



*The*  
**LIGHT**  
*of the*  
**WORLD**  
A NOVEL



E L L E N   S I M P S O N

# Prologue

A BANGING ABOVE HER HEAD WOKE Wren from her fitful sleep. She sat up, heart hammering in her chest. Her head tilted low, chin tucked in tight, as she ducked under the exposed joist above. Her breath came in short, shallow gasps.

They'd found her.

Wren rolled away from the cast iron hinges of the trapdoor overhead. She gathered herself and her blanket into a small ball as far away from the sound as she could. Blood pounded in her ears. Above, the ruckus continued. Wren wrapped her arms around her knees and tried to steady her breathing. There was no time, and no escape. She had to hope they would not find this place or else it would all have been for naught.

The crawl space was lit by narrow streams of light from the kitchen above. They cut through the gloom and riddled it with patches of bright yellow. Wren inhaled and exhaled slowly, forcing herself to stay calm. The rough wood of the wall dug into her back and the pain kept her grounded.

There were seekers at the door. Seekers that must not find her. Wren clutched her heavy pendant to her chest and wove her fingers around the points of the red-orange gem. It was warm to the touch, warmer than it should have been given her interrupted sleep. She let the sharp points dig into her palm because the pain focused her terrified mind.

It was the only comfort Wren dared allow herself. The warmth of the gem was enough to steady even the most frayed of nerves. It was all she had to keep her safe, and it would keep her safe on faith alone.

She forced herself to be as still as death. The weight of the entire world pressed down upon her. She felt it through the thin blanket she'd wrapped around herself. She pulled the blanket over her head even though she knew it would be no use. She was as far away from the trapdoor above as she could possibly get. It didn't matter. If the seekers thought to look into the space—if they found the door—the pendant would do little to protect her. She couldn't get out of this crawl space.

If she kept breathing, it would be all right. The seekers would not find her and belief would keep her safe. She had to believe that salvation would come. The words of the prayer were on her lips and she exhaled a long, slow breath. If she said the words, the men above would sense the power. If she spoke at all, they'd hear her. They would catch scent of her fear and come running, looking to gut her for the key she guarded.

It would be no use, but she whispered the words of prayer like a soul desperate for salvation. They felt stiff and uncomfortable on her lips. The pendant was the only thing that would keep her safe now.

The floor above creaked ominously.

She should have known better than to trust the kind-faced woman who'd ushered her into the cellar. Her smile had been so concerned, eating up her story about a steady with a temper. Wren had fibbed, said he was looking for her and she needed a place to hide. The woman had left Wren with a threadbare blanket, a cup of soup, and a kind word. Yet she had sold Wren out just the same as everyone else.

## The Light of the World

One glimpse of the Light of the World and all the goodness in her was gone.

Muffled voices filtered down through the floor. Wren peeked out from underneath the blanket. Small clouds of dust puffed out of the cracks where light shone through from the kitchen above. Wren had picked this house because they had seemed like her type of people: good Irish folk. They should not have been able to recognize her burden for what it was.

“Looking for this here girl,” the voice above said. It was crass and uneducated, which made Wren let out a quiet sigh of relief. Maybe they would be too dumb to think to check for a hidden door. Her fingers shook as she clung to the pendant. She’d be good, she swore to herself, she would not allow herself another dalliance. She would stay hidden and safe, and the secret would remain unknown.

There was more scraping and Wren tensed. They’d found the door. The pendant cut into her skin as she felt her palm grow wet. She did not move. She did not react. She stayed perfectly still. Her lips pressed into a thin line as she let the gem dig deeper into her flesh.

“As I told ye,” growled the woman who’d been so kind to Wren earlier. The trapdoor was yanked open and the cellar flooded with light. Wren’s breath ceased altogether. “There’s nothin’ down that cellar save some ol’ sacks an’ some potatoes, ’onestly.”

“Still gotta check, Missus,” the gruff-voiced man who had spoken before replied. He peered down into the emptiness, blinking owlishly. His eyes met Wren’s though the loose knit of the blanket, and she renewed her desperate plea for protection.

The light of the world must be kept safe at any cost. Even if it meant her own life. She learned that mantra before

she learned her own name. This was her purpose, her life. There was no other. If this was where it ended, where she died, so be it.

*Protect me...* Wren prayed. Her hand was shaking as she gripped the pendant. *Protect this place.*

“What’d I tell ya?” Wren’s host demanded. Their voices were so loud.

The man sat back on his knees, one hand still resting on the trapdoor. Wren didn’t know how he’d found it. It was so carefully hidden beneath a rug and a good layer of dirt that she’d missed it herself, the first time. “I don’t...” He stared hard at Wren’s still form and the blanket that covered her from head to toe. “I coulda sworn I ’eard somethin’.”

Her host stepped forward and pushed the man’s hand away from the trapdoor. It fell back into place with a clatter and a shower of dust. Wren felt as though she was choking on the clogging air. She let out the breath she’d been holding in a long, slow sigh. The light of the world had saved her. It had protected her and hidden her from those who sought to snuff out the light.

The man’s footsteps above faded away. Wren lay there, ears straining, listening for any possible sound. Would he come back? The question brought with it another swell of anxiety. She had to get to the safe haven. There she could become someone else. They wouldn’t know her name, or what she’d done to get away from them. There would be no evidence of the life she’d destroyed to escape the clutches of those who sought her out. The Light of the World had to be protected. It was her duty as a guardian never to allow it or herself to become compromised again.

Her heart ached as she sat in the darkness underneath the kind woman’s kitchen. She hated what she’d had to do to keep herself safe. It wasn’t fair to anyone, most of all to *her*.

## The Light of the World

There was no fixing it now. The deed was done and the letter left in their secret place where it would be found eventually—and maybe, one day, Wren would be forgiven.

Curling into herself, Wren fought back tears of relief and regret. They had not found her. The Light of the World had kept her safe. She hated it, hated the task and the duty that came with it. She hated that she had to leave it all behind. Everything she'd worked for, everything she'd *built*. She'd shattered *everything* into a million pieces, too preoccupied with duty and her obligation to care about the crumbling life she left behind. There was nothing she could do to change her fate.

Tears started to roll down her cheeks. Wren let out a dry, wretched sob. She had a long way to go before she'd be safe again, and a broken heart to carry.



# Part One

Flashlights under Manhattan





# Chapter 1

## The Girl at the Funeral

MRS. MARY OGLESBY KESSLER'S FUNERAL was a well-attended affair, despite the woman's less than charming personality during her life. Neighbors and relatives filed into the outdoor venue behind the funeral home, standing underneath wide tents for shelter from the bright summer sunlight. They tugged at their ties and pulled off somber sweaters and suit jackets to show shirtsleeves, dressing down in a way that Mrs. Kessler would have glared at disapprovingly, had she been able to.

In life, her son and nephew lamented to the gathered masses, she was not always the easiest person to know. She'd survived two world wars and the Great Depression, they said. She'd lived far longer than any of her peers, dying only after one hundred and five long years on this Earth. She was off to join her husband Harry, gone these last thirty-five years. Maybe now, the minister mused in his brief eulogy, she'd finally be happy.

Sitting at the rear of the tent in an uncomfortable folding chair that dug painfully into her lower back, Eva Kessler crossed her arms across her chest. With every passing moment, she was increasingly aware of the scowl deepening on her face. Her annoyance grew with every comment by

the minister that dismissed her grandmother's staunch denouncement of the existence of a higher power. Her grandmother had not been like that at all. She was a woman whose views of the world were so deeply founded in realism that she would have been hopping mad at this tribute to her memory.

The worst part of this ordeal was that Eva was the only person who seemed to care that her grandmother would not have approved of any of this. The entire event barely seemed to be about her grandmother at all. Rather, it was about people attempting to make themselves feel better for the fact that Mrs. Kessler was one hundred and five when she died and rarely had visitors other than Eva and occasionally Eva's parents.

Eva tugged at the sleeves of her uncomfortable black dress that she'd pulled from the back of her closet that morning, hoping by all that was holy that it wasn't part of a Halloween costume she'd bought before she'd dropped out of school. It was cut low enough to draw curious looks from her creepy second cousin Charlie and a scowl from his entirely-too-provocatively-dressed for a funeral date, despite her attempt to cover up with a cardigan. The drawback was that the funeral was outdoors under a canvas tent and it was close to eighty-five degrees in the shade. She was hot and uncomfortable as she listened to people who obviously didn't know Mary Kessler as anything other than a passing name in their Rolodexes talk about her as if she were the light of their lives, and it was making Eva crankier by the minute.

