself cry out into the night, pleading for a second chance—begging for mercy. She did not know where that plea came from, or even if anyone in the universe was listening. The cry just welled up from somewhere inside, and she let it fly with total abandon until she fell back, exhausted, into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Eve awoke before the sun. She threw the alpaca blanket around her shoulders and ran down the hill to find Celia tossing alfalfa grass into the barn. Eve told her that she had come to return the blanket. Celia leaned on the pitchfork and studied Eve's face. "You slept well last night."

Eve went into the barn and sank down on a bale of hay.

Celia sat next to her. "I know you will think this is too much to ask. But you must finish the prayer. Your healing will only be complete if you ask for the forgiveness of others, of anyone who has ever hurt you."

Eve looked at Celia but did not speak.

Celia read the protest in her eyes. "Yes, Eve. Anyone means everyone."

Eve stood up and let the blanket slide from her shoulders. Celia caught it before it touched the ground. "Keep this. You will need it tonight."

Eve pulled it around her and trudged away up the rocky trail. By the time she reached the cabin, her neck was stiff and her head was throbbing. As the hours of the day wore on, the pain became unbearable, her body gripped as if in a vise with every nerve inflamed. And by the time the sun had set, Eve was so tortured she could not rest.

She lay down and buried her face in the comforter. All through the night, she rocked in agony, reliving every trespass that had ever been committed against her. How could she forgive Richard, or her mother, or any of those...? Her mind lost reason and she moaned, running from her thoughts.

In the darkest hour, Eve began to retch. She rolled out of bed, wrapped Celia's blanket around her and ran out into the woods. Between dry heaves, she staggered over to an old pine tree. She sank to the ground, shaking, her mind flooded with the poison of her past. Tossed in this tempest, she clung to the giant trunk, pressed her cheek against the rough bark and screamed, "Please save me!" This time, she knew she was talking to God.

Eve held to the tree and felt the venom flow out of her veins, transfused with something she could only describe as peace. Every trace of bitterness seemed to have washed away and she willingly relinquished any desire for vengeance. She had only one thought, and it filled her mind to overflowing. *“This must be Forgiveness.”* And she floated in this freedom, finally slipping into a deep and blessed sleep.

A golden ray of sun shooting through the branches of the tall tree brought Eve back to awareness. She felt like she had been out a long time, finding herself curled in a fetal position on a cushion of nettles, bathed in the warm glow of the early spring morning. As she came to, she realized the pain had left her head and every part of her body, and she was free of the torment that had plagued her for so many years. She had been released from the grip of acrimony, the bondage of her own remorse. And her heart overflowed with gratitude.

It was at that moment that she felt a gentle touch on her shoulder. She looked up, dazzled by the brilliant light. And there was Celia, shining eyes and rosy cheeks, smiling down at her. “He heard your prayer, Eve.”

Now she understood; this all made sense—Celia had been sent to walk beside her through this trial, and with unconditional love, to guide her along the path to forgiveness. Eve knelt on the wet earth beneath the pine tree, reached out to Celia and sobbed, letting it all go—all the pain, the condemnation, the guilt. She could finally be free.

In those first days of spring Eve began a new journey to healing. That moment of surrender under the pine tree had left her with such a powerful sense of freedom that she knew she would never be the same. Even as she continued to struggle with phantoms of her past, she did not despair. She had a new source of strength and she was no longer fighting her fears alone.

Celia remained her wise friend, opening her home as a safe haven, a place to share work and food and friendship. The days grew longer and Eve spent many hours with the llamas, helping Celia guide them to the freshest grasses of the pasture. She came to know each animal personally and the herd greeted her at the south fence every afternoon as she came walking down the hill. In late April, Celia taught her how to brush and clip their coats in anticipation of the summer heat. And every evening, the two women sat in the gathering room, cleaning and carding and spinning the wool, preparing the fibers for weaving.

The months of spring passed into summer, and Eve watched with amazement as an exquisite blanket emerged from Celia’s loom. Soothed by the rhythm of the shuttle and pedal, Eve began a journal to reflect upon her new life. As Celia wove, she counseled Eve that there would be rocky places along the way, but though she might stumble, she would never fall if she let the Spirit light the path. With each passing day, the two women celebrated victory over fear, loneliness, and any shame associated with remnants of the past. And on the back cover of Eve's journal, Celia left this note:

“Eve. Never forget that night at the foot of the pine tree. You were desperate and realized you could not break out of your shackles by yourself. You called out to your Creator and He liberated you instantly, with power beyond human understanding. Live each moment filled with gratitude for this gift of new life.”

