

A close-up, profile view of a woman's face, looking upwards and to the right. Her eyes are closed, and her lips are slightly parted. She has long, wavy hair. The entire scene is bathed in a deep blue light, with numerous fine, glowing blue lines and particles swirling around her face and hair, creating a dreamlike, ethereal, and digital atmosphere. The lighting highlights the contours of her face and the texture of her hair.

Eva

Diane
Solomon

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By

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Prologue

*Summer 1995, New England Marine Institute,
Near Fall River, Massachusetts*

There they were, speeding to greet her, the reason Marianne could haul herself out of bed at 5 a.m. The two dolphins chirped and whirred, pressing up against her legs where she sat on the wood planks of the dock.

“Good morning, Mamie. Hey Sugarloaf!” She stroked their noses, then gasped as she slid into the water. Although a warm day in early July, the seawater off the coast of Massachusetts held a definite chill.

Being allowed to swim with these rescued wild dolphins was an act of spiritual generosity on their part. Anytime she needed peace and comfort she found it with them.

Mamie nuzzled her beak against Marianne’s belly, cackled, and grinned her huge grin, then Sugarloaf gently bumped his melon directly into her abdomen. *That’s odd. It is as if they know.* But how was that possible? She had only found out herself a few days ago.

When Sugarloaf whacked her gently with his tail, she grinned. “Ok, I hear you. Breakfast!” Pulling herself up out of the water, she reached for the bucket of fish on ice. The dolphins gulped down mackerel and herring and smiled for more.

Due to the additional responsibility, this summer internship was more rewarding than the previous year. Now, instead of assigning her grunt work, the staff in charge at NEMI felt safe with her and she was now entrusted with feeding and entertaining the rescued dolphins.

This was her life’s dream. But she was going to need a Bachelor’s, then a Master’s in marine biology. How would she manage? A lump formed in the back of her throat as she tried to figure out, yet again, how to tell her dad.

Gazing out across the gray-blue water, she could just make out the outline of the Elizabeth Islands. One was Cuttyhunk. It had been just as the travel brochure described: “An hour’s sail to a secluded paradise.” She sighed. An unusually warm day in May had extended into a glorious evening of sunburn, seafood, and laughter, with a sense of magic in the air. Not to mention the shots of Tequila, which added confidence, even pushiness, to his advances. She never knew if alcohol released a person’s inhibitions, to display who that person really was, or if it created a totally different persona. Well, it didn’t matter, now. To be fair, she’d had a few glasses of wine herself, so the fault wasn’t all his.

Mamie sidled up to Marianne’s leg and chattered softly. Sliding back into the water with plastic balls, Marianne played with her two friends, laughing out loud as they leaped into the air, tossing the balls back and forth.

“Marianne, good morning!”

“Hey, Trish!” Marianne headed back to the dock.

Tiny Trish Silva was in her mid-fifties, but from a distance looked sixteen. Slender and fit, she buzzed with energy, making Marianne think of a honeybee or a hummingbird, staying that thin thanks to a super-charged metabolism. Trish called out, “Labs show Mamie’s still thiamine deficient, so we have to dose her. You fed them yet?”

Marianne grinned. “Oh, I think I can persuade her.” She slipped the pasty little ball of nutrients into a chunk of fish and tossed it down Mamie’s open mouth. “Ta-da.”

Trish asked, “So, did you end it with him?”

Marianne nodded.

“How did he take it?”

“Not bad. At first.”

Trish shook her head. “Huh. What do you mean, at first?”

“Well, now he just keeps calling...”

“Oh man, seriously? I didn’t know rich guys did that.”

“Well, he’ll get it, eventually.” Marianne heard the doubt in her own voice and when Trish gave her an odd look, she repeated, “He’ll get it. If I ignore him, he’ll get the message.”

Trish shuddered. “Glad I don’t have to go through any of that anymore. OK, moving on, we had a rescue last night—Jeremy and the team found a short-beaked common dolphin, a baby, just a few days old. She’s in the smallest tank and we’ve been holding her afloat...” She glanced at her watch. “Peter’s on now, then I need you to take a shift.”

“What happened to her?”

Trish ran her hands through her spiky gray hair. “An incident with a boat propeller—cut her fin up badly. The vet’s been and stitched her up, but she’s lost a lot of blood. We couldn’t find her mother or the pod. We named her Grace.”

The two women headed back toward the facility, where the tanks held rescued turtles, otters, dolphins, and sometimes whales. They were returned to the wild, if and when possible. The center tried to limit human contact so most could be sent back to the ocean, but sometimes the animals were too injured to be considered releasable.

There, in the small holding tank, Marianne saw Peter, a staff biologist, holding the new infant. Only about two feet long, the little dolphin lay still in Peter’s hands. While keeping her afloat, her blowhole out of the water, he reached for a bottle of formula and held the nipple to the dolphin’s stubby snout. She didn’t respond.

“Hasn’t eaten yet,” he said.

“Not a good sign.” Trish sighed.

Marianne climbed down into the water and took over from Peter.

“Give us a shout if you have any problems,” Trish said as she and Peter headed for the door.

Marianne stared down at Grace. The nasty cut in the baby’s fin was held together by a clear line of stitches. Otherwise, the little dolphin’s gray skin was flawless. Through the water, Marianne could make out the distinctive yellow and gray pattern in the shape of an hourglass on her flank.

A big eye watched her.

“Hey, little Gracie, you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine.” She crooned to the baby dolphin, but it remained still.

A strange stirring in her lower belly sent an icy sensation racing up Marianne’s spine. It wasn’t pain, exactly, just pressure, almost as if

her insides were vibrating. She'd never felt anything like it. Was this normal in the first few weeks?

Then the little dolphin in her arms began to stir, almost vibrate, as well. And the sensation of pressure in her abdomen grew even stronger. She opened her mouth to call for help, but then the dolphin shivered, relaxed, and lay motionless. Marianne felt another chill of dread.

She called over her shoulder, "Trish, Trish? Can you come?"

As she shouted, Grace's tail began to sweep up and down, and Marianne could feel its muscles bunching and tightening. Marianne gasped, as with a burst of energy the dolphin pushed out of her arms. The strange sensation down low in her abdomen faded until it disappeared.

"Trish! Come quickly!" She held on to the ladder and watched, mesmerized, as Grace swooped around the tank.

Trish came running out of one of the doors just in time to see the little dolphin return to Marianne and press up against her.