Tucking a stray lock of wispy brown hair behind her ear, Eva glanced back to see her mother standing next to her father with a comforting hand on his shoulder. He wasn't taking this well and had retreated outside to cry unseen. Feeling guilty, Eva looked away. His emotional devastation over his mother's death was jarring. She'd seen him like

this only once before, and that was when she'd come to in a hospital room, her wrist stitched up and her family all around her. At least her grandmother was there on that day, but now they were all alone, heartbroken and grief-stricken.

Eva's heart broke all over again on hearing the wet, miserable sobs coming from her father.

Death was supposed to come; Eva had grown up knowing that. Now her father had a second void in his heart to match the one where his father had once been. Even though her grandfather had died long before Eva was born, Eva had always suspected that her grandmother had carried the same sort of wound, and that was what made her so hard and difficult at times.

Mary Kessler hadn't been an easy woman to love. She'd been caustic and cruel. She had a tongue that could peel paint with a sharp word, and a temper that was easy to heat and slow to cool. Eva had only truly come to know her when she was still attending classes in the city and would spend her afternoons crammed onto a corner of her grandmother's sofa, sipping lemonade and studying.

"Why you bother reading those books is beyond me," her grandmother grouched when Eva pulled out a textbook she'd been assigned. She was up to her eyeballs in post-Civil War politics and the growth of the New York City political machine. "It's not like I'm a primary source or anything..."

"Grandma, you're ancient," Eva joked. "But I doubt you're that old."

Her grandmother picked up the crossword, muttering about ungrateful children, and all the sacrifices of her youth, and being far too old to handle such sass. Eva rolled her eyes and went back to studying.

All that had changed on that dark day two years ago. Eva had lost her control then, lost herself in her spiraling thoughts. The whirlpools and eddies had drawn her under

until she'd swum so far down she'd forgotten how to surface. "You're a coward, trying to bow out before your time," her grandmother told her as she leaned over Eva's hospital bed. "Only an idiot tries to run away from their problems like that."

Eva's stomach ached with guilt and her mind buzzed with all the drugs they'd made her take. She bit back words that weren't suitable to say in front of an old woman. She bit back two decades of unhappiness that she'd never been able to feed into anything other than her own despair. She bit back accusations of her grandmother's struggle with the same thought patterns and repetitive spirals of misery. She buried everything behind a slow, forced smile. "I know."

The corners of Eva's eyes stung in the heat of the mid-morning sun. She dabbed at them gently with the sleeve of her cardigan. How much longer could she sit here and listen to people talk about the woman they felt obligated to mourn? Finally, the service itself was showing signs of wrapping up. Soon, they'd go off by themselves to the cemetery and it would truly be over. At least they'd gotten the wake out of the way already. Eva was sure that now it, too, would annoy her.

Slipping silently from her chair, Eva took off her cardigan and tied it around her waist as she headed past her parents toward the funeral home. Her fingers brushed against her dad's arm as she passed and he flashed her a watery smile from behind his fogged glasses before turning his attention back to the minister's closing remarks.

She crunched her way up to the funeral home's back door and pulled it open with a great deal of effort. She was assaulted with a welcome blast of frigid air inside the small lobby.

Eva pushed open the door to the bathroom, grateful that all the stalls were empty. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. She looked sweaty and uncomfortable, and her

mascara had run. Bending forward, Eva flipped on the water. Her silver bracelets jangled loudly over the tinny sound of mournful music that played from some hidden speaker.

She trailed her fingers through the lukewarm stream, getting them wet enough to dab at her mascara without messing up the rest of her makeup. Her hair frizzed out of the French braid she'd pulled it into that morning and now framed her head like a wispy halo. Eva wet her fingers again and tried to smooth it flat, tucking the errant strands under bobby pins and back into the braid that was coiled around her head.

"Brown hair is a sign that you're meant for more than your looks. I would know," her grandmother told her when she was fifteen. Eva had complained when puberty changed her hair from being perfectly straight to the wavy monstrosity that she spent too much time trying to tame. "If you'd been blonde," her grandmother continued, "I would have worried about your morals."

"But Gran, you can't just say that blondes have bad morals!" Eva protested. She had been raised not to judge and her grandmother was constantly used as a model of what not to be. Her grandmother carried a great burden of loss. Her husband and brothers were dead, and she had only one son and one granddaughter. Her family line was ending with Eva. There were times, when Eva was at her lowest, that she caught herself thinking of how Mary had carried on despite everything. She never spoke of her losses, unabashed and unafraid to carry on despite them. It was only through others that Eva had learned about them at all.

"Well, in my experience, they do," her grandmother huffed in response.

Eva had never asked her what exactly she'd meant by that. Instead, she'd gone back to whatever she'd been doing before her grandmother's comment had thrown her for a loop.

Now Eva found herself taking in the scattering of freckles over her nose peeking through the makeup that she'd already sweat through. Under the harsh, industrial lights of the bathroom, Eva could see the lighter streaks in her hair from a summer spent out of doors wandering the streets of the city. It looked strange, almost out of place, as if she'd put the highlights in purposefully in an attempt to be someone else, or as if she were masking the truth of herself behind a socially acceptable veneer.

Eva puffed out her cheeks and scowled into the mirror. She looked like hell, she decided, poking at her cheeks and blinking her green eyes furiously to try to clear them before the tears came again.

She could not handle the people out there who had scarcely known her grandmother. They only pretended that they had. They weren't the type of people who would understand the woman who had sat Eva down after she had to drop out of college and demanded to know what she wanted to do with her life. Eva had been very careful never to tell her grandmother about her struggles to find a job worth doing with no degree, but her grandmother had seen it anyway. "You need to try harder," Mary insisted when they were alone. "The world isn't all misery and heartbreak."

"It feels like it is," Eva replied.

The sound of running water in the sink calmed her. Eva stuck her hands under the stream, pushing the tap as cold as it would go. She shuddered as the water hit her wrists and began to cool her. The service would be over soon, and then they'd leave for the cemetery to bury the one person who'd ever really understood her.

Tears prickled at the corners of her eyes and Eva sniffed loudly. She shut off the water and resolved to avoid thinking of the loss. Her grandmother wouldn't have wanted that. And besides, it wasn't as though Eva didn't have other things

to think about. Her creepy cousin had a new flavor of the week, which was intriguing and a little sad. Maybe she'd spend the rest of the reception reflecting on how he was able to get the hottest chicks around despite being a total weirdo.

Eva steeled herself. She could handle this, she knew that she could. She shook herself before turning away and heading back out into the oppressive late-summer heat.

The service was over and her father was talking to Eva's mother and her uncle Nate. He was technically her father's cousin, but she'd always called him uncle. He and her father had been raised like brothers. Eva slid quietly in beside them, hoping that her absence had gone unnoticed by anyone other than her parents.

"Eva!" Nate boomed in a voice that was far too loud for the somber affair. He was a large, round man who was the complete physical opposite of Eva's willowy, beanpole father. Eva took after her father, but with her mother's shorter stature. People liked to joke that she was a carbon copy of her grandmother, back in the day. "How are you holding up, sweetie?" Nate asked.

Eva shrugged, looking away to cover another swell of tears. "I'm a little mad that Mr. McKay made the jokes he did. Gran didn't believe in heaven or god. I understand that it makes people feel better, but I don't think Gran would've liked it very much."

Nate smiled sadly and nodded. "You're probably right." Eva's lips twitched upwards into a weak smile and he added in an undertone, "She'd have had a fit. Aunt Mary was an old battle axe, that's for sure. It's such a shame she's gone."

"It really is." Her head ached from crying for what felt like days now. The temperature wasn't helping much at all to quell the headache. It was all she could do to be here and be supportive of her father and the rest of her family. "I'm going to miss her."



Sometimes, Eva caught herself wondering if who she appeared to be in public was just a mask, like the one her grandmother had worn for years to cover her own misery and self-pity.

There were so many people at this funeral whom Eva didn't recognize. They were an odd bunch of mourners: old and young, a hodge-podge of people whose lives her grandmother had touched. There was the family connection, as expected, but also several little old ladies who must have known Mary in their youth. Then there were the young people who delivered her mail and her Meals on Wheels when Eva wasn't staying with her. In Eva's mind, these people had no place here. This was mourning for family, not for strangers.

She stood, making small talk with her cousins and the few people she did recognize. There were the ladies who lived downstairs from her grandmother's tiny apartment, the old guy she'd always stolen newspapers from, the guy who owned the corner grocery store since the '80s and had watched Eva grow up. Mr. Bertelli, if Eva remembered correctly. Mostly she just remembered him as "mustache" because he had one of the most impressive she'd ever seen.