By Midsummer, Eve was strong and ready to travel back to California to face all the reminders of years gone by. I was worried that she might still be too fragile to negotiate this trip by herself, so I drove up to the cabin to take her to the train station. As we wound down the hill, I reminded her to call my mother as soon as she returned to the Plaza. I even promised that I would help her find a job when I arrived in Los Angeles in early autumn.

"Don't worry, Kit." Eve reassured me. "I know that I am not alone."

Still, when the southbound coastliner pulled into the station, I pelted her with last-minute queries as we hurried toward the tracks: "Do you have enough money to buy food? Do you need another pair of socks? Do you want to borrow my sleeping bag?"

Eve just laughed. "Calm down! I have everything." She lifted her duffel bag over her shoulder. "Even a blanket so I can sleep in the seat tonight."

I had never seen her so calm—even cheerful—in the face of uncertain circumstances. It was clear to me that Eve had a truly profound experience during her stay in the mountain forest in 1989.

The bustle and chatter of the downtown cafe was suddenly silenced as the giant clock in the tower sounded, echoing through the old bank building. We were startled into laughter. But I knew it was getting late and I had only a few minutes to ask a question that had been on my mind ever since I put Eve on that train in Oregon. "Did you really forgive Richard?"

She fell silent.

Perhaps I shouldn't have asked.

Finally, slowly, she answered. "I was in pain. Wracked with it—my mind and my body. I didn't want to struggle anymore. I had to release him, Kit. Richard and everybody."

"But how could you not want revenge?"

Again, she paused. When she answered, her voice was soft but clear. "It was eating me up. I needed to be rescued. From my own destruction."

"Do you still think about that, Eve?" This was dangerous territory. "I mean, do you ever think about—"

"Killing myself?" She looked down into her empty cup. "Sometimes."

"You're kidding me." I couldn't hide my dismay.

She caught my gaze. "Don't worry, Kit. That thought can't kill me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not afraid anymore. Life doesn't scare me. I have reasons to live. I'm strong now."

"What changed you?"

She thought for a moment. "Forgiveness. There's power in letting go."

We were going to be late for our dinner in the Sky View, but Eve had more to tell and I could not let this opportunity pass. I still had so many questions about the years after she returned to California and she was now ready to tell the rest of her story.

On a hot afternoon in the summer of 1989, Eve returned to the Plaza. The neighborhood seemed unfamiliar to her with aging houses in varying states of disrepair, reflecting the stories and scars of the families that had inhabited them. But the trees lining the avenue welcomed her like an old friend, and she recognized every Jacaranda, Magnolia, and Eucalyptus even though they now towered above the rooftops. Their endurance reassured her as she climbed the steps to the house where her mother had died, grasping the key that she had carried with her on her journeys far away from home. As she crossed the threshold, the scent of her mother greeted her. Overcome by her loss, Eve found the old phone, called her father, and went to sit on the porch to wait for his car to pull up in the driveway. And together they carried their duffel bags into the kitchen where they sat, sharing a supper of soda crackers and pinto beans late into the night.

But Eve had few days to mourn, for a new school year was beginning and I had recruited her to be my aide in a classroom for students with profound disabilities. She enthusiastically accepted the challenge and soon she had acquired a reputation throughout the district as the beloved “cheechar” of kids who had so often been devalued and ignored. Every waking hour of every day, she was engaged in the lives of her students. She had no time for sorrow.

As the 20th century neared its end, Eve changed course to devote herself to her sister's young family. Cari had taken a few years' leave to give birth to three children, but her hiatus from work could not go on forever. When she confided in her sister that she couldn't find a babysitter she could trust, Eve volunteered to be the children's full-time nanny. Cari was ecstatic since she could now return to her job, leaving her kids in the care of the auntie they adored.

