

“On par with *Olive Kitteridge*! But where Olive woos, Eva Gordon captures. MacKillop’s characters landed in my bones, guts, heart—and took up residence. A poignant, utterly beautiful story of perspective and hope.”

—**CHERYL GREY BOSTROM**, award-winning author of
Sugar Birds: A Novel

“A story about aging, caregiving, friendship, parenting, nostalgia, and dementia—and a delightfully memorable and flawed character who has made her fair share of mistakes in life. There is the kind of patience in the plot development and character disclosure reminiscent of the writings of Marilynne Robinson.”

—**JIM HEYNEN**, author of *The Fall of Alice K.*

“Splendid! A novel full of life and transformation, as charming as a New England cottage by the sea. You can’t help but fall in love with spunky, hard-edged Eva Gordon and the others connected to Try Again Farm. Anyone living with regrets will appreciate the gentleness and grace of this story, and the permeating sense of love will stay with you long after the final page.”

—**CHRISTINE KINDBERG**, author of *The Means That Make Us Strangers*,
Christy Award winner for YA

“A stirring story of both great sorrow and great love . . . that reminds us that love is indeed redemptive. Much like Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*, *The Forgotten Life of Eva Gordon* gives us a woman who begs to be hated but who, page by page, we find ourselves unable not to love.”

—**KATHERINE JAMES**, author of *A Prayer for Orion* and
Can You See Anything Now?

“With lyrical and heartwarming prose, *The Forgotten Life of Eva Gordon* masterfully captures themes of redemption and renewal in person, home, and land. Prepare to be endeared to the unlovable and contemplate the profundity of the grace of memory.”

—**KATHERINE ELIZABETH CLARK**, author of *Where I End: A Story of
Tragedy, Truth, and Rebellious Hope*

"*The Forgotten Life of Eva Gordon* is an engaging and timely novel. Well-written with a dose of humor and poignancy, you will fall in love with this cast of characters who create a misfit community. MacKillop tackles the difficult issue of aging, regret, and memory loss, with hope for second chances."

—**ANGELA CORRELL**, author of *Grounded*

"Her memory may be rapidly failing, but seventy-five-year-old Eva Gordon's sharp-tongued wit is ever-intact as she navigates nagging regrets and unspoken desires. Readers of all ages will recognize the enduring challenges of living with difficult childhood memories in an increasingly inscrutable present and will root for Eva, even in her harshest moments. Linda MacKillop's *The Forgotten Life of Eva Gordon* is a big-hearted family saga, suffused with grace and kindness, featuring a cast of appealing characters who would be right at home in Jon Hassler's *Staggerford* or Richard Russo's *Empire Falls*. A quiet triumph of goodness."

—**ADRIANNE HARUN**, author of *A Man Came Out of a Door in the Mountain*

"A gently acerbic, absorbing, and deeply compassionate look at the disorientation and dislocation the elderly often face in their last years, and at those who face it with them. Eva is a captivating heroine, both prickly and poignant, and MacKillop is a wise and canny writer."

—**SUZANNE BERNE**, author of *The Dogs of Littlefield*

"Linda MacKillop has created a cast of endearing characters that will touch your heart. She captures the essence of what dealing with memory loss looks like, but with hope and humor. I relished her beautiful writing style and ability to elegantly convey Eva's thoughts and emotions. A gem of a book."

—**TERRI KRAUS**, author of The Project Restoration series and *Farmhouse Retreat: Life-Giving Inspirations from a Rustic Countryside*

**THE
FORGOTTEN
LIFE OF
EVA GORDON**

THE FORGOTTEN LIFE OF EVA GORDON

LINDA MacKILLOP



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The Forgotten Life of Eva Gordon

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*To Bill,
my love*

One

ON THE MORNING OF EVA Gordon's escape, the sun sat crisply in the New England spring sky like a promising sign.

She tilted her head as her granddaughter's Jeep whined through the shifting gears on its way up the street, carrying Breezy to her teaching job at Hingham High School. When the sound of the engine faded farther into the distance, Eva quickly stripped off her pajamas, then donned a long-sleeved blouse, plaid skirt, a sweater, and a light spring jacket, with her winter coat over the entire ensemble. After she pulled a suitcase from underneath the bed, she stuffed pre-folded clothes into it, packing the leftovers into plastic grocery bags. There, her closet would be emptied inconspicuously. She would need her medications, hygiene items, a little snack for the bus, and definitely her glasses.

Her heart pulsed with the anticipation of it all. She gave her well-endowed chest a good tap to get her heart back into rhythm, ran a comb through her short gray curls, then tied the bags to her luggage, dangling them hither and thither off the sides. The excitement actually made her mind feel clear.

She lugged the baggage to the front hall and left it by the door. In the kitchen, she positioned a goodbye note to Breezy propped against the coffeepot on the kitchen counter where her granddaughter would be sure to see it. After making sure the dog was inside, she gazed outside at Breezy's garage, where her granddaughter had helped her set up her

furniture refinishing shop after moving all the tools and supplies from Cape Cod. Eva would be leaving unfinished work, but Breezy could bring it to her later, once Eva got settled at home.

Ah, so many good things to come—warm days and time spent in the outdoors with hands in the soil once again, tending roses and hydrangeas, maybe planting a few tomato and pepper plants after she arrived back on Cape Cod. And walking the beach. How could she forget walks on the underpopulated beach? She didn't exactly have a place to stay on Cape Cod—yet—but she would work that out when the bus arrived in her old town.