"What are you doing with your life now?" Mr. Bertelli asked her as he scratched at his collar. His beard was already growing in and the morning was not half gone. Eva remembered being utterly fascinated by his mustache when she was a child. Now it just looked to her as if someone had shoved a black feather duster under his nose. "I heard you'd left school?"

It was the question Eva never had an answer for because she was doing nothing right now. She was sitting in her tiny shared apartment, dodging multiple roommates she didn't particularly like, and applying for jobs while watching the precious months that her student loans were in deferment

tick away down to zero. Apparently, getting sick and spending months under watch was not enough to earn you a more lengthy deferment period on loans that hadn't even bought a complete college education.

"I'm still in the market, yeah." She looked anywhere but his face. Her cheeks burned with shame. "Haven't really found much at all."

"Mrs. Kessler said you were thinking about majoring in history before leaving." At Eva's nod, he continued, "It is not the best, is it?"

Eva shook her head. "No," she confessed. "Not without more school, it isn't."

He clapped her on the shoulder, "Well, should you ever need something to do, I am in need of help to mind the counter." The smile that he beamed down at Eva was wide and genuine, despite the somber occasion. "Think about it."

"I will, Mr. Bertelli," Eva promised. She felt uncomfortable with the offer, which would only set her up for days of increased subway fares and long, transfer-filled commutes. He wandered away and Eva watched him go. The humidity was rising and it made the very idea of moving around and being social horrible, especially when all she wanted to do was to sit and think about her grandmother. She fiddled with a tendril of hair that she still could not, for the life of her, get to stay in place.

From where she stood, Eva could see a woman who looked to be around her own age sitting in the corner. She was staring down at the program in her lap. The woman's fingers played with a pendant that hung around her neck, and a sense of melancholy came over Eva as she watched her. She broke her gaze away, not wanting to get caught staring at a stranger. A chill ran up her spine and her eyes flicked back to the young woman, who sat with her eyes downcast and a

shy blush warming her cheeks. What was it about her? Eva didn't know her and could not guess how the woman might have known her grandmother. The older gentleman who sat down beside her and placed a comforting hand on her arm didn't seem to know the woman, either.

Eva's father's voice cut through the quiet lull of conversation and Eva turned her attention back to her own family. Her dad had his arm around her mom's shoulders and Uncle Nate stood beside him with his wife Lisa. Eva's nose wrinkled as Charlie sidled up beside Nate holding hands with the girl he'd brought with him.

Grief was a strange thing, Eva reasoned, picking her way through the sea of folding chairs over to the small cluster of her immediate family. She would never even consider bringing a date to a funeral. It just seemed tacky.

"Hey, Eva." Charlie leaned toward her as she drew level with the group. His date gave Eva a dirty look and Eva puffed out her cheeks, scowling at the girl's too-bright and too-short skirt. This wasn't a wedding, it was a funeral, and a little respect was expected. "Whatcha doin' all by yourself over there?" Charlie asked.

"I was talking to Mr. Bertelli," Eva answered. She felt testy, ready to snap at any moment. The heat inside this god-awful tent was making her sweat and she shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. "He was a good friend of Gran's."

Charlie nodded. "He really was." Tilting his head back and staring up at the roof of the tent, he barreled on, "After Grandpa died, I always wondered if there wasn't something going on there..."

"Charlie!" Aunt Lisa admonished, grabbing his shoulder and spinning him around to face her. He was a good deal taller than his mother, but she had the scary you-done-messed-up-son tone down to perfection. He looked appropriately

chastised as she pulled him away, and her voice dropped to low and dangerous tones that Eva couldn't make out over the din in the tent.

Eva flinched and cast a sympathetic glance over to his date. "He's a bit of an ass," she explained in an undertone. "Sorry."

"And you are?" the date asked, speaking for the first time. Her nasal voice was higher than Eva would have expected and unpleasant, too.

"Oh, Eva Kessler," She offered her hand and didn't particularly care that it was probably clammy to the touch. This girl's attitude completely deserved it. "Mary was my grandmother, and Charlie's my second cousin." She glanced over at Charlie's mother, who was still chewing him out for being an insensitive prick. She didn't envy him. "How do you know Charlie?"

"We met at school," the girl replied. She seemed a little bit encouraged that Eva and Charlie were related. "I'm Ainsley. Ainsley Carter."

"Nice to meet you." Her smile was tight with false politeness. She couldn't stand people who judged so quickly and came to the totally wrong conclusion. It wasn't fair to anyone, and this girl didn't belong here. Her grandmother would have hated her. She was very blonde, after all.

"I think we have to go soon," Eva's father said, and the gathered cluster of their family's attention turned to him, almost as one. The burial itself was supposed to be a small, family affair. Eva scratched at her upper arm and wondered if Ainsley would be included in the family since she'd come with Charlie. She hoped that she wouldn't. It didn't feel right for another of Charlie's flavors of the week to be included in such a personal moment. Eva didn't want her there.

She'd been wrong to hope, Eva realized, as they trooped to the car. Ainsley was following Charlie and the rest of his family with a strange expression on her face as she rested a

hand in what was apparently supposed to be a comforting manner on Charlie's arm.

Eva glared at them both, but neither looked in her direction. Annoyed, she glanced over her shoulder one more time at the tent. The sun was now high in the sky and there was little cloud cover to protect the tent or its occupants from the harsh rays that beat down upon it. In the doorway, the girl Eva hadn't recognized stood staring out at the hearse from behind large black sunglasses. She had a dark green cloche hat pulled down low over her eyes, and her hair, from what Eva could see of it, was the color of straw in autumn.

"Who the hell is that?" Eva muttered. It was useless, though. No matter how hard Eva tried to place the girl, she could not recall ever meeting her. With a frustrated sigh, she turned away and deposited herself in the back seat of her father's rented sedan.

"Who, honey?" her mother asked, turning to look at Eva with concern.

"The girl in the doorway." She pointed.

Her mother stared at the woman for a long moment before shrugging. "No idea. Maybe she's a friend of Charlie's?"

Charlie was a handful of years older than Eva, and she always hated that he was presented as the shining star of the family when Eva was definitely the smarter of the two. But Charlie didn't suffer from the "family funk," as Uncle Nate put it. He wasn't touched by the family plague of sadness. Instead, he was the guy who had all of his shit together, so much so that it didn't stink at all. "I don't know," Eva said. She pushed it from her mind as her father clambered into the car and cranked the air conditioning to maximum. They pulled out of the cul-de-sac and she lost sight of the girl.

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Mary Kessler's will bore very specific instructions about where she was to be buried. The cemetery had been selected and the plot had been bought and paid for before Eva was born. If the date on the sale contract attached to the will was accurate, the plot was paid for even before her father had shipped off to Vietnam some four decades ago.

They were on the quiet, rural end of Long Island, far outside the city that Mary had called home her whole life. Away from the bustle of New York that sprawled out onto its west end, this place was a sedate oasis awash in greenery.

Farms and wineries flew by the car windows, pulling Eva back into the hazy place between memory and dream. The world drifted and colors blurred together into a wash of blue skies and green orchards as leaves stretched like fingers toward the blank canvas of her mind. Eva lost herself in these moments, caught up in the plummeting feeling of being undeserving of all the beauty in the world. All her life Eva had run from the feeling, pushing it away and burying it deep inside. If she ignored it, it would go away, she reasoned.

It wouldn't. She'd learned that lesson the hard way—a razor sinking into her skin and blood. *Christ*. There'd been so much blood. Her grandmother always urged her to embrace the emotions she felt and to never shy away from the depth of her feelings. Eva couldn't do that. She couldn't lay herself bare for the whole world to see. She did not want to end up like Mary: a miserable shell of an old woman all alone in the world.

The car jerked forward as the suspension dipped. Eva's father let out a startled sound from the back of his throat, and turned the wheel sharply. "Sorry about that. Didn't see that—"

"Drop off?" Eva suggested mildly.

"More like a cliff," her mother groused. She reached over and touched his leg. "Be careful, dear, it's a rental."

“Yeah, yeah. That’s why you buy insurance.” Eva’s father laughed. The sound echoed, harsh and biting. It was too gregarious and too falsely cheerful to be how he really felt. Eva was used to the putting on of airs just to get by. She understood it more intimately than her father’s fake, guffawing laughter.

