

Eva's Daughters

By

MARION JOSEPH

CHAPTER ONE

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Certain events are woven into the texture of a person's life. Some are easily recognized when they occur. Others are more subtle, unheralded, bearing no hint of their import. When Eva Stern saw the mail carrier coming down the street, she had no idea his bag held a letter that would change the lives of her family forever.

Normally, she would have stopped and exchanged a few friendly words with the man, but her mind was still in turmoil after the events of the night. She wanted only to reach the dock, where she hoped the sea air would work its usual, calming magic.

It was an early spring day on Long Island. A few strong gusts had risen shortly before Eva had left the house and she walked briskly into the wind, barely noticing it buffet her face. The last detritus of winter—dust, brittle brown and yellow leaves, acorns, bits of paper—spiraled across the street. At the end of the block, a flag fluttered wildly, threatening to break free from its pole. An acquaintance waved as she hurried up her front steps and a cat gazed balefully from its shelter on a wrap-around porch, but Eva did not notice them.

She did not pause until she came to the dock. Mist blanketed the water and shrouded the skyscrapers, turning them into phantom buildings just visible across Long Island Sound. The dock was a popular spot for fishermen, but today, with the wind whipping the waves and bending the trees almost double, it was deserted.

Eva sat down on a weathered bench and untied her head scarf. She laughed as the wind gusted through her hair and tugged at her clothing. She savored the fierceness of the waves, the spicy aroma of seaweed, the boats yanking at their moorings, the gulls swooping over the choppy water. Startled by her laughter, a gull rose from a wooden post with a loud squawking and flapping of wings. Eva watched its flight a few seconds, her amusement fading as she remembered the nightmare.

It had come again in the night: the horror which had tortured her for more than fifty years. A nightmare with endless scripts, each one stemming from a single incident at Auschwitz. She had surfaced from the nightmare, fighting to escape the arms that imprisoned her. It was a few seconds before she'd understood that the person keeping her captive was not a camp guard; it was Max, holding her, soothing her, kissing her tear-sodden face. He comforted her as she so often comforted him—for Max had his own torments.

Although she'd tried to tell him about the nightmare, only fragments remained. A baby. A monster with a face not of this world. Clawed hands like an eagle's talons. Water, dark and murky, its depths unfathomable. The elements of the dream were always slightly different, yet always the same.

The salty air of the Sound was Eva's time-tested antidote to her nightmares. At times, she spent as long as an hour balancing on the swaying wooden planks. She could reflect there, remember, converse in her mind with her parents, her grandmother and Aaron: all the people

she had lost. Painful as it was, she could also let herself remember Sarah, and shed tears for her. All the same things she normally did in the synagogue during *Kol Nidre*, the service for honoring the dead. For some reason, the outdoors, the wind and the waves, added a special poignancy to her emotions.

She could have stayed longer on the dock, but it was too cold to linger and, eventually, she felt calm enough to turn back.

Approaching her home, she experienced a familiar happiness. The exterior of the house was much the same as it had been years earlier, when she and Max had fallen in love with it: the honey-colored walls, mellowed with age, the tall windows that sparkled when the sun shone on them, and the purple wisteria that tumbled gloriously across the roof. The view had attracted them more than anything else: the thought of waking every morning to a vista of ocean and sky. They would never tire of the view, they'd told each other, and they never had. They could not imagine living anywhere else.

In the garden, Eva secured a shrub blown loose from its stake. Here and there, she saw signs of spring. A few crocuses peeped through dry leaves and the tender stems of tulips and daffodils were starting to push through the soil. In a month or two she would plant larkspur, zinnias and snapdragons. Despite the ever-present sadness, Eva was an optimist and she looked forward to summer.

She entered the house to the sound of Paganini and the passage Max had been practicing when she left. The piece was technically demanding and new to the string quartet's repertoire, but Max, the first violinist, would know his part well by the time of tomorrow's rehearsal. Eva smiled as the music stopped, only to start again seconds later.

She closed the door and bent to pick up the mail from the mat. Two bills, she saw. The third envelope, postmarked Massachusetts, was addressed in unfamiliar writing. Curiously, she opened it.