"That's great!" Trish grinned and squatted down at the edge of the tank.

Grace gave a series of clicking sounds and Marianne reached for the bottle of formula. The baby pulled at it noisily, and after demolishing the bottle, took off around the tank again. Marianne threw back her head and laughed.

"Marianne," a voice shouted from the doorway. It was Jennifer, the motherly admin/receptionist at the front desk. "Someone's here asking for you. Young guy... tall, blond..."

Trish flashed Marianne a look. "Is that him?"

Marianne muttered, "Oh for God's sake." She called back to Jennifer. "Tell him I'm unavailable, OK? Thanks, Jen."

"Oh, Marianne. That's annoying." Trish touched her arm. "And a bit scary! What are you going to do?"

Marianne shook her head and bit her lip.

This situation was getting out of hand.



Chapter 1

Summer 2022

Pine Hill, near Stonington, Connecticut

Tucked amidst the pile of spam and solicitations, Eva spotted a formal-looking envelope made of heavyweight cream paper. From the embossed corporate logo and address she recognized the name of a well-known law firm in the center of New London.

What does a law firm want with me?

Ripping open the envelope, she tossed it on the half-table by the foyer wall and scanned the contents of the brief cover letter. Waffly and full of legalese, the gist was she should have received this letter five years ago on her twenty-first birthday. Then vague apologies and explanations.

Mystified, she unfolded the two pages to which the cover letter referred. This paper was blue, like old-fashioned personal stationery, for handwriting. No address at the top, just the date, from eight years ago. At the bottom of the second page, it was signed,

Love you forever, BG, Sophie.

Her heart began to pound. Aunt Sophie apologized for not telling Eva earlier but had thought it best to wait until she was twenty-one. Sophie had assumed Eva's mother would have told her eventually if she hadn't passed suddenly. And then there it was. William Hastings III. Eva stared.

The front door opened, and her roommate burst in, the screen door slamming behind her.

"Damn," Jamie said, "It was busy in town. Jean agreed to do my hair at 7:30 this morning. What an angel. And I went for bagels..." Her hands were full, so she kicked the door shut with her foot. Laying

the bags and coffees down on the table, she whirled around. “Check it out. You like?” Her jet-black, pixie cut now sported a green streak down one side, dramatic against her brown skin and almond eyes. Framing her hands on either side of her head, she posed. “Ta-da!”

Eva couldn’t speak.

Jamie dropped her hands and her eyes widened. “Eva? What’s going on? You’re as white as that wall.”

Eva just held out the pages and watched in silence as her friend scanned the page from the law firm.

Jamie drew in a sharp breath. “What the hell?” Then her eyes raced back and forth over Sophie’s letter. Her mouth dropped open. “Oh my God... Seriously? This is *huge*. But why didn’t she tell you?”

Eva shook her head, still wordless. Time had stopped. She simply stood there, in the foyer, with her best friend staring at her, while fragmented thoughts jockeyed for attention. So, not an orphan after all. She repeated the name in her mind: William Hastings. The *third*, don’t forget that. From Boston. He attended Harvard University. That’s all it said. But that was enough. Mom had never told her anything about him. Eva never knew his name, what he did for a living, or why he and her mother were not together. For that matter, she never even knew if he was still alive.

“I didn’t even know Sophie was aware of his identity,” Eva finally answered.

Jamie held up the firm’s cover letter. “Can you believe this? Some BS about the lawyer in charge of the case dying suddenly and his cases handed out to various other partners and attorneys in the firm. Blah blah blah.” She glanced down and read, “Got overlooked.’ Overlooked? Seriously? For five *years*? They’re a law firm for God’s sake. I mean, ‘fiduciary responsibility,’ and all that?”

Jamie glanced up at Eva. Her face softened. “Come on, you look like you’re going to fall down. I got you a decaf latte—but now’s one of those times I wish you could drink. Like a large brandy.”

“It’s 8:30 in the morning... And I’m due at the shelter.”

“They can wait. It’s not every day you get news like this!” Jamie took her arm and pulled her toward the kitchen. “Sit,” she instructed.

While Jamie collected plates and cream cheese for bagels, Eva sank into a wicker chair at the old farm table. She always loved this spot, especially when the morning sun streamed in. She stared at the blowsy pink peonies she'd cut a few days ago which were now dropping petals all over the pine planks. The mess would normally have bothered her, but now she just swept them aside and spread the letters out in front of her. She read through them again. But she couldn't focus, as if someone had stuffed her brain full of cotton wool.

Her little golden cocker spaniel leaned against her leg, head on her knee, gazing up with worried chocolate eyes. She reached down to stroke the silky ears.

"Oh, Cookie, you're such a love," Jamie said. "She knows something's up."

Eva closed her eyes. She was thrown back to the days just after Sophie died, remembering the phone call from a neighbor, the race home from college, the visit to the funeral home. How she'd existed in a dazed stupor, for God knows how long. Aunt Sophie, who was, in fact, her great-aunt, had been there for her after Mom died. Took her in and raised her. Sophie, who called her Baby Girl, or BG.

Sophie hadn't told her of her illness. Eva had been away in her freshman year at UConn, and by May of that year, had suspected something was going on. Sophie had sounded tired on the phone, and when pressed, explained she was having some tests done. It was probably nothing, maybe a bit of anemia. She'd insisted she was fine, that Eva must stay and complete her exams. Sophie ended the call by saying she looked forward to seeing her when Eva got home in six weeks.

Sophie didn't last six weeks.

Her aunt's death spun around and around in her head. Eva learned that Sophie had decided to forgo treatment for a fast-growing abdominal cancer. Refusing to allow her treatment to consume her last dollar, she left her savings to Eva, hoping it was enough to pay for another year of college.

Eva didn't even get to say goodbye.

Jamie put a plated bagel in front of her. "You want anything else?"

She shook her head. The thought of eating anything made her slightly queasy. But thank God for Jamie. She wasn't sure how she'd have survived the months after Sophie died without her. Jamie cheered her up, distracted her, and made her laugh. She was as close to a relative as Eva had after Sophie had gone. There was no other family.

Well, wait a minute. Maybe there was, now.

Jamie sat down across from her and sipped her espresso. "Let's research him." She crunched up a bit of bagel and her brow furrowed as she thought. "The third, huh?" A small smile formed on her face. "Do you think he's rich? That would be cool."