At least there'd be no more city noise or knocks on the front door at all hours of the night by Breezy's needy students. Eva tiptoed out the front door and peered at the driveway. Mabel Maguire's car wasn't there. Mabel, the nosy, meddling upstairs tenant who attended church with Breezy. With no sign of Mabel today, Eva thumped her overstuffed roller suitcase down the concrete front steps of Breezy's two-family home, down the walkway, and out to the sidewalk, hurrying as quickly as possible—as much as a seventy-five-year-old woman could hurry. She wanted to get to the Cape before the planting season ended. She sketched a rough garden plot in her mind.

But then, right there at the beginning of her journey, the bursitis in her hip decided to kick up with an achy, nagging pain, arriving like a reprimand that old people shouldn't be traipsing around on long journeys. Eva hesitated. She could turn back and grab aspirin from the bathroom medicine cabinet, but she was in a rush and didn't want to be caught if Mabel returned home from her morning errands. Once Eva got going, surely the exhilaration of the escape would act as an anti-inflammatory and dull the ache.

At the edge of the sidewalk, she leaned toward the street, scanning beyond the aged maples and elms that lined the road, on the lookout for Breezy's Jeep or Mabel's huge Buick. A small sedan car turned the corner at the end of the congested city block, but no one else. Breezy should be halfway to school by now and soon engrossed in teaching the

troubled lot of her theater students. Only a few more weeks, and summer vacation would arrive.

A young mom, wearing yoga pants and sweatshirt over her tank top, turned from her home onto the sidewalk, probably to walk the young children trailing behind her to school just a few blocks away. She pushed one of those gigantic strollers big enough to fit an entire family. Even a small terrier sat in one of the seats. Farther down the street, a male commuter walked through his front gate, lugging a work bag for the train trip into the city.

The only cars on the street sat bumper to bumper along the sidewalk, as if kissing, leaving little room for Eva to squeeze through. She stayed on Breezy's side of the street, heading in the direction of the main thoroughfare where she would turn left, go straight, and eventually get to the bus station. She had practiced the trip over and over in her mind. Her neighbor, Mr. Cho, glanced at her briefly without speaking, then returned to watering his plants.

She had unintentionally offended him once, or so Breezy told her, when Eva barked out some command about his mangy, yappy little dog. There may have been a comment about "taking him on a one-way trip to the farm" when his yipping irritated her to death. But when she turned back to look again at Mr. Cho, he was leaning at a drastic angle, his ambling gaze taking in her attire, appearing to puzzle over some question.

Eva shrugged. She needed to focus on her trip. She took off at what would be just the perfect pace. Not too fast to look like someone running from a captor, yet not too slow to be seen by Mabel or anyone else who might recognize her and call her granddaughter. She tried to blend in with the morning commuters by slipping into their fluid lockstep to the train station. No one would confuse her with a businesswoman on her way into the city to work in a high rise. Instead, people could confuse her with a homeless person leaving the shelter for the night, what with the way she'd tied the Stop and Shop grocery bags to her one large roller suitcase, the crinkling plastic sounding like a hearty bonfire when a gust whipped in from the side.

As she rushed, the wind suddenly blew the bags and they slapped against a tall man wearing some kind of security uniform. "Watch it!" he said over his shoulder while still walking in the opposite direction.

Eva ignored his scolding and continued on her way. No need to let any unnecessary attention interrupt her morning plans.

Maybe because of her rushing, this was a memory morning. Some mornings were empty mornings, offering only a blank mind with familiar words vanquished, memories scattered. On those days, her gaze passed over so-called familiar objects in her granddaughter's house but their names escaped her. Not only that, sometimes she found herself thinking about *nothing at all*. She'd simply settle into an awareness that her mind was blank, the day was warm or cold or rainy. She was hungry. People were around her. But these thoughts never appeared as words.

Other mornings, like this one, were filled with a rush of memories, a consistent flow of stories and people playing like a video of her past, complete with a soundtrack of familiar voices returning with the good *and* the bad. As she rushed down the sidewalk, the memory of a tossed suitcase and spilled contents, including her favorite teddy bear, overwhelmed her mind. She let the memory come, its sounds and textures filling her consciousness and blocking out the present moment, taking her back to her earliest memory—one that had haunted her repeatedly over the past seven decades.

Three-year-old Eva watched her impoverished parents prepare to leave on the day of their move to New York City. Left to remain with her grandmother on Cape Cod, she shivered as cold air swept over her skin as she hid behind the Windsor chair, staring at the open front door. It looked like a mouth waiting to gobble up her weeping mother and angry-faced father.

"Holy Moses. No time to drag this out. Give her a hug and let's get going," her gruff father's voice had boomed.

She rubbed her arm where her father had grabbed it all those years ago, yanking her in front of the Windsor chair, grabbing her small suitcase and tossing it across the room, breaking the latch.

Instinctively Eva looked down at her roller bag as she hurried to the bus station. A strap held her suitcase together along with a zipper. No latch or stuffed bear. Right. She reoriented herself to the present moment. Stopping at the next intersection, though, she stepped into the street then jumped back on the sidewalk. How would she cross such a busy street with the whooshing of cars and trucks, with horns blaring and music busting out of radios then fading as the vehicles passed by? Stores lined the street with signs screaming *Bring a friend for a free desert, Cash checks here, or Stop in and let us meet your insurance needs.*

After several false starts, she stepped in behind other folks crossing the street on their way to the train. On the other side of the crosswalk, Eva glanced down at her bags to be sure her contents weren't about to spill.

Her panties lay there on the top of her shopping bag, working their way toward the opening. Mortifying! She could only shove them further into the bag. No time for a permanent fix or she'd be caught by Breezy or Mabel.

With one stolen look down the street, she kept on toward the station but stumbled over a man's knapsacks and stuffed trash bags strewn across the sidewalk where he sat in front of ACE Hardware.