So Eve went to live in a tiny cottage on her sister's property in a little town in the county of Orange. Everything seemed to fall into place and she finally felt that she was really a member of her own family. It was the life she had always dreamed of in a quiet little community filled with churches and fruit trees and children. The days with Allie, Justin, and Jonathan flowed pleasantly through cycles of seasons. Every morning, Eve made waffles for the children, packed up their lunches, and strapped Justin's book bag on his back. She checked the wheels on his scooter, buckled Allie and Jonathan into their stroller, and took off with her little brood through the neighborhood. After dropping Justin at the primary playground, Eve strolled along the avenues with Allie and Jon, window shopping in Old Town, and stopping for lunch on a green hill in the local park. By early afternoon, Eve was on her way back to the school to pick up Justin and wander past the charming old houses of the historic district.

Each day, Eve passed a two-story Victorian with gingerbread trim on the edge of town. She soon found out that the quaint dwelling belonged to our friend, Scott—the same Scott that she had met back in the seventies at one of those late night parties in Richard's apartment. Scott had discovered the house while taking photographs of centenarian homes in California, and when it came up for sale in the late nineties he jumped at the chance to purchase it. Within months, he had closed his Los Angeles studio and moved south to begin his renovation project. And as the new century began, while he was putting the finishing touches on his restored home, Eve had moved into a cottage on the same street to care for her sister's children. This remarkable intersection of their lives brought Scott and Eve together again.

Scott's daughter Lexia stood every afternoon on the corner in front of her house, waiting for Eve and the children to pass by. The vivacious little redhead insisted that they stop so she could play with Allie and the boys. Over time, Lexia grew so attached to Eve that she claimed her as her

own auntie. Eve showered her with warm attention, knowing that Lexia's mother, Scott's estranged wife, would probably never return.

And so the afternoons passed, Eve rocking in the porch swing, watching the children play while Scott painted the lattice work that graced the verandah. She and Scott shared a comfortable friendship, but it would not be until much later that Eve would find out how much he cared about her—and how much she appreciated him.

Eve picked up a napkin and began to spread it on the cafe table. "You know, right in the middle of all this..." Her eyes were cast down. "I did finally stumble. Just like Celia warned." She squashed the napkin in her fist.

I stared at her hand and the mashed up ball of paper. "When did that happen?"

"When did it all come down? I was living in Cari's cottage." She looked up at me. "Remember 911?"

"How could I forget?"

"Tuesday—it was a Tuesday morning. I was making breakfast. For the kids." She looked back down at her fist. "That was—it was a terrible—what do you call it? When things happen all at once...? She broke off.

"Coincidence?"

"I tried to talk Cari out of it. To change their plans."

"Plans?" I knew something happened to Eve that day, but she had never given me the whole story.

"They had that trip planned already. For months. To take the train all the way to—somewhere. A thousand miles away. And they had tickets to leave. That night." She straightened out the napkin. "I begged Cari. She wouldn't listen to me." She started to tear it into tiny pieces. "So, I was supposed to drive everybody. Over to the train station."

"So did you?"

"Straight to their deaths. That's what it felt like." She stopped tearing the napkin and looked at me. "Allie was so excited. She was bubbling in that tiny kid's voice, *'Auntie Eve! We're going on a long trip!'*" She looked down again. "So they climbed on the train. And then I turned around real fast. And got back in the van. And I just broke down."

She brushed the pieces of shredded paper into a pile. I handed her my napkin.

"I thought I'd never see them again. So I'm driving home. I'm shaking. And I drive past the liquor store." She put her hands over her face.

"And you stopped and you bought a bottle."

"Brandy." Eve stopped and looked directly into my eyes. "I haven't had any since. You know that."

"I know that, Eve. I believe you."

She took a deep breath and exhaled. "So I take this paper bag with this bottle. And I'm sitting there in the parking lot—this is so dumb. I shouldn't be telling you this."

"It's okay, Eve. I can figure it out. You opened the bottle and took a swig."

"A few swigs. A lot of swigs. And then I started to drive away..."

I could see she needed help with the rest of this. "And the next thing you knew there were lights flashing in your rear view mirror. And you got pulled over."

"Right there. Outside the liquor store." She covered her eyes again.

I could tell she was ashamed. "It's okay, Eve."

"They booked me."

"You spent the night?"

"Who could bail me out?"

"So how did you finally...?"

"I finally called—the only person—"

"Scott!" I blurted out. "You called Scott."

"Shh!" She looked around the cafe.