Eva shook her head. "No idea." The latte felt good going down, warming her. But why did she feel so chilled? It was already a warm day, and humid. "I'll Google him later when I get home." Starting for the door, she added, "Thanks, Jamie, got to run."

"Wait, take your bagel." Jamie wrapped it in a paper towel and plopped it in her hand.

Eva smiled her thanks. Trying to shove the entire episode from her mind, she hurried out to her faithful, if ancient, SUV. Wending her way down the familiar wooded lanes of Connecticut, everything looked strange. She felt as if she were looking at the world through the wrong end of a telescope. Now, everything was different somehow, out of kilter.

What do I do with this?

Focusing on breathing deeply, she remembered what Aunt Sophie used to say. "Relax, Baby Girl. If you can't figure something out, don't think about it. It will come clear in time."

When her mom died, Sophie tried to help her the only way she knew how. Eva's great-aunt was a spreadsheet sort of person, extremely organized and logical. Nothing ever flapped her. Sophie's British upbringing had instilled a degree of calm and restraint, which rubbed off on Eva. Not control, exactly, but certainly never histrionics or dramatics. The old-stiff-upper-lip approach.

Still, if ever there was a time, this was a fitting moment for a dramatic response. A father she didn't know might be living a couple of hours away.

She turned her mind to the animal shelter. Seeing and holding that little Maine Coon cat would help. Her hours at the shelter were a haven, most of the time. The cold sterility of the hard floors, the concrete, the cages, were offset by the amount of unconditional love pouring from the dogs. They were of all sizes and breeds and mixes. It made no difference; they rushed to the kennel gates, barking or whining for attention, eager to lick a hand if it was offered. A few were fearful or damaged, but she usually got through to them. Even the cats, so many of them reserved or downright prickly, needed affection and love. And of course, there were often cases of seriously injured or ill animals, or cases of abuse, which were almost impossible to fathom or to bear.

She parked outside the low, nondescript building of the shelter. As she shut the front door behind her, she called out to Jake, the resident veterinary tech.

“Yo,” she heard him holler, from the treatment room in the rear of the building. “Back here.”

He was always there. First thing every morning, Jake dug in with one of the volunteers to clean cages and feed all the dogs, cats, and occasional rabbit currently in residence. That completed, he could be found preparing any necessary meds. She would assist with that, then they’d move on to hosting the potential adopters as they arrived. But her favorite part was just being with the animals.

He was filling metal food bowls in the dogs’ cages. Perfect for the job, Jake was efficient, professional, and compassionate. Double wired, a wiry physique and wired on caffeine most of the time. How could he drink double espressos the way he did in the morning, then switch over to strong coffee for the rest of the day? Did he ever sleep at night?

Emptying a large kibble bag, Jake folded it up and shoved it down into the recycle bin. “Now, the first job. I’m going to bring the new orange male cat—let’s see, he’s in here, cage four—I need you to hold him while I re-test blood sugar.”

As she watched him unlatch the cage, the big-framed cat rubbed against the door and then against Jake’s hand.

“We got him in yesterday. Someone found him behind their barn. His blood sugar is way high.”

“Poor guy. Hope he’s not diabetic, it’ll be hard to get him adopted.”

Jake brought the cat to the metal table and shook his head. “Never say never.” He paused, sipping from his travel cup, his constant companion. “He sure is handsome. Maybe....”

Eva grinned. “How many more will Trina be OK with? I know you guys have the best marriage ever, but... What is it now? Five? Or is it six?”

Jake grimaced. “Enough, I guess,” he muttered. “But none of us can match Gabby—I think she’s at eight cats right now.”

“I’d take him, but since I rent a room in Jamie’s house, I can’t take home a cat. She’s allergic. But she loves Cookie – doesn’t seem to be allergic to dogs.”

“Cookie?”

“My English Cocker Spaniel. I adopted her when a hunter found she was gun-shy. He didn’t want to keep her as a pet.”

“His loss. Your gain, I suspect.”

“Definitely.” As Eva held the cat still, in deft movements Jake collected the small blood sample from the cat’s ear.

She scooped up the cat. “There, Pumpkin, all done.”

“Pumpkin?” Jake grinned.

Shrugging, she said, “We have to call him something...”

While Jake set up the blood, using the glucometer, she focused on the cat, as he purred in her arms. Soon she felt the familiar sensation she experienced so many times with animals. There it was again; as she sank into that peaceful place, there was warmth, then the slight vibration. An internal hum. A tone you feel rather than hear. It was a connection, a bonding, a resonance. Something like that. And a huge darkness, almost like floating in deep water. She’d never tried to explain it to anyone—she wouldn’t dare, they’d think she was nuts. She needed to prove her scientific focus and professionalism and the veterinary world was not somewhere to expose anything that might be seen as flaky or “woo-woo.”

Jake checked the sugar count. “Yup, 385.” He glanced up at her. “And what should it be?”

“80-120,” she replied promptly. Online courses covered that early on.

“Right.” He studied a nearby computer screen. “Let’s see, Dr. Michael is on at the clinic today and available for us. Have you met him yet?”

She shook her head.

“Nice guy. And a ‘hunk’, my wife says. ‘Real GQ with an IQ’, was how she put it. Honestly, the expressions nowadays. But you might get lucky there.”

She rolled her eyes. Would people ever stop trying to set her up?

“Anyway, I need you to go right away.” Jake glanced at his watch. “I don’t want to wait—this boy needs insulin.”

While he wrote up some notes, Eva grabbed the opportunity to wander among the large steel cages of abandoned or rescued dogs and cats. The little Maine Coon was still there, but Jake had said someone was interested and the center was now reviewing their application. Fingers crossed. She knew that young cat would steal someone’s heart. What a gentle, affectionate creature, with big bright eyes and a meow that was more of a chirp.

Her heart fell when she saw the old black Labrador. So, still here after last Saturday’s open sessions. “Hey there, sweetie,” she said as she fondled his ears. She refused to call him by the name his people had named him. Booger. *I mean, seriously?* She had renamed him, Jeremiah. His eyes drooped and his muzzle was gray. He was a sweet dog, and it turned her stomach that people could abandon an old pet. A family member. Just like that.

As she headed off for Wood Lane Veterinary Clinic, the orange cat gave a couple of stressed yowls but settled down soon after she held her hand to the grid-like door of the carrier. She felt the little nose touch her hand and he quieted when she talked to him in a soft voice. As she waited in the reception area of the clinic, she gave in to her own need for comfort and pulled the cat out of the carrier onto her lap. He began to purr, a deep throaty sound that reverberated against her chest when she cuddled him close.