He jumped to help her before she fell, steadying her by clasping her arm, steering her luggage over to a wooden bench as though she'd be staying awhile. He gestured with his hand, offering her a seat. "You okay, ma'am?" He peered at her more closely. "Did I see you last night at Sheltering Arms?"

"No, you did not!" Eva huffed at the mention of the homeless shelter. Did he mistake her appearance to be on a par with his? "I'm just going on a trip, taking a lot of stuff."

He released her arm, nodded, and half smiled, holding his eyes shut for just a second longer than a normal blink, an expression that revealed his own knowing and seemed to narrow the distance between their two stations in life. One of his eyes focused farther down the street and one on her. He wore a fluorescent-orange ski coat on this warm spring day,

with a thick sweater underneath, carrying the contents of his closet on his back and in worn bags, the same as Eva. His outfit seemed in need of a good laundering.

"I'm in a hurry, sir," she said, retrieving her bags. "Thank you for steady-ing me."

He glanced down, taking a good, long look at her nicely pressed skirt and newish sneakers. "You don't happen to have money for a cup of coffee, do you?" He blocked her way, moving to the left as she did so, moving to the right when she moved.

When a police officer came out of a nearby store carrying a cup of coffee, the man sat back down and pulled his belongings in close.

Eva took the opportunity to make her escape, dodging other people on the sidewalk, huffing loudly when she found herself stuck behind a slow walker. Glances over her shoulder said she was safe—no one on her trail. Her spirits rallied, buoyed to be saying goodbye to the noisy Boston suburb that couldn't even provide salty sea air without mixing it with the fumes of buses and delivery trucks. She picked up her pace a bit, rubbing her hip as she walked.

Bumping her suitcase over each split in the concrete, she gripped the handle more tightly to offset an increased wobble in one of the wheels. Hopefully the wheel would make the trip, as it was likely some careless bus driver would throw the bag into the bus's luggage compartment with little to no concern. She paused. Examining the wheel gave her a chance to steal a quick peek behind her. Had anyone spotted her? There were joggers and mothers with jogging strollers, and men dressed in black pants with white, pressed shirts, those computer bag things flung over their shoulders. Many walked while looking at their phones. Eva would trip on the sidewalk if she read her phone while walking. Of course, she could barely read anything on her phone without Breezy's help. She had hardly mastered making calls.

She approached a Dunkin' Donuts, and the coffee smell permeated the air, sparking a sudden craving for the warm beverage and the jolt it offered. But she didn't have time. She reached another intersection and stood next to one of the contraptions that changed the light to read

“walk.” She reached to press the button, but a child’s eager hand beat her to it. When the moment came for her to cross the street, a strong memory of walking to school with her snakelike cousins invaded her mind.

Suddenly Eva was crossing Old Main Street near her grandmother’s house. Daily she walked to school, crossing a street like this one with those hard-hearted relatives taunting her.

“You’re just an orphan, Eva,” her cousin Jake whispered just as a car sped through the intersection, preventing her from fleeing the abuse. “Nobody wants you to live with them. Not even your own parents.”

She only stole a glance at him, enough to see his yellowed teeth stuffed with the morning’s cereal.

She brushed the distressing memory away, focusing on the promising day ahead, taking a gander to the left and right and behind herself. No sign of Breezy’s familiar Jeep or Breezy’s boyfriend, Ian, in his police car. She kept on her straight path. The bus station *should* be located at the corner just after the chain drugstore.

The farther she walked, the more convoluted the route back to Breezy’s house became. What if Eva never found the bus station? Each side street with their shaded sidewalks and snug yards and houses looked exactly the same.

She could always ask directions.

Taylor Street?

Yes, Breezy lived on Taylor Street.

And then, just a ways down on her right, the giant Greyhound Bus sign hung like a great, welcoming beacon from the sky. She almost gave it a wave. She switched her suitcase to her other hand for some muscle relief and pushed on for the last distance to the station, then rummaged through her purse for money. But when she arrived, a dark, empty building met her—and a completely empty parking lot without any buses. The glass window out front had a sign saying Greyhound had moved over to Central Street.

A tall young woman wearing cowboy boots and straight, tight slacks leaned against the glass, head down, hair pulled sideways over one

shoulder, purse strap crossing over her chest as she scrolled through a phone. Looking up, she said, "Good morning, Gram."

Breezy.

"Well . . . how did you, why aren't you . . . ?" Eva let go of her suitcase, hope and excitement exiting her body like a balloon deflating after a puncture.

Her luggage toppled awkwardly to the ground from the heavy, off-balance load.

"I told the principal I'd be late."

"How did you *know*?" Eva asked.

"I can follow you by your cell phone, remember?" Breezy held up her own phone and showed her grandmother the phone screen with a map of the area and a little circle with the initials EG. *Eva Gordon*. "An app called *Find My Friends*." Breezy picked up the luggage from the ground. "Mabel is going to have to stay with you for the rest of the day."

"I don't want a babysitter anymore, Breezy."

"I'm parked over here." She started walking, motioning for Eva to follow as if assuming her grandmother would fall obediently into step with her. "Gram, this building was closed last week when you ran away, and it will be closed next week too. We need to talk."



After that, the memory day slipped away, silencing the flow of voices and faces in Eva's mind. Still a crisp New England day, but no longer as bright and promising. Breezy navigating her Jeep through the city to Taylor Street, singing along to the radio . . . country music. Mabel, with her puff of white hair and sky-blue smiling eyes, waiting outside the house, rubbing her hands, a slight bounce on her heels, a shimmer to her waiting petite body like a racer anticipating the firing of the starting gun. Breezy's engine cutting off. Mabel hurrying to retrieve Eva from the Jeep. Mabel and Breezy exchanging pleasantries. Breezy pulling luggage from the back. Eva shooing her away. The heavy luggage thumping up the front steps one at a time, retracing in reverse the earlier getaway.