My dear Aunt Eva and Uncle Max, she read, as she unfolded the letter. You will be surprised to hear from me. I have taken a break from my engineering work in Tel Aviv to attend a course at MIT. I was a child when we met once in Israel, but my grandfather, my Sabba Sam, talked of you so often that I feel I know you. It is my great wish to see you while I am in the United States. Will this be possible?

*With great affection,
Ilan Stern.*

As Eva reread the letter, more slowly this time, an image appeared in her mind: a little boy, dark-haired, rumped and a little shy.

Ilan Stern, after all these years, his English somewhat stilted, in the way of a foreigner not quite comfortable with the language. Max still grieved for his cousin. He would be overjoyed to hear from Sam's grandson.

Letter in hand, she stopped in the doorway of the den where Max was still absorbed in his music. Out of habit, her eyes moved to the carving of the girl on the pedestal by the window. The child appeared in every room of the house, shaped in clay and in stone, in copper and in marble, in different poses and at different ages. Of the many pieces Eva had sculpted, only the girl was never for sale.

Max had gone on to another section of the Paganini. He had a way of leaning into his violin, almost as if the instrument were an extension of himself. As medicine had been his

vocation, so music was his passion. The violin was his most treasured possession. He knew every scratch and mark on its body. At times, he had been too ill to play, but whenever he picked up his instrument and the sound of his music filled the house again, Eva knew he was on the mend.

It was warm in the den, but Max's sleeves—as always—covered his arms to his wrists. Eva had learned long ago to live with the numbers on her left forearm, but her husband never had. He loathed the tattoo which was almost as legible as the day it had been burned onto bare skin, branding him like a steer for the marketplace. Only in the operating theater, where he had worn short-sleeved surgical greens, had the numbers been visible. The dedicated cardiac surgeon had developed a reputation for brusqueness during surgery, his way of discouraging the questions of curious nurses and doctors. At no other time did he bare his numbers to the world. He did not swim, never sun-bathed. The most civilized and cultured of men, he was ashamed of the tattoo. Eva had never managed to convince him that his shame was misplaced.

As Max paused to turn a page, Eva stepped into the room. "It's coming on nicely."

"The fast passages are brutes," he said doubtfully.

"Sounded good to me."

"Problem is, Eva, some of the notes have become difficult for these old fingers."

Wistfully, he glanced at hands that were gnarled and scarred. "The music was so easy once."

Eva kissed the bald spot on top of his head. "You're still the finest player I know. Time for lunch, darling."

Max began to loosen his bow. "Your lips are cold. Chilly out there?"

"Very windy."

"I heard the wind over the music." He stood up and put his arms around her.

"You had the nightmare again last night, darling. Were you out chasing demons?"

"Yes . . ."

"Have they gone?"

"For now. Will they ever go completely, Max?"

"Maybe not." His eyes, dark and sunken, intelligent and compassionate, were troubled.

"You know that mine keep tormenting me, too. It's why we have to make the most of the good times."

"Which, at this moment, means lunch."

Max laughed. "How practical you are, Eva."

"One of us has to be."

She had prepared their meal before leaving home: a crusty baguette, goat cheese, a tossed salad. They ate at a round oak table in the kitchen, beside a pair of French doors that opened onto a cedar deck. Woven mats and a ceramic vase filled with pussy-willow and stalks of dry wheat created the rustic atmosphere they both loved. They never tired of watching the activity at the bird-feeder clamped to the railing of the deck. Gulls came from the water, and starlings, jays and chickadees visited regularly. A bird guide lay always at hand, so that they could identify any unfamiliar species.

Eva poured the coffee. Handing her husband his cup, she smiled at him. "There's a letter, Max. From Ilan Stern."

His eyes widened in astonishment. "**Sam's grandson?** From Israel?"

"From Massachusetts. He's studying there. He wants to meet us."

"In Massachusetts?"

"He didn't say."

"We could drive out there some weekend."

Eva gazed through the glass pane towards the turbulent water. Seconds passed before her eyes returned to Max. "I've had an idea."

"I recognize the look."

"A family get-together."

"What's on your mind?" he asked warily.

"Passover is less than a month away. Amber won't have left on her travels yet. We could invite Ilan to join us."

Max relaxed. "Excellent! The boy will be homesick. Good for him to be with family."

"Not just the four of us, Max. I was thinking of a family reunion."