"Oh, Eve! I love it. He came to your rescue."

"I was so ashamed."

"But he came and picked you up."

Eve didn't answer.

"So he came and took you home."

She still didn't answer.

"Come on, Eve. Tell me. He took care of you?"

She swept the shreds of napkin into her hand and dropped them into a trash can near the table.

"He helped me pick up the pieces and put my life back together."

"He found you a lawyer."

"And a group. For recovery."

"At his church?"

"The church on the hill. He took me up there. Every night. So many times. And he waited for me. And he drove me home. Night after night. I don't know why he did."

"So you turned your life around?"

"No, Kit, I couldn't do that by myself. That's what I had to learn. It took me all my life to see that. So many people told me—in so many ways. Celia up north. And Patricia down south. And even Jewel on the day I left the Home. I will always need the Comforter." Eve bit her lower lip.

"You probably think I'm crazy."

"Well, there's no question of that!"

For a moment I didn't know whether she was going to laugh or cry. She tossed her empty cup into the trash basket. Then she sat back in her chair and beamed at me. "You *do* know what I'm talking about."

"I think I get it, Eve. It's the Comforter that protects you from the storm."

"And from myself."

"From killing yourself?"

"I can't fight this alone. I have to reach out. And the Comforter is there. Always. And every day." She picked up a straw and twirled it between her fingers. "You know, I've been looking back. Do you how many times I could have been taken out?"

"Taken out?"

"All those years, wandering alone. In the desert. And down mountain roads. And around this old city. Late at night. I could have been killed. So many times I screamed, 'Oh, my God!'" She shook her head. "There must be a reason. Some reason I'm still here."

"This world still needs you, Eve." I reached across the table and took her hand. "Like that night last summer. You saved Mom's life. Thank you for not killing yourself."

She pulled her hands back and folded them on the table. "Can I ask you something?"

"Ask."

"Did Cari ever show you that letter? That one about driving back to Uncle Clay's?"

I could feel my heart speed up a bit. "Yes. She did."

"It's okay, Kit! By now you know everything."

I relaxed a little. "That was that night in '72? When you couldn't find anything on the car radio?"

"Except the preacher." She bowed her head slightly. "I almost turned him off. I thought he would bawl me out. I didn't want to feel guilty."

"I remember your letters, Eve, especially that one."

She raised her head, but continued to look at the table. "So I let him talk. He kept talking. And it started to dawn on me—he was talking about me. I mean, the son who left home and made a mess of his life—that was me."

"The prodigal."

She nodded. "That was my story. I was so ashamed. And I deserved to be punished. So I listened to that preacher. I just kept driving. And listening. That father loved his child so much. It made me cry. I cried because I was that child. But that father loved me. No matter what. Even if I messed up. He wanted me to come back. And he would meet me on the road. With open arms." She paused. "That night I deserved to die. But the voice out of the sky told me there was mercy. Mercy for me."

"It's been a long journey, Eve."

"I stumbled lots of times." She shook her head. "I could've just stayed down. I could've been crushed. But I always remember that night. Driving on ice. Trying to get home." She took a deep

breath and smiled at me. "Now I'm not afraid. I know the road will lead me home. And my Father will take me back."

I looked deep into Eve's eyes, lavender tonight. Her long hair was all shades of gold and platinum and her face shone under the bright holiday lights. Now I finally understood what had happened, the transformation I saw in her. She had been saved by grace.

It was late when we finally walked out into the night. Our steps were fast and light and I was relieved that Eve had not been undone by our trip back in time. In fact, like the city, she seemed revitalized. She had survived the demolition and embarked on a new life. And I watched her chase the stars shining from the sidewalk along the boulevard to the shore.

Scott and Kurt were waiting for us on the roof of the Sky View with a platter of *tapas* and a carafe of hot cider. Eve was enchanted by this high place, and could not settle down until she had taken a spin around the entire panorama. She was so exuberant that I thought for a moment she might become airborne. Eve stood on the tips of her toes and pointed into the night. "There it is. You see it?" The fog was still low and could not obscure the dazzling tree of lights that graced the pinnacle of Oil Hill.

Our supper was light but warm and we sat there for a long time, sipping the hot spiced drinks. Scott took a small book out of his pocket and turned to Eve. "I thought you might want to see this."