Breezy and Mabel outside, heads close together, a whisper passing between them in the driveway, gazing up as Eva entered the house with her heavy burden. Inside, Eva opening the hall closet, yanking out the vacuum cleaner Breezy never used, stuffing the suitcase way in the back of the closet after untying the grocery bags and dropping them in the hallway. Pushing the vacuum to hide her suitcase. Breezy and Mabel coming inside as Eva carried the plastic bags back to her bedroom.

The rest of the day automatically flowed past Eva in the same manner. She observed the blur of images without engaging, attaching very little meaning to their arrival. Mabel following Eva for the rest of the day, sitting on the sofa across from her friend as Eva held a closed magazine on her lap. Mabel blathering on about something as Eva just nodded. Mabel banging pots and pans in the kitchen as she cooked dinner and kept up light chatter.

Breezy after work, sitting at the kitchen table, eating a meal of beef stew prepared by Mabel. Eva breaking crusty bread and dipping it into her stew, the crunching food echoing so loud and deafening inside her head, blocking the voice of the other person at the dinner table who showed concern by furrowing her brow, then quickly adjusted to a tense smile. Breezy moving her mouth and swooping her hands, offering the rising pitch of someone asking question after question with attempted calm. Eva struggling to hear her granddaughter over the crunch of bread inside her head.

Breezy's pitch flattening out as she offered reason after reason why Eva needed to stay and live with her.

Eva sitting back with her hands on her lap, staring at her beautiful granddaughter's face, seeing her own daughter's looks reflected in the dark lashes lining beautiful wide eyes filled with suppressed irritation but mixed with concern. Her mouth forming, over and over, into sentences and phrases Eva couldn't respond to with words. Over and over, her blank mind simply clung to the word *home*.

Two

THE NEXT MORNING, A SHIMMERING, clean May day, felt as welcome as the rare good night's sleep she enjoyed last night. And for whatever reason—possibly the new nutritional supplements Breezy insisted Eva take, handing her handfuls of pills with breakfast and dinner to be swallowed two by two with water—she could remember the fact that the bus station had moved. The next time she headed for Cape Cod, she needed to leave her phone behind to knock Breezy off her trail. Eva pulled a piece of scrap paper from a desk drawer and wrote herself a note, hiding the paper in a pocket in her leather purse to remember those details when her mind dulled. Hopefully she would remember writing the note.

Her plan today was to find that new bus station and make a practice run to it, the events of the previous day now just a lesson in perseverance. In the face of sunshine and rest, resolve didn't feel as desperately needed as on the other days when words failed to form in her mind. Sure, a quiet nagging haunted her about her mysterious foibles and how they weren't normal, but today she would push away that worry, feeling firm and strong, her mind crisp.

Maybe it would stay that way.

Eva opened the window shade and looked down at the crowded neighborhood outside Breezy's home, houses lined up tight like sardines, all pressed together with only a driveway separating them. No stone borders. Way too close for Eva's liking.

Summers in the city were especially challenging to someone who preferred whispering fields and wildlife over the noise from her neighbors' lives shared through open windows. Televisions blared soap operas or twenty-four-hour television news. Squabbles erupted between parents and kids over broken curfews and uncompleted chores—yelling about not helping with dinner, never picking up after the dog, not doing an equal share of the work. Radios resounded from garages where young men gathered in groups to work on old cars or motorcycles. Basketballs bounced on pavement or against the rims of nets at all hours, beating like an unwelcome drum in her ears. So she schemed about finding somewhere else to live, making that secret trip back to the Cape.

As a person who had lived alone for so many years, Eva missed her privacy. She missed the gentle curves in the roads of Cape Cod, the way the sea air wove through the treetops even from miles away, the antique shops selling their wares, the timeless antique homes with their twelve-over-twelve windowpanes, stone walls providing a nice border between neighbors.

Eva dropped the shade with a sigh and headed to the kitchen to make her morning coffee. Then she could find the new bus station and prepare to leave.

In the living room, as she reached to open the two front window shades, a small voice wafted up from the couch.

"Good morning."

Startled, Eva released the blind to *phit, phit, phit* in on itself, flapping in circles around its rod. "Who are *you*?" Eva protected her chest with trembling hands as she backed away from the couch. "I thought I was the only one here."

"Sorry." The girl's face slowly came into focus, looking alarmingly familiar as it peeked out from beneath a blanket on the couch.

Eva stared at her, unable to remember her name or whether or not she *should* remember her name. And then a closer look at the girl's sunken cheekbones and sharp shoulders poking through blankets said it all. "Sarah," Eva whispered.

Just uttering her daughter's name urged her to suddenly distract

herself with straightening the house or making breakfast to avoid the feeling of grief.

“No, we haven’t met.” The girl pulled herself up on one elbow. “I’m Isabella, one of—”

“My granddaughter’s strays,” Eva finished for her, releasing the tension from her shoulders.

“Actually, I go to church with Breezy.”

Eva introduced herself as the girl hunted around for a pair of glasses that made her eyes suddenly magnify when she found them and propped them on her delicate nose. Something about her strong jaw made her look as if she would make a great boxer in another life. Jet-black hair in one of those ratty messes on her head—dreadlocks, according to Breezy—framed her pale skin like a contrasting checkerboard.