Eva turned to the window, her forehead bouncing against the warm glass as they headed down the dusty dirt road that led to the cemetery. The road felt, and looked, as if it belonged upstate rather than on the island. Eva wasn’t used to being jostled around so much in cars. Beautiful splashes of green swam together against the tears still pricking at the corners of her eyes. She couldn’t get this much green in her day-to-day life. Her tiny apartment and too many roommates were so far removed from it that she felt as though she had ventured to an alien landscape, far from the busy concrete jungle of the city.

Living away from her parents’ home was her single act of self-assertion following everything that had happened. She didn’t want to retreat to the safety of her parents’ home, and her doctors had agreed. Eva needed structure and something to do that wasn’t wallowing. She’d been trying for months now to find a job, but she had never graduated. There weren’t a lot of jobs available for people like her.

The cemetery was off a connector road, nestled by the ruins of a farmhouse. The roof had partially collapsed, giving it the sunken look of a building that was eating itself alive. The car jostled over some train tracks and a plume of dust rose behind them. The house was obscured by the dust until all that was left was the memory. Eva’s father turned the car toward a cluster of trees that grew up like a beacon beside the grassy fields that surrounded them.

“Must be aerating these this year.” Her father spoke as if he knew anything about farming. “No idea why your

grandmother wanted to be buried here of all places.” He glanced at Eva’s mother. “It’s not like anyone’s buried here, I don’t think.”

“Your dad’s in Arlington, right?” her mother asked.

“Uh-huh. I know that their marriage wasn’t the best, but to not want to be buried with Dad... I really don’t understand why she wouldn’t have wanted that.”

Eva shifted a little in her seat and tilted her head back against the headrest. Why had her grandmother wanted to be buried in this anonymous cemetery in the middle of nowhere? It didn’t make any sense.

“Maybe this is about before she met Grandpa, you know?” Her voice shook, just speaking the thought. She did not want to disrespect the dead. Her grandmother had so rarely talked about the time before she had children. It wasn’t taboo, it was just never mentioned. When Eva had pressed, her grandmother had always just said that the light had gone out of her world and that she had no reason to carry on after that. She’d gotten married after the war because it was the thing to do.

Her father was quiet for a moment, his face set in profile and his jaw tight. His Adam’s apple bobbed. Eva wondered what he was thinking. “Maybe when we get back to the apartment we can start to look for an explanation for that,” he said. “I’m sure that there is one. Papers or the like.” There was a resigned tone in his voice of a son who knew nothing of his mother’s secrets. Eva’s grandmother had kept them as well as Eva had kept her own.

“Really, Dan? You think that a woman as private as your mom is going to just have stuff lying around that would explain away all her deepest, darkest secrets?” Eva’s mother gave a good-natured laugh.

“Well, she better have left something. The woman was a damn mystery.”



Eva's mother pushed his arm playfully. "I thought we weren't supposed to speak ill of the dead."

"Yeah, Dad," Eva agreed. She enjoyed ribbing her father just as much as her mother did because he walked right into these sorts of situations with all the grace of a bumbling professor. "Gran'll come back and haunt your ass if you insult her on today of all days."

Laughing, Eva's father pulled the car into a grassed-over parking lot and set the car into park. "Don't I know it?" He smiled fondly at the two of them.

It was cooler here. The cemetery was old; the graves were marked with dates that went back more than one hundred years. Eva bent down and brushed dirt off a grave marked "Monroe." Her fingers dug at the moss that had grown into the R.

A bobwhite called in the distance. The mournful cry filled the cemetery. It echoed like a gunshot, and in that moment even the cicadas fell silent. The hair on the back of Eva's neck prickled as a stiff breeze whipped through the lush greenery around her. The bit of moss in her hand fell to the ground. The bobwhite called again.

"Why here?" Eva murmured. She straightened and fell into step beside Charlie and Ainsley. She glanced over and offered an unsympathetic smile as Ainsley's heels sank into the soft lawn.

The spot that her grandmother had picked out was under a tree and far to the back of the small cemetery. It stood in shadow, but the light hit it in such a way that there was one place that was bathed in light. Eva could see Mary's grave marker, flat and silent, illuminated as if under stage lighting. A pool of sunlight amidst the shade.

In her pocket was a Loonie from a trip Eva had taken to Montreal and Quebec City in middle school. Her

grandmother had been far too old to chaperone, but she'd sent along all her coins from her own trip to Canada many years before, as well as a note that told Eva not to talk to any strange Canadian men or women. She insisted that they were after nothing but her virtue. Eva had been all of fourteen at the time and had found the note hilarious. She still had it, tucked into a journal she'd kept during high school. It promised a smile—always.

As the pastor said his final words and they said their goodbyes, Eva stood in that pool of light and turned the Loonie over and over in her hand. The Queen's face on one side, the loon on the other. A dollar, a ticket into the world of the dead.

As they left, Eva flipped the coin expertly into the small hole where the urn that held all that was left of her grandmother had been placed. It clattered against the blown glass before falling silent amidst the flowers and dirt.

She walked away, her head held high. She couldn't look at her aunt and uncle, or her stupid, insensitive cousin and his date. Her eyes stung as she looked out over the cemetery, and the bright green of the vegetation twisted into a blur of tears tinged with summer.

# Chapter 2

## Slow Drive

UNSHAVEN AND BLEARY-EYED, EVA'S FATHER clutched a cup of coffee to his chest. He stared blankly forward as if lost in thought, his fingers curling on Eva's mother's knee. "You know," he said, "sometimes I feel like I never really knew my mom."

Traffic was a snarl at this hour, and the hour-long drive back into New York was already stretching well into its second hour. Eva stared down at her own cup of gas station coffee and picked at the fraying hole in the knee of her jeans. It was cooler this morning; rain had rolled in overnight and with it had come a more comfortable temperature. It was sure to still be hot in the city, but Eva thought that anything would be better than the heat of yesterday.

"Why do you say that?" Eva asked. Her mother was glaring at the line of brake lights and stopped cars that filled the road ahead. Her expression was stormy in the rearview mirror, but she hadn't objected to the conversation. Usually traffic like this called for absolute silence. Eva's mom couldn't concentrate otherwise. "She was your mom, after all."

This was a regular conversation in Eva's family. Eva didn't anticipate that her dad's response was going to be any different than before. There were questions about her

grandmother and her grandmother's life that no one could answer. She was a strange and enigmatic woman at the best of times, and grouchy and biting sarcasm for the rest. There was a sadness that she carried with her like a great albatross around her neck. She never answered Eva's questions about her past even though she had grown up during the Roaring Twenties and had survived the Great Depression and the Second World War.

"I don't really remember them," her grandmother confessed. It wasn't too long after they brought Eva back from the hospital. She was sitting next to her grandmother in her rickety old bed, hands cupped around a mug so large that it must originally have been intended for beer. Her grandmother had been sick for a week over what Eva had almost done. Eva was sleeping on the couch in her grandmother's living room to make sure that her condition didn't get any worse. "It's almost like there is this terrible cloud that had descended over my memories and turned them all to ash," her grandmother told her. "I remember the major events—the Crash, FDR, Hitler invading Poland, Pearl Harbor—but I could not tell you what I was doing during that time."

"Why?" Eva asked. She curled forward and leaned against her grandmother's thin body then, burrowing deeper under the blanket against the chill that had settled over the apartment. "Was your life really that boring?" She hated that she couldn't hide her skepticism. It was obvious to Eva's entire family that their matriarch had a great deal more than just a passing memory of such events. She chose not to recall them, or to deny her presence during them, and even as a young child, Eva had been determined to know *why*.

Her grandmother huffed, folded her arms across her frail, aged chest and looked insulted. "It was hardly boring, darling.

It's just that sometimes you forget things. Especially at my age." She looked away from Eva then, out the window where rain pounded against the glass. Her expression darkened. "Sometimes you want to forget the things you remember."

Eva had never mentioned that conversation to anyone, and she wasn't about to mention it now. It didn't have any bearing on the current conversation. She and her grandmother had been far closer than her grandmother had been to Eva's father or her nephews. There was a shared history between them and a shared understanding of the cast of demons that danced mercilessly in the shadows of Eva's dreams. Her grandmother had them too, Eva was sure of it. The knowing looks and comforting smiles made that very clear to her when she woke up sobbing in the middle of the night to find her grandmother sitting beside her bed.

She held her tongue, not wanting to voice her thoughts. Eva hated keeping secrets. She'd grown good at it over the course of her life, but she hated the deception and the little lies that had to be told to keep the secrets safe. Her grandmother's secrets were kept by the dead now. The only way to discover the truth was for them to be shared beyond the grave.