Eve looked at the book but did not touch it. It was a collection of poetry that Richard had published at the university sometime in the eighties. Eve just stared at the cover—at the title on the cover: *Onetime a Seaside Resort*. I asked her if she had ever seen this book. She shook her head, so I took the book and opened it.

There on the very first page, Richard had left a dedication:

"To Eve."

And on the last page of the little book, I found this poem that Eve had penned just before she left the city.

*Onetime a Seaside Resort...
and so all along the boulevard
the palm trees drop their dates,
and last of last night's fog
stain the walks, the road,
the cold porch steps and
plaster lion on the landing.
a mile out in the harbor the lonely warnings
echo hollow, weary
back in the alley on the fire escape steps*

*an old man came to die—
here in early morning haze, he drifts away,
soothed by the sad foghorn song,
off to sleep, out past the break.*

Saturday, December 24th

As soon as the sun set on Christmas Eve, Kurt and I packed up the car with gifts and jackets and headed out to the Plaza. There was a chill in the evening air and Venus sparkled over Oil Hill. We turned off the highway and I could see Eve's house glowing in the distance down the avenue. It was a glittering scene of tiny lights woven through the trellis and trees, and hanging like icicles along the roof.

Kurt pulled slowly to the curb and I threw open my door to hurry up the walkway, worried that Eve's holiday preparations had escalated into mania. We climbed the steps and the front door swung open, tossing a wreath of poinsettias and juniper into the air. Max and Callie bounced out to escort us over the threshold into the cozy living room lit by flickering candles and rose-colored lamps. The scent of pine and bayberry hung in the warm air rising from the floor grates. The dining room table was draped in lace and laden with treats from Eve's kitchen and oranges from her garden tree. Ruby was arranging crystal glasses near the punchbowl while her granddaughter Jade chased the dogs around the house, sending the cats to hover atop the china cabinet high above the festivities.

Kurt joined Justin and Jonathan at their Grandpa's old computer, and I just stood there, soaking in the atmosphere and watching Allie hang heirloom angels on the highest branches of the Christmas tree. It was hard to believe this was the same house that a few months ago had been cluttered with cobwebs and piles of dusty relics.

Eve made her entrance, her cheeks pink with the oven heat, carrying a pan of hot ginger cookies from the kitchen. She gave it to Ruby and wiped her hands on her apron.

"Eve! I haven't seen an apron since..."

"Sit down, Kit." She went to her mother's china cabinet and returned with an antique photo album covered in deep green velvet. And she placed it before me, ceremoniously. Intrigued, I was just about to open it when the doorbell rang.

The dogs went crazy and in walked Scott with a pretty red head dressed in gold leggings and high heels. The young woman spotted Eve across the room and ran over to throw her arms around her. "Aunt Evie! I'm here!"

"Lexi!" Eve lost her balance and bumped the table, making waves in the punch bowl.

Cari sprinted in from the kitchen just in time to catch it. "Lexia, turn down the megawatts!"

Lexia froze. "Is Allie here?" She spun around. "Look at you, little sister!" And she reached out and twirled Allie like a ballroom dancer. "Look how much you've changed!"

Allie could barely catch her breath, giggling with delight.

Then Lexia turned back and took Eve's hands. "But Evie, you are just the same."

I looked down and began leafing through Eve's album. It was filled with those old photos she had found while cleaning out the house last autumn. Mom began to doze, and Jade crawled up on my lap to help me turn the pages. Lexia sat down next to me. "Old photographs!" She began flipping through the album. "Allie, come here. Look, this is you in the stroller. And here's me in my roller skates."

Allie studied the picture. "That's Aunt Eve? What happened to her hair?"

"Some kid called me Carrot Top, so she tried to tint her hair red. To make me feel better. But it just turned pink." Suddenly she held up the album for all to see. "I took this picture! This is my favorite." It was a snapshot of Scott and Eve sitting on the verandah of the old Victorian. "They always used to sit together in the swing." She passed the album back to me and stood up. "By the way, where did they disappear to?" She scanned the room and then gave Allie a sly grin. And the girls headed out the kitchen door with their cameras, like paparazzi on the prowl.