“Well, I should be used to it by now,” Eva said, gathering herself. “Breezy practically rents out this couch by the week. Folks from church, broken-down students. Anyone who needs a place to sleep.”

The girl didn’t move an inch while Eva straightened books and magazines on the coffee table and stacked a dirty mug on a plate to return to the kitchen. Amber, Breezy’s golden retriever, lumbered into the room for a morning greeting but Eva ignored her. “Shouldn’t you be in school by now?”

A long, thin hand emerged from beneath the blankets. The girl rummaged around until she held up a cell phone. “Yup. Missed my English Composition class at the community college. Oh well. Breezy woke me up, but I must’ve fallen back asleep.”

Eva waited, but the child still didn’t move. “Well, for heaven’s sake,” she finally snapped. “Get up. I’ll make you something to eat.”

Mary or Bella or whatever her name was jumped up with the blanket twisted around her body and tripped as she tried to untangle herself. In a clumsy tumble, she hit the coffee table, then headed to the bathroom.

“Be careful!” Eva marched toward the kitchen with Amber following at her heels in need of water or food. Looking in the hall mirror, she adjusted her hair and smoothed a few loose silver wisps back from her ashen skin. Each year, as decades passed and Christmas cards and

letters arrived from old neighbors or her clients, Eva noticed other people fading from view, too, with lightened or invisible eyebrows and lashes and cloud-colored hair. As they grayed and turned sallow, they looked lighter in each photograph, as though they'd been underexposed. One day they might vanish completely, and the Christmas photo would arrive with only white paper.

In the kitchen, she gave the dog some food and water but halted in front of the coffeepot as the unwanted blankness washed over her mind, probably from being startled by the girl. With great effort, she puzzled over adding the filter or the coffee first. The coffee or the water first? She studied the diagram Breezy had drawn, arrows pointing in the direction of pouring like a flow chart. She hated to ask the girl for help. She read some Post-it notes marked up with instructions and finally put the filter in the top, added water, then coffee on top of the filter. Her mind cleared. She put bread in the toaster, which was simple enough. How long would the girl stay? Was she a babysitter? Eva didn't want to give up her plans for the day, but she could always lure the girl into driving her to find the new bus station . . . if Isabella—that was her name!—didn't have to go to school.

When she opened the refrigerator door, once again Eva's bafflement returned. So many food items she could never recognize as food. If it were just her and Breezy, she might be able to keep track. But who wouldn't be confused by the sudden appearance of almond milk (how does one milk a nut?), leftovers from meals she'd never cooked, vegetarian sausage, and something that looked like a stick of butter but wasn't butter at all? She had no idea what was inside the plastic bowl blocking her from getting the orange juice. She hoisted the unknown container in the trash.

"They've made me lose my mind," she said, giving the refrigerator door a slam.

"Who has?" The girl had lugged her disheveled self to the table and rested her head on her hands after setting her phone and some type of book on the placemat. Obviously, she had slept in her clothes—and had a restless, sleepless night by the look of her mess of a hairdo tangled around her face and those dark circles under her otherwise young eyes.

Eva threw her a clarifying look.

“Oh.” The girl pointed to her own chest with a light touch of her finger. “Me?”

Eva’s look didn’t waver, but she made no response.

“Sorry to startle you in there. I forgot Breezy lives with her grandmother.”

“Actually, I live with her.” *But not for much longer.* When the bread popped from the toaster, Eva buttered a piece for herself and for the girl. She set it down along with two glasses of orange juice. Was that a moistness appearing in the girl’s eyes? Not wanting to get involved, she refrained from questioning it.

“You’re so lucky to live with Breezy. She’s the best. She doesn’t know it, but I targeted her at church. I wanted to get to know her . . . especially because she wears cool cowboy boots.” The girl picked up the toast, examining it closely before turning her eyes to examine Eva with equal concentration. “You remind me of someone—my grandmother, who died five years ago.” She took a bite of the crunchy bread. “Grandma used to make me breakfast when I visited.” Water filled her eyes, and the girl brushed her cheeks with a wave of her hand. “Oh, brother. I don’t know why I’m being so emotional. I’m just going through a hard time lately. My mom’s life is very full. New boyfriend. New job. Yoga. New friends. And my father, well, he’s a piece of work. Always butting into my life but couldn’t keep his own marriage together. I’m actually used to those two, but now that Brad dumped me—he *was* my boyfriend—I’m feeling a little rudderless.” She picked up her phone from the placemat and scrolled for some sort of information. “*Rudderless—to lack a clear sense of one’s aims or principles.* That’s me.” She put the phone back on the placemat and looked to Eva as if for comment.

Eva simply cleared her throat and offered a faux cough.

The girl rattled on and on with details of her life.

When the coffeepot finished gurgling, Eva got up and poured two cups of coffee, then poured milk into a pitcher and sat down across from the girl. Her mind stuck on Isabella’s words about being “lucky to live

with Breezy.” The good, warm coffee offered a welcome comfort. Eva could feel her mind calming.

The girl’s mouth moved as she formed words about her family and her problems. She reached for the pitcher to add cream to her coffee, then pulled and twisted her hair until it magically tied itself in some sort of knot in the back, no pins required, loose braids spiraling around her face.

How could Breezy listen attentively to this blather on a regular basis? Her granddaughter was certainly a master at finding the neediest ones. The girl might’ve talked until lunchtime, if Eva hadn’t interrupted her. “I’m not much good in the advice department, but I have learned I’m happiest if I don’t depend on others for my well-being. ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ My parents always taught me that principle.”

The toast stopped midway between the girl’s plate and mouth. Finally, she said, “Breezy taught me a different principle. ‘God helps the helpless—if they look to Him.’”