Her father's shoulders rose to his ears in an elaborate shrug. Eva turned away and rested her chin on the palm of her hand. Was keeping that conversation to herself really the right thing to do? Would it help him heal and move on? Was it worth it to betray the confidence she'd kept? She hated omitting details, which was no better than lying outright.

*Is this the sort of lie you want to tell?*

Outside the window, a long line of concrete noise shields were covered in creeping ivy. The effect was beautiful, a great hulking monument to modernization and the long fingers of suburban sprawl. A small, sad smile crept across Eva's lips.

Even the walls had secrets, covered in the lush, reclaiming force of Mother Nature.

“I don’t know,” her father said. His voice was so quiet that Eva could barely hear it over the rumble of the car. Her father was not a quiet man by nature. He was quick with a joke and always laughed easily. Now his voice sounded lost amid the road noise and the steady sound of Eva’s breathing. “She was just so... I don’t know, unhappy all the time. Sometimes she’d spend days staring off into space, and she’d talk about the light of the world as though it meant something to anyone other than her.”

Eva chewed on her lip for a moment before she sipped her cold coffee tentatively. It tasted bitter as she swallowed, and she frowned deeply at the taste. She hadn’t put in enough sugar. *Gross*. “Maybe she was just depressed,” she suggested.

It was a simple explanation to a situation steeped in stigma. Eva had grown up with the illness and had embraced it as a part of herself long ago. For many people older than her twenty-two years, however, it was a source of deep shame and something never to be discussed publicly. Eva’s father almost never spoke of his own struggles with depression, and her mother never made much of an effort to understand. She just nodded, asked Eva if her medication was still working, and went about her day pretending it didn’t exist.

Until Eva lost control one day, and they had all been forced to confront the real cost of ignoring such an illness. That day they called her a coward and demanded to know why she hadn’t asked for help. Eva thought the reason was obvious, especially in their reaction to what she’d done. They’d demanded to know how she could be so selfish, not once bothering to ask why she felt her world was slowly spiraling out of control.

Eva shook herself free from memories of her failure. The car was moving again, slowly, but it was moving. They would be back in the city soon.

Her mother laughed. It was a short, derisive bark. “Oh, she *certainly* was depressed. No one could possibly be that negative without some depression coming into the equation.”

Eva bit her lip so hard it bled in an effort to stop an angry retort.

“Let’s not speak ill of the dead, Claire,” Eva’s father said quickly. He probably sensed disaster. This was an old argument they’d had many times. Eva didn’t know if she and her parents would ever see eye to eye on the subject of coping with mental illness. Her parents believed that any depression her grandmother struggled with stemmed from her grandfather’s death. It could not be that simple. Eva had always sensed that her grandmother regarded her husband as nothing more than an inconvenient necessity of life. The sadness her grandmother struggled with was there long before Eva’s father was born. Of that, at least, Eva was certain.

Silence filled the car again. Eva sat back and drank more of her disgusting coffee. She was starting to feel carsick. The conversation wasn’t helping. This was the sort of argument that Eva hated. There was no point in guessing. Her grandmother was dead, and they’d never know.

“I think there’s something more to it than simple depression.”

Eva’s stomach turned. Her mother, of course, would not leave well enough alone. Eva wished she would let it go. There was no point in continuing to talk about this. They couldn’t find out anything more because the subject of the discussion was dead and burned and buried in the ground.

No one interjected, so Eva’s mother continued to speak. Her voice was sharp and biting over the sound of the road

outside. “Come on, Dan, do you think that she married your dad for any reason other than convenience? We both know that they hated each other’s guts.”

Eva’s father sucked in a harsh breath. Turning to stare out the window, Eva gritted her teeth. She would not rise to the bait. She would not. She could not. She did not want to have this argument.

“Once we get back to her place, we’re going to find something to explain why she was such a miserable pill of a woman. Mark my words we will.” It wasn’t a secret that Eva’s mother didn’t care for her mother-in-law. They were constantly at odds during Eva’s childhood, and doubly so after that day, when Eva became the object of a contest of wills.

*On today of all days. We don’t need this right now.*

Despite the harsh way her mother had said it, the comment had made her think. There was something more to the story. Eva was sure of it. She braced herself for a fight between her parents, not sure if one was to come.

The silence stretched on.

She tossed every little tidbit her grandmother had ever told her around in her head as they inched their way back to Brooklyn and her grandmother’s apartment. There were so many little comments that had to have meaning, such as not liking blondes when Eva showed her a picture of a fair-haired boy she liked. Or, after Eva’s first breakup with her high school girlfriend, when Mary warned her not to invest too much time in loving women because they were fickle.

Eva wondered if this was her grandmother trying to tell her something about herself, but as soon as she finished one rant about loving women, she would start in on the men. There seemed to be no end to the comments. There had



to be something else beyond the obvious answer that her grandmother was simply difficult to get along with.

Eva leaned forward and set her coffee into the cup holder. She brushed her father's arm with her fingers before she slumped back into her seat and he turned to smile at her. His eyes were crinkled and kind and his shock of graying hair caught the light and haloed him. Evidently, he was happy that she hadn't started the fight her mother so obviously wanted.

It was getting easier not to take the bait. Eva's mind was preoccupied with what her mother had not said. Something that she could not quite recall was shifting just below the surface. Her mind felt slow and weak as she fumbled through her thoughts. The straws she grasped at didn't fit her mental image of her grandmother. They were lies, a veneer on a crumbling foundation.

All her life, Eva could not shake the feeling that her grandmother wasn't always there, and that she was caught up in a bad memory of which she could never be free. Her father had grown up never truly understanding his mother, and had watched his own daughter grow closer to her than he had ever been. Eva owed it to her father to try to find some explanation for her grandmother's depression. All Eva wanted was for there to be another reason, something encouraging that would give her some hope for her own future.

She shook her head. It wasn't right for her to think that there should be another explanation. She was evidence enough that sometimes people simply couldn't help themselves. It was just a lurking, unpleasant feeling that Eva could never shake. Her grandmother saw something, once upon a time, and it had completely changed her. Eva wasn't sure if it was a great lost love or some horrible trauma. Her grandmother

had lived through nearly two decades of unpleasantness before she'd gotten married after World War II.

"I was an old maid then," she told Eva. "No one wanted to marry a girl who was on the wrong side of thirty. Your Grandpa offered me an agreeable match."

"You say agreeable like you didn't love him, Gran." Eva was eleven, sullen and stubborn. Always determined to get the last word. "I thought you had to love someone to get married to them."

Her grandmother threw back her head and laughed. "That's true, Eva darling, but not everyone makes good choices." Her expression, and Eva remembered it clearly to this day, went dark then. Her face became unreadable and caught on a miserable grimace of a smile. "Not everyone has a choice in the end," she said. "Your Grandpa would have loved you, sweetie. You're a lot like him."

"I want to be more like you, Gran!" Eva stuck her lip out petulantly. "Your life is so much cooler than Grandpa's."

"You say that now, Eva..." Her grandmother shook her head. "Soon you'll find out I'm just a tired old husk of a woman whose world was ripped out from under her nose when she was scarcely old enough to realize it."

Eva had spent what felt like half her life trying to understand the great mystery that was Mary Kessler. The cryptic recollections and one-off comments only deepened Eva's confusion. Now that her grandmother was gone, Eva wondered if there was something left lying about in her grandmother's apartment that might hold the key to this mystery.

Her mind preoccupied, Eva leaned against the window and watched the slow-moving traffic. She soon dozed off as the gentle lull of the car moving through stop-and-go traffic made her eyelids heavy and sleep come easily.

*The hole was deep, so deep that she could not climb out of it. Eva's fingers scrambled against the slime-covered walls of her prison, but could find nothing to grab onto. Everything smelled like decay, the constant and steady drip of water long forgotten and left to fester. Moss grew in brilliant patches of violent, electric green. It surrounded her, making the walls seem as though they were closing in around her. Fear gripped her like a vice.*

*She ran down a narrow passageway. Blue-green sludge got in her hair. Eva swiped at where it fell cold and wet against her forehead. She raised a shaking hand to touch the dampness and her fingers came away streaked black. She stepped into a large, dark room with high walls. Light played across them, dancing in beautiful, indescribable patterns. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. A myriad of glowing geometric shapes swam like tropical fish against a stark black background.*

*Except that when she looked closer, the background was also moving. It was a living thing. Gooseflesh rose on the back of Eva's arms and a shiver ran through her body.*

*A girl was in the room with her. A girl she felt she knew.*

*"Who are you?" Her voice was lost in the darkness. "Who are you?"*

*The girl turned and her face was a blank mask of skin stretched over bone. A hollow rattled where her mouth should be, sucking in a long, slow breath.*

# Chapter 3

## Buried, Not Forgotten

EVA AWOKE WITH A GASP. Her entire body shuddered as she surged forward, her fingers reaching for something that wasn't there. Her head pounded and her vision was still blurry with sleep. Sitting back, she rubbed at her eyes and blinked to see her father looking at her from the passenger's seat.