What was it about Lexia that reminded me so much of Eve? Was it a passion for living, or that intensity that verged on desperation? I turned my attention back to the photos of Eve and the children playing in front of Scott's big white house. It was clear those kids loved her, crawling into her arms and hugging her waist as if she were a benevolent tree. Scott had captured these moments before those long, gentle afternoons could escape with the years.

In a rush of cold night air, Allie and Lexia scurried back into the kitchen, snapping selfies. Lexia shivered dramatically. "It's freeeezing out there!" She came to the table and was just about to show me incriminating shots of an old ladder leaning against the house when we heard the back door open. We all fell silent as Eve and Scott came in together. Their faces were flushed and Eve's hair had been tossed by the wind. They stopped and stood in front of us, suddenly sheepish.

Lexia aimed her camera and snapped. "Have you two been up on the roof?"

Scott launched into an explanation. "I'm pretty sure I found the flashing that needs to be fixed, that's causing that leaky spot."

"Well, Dad, you'd better start working right away because it could start raining any time."

My mother lifted her head out of a light sleep. "Why don't you all just stay the night?"

Lexia looked at Allie, and the girls burst out in another round of glee.

If I had not known these people, I would have thought they were all members of the family that inhabited this house. It was a small crowd, but it filled the rooms—the men clustered at the computer, the women overseeing the oven and table, and two teen girls full of energy, sharing their enthusiasm for life. And, like a true extended family, Ruby's little granddaughter was standing on my dozing mother's lap, sampling as many treats as her little hands could reach. It was a comfortable occasion and I found it hard to believe that Eve could have pulled this all off by herself. I had expected her to be in a frenzy, rushing to get everything ready before anyone showed up, possibly burning a pan of cookies as the guests arrived. And worst of all, what if no one had come to her party? Her fears of rejection would have been confirmed for the rest of her life. But everyone was here, enjoying this tranquil gathering, the house filled with soft light and sweet smells—and the smiles of people who loved Eve.

The hours passed and by midnight, the guests were warm and full of food. Jade had opened everyone's gifts and fallen asleep, nestled in my mother's lap. Lexia stood near the table watching Eve wrap foil around ginger men. "When are you gonna come out and see us?"

"I will." Eve gave Lexia a cookie.

"When?" Lexia sounded so like a child that I almost laughed. But I was hearing the voice of a daughter with a wound of abandonment. No wonder she clung to Eve.

Eve gave her a bundle of cookies. "Soon."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Slowly, the company took off into the dark hours of Christmas morning, and Cari and Allie went to the kitchen to wash the crystal. I sat with Eve and my mother at the dining table, wrapping tea spoons in their little flannel blankets. "I can hardly believe this is the same old house that was suffocating you back in September."

Eve opened the silverware chest and began to slip the spoons into their silk pockets. "I wish Moma could've been here tonight."

Cari came to the kitchen door with a dish towel over her shoulder. "Moma tried to have a party every year. But she could never get through the night without... You know, this may be the first happy holiday this house has ever seen." She opened the glass door of the china cabinet and began hanging cups above the shelves. "You've done a lot with this place, Eve. You deserve to live here as long as you want."

Eve looked at Cari but did not respond. I could see she was trying to grasp what her sister had just said.

Cari closed the cabinet and turned around to face her. "Why don't you just stay? You can live here."

Eve looked down and straightened the tablecloth. "I can't, Cari. I can't buy you out."

"You don't have to. Daddy wanted us to keep it in the family. Anyway, I have enough to take care of with my own place."

Eve studied the intricate pattern of the lace cloth. She still did not look up. Her sister had just offered her a priceless gift and Eve would never again feel evicted from her family home. It had been an enormous and emotional task, clearing away the debris of shattered dreams and broken hearts. Like a diligent archaeologist, she dug through the decades of habitation, and brought order to the chaos. Yet, though Eve had cleared this house of its internal story of pain, it would for her always be a wistful victory. At this moment, she could not find words to say. She did not even know all that she felt, so she picked up a crystal glass and began to polish the stem.

I returned my attention to Eve's album, flipping back to the bright images of a late summer afternoon. There I found a woman who barely resembled the somber girl in the previous pages. I might not have recognized her if I had not taken these myself, these photos of Eve in front of the old high school, surrounded by a crowd of children in wheelchairs. She was wearing a red football jersey and bright lipstick. And she was actually smiling.