“How’s that working for you?” Eva asked.

“Let’s just say I haven’t mastered the principle yet.” She put down her toast and scraped off the butter down to the plain bread.

“So are you spending the day here or going to school?” Eva asked.

“School.”

Remembering her plan, she just wanted to end the talk and send the girl on her way so she could take advantage of a rare day with a thinking mind. If only Eva could just hand her those things . . . whatever they’re called . . . to start her car and get on her way. She sorted through her memory for the name of those things that jangled.

The back door rattled with someone’s knock, and in walked Mabel.

“It’s like Grand Central Station this morning,” Eva mumbled. She gave Mabel a look over the top of her glasses before getting up to pour her neighbor a cup of coffee.

As was her custom most mornings lately, Mabel arrived armed with side-of-the-road weeds in an empty concentrated orange juice container. Dandelions, Queen Anne’s lace, and itty-bitty clover. Her social security check would never allow for the extravagance of store-bought

flowers, but Mabel was a gift giver. She'd been arriving in the apartment lately like a spontaneous visitor, as if she was checking in on Eva, spying on her with instructions to call Breezy with any suspicious moves.

"Good morning, ladies." She turned her attention on the girl. "Who do we have here? You look familiar. Have we met?" Mabel gently cupped Isabella's tearstained face in her hand for a closer examination from several different angles.

Eva started to introduce her as another of Breezy's strays, but the girl introduced herself as Isabella Barrington. "We attend the same church. That's why I look familiar. But you sit on the right side of the congregation, and I sit behind Breezy on the left side."

Mabel offered her age-spotted, vein-covered hand for a shake, which Isabella accepted heartily with Mabel clasping the girl's arm with her other hand. "Well, now we've officially met." They appeared to be instant friends. "Isabella Barrington. Are you George Barrington's daughter from Wollaston?"

"Nope. No relation."

"Or David Barrington, the pediatrician?"

"No. I'm the daughter of 'Lord' Thomas Barrington from Hanover, owner of Barrington and Todd Real Estate and builder of McMansions. You've probably seen all his beautiful masterpieces all over the South Shore."

Eva's mind was clear enough to detect the sarcasm.

"I don't know him," Mabel said, "but I'm glad to meet you, Isabella Barrington." She set her weeds down in front of Isabella. "I like to bring Eva flowers in the morning to get her day off to a good start, but if my hunch is right, you could use a little cheer this morning."

Isabella wistfully picked up the container and sniffed the weeds.

Eva busied herself with kitchen clutter, wiping down the counter. *Spoons, she thought. No, clips. She needs her car clips to start her car and leave? No, that's not right either.* Eva looked out the kitchen window at the girl's SUV in the driveway, blocking the door to the garage workshop. If she could find the girl's things, she'd send her on her way in that huge

monstrosity of a vehicle. She finished at the sink and joined the ladies at the table to eat her breakfast.

Mabel opened the *Daily Times* as she did most days, moving the flowers, butter, salt, and pepper out of the way to spread the newspaper open on the table, then positioning so that both she and the girl could read it. "Eva and I like to have coffee and read the newspaper together. And offer our weighty opinions."

Isabella sat up straight, squaring her shoulders and sipping her orange juice. "You like politics? What do you think of this crazy president? He's going to destroy our country."

"Oh, we hate politics." Eva joined them to glance over the newspaper. "I just like to see all the lamebrain things people do in this world, like people working for the mob claiming they didn't know those people were criminals, or people trying to break into a house, not knowing a detective owned the place."

Isabella leaned across the table. "Ahh. There's a nice story." She pointed to a headline. *New Life for Old Throwaways*. "A local teenager started a business collecting old throwaway electronics and refurbishing them for the poor. Good idea. Kids'll never get by in this world if they don't have a computer or computer skills." She wiped her mouth with her paper napkin and turned over her upside-down cell phone, presumably to steal a glimpse of the time.

"Probably trying to get his parents' approval," said Eva.

"Who? That boy?" Mabel pursed her lips. "Oh Eva, that's a special young man to care about others," she said as a quiet scolding, her white hair puffing around her head like a cloud wanting to rain on an otherwise sunny morning. She removed her glare from Eva, flipped to the back section, and smoothed down the paper's creasing on the table. "And we like to check out the obituaries. At our age, we know lots of people on these pages." She tapped on someone's picture. "Like this gentleman. *Davies, Matthew. Departed this life May 7. Memorial service at 2 p.m. in the funeral chapel on May 13. Condolences may be registered on our website. Can you believe it? A funeral website?*"

Eva leaned closer to read the entries over Mabel's arm. "*Remains resting?* Does he need a nap or something?"

"Appears no one survived him." Mabel skimmed her knobby finger over the paper on her way through the obituary. "No loving words written by his family about being a devoted dad or husband. We'll have to go support him."

"Isn't he dead?" Isabella's gaze passed back and forth between the two ladies.

"Mabel likes to go to the funerals of the 'lonelies' in case no one else shows up. And you'd be surprised how often no one shows up." Eva raised her eyebrows for emphasis. Funerals with Mabel accounted for much of Eva's adult church attendance. More times than Eva could count, the two women had slipped into plastic, cushioned, or wooden seats, dressed in their most somber clothes, and listened to the eulogies and farewell words from families, pastors, and friends.

"You knew him, too?" Isabella asked Eva.

"Never laid eyes on him," she answered.

"Eva needs to get out of the house sometimes," Mabel said, "and I just hate traveling around all alone, so she joins me. You know, in case my car breaks down."