"Musta been some dream," he said wryly.

"It was... something," Eva replied. The disquiet feeling would not leave her. She reached for her coffee, only to find that it was cold. She drank it anyway, wanting to pull herself closer to wakefulness. The black pit and the dancing colors would not leave her mind. The memory of the girl's rattling breath made the hair on the back of her neck spike upwards. The car was hot, but the skin on Eva's arms was covered in goosebumps.

Blinking sleepily in the hazy mid-morning sunlight, Eva let out a yawn. New York stretched up above her in all directions. She exhaled and tilted her head back to gaze at the buildings, feeling far more relaxed than she had in the wide-open spaces of Eastern Long Island. There were people everywhere, and faint patches of blue sky could be seen above the buildings as they made their way through her grandmother's old neighborhood. A grin tugged at Eva's lips. She was home.

Ten minutes later, Eva was staring up at the brick building where her grandmother lived for close to thirty years. They parked in the tiny and absurdly expensive lot across the street, and her mother argued with the lot attendant that they should be allowed a cheaper rate because they were technically residents.

“No resident parking pass, no deal,” the attendant said in a thick Brooklyn accent. “Take it up with the super.”

There was drool on the window and Eva rubbed at it with her sleeve. She didn’t want her parents to have to wash the car before returning it to the rental lot. It was just one more thing to remember to do, and they already had their work cut out for them.

After a few seconds, Eva was satisfied that the smear was gone. Already the memory of the dream was fading. She grabbed her purse and slung it over her shoulder. Her mother was gathering things from the back seat opposite her, a few notepads and a camera. She had a harassed look on her face, and the crow’s-feet at the corners of her eyes seemed like deep lines cut in by years of worry. Her hair, nearly the same shade as Eva’s, was frizzing in the morning humidity.

“Do we have a game plan for this?” Eva asked. Her voice was still thick with sleep. She knew that she must look like hell because she was sweaty from her nap in the too-hot car. She was sun-and-sleep-warmed, and in a good mood despite the smell of hot garbage that assaulted her nose as soon as she opened the car door.

“I figured we’d make one once we got up there,” her mother replied. She held up a notepad with a triumphant smile. Eva bit back a groan. Lists were her mother’s favorite thing, and Eva hated that level of meticulous planning. “Nate and Lisa have both said that aside from what was already

left to them in your grandmother's will, they're not really interested in anything up there. It's all ours to process."

Eva sighed. The absolute last thing she felt like doing was spending days and days working in close proximity with her mother processing her grandmother's things. They were sure to come to blows before it was over. Eva couldn't imagine that her mother would be particularly compassionate about some of the things her grandmother had kept over the years.

"Goody. *Processing.*"

"Yup, processing. There's close to four decades of junk crammed into that apartment. It's gonna be an undertaking," her mother said. "Maybe we should have ordered a Dumpster..."

The thought of throwing away her grandmother's things was horrifying to Eva. She knew it was inevitable, because they couldn't save everything, but Eva had hoped that they could say goodbye first. She tried to put on a brave face. *Put your best foot forward. Don't let her get to you.*

Eva stood in the middle of the parking lot and stared up at the six-story brick building that Eva's grandmother had called home for so many years. Crumbling at the corners, it was a former sweatshop turned into apartments during the first period of gentrification of this area some twenty years ago. Apartments were selling and renting for obscene amounts of money these days. A great deal of her father's inheritance was wrapped up in this apartment, but she didn't want him to sell it.

Eva loved this neighborhood. The apartment was bought and paid for long before the property values had skyrocketed in recent years. Her grandmother had been an institution in the neighborhood for so long that Eva felt that they couldn't have just anyone fill the void she'd left behind.

Looking up at the building, Eva felt the sharp sting of loss at her chest. Nothing was ever going to be the same

again. The sense of finality in this moment threatened to overwhelm her, and it filled her with a with a strange sense of foreboding, that she couldn't shake.

"Come on," her father said when there was a gap in the traffic.

*Still*, Eva reasoned as they dashed across the street in the wake of a speeding cab, *Gran was a bit of a hoarder. There's a lot of work that has to go into this place before we can even consider putting it on the market.*

Eva hoped that it would take a little while to get the apartment all sorted out. She didn't want to say goodbye to this neighborhood just yet. She had so many good, positive memories associated with this place. They were the sort that she thought back to when she found herself wallowing in the melancholy that she sometimes could not shake. To leave her grandmother's home for good seemed like a final farewell, and Eva certainly wasn't ready for that yet.

They climbed the stairs to the fourth floor slowly, pausing to greet the new first-floor residents who were kids fresh out of college, and Mrs. Sandley on the second floor. She was a shut-in and was very sad that she did not have the means to bring herself to Mary's funeral. Eva's father lingered to speak to the old woman and help her back into her apartment with his usual politeness and distant charm.

"We should keep going," Eva's mother said. "He'll be along after he gets her settled." She nudged Eva on the shoulder as she rose on her tiptoes to peer curiously into Mrs. Sandley's apartment. The room was as much of a time capsule as Eva's grandmother's apartment upstairs was, overflowing with antiques and full of reminders of days long past. Her father was settling Mrs. Sandley back on her couch and offering to make her some tea to tide her over until the Meals on Wheels "boy" delivered her lunch at eleven-thirty.

Eva wasn't even sure that her father had ever met Mrs. Sandley before. He came here so infrequently that it seemed impossible that he would know her. He preferred to keep his distance from his mother's home, and instead would invite her to lunch in Manhattan or to come up to Connecticut on the weekends if she was willing to take the train. Both her parents said the apartment was full of bad memories. Her mother went so far as to say that there was a black feeling in the place, as if it were an inescapable pit.

Eva wasn't like her parents. This building had the sort of charm Eva adored about some of the older buildings in the city, all narrow staircases and windows that didn't open properly. The staircase was like something out of a Hitchcock movie, and she could just picture some beautiful silver-screen actress descending the stairs with ominous music in her wake. How anyone could find it unsettling was beyond Eva, but even she could not shake the uncomfortable feeling that had come over her since they'd arrived.

The door to her grandmother's apartment swung open silently. The breath left Eva's body, and her stomach twisted with an ache unlike anything she had ever felt before. The oppressive, flowery smell of her grandmother's favorite perfume was everywhere. It leaked into Eva's senses and threatened to overwhelm her. She raised shaking fingers to cover her lips and swallowed down tears and the desperate feeling of loss. She was a trespasser in a tomb, someone who should not dare take a step forward, and then another, until she was standing in the middle of her grandmother's cluttered living room.

Her mother had no such qualms. No reverence or respect for the dead. Upon entering the room, she went straight to the window and threw open the drapes. She coughed quietly in the dust as she tied them back. The little air conditioning



unit that was held up by sheer force of will whined as Eva's mother cranked it on to its maximum setting and stepped back, surveying the room.

Eva was trapped in the middle of the floor and unsure of how to go about getting started going through everything—the entirety of her grandmother's *life*—so that the apartment could be sold. It was a feeling that ate at Eva, paralyzing her and making her linger in the middle of the room where she knew that she would not disturb any memories. There used to be a rule in this apartment that you took your shoes off at the door. There was still a line of her grandmother's shoes in the hall, which ranged from comfortable walking shoes to a pair of low heels that Eva couldn't help but imagine her grandmother scowling at. Eva bent and unlaced one battered Converse All Star with shaky hands, resting her foot against her knee as she did so.

“What are you doing?” her mother asked. She turned, setting her notepad down on the coffee table that held a stack of old *National Geographic* magazines and a few newspapers. There was an odd look on her face as Eva tugged off her first shoe and moved on to the next one.

“Taking off my shoes,” Eva explained. “Gran... Gran liked it when I did that.”

Her mother's round face, which had been pulled tight into an expression of confusion, seemed to slacken into one of understanding. She stepped forward and put a hand on Eva's shoulder. They were the same height, and the gesture was intimate for Eva, who was unused to physical contact from her mother. It was her dad who was the affectionate one. Her mother was more distant and less overt with her affection. Eva remembered the last time her mother had touched her like this, and that had been a dark day, too.