“Such a good boy,” she whispered. He rubbed his silky head against her chin. She closed her eyes and settled into that experience of connection once more. She tried to shove the discovery of her father’s identity out of her mind, but there remained a gray shadow over everything. She’d have to Google him when she got home.

But then what? Her stomach clenched and jumped whenever she thought about it.



Chapter 2

“Room Six, Dr. Michael. A cat from Coastline Shelter.”

“OK, good Nina, thanks,” Michael replied, as he took the clipboard from her.

He smiled at her. Nina was a stylish sixty-something African American woman who somehow managed to make scrubs look good. A vet tech with long experience under her belt, she was completely indispensable as manager of the clinic. “If in doubt, ask Nina,” everyone said. The place ran like clockwork when she was there, and Michael wondered what the partners would do when she wanted to retire.

He sure hoped this next appointment would be a quick one. It had been one of those hectic mornings and he was behind already. He read through the notes from the shelter, then opened the door to the exam room.

“Hi, you must be—” He glanced down at the notes Jake had sent. “Eva? Oh, right, Jake has mentioned you. Sorry I kept you waiting. I’m Michael Lowery.”

He strode across the sparkling clean room to the stainless-steel table, where a young woman stood holding his next patient, a long-haired orange cat. The woman was tall, maybe five feet nine, slender, in white t-shirt and jeans. Her dark blonde hair, streaked with sunshine, was twisted up into a casual knot on her head and secured by a tortoiseshell clip. He couldn’t see her eyes, hidden as they were by large, gray-rimmed glasses.

“Good morning,” she said. “Thanks for making time to see him.” She placed the cat gently on the table.

Michael reached out slowly, allowing the cat to smell his hand, then began to examine him. Thin. Ears were clean and his fur wasn’t matted. Plus, he was gentle and friendly, so not likely to have been abused.

Michael thought out loud. "It doesn't appear he was out in the wilderness too long. No one's come forward?"

She shook her head and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "He was just found yesterday. We've posted on social media and neighborhood apps and we're hoping someone will come forward. I've been calling him Pumpkin."

"Hey, Pumpkin." Michael stroked the cat's head.

"The main issue is elevated blood sugar. Jake took it last night and again today."

"Yeah, I see that. Some people dump cats who are diabetic. Makes me furious." He shook his head. "We're seeing more diabetes and we're not sure what's causing it. Often, it's obesity, but that's not this guy's problem. Well, not now, anyway."

The cat's teeth were in good shape, he was maybe six or seven years old. While he continued his examination, Michael kept up friendly chatter with Eva. "You're volunteering at the shelter, right?" At her nod, he added, "You new?"

"I've been there a couple of months. I'm on the vet tech track. I've done the first year and have been volunteering at the shelter about ten hours a week."

"Studying online?"

She nodded. "And hoping to do my clinical work here, or at one of the other nearby vet hospitals."

"Jake said you really have a way with animals. He called you a 'natural.'"

"I love them," she said simply. "Working with animals is all I've ever wanted to do."

"You like them better than most people?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said and smiled.

That smile... what a transformation, Michael thought. Aloud he said, "I hear that a lot. Some say human beings have been a bit disappointing."

She grimaced. "You could say that..."

"Animals have no agenda and are true to who and what they are. Ever thought about what animal you'd want to be? If you could?"

She turned her head to one side. "Huh. Great question."

He stood up straight and studied her. The answers to that question always told him so much about someone. “Let’s see, Pumpkin, what do you think? I know, maybe a doe?”

Eva gave a quick shake of her head.

“Nope,” said Michael, “on second thought, you’re too confident. I don’t see the fearful flightiness... And I’d hate to wish all those ticks on you. Or deer flies.”

“Not to mention hunters.”

“Ah, yes, there is that.”

She said, “I know, maybe a dragonfly. Or a cardinal.”

“Hmmm... OK. Or a heron. I’d love to be a heron. Or better still, how about a dolphin?”

Her face lit up. “Perfect. Oh, yes, a dolphin. I’d like to be that playful and trusting. But it must be a wild dolphin, even as risky as that is, not one in a rescue center or aquarium that has no freedom. I’d just have to stay away from boat propellers. And nets...”

As she spoke, she took her glasses off and grabbed a tissue to give them a quick clean. While her attention was on the lenses, Michael found himself studying her long eyelashes, the high cheekbones, the golden tan, the perfect skin. No makeup, but she needed none. He imagined what it would be like to touch her cheek.

With a sharp movement, she glanced up at him, as if something had alerted her. Her eyes were a rich brown, with flecks of gold in them. He stood silently, suddenly lost for words.

He saw those eyes widen, then she withdrew. That’s the only way he could describe it. She covered herself over and disappeared. She slid her glasses back on and stood up straight.

“I’m holding you up,” she said quietly.

Collecting himself, he reached into a cabinet for a glucometer.

“We’ll have to double-check blood sugar,” he said. “Sorry, not that I don’t trust Jake’s findings, but for legal purposes, we have to confirm the test ourselves.”

“Right, of course.”

She held the cat while Michael did another quick stick into the cat’s ear. Pumpkin didn’t seem to notice, didn’t even stop purring.

“Jake’s requested tests for Feline Immunodeficiency and Feline Leukemia, as well,” he said, “so we’ll take him to the back and do a blood draw. Come on back. You can meet Nina and assist.” He pressed the blood drop onto the test strip. “OK, let’s see.” Michael waited while the little device determined the sugar levels. He frowned. “That’s weird.” Holding up the device, he showed her the reading.

“95. Wait, what? 95? Is that a mistake?”

“Perhaps I didn’t get enough blood on the strip.” Michael scooped up the cat and led her to the large open space at the back of the clinic, where there were work areas and operating tables, and a line of sturdy metal cages holding pets in various stages of treatment or recovery. While Nina brought him up to speed on two other cases in the clinic, he noticed Eva visited several of those animals, petting a head here, stroking ears there, and murmuring to each one.