"She travels around town all alone all the time. She just likes to coerce me to cross the doorway of a church," Eva explained. "She claims she only wants to go to the funerals of the lonelies, but Mabel's been known to slip me into some packed services."

"And someday she's going to grace the doorway of our church. Aren't you, Eva?"

"Nothing on the other side of the door I can't find on this side, Mabel."

"I believe you're wrong." Mabel tapped the table before speaking again. "I've been overwhelmed by God's surprises over the decades. I might ask for something—beg even—only to receive something completely unexpected and find it's better than my pea-sized brain could've imagined. You can't possibly know everything about a limitless God, Eva."

Ignoring Mabel's comment, Eva silently recounted the many

surprises in her own life and their unwelcome arrivals. Finally, she returned her glance to the obituary, pointing to the page. "Not one loving relative? What'd he do to tick everyone off?"

"He wasn't the kindest of men. Made folks angry." Mabel dropped her head as if regretting speaking ill of someone.

"Was he a murderer?" Eva asked Mabel in between bites of her toast. "Did he work for the mob?"

"You don't have to work for the mob or murder someone to be bad. Scripture says if you say unkind things . . ."

"Unkind things have that much power?" She had been stirring sugar into her coffee, noting the tinny sound of the spoon against the porcelain, splashing liquid over the sides. She fell into the splashes, thinking of waves crashing over the side of a boat when they sailed on a Cape Cod summer day with her bossy cousins.

"You're just an orphan. An orphan with a doll instead of parents."

"Can you hear us, Eva? I'm talking to you." Mabel's voice came from some faraway place.

Eva shook her head, slowly exiting her waterlogged memory, refocusing her attention. She didn't like the concerned way the women looked at her. Eva stood and abruptly took the dirty cups from breakfast to stow in the dishwasher. She read instructions from the Post-it note on the front of the dishwasher.

Fill with dishes, add soap in dispenser on door, close door, hit start.

A gentle hand pressed on her upper back. "It's not full, Eva. I don't think we need to start it yet." Mabel quietly closed the door. "It saves water if we just run it when it's full. Now, let's take a look at your calendar." Mabel put on her glasses, adjusting them on her nose.

Eva found her own on the table and put them on.

They walked over to the wall calendar and stood side by side. "Oh, it's a big night for you tonight. You're going to the farm for dinner."

Eva squinted at the little squares that ordered her days. "I am?" She looked out the window.

The neighbor lugged his trash down the driveway to the street. How could he remember which day the garbage trucks came?

"A birthday party. For the old uncle who lives with Breezy's boyfriend."

The memory appeared slowly, like a gradually opening bud transforming into a full blossom. Breezy had behaved strangely about the birthday party, mentioning it way too often, earning Eva's suspicion.

"What's the uncle like?" Mabel asked.

"Haven't met him yet. Ian inherited him along with the farm." Eva recalled Ian's intrusion into their lives—especially now that he'd grown serious about Breezy. He added to the overcrowding of an already busy home and became as frequent a guest as the students and Mabel. Often his presence forced Eva to stay in her bedroom in the evening, even if she'd like a cup of warm milk to get to sleep or to watch a television program with Breezy. She didn't want him to see her in her pajamas or be a third wheel to his and Breezy's relationship. She could hear them down there discussing their day, like an old married couple, giving Eva concerns about what lay ahead. Often, they'd expand their discussion to include the old uncle Ian lived with and cared for. They didn't seem to know Eva overheard them comparing notes about caring for the elderly, like how to make conversation with people who didn't always have a lot to talk about or make meals that fit both their tastes. But their talk never moved to complaining about either her or the uncle.

"I'm sure he's a fine, interesting gentleman." Mabel accepted Eva's offer of a napkin from the counter to wipe some leftover breakfast off her chin. "Well, at least you're free on Monday so you can join me at Matthew Davies's memorial service. Would you like to come, Isabella?"

"School." The girl finished her coffee with a long gulp.

"Stop trying to rescue me, Mabel." Eva positioned her hands on her hips. "I can take care of my own 'inner life' without being slipped into a church under false pretenses. Or babysat."

"What do you need to be rescued from?" Isabella paused in the doorway to the living room.

Well, there was her inability to drive, her forgetfulness, her financial episodes, self-imposed isolation, and the Post-it note parade. "Myself."

The first time Mabel had asked Eva to join her at a funeral a couple of years ago, the woman appeared to have lost her mind. “Let me straighten out this question,” Eva had said then. “Lay it flat on the table so we can be sure we’re talking about one and the same thing. You’re asking *me* to attend the funeral of a total stranger with *you*? Someone *you* know, but that I’ve never laid my eyes on?”

Mabel’s eyes grew wide and she nodded.

It was the craziest invitation Eva had ever received. But afternoons usually looked a lot like mornings. Straightening the apartment. Painting a set of dresser drawers for a client. Taking out a piece of meat to thaw. Trying to come to terms with her new, overcrowded living arrangement.

Eva had agreed to go. By now, she’d said goodbye to dozens of people she had never said hello to in life.

“I’m glad that’s settled.” Mabel now penciled Mr. Davies’s funeral on the calendar. “Monday morning it is.”

“Mabel just has this natural ability to influence people to go somewhere they have no desire to go.” Eva grabbed Amber’s collar and pulled the dog to the back door and out onto the back steps, where she clipped the collar to a rope so the dog could relieve herself without escaping the property.

Amber lumbered down the back stairs, then onto the meager grassy area while Eva watched from the back steps, hearing her father again bellow about getting “this show on the road.”

“Eva, I was just saying that I think that’s the nicest compliment you’ve ever paid me,” said Mabel from the table. “Did you hear me?”

“What’s the nicest compliment?” Eva asked as her father’s voice faded out.