"**What?**"

"It relates to something Amber talked about a few days ago."

Max was horrified. "A horde of people around our *seder* table?"

"You make it sound like a gathering of the clans," Eva said drily. "No, nothing like that. The only ones on your side are Ilan and his parents—the Holocaust took care of that. On my side, there are just the few relatives who arrived in the States at the turn of the century."

"Whom we barely know."

"All the more reason to get to know them better."

It would be too much for Eva to cope with such an event, Max protested, but she disagreed. Their weekly housekeeper might be willing to help. Mrs. Connors, recently widowed, had mentioned just last week that she was bored and would welcome more work.

"Besides, it's our fiftieth anniversary about then," Eva added eagerly. "That's what Amber mentioned. She suggested we celebrate our fiftieth at the same time as Passover."

"Amber suggested a get-together?"

"No, that was my idea."

Max buttered a slice of baguette before looking at his wife. "Where would all these people stay?"

"We can put up a few. The rest could stay at the hotel. It's not far."

Max looked uncertain. "I don't know, Eva . . . Do we really need all these people—virtual strangers, if you're honest—to give our marriage meaning?"

"We don't, but it might be nice." Eva's thoughtful expression was one her husband knew well. "Think of our wedding, Max. The DP camp in Germany. Only you, Sam and me. We had no idea what the next hour, the next day, would bring. And here we are in America, fifty years later. Isn't that a reason to celebrate?"

A moment passed. Then Max said softly, "You've always known how to persuade me."

Eva's eyes shone. "I'll start planning."

"Not so fast, darling. Think this through properly first."

"It could be wonderful, Max."

Max watched a starling hovering over the feeder. It had pecked at a few grains when it was joined by another bird. *Its mate?* Max wondered.

"Do you think," he asked quietly, "that Beth would come?"

Eva lifted her hands in a question. "Have we ever known what our daughter will do? We can only keep hoping for a miracle."

"Which is unlikely to happen."

Max was right, Eva knew. Their daughter's estrangement was a sorrow to them both. They had tried, in so many ways, to repair the relationship, but without success. At least, Beth's daughter, their beloved Amber, was a constant presence in their lives.

"We can hope," she said.

In a different tone, she went on. "Here's a thought, Max. How about advertising the get-together? Not only here, but in Hungary. In Israel and France and England. And wherever else we can think of. We'll include Elzabet and Ignatz's names in the ad. And the old addresses."

Max put a hand over one of hers and stroked it gently. "We've had no luck in the past, Eva. Searches. Hopes. Expectations. Always unsuccessful."

"I know, but just in case there are survivors. Even after all these years." Eva's tone throbbed with sudden passion.

"Eva . . . Darling . . . It's so unlikely we'll find anyone. I can't bear to see you disappointed again."

Max was right, of course. They had made numerous attempts to find family. Realistically, Eva knew it was improbable that an advertisement would yield results, yet an urgency drove her to try once more.

"It will be the last time, Max. I promise."

"I don't know . . ."

"Think, darling, we've nothing to lose. Don't you think it's worthwhile?"

He looked at her somberly. "I do," he said, then.

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CHAPTER TWO

EVA – HUNGARY, 1943

The synagogue stood at the end of a street nicknamed the Lane of the Jews. Various Jewish storekeepers still worked there: a baker, a shoe repairer, a wig vendor, a kosher butcher. Above the stores lived an assortment of Jews, mainly elderly and religious, most of whom loved the old synagogue. The roof leaked in places, the frayed curtains over the ark needed replacing, the seats were unsteady, yet the congregation would not have exchanged their modest house of worship for a more elegant synagogue.

The little synagogue had remained standing through centuries of Jewish and Hungarian history. Its proudest possession was a fifteenth century *torah*, no longer read from because the scroll was so fragile. The crumbling walls of the building had witnessed everything from happiness to sadness to tragedy. At times, in this city west of Budapest, the building had been a refuge from persecution. On this Sunday in early 1943, it was the scene of a wedding.