“Thanks, Nina,” he said, as he glanced at his watch and headed for the next treatment room. He needed to catch up on his day, if possible. But at the doorway he couldn’t resist turning for a moment, to see Eva standing next to Nina at a treatment table, holding Pumpkin. He was struck by the look of tenderness on her face. She stood with her eyes closed and it washed over him, the realization he was in the presence of someone different, someone special. There was just something about her. Beautiful, yes, in a natural understated way, but it was more than that. She was calm, self-contained, didn’t spout the usual chatty nonsense. Most people are uncomfortable being still, so they move, smile, fuss with something. Not Eva. She stood still, quiet. Her composure was authentic.

After finishing a lengthy initial visit with a family of five Siamese kittens, he went hunting for Nina again.

“What did you get on the blood sugar test for that orange cat? You know, the one Eva brought in?”

Nina didn’t have to look at the notes. “That cat’s *not* diabetic! We did the test two more times. Poor guy, he had to put up with all those sticks in his ears. We got 92 the first time, 94 on the retest. And you got normal as well, right? Well, it can’t be the glucometer—we used a different one. They can’t both be broken.”

Michael shook his head. “Not to worry, I’ll call Jake. Maybe something’s up with their meter. But good news for the cat!” He paused. “And Eva, she’s gone, I assume?”

“Yes, she took Pumpkin back to the shelter.” Nina gave him an odd look. “She has a great way with animals—sure but gentle. We should think about hiring her when she’s qualified.”

Now there’s an idea.



Chapter 3

Eva glanced at her phone again. There was another text—the third—from Jamie.

*Looked up William Hastings
yet? I found him. O.M.G. Call me!*

A possible family after all these years, on the one hand, was enticing. But what might she be getting into? There must be a reason her mother hadn't told her about her father. She remembered a strange kind of vibe from her mom whenever Eva asked about him.

In the small, dormered bedroom she used as an office, with Cookie curled up at her feet, she sent off her final email of the day, a reply to a client who wanted a new theme for her website and changes to the header. Work came in consistently, thanks to referrals from Jamie, and from her current clients. Creating and maintaining websites kept the bills paid, just, while she found time to study and volunteer at the shelter. All part of the overall plan: to become a veterinarian. To spend as much time as possible with animals and get paid for it. It's what she did anyway, now, for free.

Now, having finished work for the day, she grabbed Cookie's leash from its hook and headed out with the pup around the lanes near the house. Although too hot and humid to qualify as fresh air, she hoped a bit of exercise would clear her head. Not only of the morning's shocking letter but of Dr. Michael's face. Those warm eyes, that thick dark hair, his height, his wide shoulders. She'd found herself studying his hands, gentle but sure, as he examined the cat and felt a stir, a melting inside. Since when was she attracted to *hands*? Why had he made such an impression? She was immune to overtures from guys, even "hunky" ones, as Jake's wife had described him. Yes, he was certainly charismatic. Probably sure of himself and his

attractiveness to women. Not a bad thing, but she would just have to keep her guard up.

Leave it alone, BG. She just didn't want to get involved. She had her reasons.

Taking a deep breath, she opened a new Google tab.

OK, focus. I have a father, after all. Come on, how bad could it be? There's nothing to lose... This man doesn't know about me.

A chill ran up her spine. Wait a minute, what if he did? What if he had known about her and wanted nothing to do with her?

She was going to talk herself out of this if she wasn't careful. But the bottom line, for better or worse, she had a family. And she simply needed to know.

Into a fresh Google page, she typed: "William Hastings III." Then added "Massachusetts" and "Harvard." That's all it took. Up came pages and pages of links with his name connected to dozens of companies, and organizations both political and philanthropic. Could there be more than one William Hastings? The years he attended Harvard included the year before she was born. Seemed unlikely to be more than one William Hastings achieving an MBA at Harvard that year.

Her phone chirped.

Jamie's excitement raised the pitch of her voice, tinny anyway from the tiny speaker. "Can you believe it? Remember I said it would be cool if he was rich? Man, oh man!"

Eva scanned the webpage. Will Hastings was from one of those wealthy New England families, political and connected. These were Massachusetts elite, almost celebrities, with William Hastings III being the CEO and owner of a well-known pharmaceutical company.

"Hastings Pharma," Eva said. "I've heard of them." There had been some controversy in the media recently over the price of their drugs.

"I know, he's *that* Hastings! He has properties all over Massachusetts. And you've got brothers and sisters!"

"Yes, I found him. The corporate headquarters of Hastings Pharma is just south of Boston... And the family compound is in Plymouth County."

Jamie cut in. “*Compound?* As in one of those Kennedy-type places?”

Eva could detect a touch of awe in her friend’s voice. “Yup.” She kept reading. There was also a stately mansion in Boston’s Beacon Street area. That was just the beginning. There were holdings all over New England and even manufacturing facilities in Ireland.

As she ended the call with Jamie, she realized she was sweating. Her office wasn’t air-conditioned, but it wasn’t usually this bad. The trees shaded the house on one side and the room benefited to some degree from the two AC units in the main bedrooms. But now feeling flushed and overheated, she reached for her yoga towel to wipe her forehead.

Digging deeper, she learned William Hastings had been married three times, but there was no mention of her mother, Marianne McGrath. Not surprising. And other children? Eva didn’t have to hunt to find references to them. There were hundreds of images of well-dressed young elites at parties, on boats, at graduations. This lot sounded like members of the trust fund brigade.

She found plenty of pictures of William Hastings III, as well. Judging from the number of staged photo ops and press conferences, he’d shaken hands with everyone who was anyone in New England politics and business. Images showed a tall, lean, gray-blond man, fiftyish, in impeccably tailored suits. There was a still shot from an interview with a well-known TV news journalist. And then there was the head-of-the-company photo, well-lit and posed, showing his square clean-shaven face, strong jaw, and golden-brown eyes. She looked closely. Her eyes.

This was her father. Her *father*.

Jumping up, she hurried to her bedroom and stood in the cool air blowing from the window air conditioner. She turned slowly, letting the icy wind flow over and around her. If only that could straighten out this reality rip.

From back in her office, she heard her phone pinging. A text. Probably Jamie again.

She kept turning in the cold breeze. She figured she might as well spin in circles. It would match the spin her mind was in.

* * *

“Oh, come down, just for a little while,” Jamie pleaded on the phone. “Jake and Trina are here. And I won’t mention William Hastings, I promise. We’ll talk about it whenever you’re ready. But the food’s great, everything from Thai spring rolls to tapas to grass-fed steaks.”