The children with twisted limbs and asymmetrical smiles were my students—our students. And it was the beginning of “decentralization” when special schools closed their doors for good and thousands of kids with disabilities were sent out into the community. Eve had come to help me teach my special ed students: I needed her not just for lifting and moving their rigid bodies—I needed Eve to interpret their world for me. Only she could know how they felt, what it was like to be unacceptable, rejected, resigned to a life of isolation.

And she did bring joy into the classroom. I watched her communicate with children who had never learned to speak. She danced with teenagers who had spent their lives in wheelchairs. When she was with them their faces lit up, and kids who had forgotten how to smile lifted their heads with laughter. She spent eight years with me in that class, the longest time she ever stayed on any job. And although most of those children were dead by now, the memory of Eve as the angel who changed their lives would live on in the families they left behind.

Eve’s album told a remarkable story of a woman who had been sent off as a little girl to endure a treacherous journey. From the day she was institutionalized, doctors had given her all kinds of treatments for a multitude of diagnoses. Over the years, she had been labeled schizophrenic, autistic, bipolar, and developmentally delayed. She lost count of all the meds she had ingested since her first anti-psychotics in the Children's Home. And as a teenager, she smoked and swallowed street drugs to get high and dull her pain.

She traveled aimlessly for years, searching for a place to call home, wandering in and out of relationships fractured by the thoughtlessness and cruelty of people she had trusted. By her own account, Eve could have been committed to an insane asylum. She could be homeless, living under the bridge at the mouth of the Los Angeles river. She could even be doing time for substance abuse. Or she could simply be dead, a victim of her own troubled mind.

But she was not today in any of those places. She had traveled rough roads in desolate lands, yet she had survived. In the holiday candlelight, she seemed almost ethereal in her vintage cashmere sweater adorned with tiny rhinestones. Her hair floated in golden and silver locks around her shoulders and her face was serene as she polished the antique crystal in the flickering light. She had been denied the dreams of childhood, but Eve had not been defeated.

I closed the album and latched the velvet cover. “Tell me the truth, Eve. Tonight, when you and Scott were up on the roof together, what did he really say to you?”

She just kept polishing the glass. "He offered to fix the leaky spot."

"Is that all?"

"He also told me..." Her voice faded dreamily.

"What did he tell you?"

"That he would help me to restore it."

"He would help you with the restoration of the house?"

She held the glass to the light. "With the restoration of everything." She smiled.

Then she tossed her apron into the air. “Let’s drive up to Oil Hill!” And she disappeared into the hall.

Allie’s eyes lit up. “Right now?”

Eve tossed a jacket across the table.

Cari caught it. "I'd like to know how we're all going to fit in that T-Bird."

Allie took her jacket from her mother. "We need a blanket for Grandma."

Eve went to the bedroom and brought out an immense comforter made of pure white wool. I watched her wrap it around my mother. She glanced back at me. "Yes, Kit. Alpaca. A gift from the gals up north."

Whipped by a chill wind, we survived the climb to the top of the Hill in the open convertible. Eve parked beneath the towering tree of lights, and the dogs jumped out before we could even open the doors. We followed them to the south cliff. Allie draped the big blanket around my mother. "Why do they call it Oil Hill?"

Eve was just about to tell the story of the day the Hill had gone up in flames, but Allie took off, chasing Max and Calli to the little park where the Star Dust Cafe once stood. We watched her turn cartwheels across the grassy ballroom floor until the dogs knocked her over and she fell laughing, her face plastered with wet tongue kisses.

A cold gust blew up over the cliff and Eve wrapped herself in the blanket next to my mother. Cari and I joined her in the warm cloud of the comforter, and we stood there bathed in the glow of the holiday lights. Eve lifted her head. "Too bright to see the stars. But I know they're up there. A heaven full of them."

Mom pressed her cheek next to Eve's and whispered in her ear. "You are my star, Evie. A special star. You have a destiny to fulfill."

Eve's eyes met mine, and silently we shared the blessing my mother had spoken over her so many times, we both knew it by heart:

"For I know the plans I have for you—to give you every good thing and to keep you from harm's way. To give you hope and a future..."

It was a loving assurance and it had sustained Eve throughout the journey of her life. She gazed triumphantly into the Christmas sky. "I believe that, Mom. Tonight, I believe that promise."