“That I influence you to go places where you have no desire to go. Because I only influence you to go to *good* places. Like Mr. Davies’s funeral.” Her arthritic finger pointed to the open newspaper.

Like church. Eva came back inside, letting the door slam behind her. She and Mabel sat in those pews and listened to all sorts of ministers of the gospel—male and female, educated and uneducated, silly and substantive, and probably a few imposters—and Eva thought of the

existence of God. When she was a child occasionally visiting a church with Grandmother before she died, she used to stare at the stained glass windows and make up stories about the pictures there to avoid the preacher's description of a terrifying God—someone who existed *everywhere* and knew *everything*.

"But it's not even a *funeral*. It's a memorial service at the funeral home. How about this one instead?" Eva pointed to a distinguished-looking man on the page. "Don't you know *him* too? Charles Fletcher Sr., seventy-eight, who went home to be with the Lord, leaving a widow and a million children and grandchildren and a much-loved church and job." Smaller crowds made her nervous.

"Oh, I do know him too. A fine man. Served on many boards and built a new exhibit at the zoo. Great family, but Matthew Davies *needs* us."

Once again, the pressure made her acquiesce to someone else's lead. Just like when as a child she sat next to her strong grandmother as her parents left her behind, her little girl's coat still accidentally worn upside down because she had hurriedly tried to leave with them as they moved away. Ever since that day, Eva had mimicked her grandmother's stance, reflecting a sternness toward people and toward life, standing with feet together, legs straight, back tall, no tears, no emotions. Just resolve.

"Eva, you're not listening again, dear," Mabel said. "I have some errands to do today, and you're welcome to come with me."

A drive around the city would allow her the opportunity to spy the new bus station. "Might as well." Eva walked outside to where her father's old ship's bell hung by the back door. Reaching for the bell with *The Eleanor* still visibly etched into the brass, she rang the gong three times.

Amber dashed around the side of the yard in response.

Isabella had returned from the living room where she apparently had gone to retrieve her shoes and sweater. "You call the dog in with a ship's bell?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Eva smiled.

Mabel filled in the blanks. "The bell was a special gift in Eva's childhood when she went through a separation from her parents for a time.

Ship's bells always announced the whereabouts of one ship to another on foggy nights."

Wistfully, Eva looked outside at the bell. "If you ring it for us, we'll always know where to find you when we're on our way home." Abruptly she turned and gathered the girl in her sights. "Mother gave me those words—and the bell. Then they left me." And they gave her one other item—a Bible with her name monogrammed on the front, which Eva never read anymore, only using it to prop up other books on her shelf.

"Huh," Isabella said, looking to Mabel as if needing an explanation. Mabel just smiled.

"I think I should be going now." A nervous titter suddenly appeared in Isabella's voice. She collected her book and phone from the table.

Mabel gave her a warm embrace, then reached for her ever-present purse. "I almost forgot. Where is that rent check of mine?" She rummaged through her purse pockets. "I don't want Breezy evicting me. Please tell her I apologize that it's a day late. I wanted to walk downtown and get a cashier's check for her."

"For heaven's sake, she told you not to bother with cashier's checks, Mabel," Eva said.

Mabel stuffed the cashier's check in Eva's hand, leaning in as if a swift wind pushed her from behind, closer and closer, and then wrapping her fingers over Eva's, giving her a good firm pat.

"Do you know how jealous this makes me each month?" Eva pulled her hands away, waving the check in the air. "When you get to pay rent on your *own* place where you *choose* to live and can nap without anyone knowing, or stay in your nightgown till noon if you want to, or make your *own* plans for the day?"

Isabella paused by the back door, watching the two women.

"Is it really so awful living with Breezy?" Mabel said. "Living with a beautiful granddaughter who loves you? Some people have no one."

"Yeah. At least you *have* family who loves you." A deep sadness appeared on Isabella's face.

At least I have family? If only they knew how many unwanted

goodbyes had inserted themselves into Eva's life, how powerless she'd been to prevent them.

Isabella pulled out keys from her purse and jingled them.

"Keys!" Eva yelled. "You needed keys!"

"No, I have them right here." The girl raised an eyebrow questioningly. "Well, thanks for everything. Sorry for scaring you, Mrs. Gordon." The girl who looked just like Eva's Sarah left.

The memories came. The soft feel of Sarah's pudgy hand on Eva's arm when her daughter was a child, the sound of Sarah's gravelly teenage voice echoing in Eva's ear. A failing memory served as Eva's only connection to her daughter, making it her most prized but ailing possession. What if she forgot her daughter scampering up trees, then sitting on branches while singing "The Sound of Music" lyrics to an invisible audience? Or the way the memory of peeking in on Sarah's sleeping body in her small bedroom recalibrated Eva as a parent, allowing her to fall in love again with the quiet, unobtrusive child so that—just maybe—she would make it through one more day with children in tow.

"Mabel, where are you going on your errands?"

"To Claire Abernathy's to drop off a meal, and a few other places."

"Isn't Claire Abernathy somewhere near Central Street?" Eva asked.

"As a matter of fact, she is. See, you can still remember some things."

Eva would join Mabel on the errand of mercy. They would drive by the new bus station, and Eva would see it firsthand, gathering information about her next attempt to get home—like a reconnaissance mission.

Mabel tended to many people. Diabetic Willy Martin, who needed to be driven weekly to dialysis. Marge Hamilton, across town, who used a walker, so peanut-sized Mabel helped her with grocery shopping and errands.

Then there was Eva.

What made Mabel want to rescue Eva? Eva, who *at least had family*, but felt alone and desperate to make her escape from the encroaching changes.