At the mention of Thai spring rolls, Eva’s mouth watered. She couldn’t remember when she’d eaten last. She could almost taste the chicken, the crunchy vegetables, the tangy sauce. At dusk, she had dodged clouds of mosquitos and taken Cookie out again, but now she was antsy and restless. Couldn’t focus on work, couldn’t focus on her studies. Not even on what to do next about William Hastings III. Food and a bit of company might take her mind off it.

Driving slowly through Stonington, she felt her usual rush of pleasure at the eclectic boutiques, restaurants, and historic seaside homes of this picturesque New England village. She couldn’t resist heading down Water Street for a quick stop at Dubois Beach. This late, it should be deserted. She stood on the sand, gazing out at the spectacular view across the Sound toward Fishers Island. The air was humid and warm, but still, as if preparing to rest for the night. Breathing in the salty tangy fragrance, she scanned the water’s surface for dolphin fins. Although Eva knew it was highly unlikely she’d ever see them this near the shore, she never stopped searching.

As the door to Million Corks wine bar swung shut behind her, she spotted Jake with his wife Trina at a table near the bar. And there was Jamie, vibrant in a bright red tank top with black jeans. Red and black looked great on her, setting off her black hair, now with a bit of green, and her brown skin. She was leaning in close to an elegant-looking woman, a red-head who looked a little older than Jamie, perhaps in her mid-thirties. When the woman threw back her head and laughed, Eva wondered if this was a date. Had she missed something? Jamie hadn’t said anything... Of course, Eva had been so distracted by the morning’s discovery, Jamie could have told her it was raining

toads and she would've missed it. She hoped this one might work out. Jamie met so many women, but for one reason or another her relationships never seemed to last very long. It was as if she expected too much.

She glanced around. Granite and wood, with golden hardwood floors and leather stools and chairs, gave the place a warm inviting feel. Over the bar hung a string of wine bottles filled with lights, casting a soft glow. Eva drew in a deep breath, and the fragrance of seared beef and roasted vegetables set her mouth watering and her stomach growling. She didn't eat much meat, but it sure smelled enticing. A guitar player at one end of the room was singing close into a microphone. It was an Ed Sheeran song, about how his woman was perfect.

She was suddenly glad she'd come. The whole father issue could just go hang for the rest of the night.

She plopped down on the other side of Jamie, who introduced her to the redhead, Clare. Clare explained she needed new marketing materials for her distribution company and she'd heard great things about Jamie's talents. Eva still couldn't tell if this was just a good example of a graphic designer cultivating a client, or if this was a potential girlfriend. Maybe both.

Jake spoke from across the table. "Eva, about that orange cat? The one you call Pumpkin? Did you hear? He's not diabetic after all. We figure it must have been a misreading or something."

Before she could respond, a voice spoke over her shoulder. "Hey, Jake, good news, huh? Except for your broken glucometer."

Eva looked up to see Dr. Michael Lowery standing just behind her. Her stomach jumped, just a little. She reminded herself he wasn't there to see her.

Jake jumped up and shook his hand.

"Anyone sitting here?" Michael pulled out the free chair next to Eva.

She felt her face get warm. Why was she so aware of this man? *Honestly, I'm not a teenager, what's wrong with me?*

Jake introduced Michael to Jamie and Clare. "This is Dr. Michael Lowery, a vet at Wood Lane Animal Hospital."

“Ah, Lowery?” Jamie asked. “You related to Luke Lowery?”

“He’s my cousin—how do you know him?”

“From Lowery Construction.”

“Oh, right, that’s my dad’s company.”

“It was Luke and one of your dad’s teams that did my mom’s new kitchen last year,” Jamie said. “They did a great job, too. Now she tells everyone about them. Soapstone countertops, I’d never heard of them... who knew?”

Michael grinned. “I’ll tell them she’s pleased.” He signaled to the waitress nearby and took a menu. “My dad wanted me to join the company, got my cousin Luke instead. I think he got the better deal. And believe me, my summers working for my dad have paid off. I bought an old colonial last year that needs a ton of work. I can do a lot of it, and for anything I can’t do, I get cheap help.”

“Have you met Eva?” Jake asked Michael. “She’s working toward a career as a vet, too.”

Michael turned to Eva. “Tech’s a great place to start. Lots of people do it that way.” He asked the server for a glass of old vine zinfandel.

“Well,” she replied. “I have to save up, big time. My dream, as long as I can remember, is to be a vet.” She gave a rueful smile. “Eventually,” she added. “Who knows how long it’s going to take me to get my degree.”

Trina groaned. “I hear you. School loans are a bitch. It’s been fifteen years and Jake and I still haven’t paid ours off.”

Jamie looked up from the menu she was studying. “I got really lucky. My parents paid for me to go to RISD.”

Trina looked puzzled. “What is ‘Riz-dee?’”

“Oh, sorry, Trina. Rhode Island School of Design, it’s in Providence.”

Eva said, “And you got a scholarship, as well. You’re just that smart.”

“For some of it,” Jamie said. “But affirmative action played a big part, I think. I mean half black, half Chinese, and a woman? Tick off three boxes. Add gay and they should have paid *me* to go to college!”

Everyone laughed. Food arrived and they all dug in.

Her friend Jamie. Eva was happy just to glide through life in the wake of Jamie's personality. Though physically small, just a bit over five feet tall, she was usually the most vibrant personality in the room. She was, by nature, a people person, extroverted. Eva wondered, not for the first time, what that was like. By comparison, people had always worn her out. She'd rather pound nails in her temples than endure a cocktail party, where each brief encounter took a bit more energy and soul. She ended up feeling like a balloon flying around the room, falling limp and damp and flat in the corner. Wishing she'd just stayed home.

Eva tuned back into the conversation around the table. Jake was talking about Jeremiah, the old black lab at the shelter.

"He's such a sweet old boy," Jake said. "How could they have dumped him? How could people be so heartless?"

Michael said, "I know. It's hard. But humans are flawed. We believe we've been made the custodians of the animals but look at the things we've done. The cruelty, the abuses... Human beings are the only creatures on this planet that don't know their place in the scheme of things. In the cycle of nature."

Eva stared at him.

"Sorry about the rant," Michael said. "It's one of my pet peeves."

Jamie was shaking her head. "Wow. I've never heard anyone say that but you, Eva. 'Human beings don't know their place in the scheme of things.' Those are your exact words."

Eva felt Michael watching her.