“Oh, Eva,” her mother said. “Take them off if you must, but leave your socks on. I know that it got hard for your grandmother to move around toward the end. There’s no telling what might be growing on the floor.”

Huffing angrily, Eva stepped backward and away from her mother’s touch. Her grandmother had been dead and buried for one day. *One day*. She didn’t know why she expected her mother to be any better. It was a joke to think that she would be, given the way she’d spoken in the car. Eva didn’t understand how her mother could be so cruel when the memory of her grandmother lying dead in a hospital bed was still fresh in everyone’s memories.

Her mother was like that, though, so it was silly for Eva to expect any better from her. She was always making assumptions about how people lived their lives and kept their homes. Eva hated that there was even a doubt that her grandmother’s life wasn’t vibrant until the very end. She’d died peacefully in her sleep with her family around her.

Eva had been there.

“It’s fine,” she said quietly.

She glanced toward the small hallway that led to the storage closet. “Should I go get some trash bags or something?”

The apartment, her grandmother’s last sanctuary, was clean, and her mother was stupid to say otherwise. *Christ, I sound like an immature teenager*.

Eva shook her head and set her shoes beside her grandmother’s. She knew she had to stop letting her mother rile her up so easily, even if she was getting a lot better at not showing it.

“I figured that today we’d spend some time going through stuff, maybe collect some clothes to take to the homeless shelter and the Salvation Army...” Eva shook her head violently at the suggestion and her mother tilted her

head to one side, confusion drifting across her face. “Why not them? They do good work.”

Eva shrugged, fiddling with the braid that she’d wrestled her hair into that morning. It was starting to come undone. Eva stared at it in her hand for a moment as annoyance prickled at the back of her neck. This was exactly the sort of conversation she did not want to have with her mother. Getting into something like this would only make things worse.

She remembered being very small and walking by the haggard and cold-looking men ringing bells outside of Macy’s. It was one of her first times into Manhattan with just her grandmother, and she was awed by everything. The city was alight with the magic of the coming Christmas holiday. The man rang his bell beside his little red pot and Eva begged her grandmother for change to put into the bucket.

“You shouldn’t give to them,” her grandmother said roughly, pulling Eva away from the man with his ringing bell.

“Why not?” She was five and didn’t know when to leave well enough alone. They paused before a homeless man who was hunched over a subway grate and wrapped in a blanket. Mary handed him two dollars and pressed two quarters into Eva’s hand.

“Give them to him,” her grandmother said. “He is someone who is actually in need.” The man stared up at them for a long time, smiling with bright white teeth and thanking her in a rough voice that only came after a long pause. It was as though he’d forgotten how to speak. Eva pressed the two quarters into his gloved hand. “You will seek,” he whispered. “You got the look.”

“She won’t seek,” her grandmother replied curtly. “Nor should you.”

He smiled toothily at them again as Eva's grandmother pulled her away down the street to stare into the lavishly decorated Macy's windows.

"Why can't we give the money to the men with the bells? They don't say weird things—"

"Because sometimes people aren't as good as they say they are," her grandmother explained. She was clutching Eva's hand tightly in her own. Eva remembered glancing over her shoulder as the homeless man raised his dark head skyward and started to sing the saddest song that Eva had ever heard.

That was the first time that her grandmother had told her about the light of the world. The homeless man off Sixth Avenue had sung an ode to that very same light her grandmother insisted had gone out in her own life. The light she could never find again. His voice was pure and golden above the din of the city. He'd sung it for two dollars and two quarters.

Later that night they sat on the couch drinking hot cocoa and looking at her grandmother's little fake Christmas tree. "Why did that man sing that song?" Eva asked. She tilted her mug from side to side, making absolutely sure that she got all the marshmallows to the middle so that they'd melt and add a layer of creamy, delicious foam to the top of her drink. Her grandmother had been quiet the entire train ride back to Brooklyn, lost in her own thoughts. Eva remembered being annoyed at her, and had chattered non-stop in an effort to get her to engage. "It wasn't even a Christmas song."

Eva's grandmother was quiet for a long time after that, staring at the Christmas tree lights. Her face was a landscape of late eighties wrinkles and her posture was ramrod straight.

Sighing, her grandmother wiped away Eva's cocoa mustache. "He sang that song because he is a seeker of the

light. He has been touched by it, he's seen it, he knows what it can do, and he's sore afraid."

"Like the shepherds when the angels told them about Jesus?" Eva asked. It was close to Christmas, after all, and even if they weren't a very religious family, the story was on Eva's mind.

"There's a lot of truth in that moment in the story," her grandmother agreed. "His light has gone out. He saw it once, it touched him, and then someone reached out and snuffed it away into blackness. It is a cruel fate, sweetie. You should never seek out the light of the world."

Eva sipped her cocoa, her eyes wide. "Why not? What's the light of the world?"

"I have no heart to teach it to you. That can only be the path of mourning."

Shaking herself, Eva blinked hard and focused her attention back on her mother. She had forgotten that conversation, amid the myriad others she'd had with her grandmother since. Her mind was racing with half-remembered conversations about the light of the world. Maybe that was the key to all this.

"Sorry," she said quietly. "When I was really little, Gran told me not to give to them because they aren't as good as they say they are."

"Because of how they treat the gays?" Eva winced. "Your Gran wasn't gay, why would she care?"

She shouldn't have said anything at all. *Stupid, stupid...*

The urge to fight back overwhelmed her and Eva looked her mother straight in the eye. "Maybe she was taking a stand, Mom, for something she believed in. Something that *meant* something to her."

She couldn't believe her mother sometimes. There were certain things that just weren't *said* and certainly were not

implied. Her grandmother had always been one of those people, a good sort of person who would stick her neck out there for something that she truly believed in. What did it matter if her grandmother was or wasn't something? She cared enough to take a stand and to tell Eva that it wasn't right. *Why can't Mom see that?*

She stormed off down the hallway toward the supply closet to at least collect some trash bags and buy a few moments to herself to calm down. Her mother huffed quietly and reached for her notepad once more. Eva wasn't sure who she'd put this round to, but she did not want to go another until her dad emerged from Mrs. Sandley's apartment. It wasn't unreasonable to want to respect her grandmother's wishes and views in the distribution of her things, Eva thought. Her dad would see it that way.

There were times when Eva felt she was the only one who appreciated her grandmother for who she was. Eva embraced the good and the bad in her, the deep sadness and the mysterious ghosts that haunted her past. Eva knew those ghosts well because she was haunted by her own demons. Her mother didn't get it, and she never had. Throughout Eva's childhood, she had made no secret about how much she hated that her mother-in-law would have days where she was so sad she couldn't get out of bed. She hated it when she saw Eva having the same sorts of days.

Eva's dad did understand. He struggled with himself, but Eva always assumed that he stayed away because of the bad memories he had of growing up in the shadow of a woman as mercurial as his mother.

The hallway was dimly lit. A pale glow of yellow light illuminated the room, throwing everything into washed-out relief. Eva had always hated it as a child. It seemed to curl in around itself and create a dark void where there should

have been bright white light. The entire apartment was off of this one corridor that dead-ended in the closet where Eva was heading.

Eva's grandmother had stored many things in the hall closet: Christmas presents and secret snacks, door hangings and cleaning supplies. It was the cleaning supplies that Eva was after now. The last time she'd been in there was before her grandmother had gotten sick. They had gathered up a great deal of clothing to be donated to the local women's shelter. "I have too many clothes," Mary had explained from where she held court in the comfortable and worn easy chair by the window, "and I want you to help me give them to people who actually will wear them."

Eva helped her without complaint, loading up the grocery cart three times and walking the trash bags full of donations down to the women's shelter some three blocks over. It was not long after her hospitalization, when her mother wasn't speaking to her and her father couldn't look at her without tears in his eyes. When Eva made the decision to drop out of college after spending almost a semester away, Eva's grandmother had not cared.

"You focus on learning how to get better," she said. She offered Eva things to do so that she wasn't stuck in her head. "Try a stunt like that again before I'm dead and in the ground, and I'll do it myself, Eva. You're too good to lose."

"I'll try, Gran," Eva promised.

Now, though, with the apartment devoid of the life it had housed for decades, Eva did not know where to start. She yanked open the closet door.

Slung over the back of the door was a plastic and nylon shoe rack that probably dated back to the '70s. Stuffed into one of the shoe holders was a roll of drawstring trash bags. Eva pulled them out of the stiff plastic and shoved them

into her back pocket before reaching up to pull on the light switch cord that dangled from the ceiling.