Eva Lerner's eyes filled with tears as she watched her sister walk down the aisle. People tended to regard Elzabet as sturdy, sensible and responsible, but today a luminescent radiance overshadowed those worthy qualities. Her dark eyes glowed, her cheeks were becomingly rosy, and her upswept hair gave her a look of unaccustomed sophistication. Elzabet had adored Ignatz Czabo for the last three of her nineteen years. As she joined him beneath the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy, happiness made her beautiful.

Elzabet began to circle her bridegroom, walking around him seven times before stopping beside him. "The bride is symbolically building a home and protecting her husband from evil," she had explained to Eva. The number seven corresponded to the week of the Creation.

As the *chazzan*, the cantor, began to chant the wedding blessings, Eva thought back over the years of Elzabet and Ignatz's courtship. In a sense, she had experienced it vicariously through her sister's late-night confidences. The couple's accidental meeting in a local library had led to walks by the river, a first kiss, and then others, and picnics where they could be alone together. Eva remembered her sister's ecstatic words: "I'm in love," followed, a year later, by the excitement of Ignatz's proposal.

As the rabbi began to address the bridal couple about values and commitment and the importance of Jewish tradition, Eva's eyes went to the family members gathered beneath the *chuppah*. The two sets of parents: Papa, handsome with a tidy mustache and hair starting to gray, his eyes misty with emotion; Mama, emotional too, graceful and very beautiful in navy silk; Ignatz's mother, in a lighter shade of blue; and his father, a distinguished, older version of Ignatz, presaging the man his son would become one day.

Nagymama stood beneath the *chuppah*, too. Eva's grandmother was elegant in black lace, with pearls at her ears and throat. She had arrived a few days earlier from Budapest. Eva thought, sometimes, that she loved *Nagymama* more than anyone else. Their bond stemmed

only in part from their mutual passion for art—Eva was an ardent amateur painter, *Nagymama* a sculptor; it had existed long before Eva was old enough to hold a paintbrush. Their eyes caught beneath the *chuppah*, and they exchanged a smile.

Sensing someone watching her, Eva turned her head, and her gaze traveled across the guests, to rest on Aaron. Aaron Cohen, her oldest friend, her best friend in some ways. Her boyfriend, Elzabet sometimes teased, though he had never been that. He sat beside his parents: dark-eyed, curly-haired, good-looking. She was about to smile at him, when he winked at her. Something about that wink, so uncharacteristic of the boy she had grown up with, made her tighten uneasily. Unable to hold his gaze, she turned back to the *chuppah*.

The ceremony continued. The *chazzan* sang. The rabbi spoke. Bride and groom sipped wine from the same silver goblet and recited their wedding vows. Ignatz placed a gold band on Elzabet's finger. And then the rabbi ordered the bridegroom to crush a glass beneath his shoe, a reminder that sadness was present even in the midst of joy. As Ignatz trod down hard and shattered the glass, shouts of *mazel tov* rang through the synagogue.

The two families beneath the *chuppah* kissed and wiped away tears of joy. Eva hugged her sister and whispered, "Be happy, darling Elzabet." And then Elzabet and Ignatz, man and wife, walked hand in hand down the aisle between their applauding guests.

Eva was unable to sleep that night. Her mind throbbed with the music and the singing of the wedding reception. Her feet tingled with the beat of the dancing. A waning moon lit the sky and a breeze caressed the branches of the tree outside her window, casting shadows along the ceiling and across the bed which Elzabet had slept in until this morning. Eva would miss her sister: the nightly whispers, the giggles, the jokes that only they understood.

Her mind went to the cabin on Lake Balaton, where Elzabet and Ignatz were starting their marriage. Aaron's mind would be there too, she guessed, for he'd mentioned the wedding night in a lull between dances. He'd sounded so odd when he said it, reminding her of his wink during the ceremony earlier. Not at all like the childhood friend she knew so well.

The way he'd held her on the dance floor had been odd, too. At their parents urging, Eva and Aaron had attended dancing lessons together: an important social skill, both mothers had insisted. Formal ballroom dancing: the waltz and the foxtrot; as well as the Lindy Hop, which their instructor had learned in America. Eva had enjoyed the lessons from the start; Aaron had resisted, at first, but had grown used to them. Eva had looked forward to practicing their steps at the wedding party. But instead of doing the foxtrot with the long glides they had learned, pausing every few minutes so that Eva could twirl beneath Aaron's arm, he had held her close and his steps had been a slow shuffle.