It was a powerful realization, that she and Michael were on the same wavelength about this. She turned to him, studied his face, found she wanted to know what made that square jaw soften into a smile. What that thick hair would feel like...

She met his eyes. And was held there, somehow, in that deep brown. Behind them lay a vortex that tugged at her, like a powerful magnet. It drew her in, deeper and deeper. The voices, the music, and the clatter of plates and cutlery all faded. There was nothing but his eyes.

Michael said gently, "You're staring at me."

Eva jerked her eyes away and grabbed her iced tea, fussing with it and her napkin. “I’m sorry,” she said.

His eyes didn’t leave her face and his voice was hardly above a whisper. He leaned close to her ear and replied, “I wasn’t complaining.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She felt other eyes on her. She glanced around quickly to see Jamie studying her. Emotions were racing across Jamie’s face.

Then Jamie leaned close and spoke quietly. “Sorry, looks like I’m interrupting... But you might want to know there’s an older guy at the bar who’s been watching you for a while now. I wonder what his deal is.”

Eva swung around to see a man, solo, at the bar, wine glass in front of him. Sporting a buzz cut of graying hair, he was maybe fifty. He appeared a touch out of place. He looked more like a Whiskey Guy than Wine Guy.

“How do you know he’s looking at me?”

“When you went to the bathroom a while ago, he watched you all the way there and back...”

She stared at the man. When his eyes met hers, he turned away sharply and busied himself with his wallet. Nonchalantly dropping some cash on the bar, he strode out.

“Huh,” she muttered. “That was weird.”

* * *

The man strode down the street a few paces, then ducked into a doorway of a closed retail shop. He watched the door of the wine bar behind him for a couple of minutes. Then put his phone to his ear.

“Bad news. I think I’ve been made. Better not take any chances. Want to come and replace me?”

He listened.

“OK, well, ask him what he wants me to do.”



Chapter 4

“I can’t believe this is the same dog!” Michael bent over to greet the Golden Retriever as she pranced from her cage.

Friday was the weekly shelter day to examine the most recent animals found or turned in. It was Michael’s week. As he passed the full cages which lined the walkway, he had to steel himself. Although the animals were treated with kindness here, he struggled a bit every time he saw all the unwanted pets. Nothing could soften the effects of the concrete beneath his feet, the aromas of litter pans, the whines and meows of the caged animals, and the hollow clanky feel of the place. Every visit, he had to remind himself of the potential good he could do.

“When I saw her just last week, she didn’t even want to stand up,” Michael said. “Now, when I palpate her hips and legs, she doesn’t even flinch.”

“I know.” Jake shook his head.

“You sound dismayed.”

“No, no, of course not. Don’t get me wrong—it’s wonderful. She’s doing great. I mean, it’s hip dysplasia, and the outlook was awful. We put her on glucosamine and chondroitin, but that was only—” Jake checked his clipboard “—four days ago. In a perfect world, it would take two to three months before we noticed improvement. I can’t figure out what helped her so much, so quickly. The x-ray from last week showed severe arthritic changes in the joint. If you remember, she was turned in because the owners couldn’t, or *wouldn’t*, pay for hip replacement or osteotomy.”

“What about showing the owners how improved she is?”

Jake shook his head. “Someone who turned in this sweet dog because they didn’t want to treat her? Give her back? That’s not going to happen.”

He made a good point.

“Golden Rescues, up in Mass,” Jake said, “thinks they’ve found a potential foster, but after that, who knows? People willing to adopt a dog with hip dysplasia are in short supply.”

“But look at her!” Michael fondled the big dog’s ears, and she licked his hand. “Sweet Nellie.” His heart went out to this gentle, beautiful dog.

Jake led her back to her cage, where she curled up on an oversized dog bed and plopped her muzzle down on her paws.

“It doesn’t matter,” replied Jake. “Her file says hip dysplasia. The x-rays show hip dysplasia.” He paused, an odd look on his face. “You know, Dr. Michael, I just don’t know what’s going on. I’ve been here for almost fifteen years, and I know what I’m doing. Or thought I did.”

Michael waited.

“So many weird things happening! You remember the orange cat with the high blood sugar that then *didn’t* have high blood sugar? Well, we’ve checked and rechecked that glucometer. It’s functioned just fine since then. And now, this Golden. But there’ve been a bunch of other oddities. We had a cat with hot spots all over her skin—one of the vets at your office recommended a short course of prednisone. But she healed up in a day or two and we hadn’t even picked up the drug, yet. Allergy to something where she was living? Maybe... But the skin to heal over? In two days? We fostered her out two weeks ago and haven’t heard she’s had any skin issues at the foster home.”

Michael shrugged. Identifying the triggers for allergic reactions was often impossible.

Jake continued. “Here’s another one: a basset hound mix with otitis, diagnosed by Dr. Jacobs, which recovered overnight. Literally overnight. Ear infection gone. Now I know antibiotics still work well for some minor infections, but not that fast. So maybe it wasn’t an infection?” He shook his head. “I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

Michael clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, it sounds like a great problem to have.”

Jake grinned. “OK, I’ll get over myself.”

Michael looked back at the cage again with the Golden Retriever. It was a bit miraculous, he had to admit, but there must be an explanation. Or was this one of those flukes that life offered up now and then?

“Well,” Michael asked, “is there a common theme running through these cases? Anything you can identify?”

Jake chewed his lip in concentration. Then chuckled. “They’re all Eva’s favorites. She’s always a sucker for the sad-sack hopeless cases.” He read something on his clipboard, then continued along the walkway, opening a cage holding a young-looking black cat. “OK,” he said, gently picking up the cat. “Here’s a new one.”

“Looks like a Bombay, or Bombay mix,” noted Michael.

“Probably. Needs checking out. He was turned in, probably out on his own for a while. Too thin, but besides that and his matted fur, we hope he’s OK.”

“Right, let’s do it.”

As Michael drove away from the shelter an hour or so later, he just kept thinking of that Golden Retriever. This might be the right dog for him. This wasn’t a puppy needing a ton of work and training. A great companion, now he had the house with the big yard, and if anyone could deal with a dog with hip dysplasia, it would be a vet. He might just do it.

All thoughts of the dog and the shelter were banished from his mind that afternoon as he tackled myriad jobs in the clinic. With a vet tech’s help, he performed neutering and spaying in two young cats, then a dental operation to remove teeth in an older one. Plus, there were two new patients, a first exam for a twelve-week-old puppy, and then a duck with a fungal infection. Rural people often kept chickens and ducks, and it was amazing how many people turned these birds into pets, with the emotional involvement this entailed. But he grinned. It was a sweet duck.