As a child, Eva had always stayed toward the front of this closet. She'd been worried about monsters. Now, she was curious about what lay beyond the storage rack that was filled with household supplies and bed sheets. She had never been back there.

A chill shot up Eva's spine. The biting, anxious feeling of desperately having to pee and of knowing that she was where she should not be ate at her stomach. She shoved the feeling away. There was no one left to judge her now.

Eva stepped into the dim space beyond the storage rack. She was just barely able to make out the murky shapes of boxes and what looked like an old-fashioned desk shoved against the back wall underneath a leaning tower of encyclopedias. The air was thick with dust.

From the living room, Eva could hear her mother and father talking. He must have finally arrived. Eva wondered if her mother was going to say anything to him about Eva's outburst, but the conversation soon dissolved into the quiet sounds of papers being sifted around.

This was a huge undertaking and all three of them knew it, but it was something that had to be done. The property value for this particular building was through the roof right now. Eva wasn't stupid. Despite her emotional attachment to the place, she knew it had to be sold. She'd pretended she hadn't heard her father on the phone with a real estate broker inquiring as to what he was going to do with the property now that his mother was gone. People wanted this property. People would pay a *lot* of money to get it.

Maneuvering one foot carefully around a mop and bucket, Eva twisted her body so that she was parallel to the wall and could slip past the rickety-looking storage



rack. It rattled as Eva wiggled past it, but thankfully did not tip over. Eva didn't want to think about what her mother would say if she got herself trapped in the closet by a piece of cheap IKEA shelving.

Behind the storage rack was a small space where Eva could stand. The light here was very dim, so she pulled out her cell phone and turned on its flashlight app.

This space had not been touched in years. A coating of dust more than a quarter-inch thick in places covered everything. Eva's nose twitched and she sneezed as she pressed herself flat against the wall so that she wouldn't disturb anything. An odd feeling came over her as she rubbed at her nose. She was uncomfortable, on edge.

Under the bright white light from her phone, Eva was able to see a small stack of shoe boxes next to the desk. They were piled up about waist high and were labeled with faded black letters on yellowing masking tape. The dates were *ancient*, far older than any story Eva had ever heard her grandmother tell.

Nudging a broken-looking vacuum cleaner out of the way, Eva inched forward and reached for the first box. The cardboard was so dusty it was almost slippery under her hands. Eva clamped her phone between her teeth so she could have both hands free. The box was heavy. She pulled it around and balanced it on the storage rack.

Pulling her phone from her mouth, she set it on the shelf above, pushing aside old aerosol cans to make space. She would throw them into a trash bag once she was finished checking out the boxes.

On the brittle, yellow masking tape label, a date was written in her grandmother's precise script. Eva stared down at it, chewing on her lip. It was strange to see something so old, and to hold it in her hands and know that it probably

hadn't been touched for thirty or maybe even forty years. To touch something so old seemed almost to violate it. The date on the masking tape was seventy years ago, almost to the day. It seemed like a breach of some unspoken trust between Eva and her grandmother to touch these boxes, but Eva was curious and her grandmother was dead. She could look.

Eva bent and blew some of the dust off the top of the box. It was dated 1935–1940, which was before Eva's grandmother had met her grandfather. This was when Mary was in her late twenties, in the midst of the Great Depression and a buildup to a world war. This was a piece of history, *her* history. Eva's heart was racing. She was about to see it for the first time.

She wanted to call her father in and have him watch as she opened the box, but the words died in her throat as she pulled the top off to find two jumbled clusters of yellowed paper envelopes that had clearly once been tied together with ribbons. There was a leather-bound journal tucked into the bottom that looked suspiciously like the notebooks that Eva's grandmother had given her for Christmas every year since she turned seventeen. Underneath the two stacks of envelopes was a thicker envelope that Eva could tell contained photographs. The storage rack creaked as she tried to find a more comfortable position where she could get better light.

"Shit," she muttered. The box nearly slipped out of her hands and the light from her phone wavered. She turned and nearly tripped over the vacuum's hose as she grabbed another one of the shoe boxes and pressed the top back onto the one she'd just opened. Holding the stack of boxes against her stomach, Eva reached into her back pocket and carefully pulled out a trash bag. She shook it out and shoved her phone into her other pocket. One by one, each of the gross, old aerosol cans was thrown into the bag, and soon Eva had a space wide enough to relocate the boxes to the storage rack.

She pushed the trash bag through the space she'd created and it fell to the floor with a clatter, the bag spilling open and the cans rolling out into the hallway.

From the living room, Eva's mother called, "Everything okay?"

Eva coughed a little bit on the dust that had risen as the bag had tumbled to the floor. "Yeah!" she shouted back. "I found the trash bags and some other stuff. I figured that I'd throw out all the cleaning supplies that are older than me while I was back here."

"Good job, kid." Her father stood at the end of the hallway with a stack of books in his hands. "Bring out those bags when you're done. Your mom wants to do the entry closet today at least."

Eva gave a mock salute, and he grinned back at her. "Will do."

When her father was out of sight once more, Eva pushed the stack of shoe boxes that she was holding onto the storage rack's shelf and turned to collect the rest of them. There were five in total, dating back to 1923, when Eva's grandmother would have been thirteen years old. Eva had no idea why she would have kept her correspondence and letters from that long ago, but she apparently had, and Eva wanted to have a look at them. She stacked. She stacked the boxes on the storage rack so she could get at them easily from the other side and brushed as much dust off herself as she could before contemplating the narrow gap she'd have to wiggle through once more.

In the hallway, the bag that she'd filled up was lying open and some of the aerosol cans had fallen out. She bent and shoved them back in, then picked up the bag and slung it over her shoulder. After a moment's contemplation, she reached out and grabbed one of the shoe boxes as well. The

faded masking tape dated it to 1925–1926, and it scratched against Eva’s side as she tucked it under her arm. Her entire body was streaked with long gray lines of dust, like skeletal fingers that had reached out to hold her in the darkness behind the storage rack.

“Gross,” she muttered. She left the door open and the light on. There was a mop in there, as well as all the non-expired cleaning supplies. Eva wasn’t sure that they’d get to the cleaning stage today, but she wanted to at least pretend that she’d made an effort to be helpful.

In the bright, natural light of the living room, Eva was finally able to see that the shoe box was not the old, gray cardboard shape as it had appeared to be in the closet, but rather it appeared to be made out of some sort of archival material. The writing on the masking tape label was faded, but the box itself looked almost as if it were brand new. It wasn’t like the others, held together with tape and sheer force of will. *Why is this one different? What’s so special about it?* She deposited the trash bags and shoe box on the coffee table, lost in thought.

“What do you have there?” Her father peered curiously from where he was looking through a stack of tax returns.

“I’m not really sure,” Eva replied. She brushed as much dust off herself as she could before settling down on the couch and pulling the box toward her. “I found this way in the back of the storage closet. It doesn’t look like it’s been touched since Gran moved in. The one I opened in the closet looked like it had old letters and pictures in it.”

Eva’s dad leaned forward and Eva carefully pulled the top off the box and set it down on the coffee table.

The inside of this box was different than the one that she’d opened in the closet. There were journals in here, little leather-bound notebooks stacked in three perfect rows,

four deep. Eva figured that there was one for each month of the year between 1925 and 1926. She reached forward and picked up the first journal, and her father went back to his perusal of the tax returns.

“Don’t you want to look?” She peered up at him, her bangs falling into her eyes.

Her father glanced at her sideways and shrugged. He shifted from his position at the other end of the couch. “Honestly, Eva, this is more important right now. I gotta figure out if I need to file anything for your grandmother.” When she blew her bangs out of her eyes and made a noise like an irritated horse, he laughed and brushed them off her forehead. “You know that I want to read them too, Eva, but this has to come first.”

Eva smiled at him, holding up the journal between her thumb and curled forefinger. “I’ll give you a full trip report, how about that?”

He nodded. “Sounds good, sweetie.”

She sank back into the couch that still smelled like the jasmine soap her grandmother favored. There was another scent there too, of the expensive perfume she wore only when she went out of the house. Cloaked in a sense-memory of her grandmother, Eva opened the diary and frowned. This one was dated September 1, and that wasn’t what she needed. She leaned forward and picked up the journal from the stack opposite. Her grandmother must have been going through some sort of a journal-writing kick because the entry for January 2 was nearly seven pages long. It was no wonder that she’d had to keep a separate journal for each month.

Eva curled back on the couch, propped the book open against her knees, and started to read.