"What are you doing?" she asked, tilting her head back so that she could look at him.

"Enjoying you," came the strange response.

"You're crazy, Aaron," she said crossly.

But he only drew her more tightly against him, his cheek against hers, their bodies so close that they seemed to touch everywhere. She heard the unfamiliar roughness of his breathing as he caressed the bare skin of her low-backed gown. Bewildered, confused by an unfamiliar response in her own body, she did not protest again.

Eva shifted restlessly beneath the covers as she watched the shadows on the ceiling. The excitement of the evening was to blame for her sleeplessness, she tried to tell herself. But she knew the real reason was Aaron.

Eva could not remember a time when Aaron had not been part of her life. Both now aged seventeen, they had been friends since they were toddlers playing in a sandbox together. Yet the Aaron Cohen on the dance floor that evening had been a stranger. And she was not certain how she felt about that.

What she needed, she decided, at length, was a glass of warm milk.

She did not stop to put on slippers when she left the room. The door to her parents' room was slightly ajar, a habit left over from the days when they'd needed to hear their children call or cry in the night. Eva paused when she heard voices, her attention caught by a single word.

"America!" Mama exclaimed. "Ignatz must have been joking!"

"He means it, Marta. He wants to take Elzabet to America."

"He waited until now to tell us?"

"He didn't want to distress us."

"He knew we'd cancel the wedding!" Mama's voice was shrill with nerves. "We would have forbidden her to marry him, had we known."

Eva trembled as she strained to hear more. Her mother had started to sob.

"When will they go?" Mama asked, at last. "And why didn't Elzabet tell us herself?"

"They wanted us to enjoy the wedding. Ignatz has applied for visas. They'll leave when their papers are in order." Papa was trying to speak calmly, but Eva heard sadness in his tone. "Marta . . . Please, Marta, don't cry."

Eva stood outside the room, her bare toes curling on the carpet. America was thousands of miles away. If Elzabet left home, when would Eva see her sister again?

"How can they even think of leaving Hungary?" Mama's voice was thick with tears.

"People live well in America."

"Other people. God willing, Elzabet will have children. In America, they won't know their grandparents."

"Our daughter has been married a few hours and already you're worrying about grandchildren." Papa was beginning to sound impatient. "Calm yourself, Marta, and consider what's happening to our people in Europe. America could be a good place for Elzabet and Ignatz."

"The Germans don't bother us, Tibor."

"Not yet. That may change."

"I don't believe it," Mama said stubbornly.

"You've never wanted to believe. If the Germans decide to invade Hungary, nothing will stop them from coming after us. Maybe we should go, too, Marta."

Mama did not answer immediately. Eva knew she was thinking things through before speaking, as was her way. "I pray to God you're wrong," she said, at length. "Even if you're right . . . Where would we go? And why **should** we go? We are Hungarians."

"We are Jews," Papa said flatly. "We've talked about this before. Let's go before they come for us."

"No! What would we do in America? People know us here. You're a respected coffee merchant. We've saved money for our old age. How would we live in a strange country?"

"I wish I had answers for you. It would be difficult, at first, I admit, but we'd find a way."

"My mother . . . Her asthma and arthritis . . . I can't leave her."

"I've thought of that. We'll send for your mother as soon as we can take care of her."

"And abandon her until then? How can you be so heartless, Tibor?"

Papa's tone hardened. "Heartless? Have you thought about Eva? Are you certain she'll have a future in Hungary? And you and me, Marta? We're not old. Please God, we'll have many more healthy years together."

"God, Tibor, I feel so torn. You may be right, I know. But think of all we'll give up if we leave. Our lovely home, our comforts, our savings. Some of our friends were talking today. Everyone knows Germany has enough problems without starting on Hungary. Now that America is in the war, it will soon be over."

"All these clever politicians—let's hope they're right." Papa was somber.

"We'll leave if things get worse," Mama said, in her most conciliatory tone.

A short silence followed. Eva thought the discussion had ended until her father spoke again. "We should prepare ourselves in the meanwhile. We need a plan in case the Germans surprise us."

Eva had heard enough. Forgetting her milk, she fled to her room. She got into bed and drew up her eiderdown. Life, she thought, was about to change in ways she could not predict.

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