Then there was the family who couldn’t bring themselves to butcher their chickens for the freezer when they stopped laying. He told them, with a laugh, they were keeping a chicken nursing home, looking after them all lovingly until their natural death. Most of the

staff at the vet clinic thought it was madness, but Michael could find no fault with growing compassion toward animals. It was better than history's alternative.

The final job of the day wasn't one he was looking forward to. He had to deal with the small calico with a tumor on her jaw. In the furthest cage in the back room, the little cat lay, unmoving. Kurt, one of the older vets on the staff, had examined her and given her pain medication. The x-ray revealed the depth and invasive quality of the tumor. The cat's owners were coming in at 5:00, and Michael had to inform them the cat should be euthanized. He made himself focus on the best interest of the suffering animal, but he dreaded it, every single time. It never got any easier.

He was grabbing a water bottle in the break room when Nina came in. He gulped back a few swallows.

"Michael, the calico cat's owners have arrived," she said. "They're in Room Four. You ready for them?" She studied him, then touched his arm. "I know," she said.

Her compassion choked him. He took a deep breath and headed for the exam room.

The anxiety in the room was palpable. The cat's owners were a young couple, mid-thirties, with a pre-teen daughter chewing her nails. The mother, eager and polite, nodded frequently, birdlike. The husband was taciturn, stern-jawed, as if he knew the bad news even before it was delivered.

Michael told them the diagnosis clearly and kindly. The tumor had invaded the jawbone and now even the sinuses. He explained it wasn't a good prognosis for their pet. The husband said they'd been to a previous vet who suggested a lengthy and extremely costly operation that held no guarantee of success. Couldn't even promise the procedure might grant the cat some quality of life. Wanting another opinion, they said, they'd come to Wood Lane Veterinary Clinic.

As hard as it was, Michael had to tell them. "I'm afraid it's progressed too far even for that option. Your little cat is in pain. And there's no guarantee the operation would be successful." He paused.

“I’m sorry to tell you, but the kindest thing to do would be to put her to sleep.”

The young daughter wailed and burst into tears.

“I know you’ll want to say goodbye. I’ll have her brought in.”

When the tech carried in the little calico, the small girl, who couldn’t have been more than eight or nine, reached for her pet. She held her close and buried her face in her cat’s fur.

“Come on honey,” her mother said. “Let the doctor look at her.” The mother gently took the cat and placed her on the examination table. She bent over to study the animal’s face. “Wait a minute... Charles, look,” she said to her husband. “Isn’t the tumor on this side? But, hang on... I can’t see it now.”

Michael stared in surprise at the cat’s face. He physically examined it, while it stood quietly on the table. There was no swelling.

“This *is* your cat?” he inquired.

The couple nodded.

What on earth was going on? The file described a large squamous cell carcinoma on the left side of the animal’s face and neck, invading the teeth, the jaw, the sinuses. But there was no tumor. He felt carefully. Nothing. With effort, he kept his face still, without expression. How to explain this? He looked again at the file, again scanned the x-ray.

The owners confirmed again it was indeed their pet.

Speechless, Michael excused himself and turned for the door, with the image of the little girl’s full eyes seared into his mind.

Two hours later, after several vets and techs had examined the little calico cat, they were all stunned, but no one had any answers.

Kurt, the vet who had first examined her, was adamant that yesterday there was a large growth, an SCC. And he kept referring to the x-ray. “The x-ray doesn’t lie,” he repeated for about the third time, clearly feeling defensive.

“No one’s claiming you’re lying, my friend,” replied Jerry, the clinic’s founding vet. An older man with a full head of silver hair, he had the respect of everyone at the vet clinic for his knowledge and lengthy experience.

“But what the hell? How is it *possible*?” Kurt asked.

Jerry patted his colleague on the shoulder. “There must be an explanation...”

But no one had one.

Most of the staff headed home, but Michael just couldn’t leave. At this rate, he knew he was not going to be able to give a rational explanation to the owners of the cat. He had simply told them he’d like to keep her another night, because of the painkillers, and said he’d call them in the morning. They were fine with a reprieve from euthanasia but Michael knew he was just buying time. Bottom line, there was no tumor anywhere on that cat. Like Kurt had asked, how was that possible?

The only thing Michael could think of to do, because he needed to do *something*, was to watch the closed-circuit TV camera footage from the back room, to see what had happened since the cat was brought to them yesterday morning. What, if anything, anything at all, might explain this “miracle?” Damn it, he hated to even use that word. It didn’t mesh with the practice of science.

The veterinary practice had recently installed three cameras in the back room, two over the operation tables, and one for the line of cages housing the animals in their care. They ran 24/7 for insurance reasons, liability, and security. He didn’t think anyone had yet needed to view them, but now he logged into the app which controlled the cameras and hunted for yesterday’s date. He chose to view the camera focused on the line of cages. Fortunately, there was a fast-forward selection in the digital app, and he systematically plowed through many hours, sped up. He watched the assistants, vets, and vet techs as they moved in and out of the cage area, taking animals out and returning them, cleaning the cages, adding food to bowls. He saw an assistant lift the little calico from the cage and return her half an hour later, and glancing at the file, he confirmed this was the logged time of the X-ray. Scanning through a few more hours of normal behavior, he was beginning to think he should just bag it and go home.

Wait a minute, isn’t that...? He slowed the images to normal speed. Yes. It was Eva. Why was she there? Four in the afternoon of

the previous day. He watched as she slowly moved past the cages, touching a Rottweiler through the bars, then opening the cage door of another dog, a little terrier mix, and stroking its ears. When she reached the last cage housing the Calico cat, she stood and stared, her head slightly to one side. She reached into the cage and gently scooped the cat into her arms. Sinking down onto a small metal stool at the end of the line of cages, she closed her eyes. As she held the cat close, Michael could see her lips moving, although he heard nothing. There was no sound, just this image of a young blond woman holding a small multi-colored cat. The look on her face was the same as the day he saw her holding the orange cat, Pumpkin. It was an intense, all-consuming tenderness and focus.

An idea struck him. “No.” Michael spoke the word aloud. “*No*,” he repeated. “That’s ridiculous.” He shook his head.

But he continued to stare at the screen.



Amazon Eva