

# ONE

EVE GOLD WASN'T SURPRISED to die on her twenty-seventh birthday. The Angel of Death's greasy fingers had been pressing against her spine for ten years — maybe longer — and in the underground of her mind where truth squirmed away from the light, she knew that it was just a matter of time before press turned to shove. No, death wasn't much of a shock. The real surprise was everything that followed.

She left the gallery early, hoping to get home before the storm hit. Six of her paintings about life on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside were set to debut the next day, as part of *The Other Side* exhibit. After years spent hiding behind her role as an event coordinator, her artistic debut was causing Eve heartburn and night sweats. Her birthday was a perfect excuse to leave work early.

The rain hit as she left the bakery, and it meant business. It pummelled her blind and deaf, and by the time she ducked under the Starbucks awning to wait for the southbound bus, she was soaked to the skin. Her feet squished inside her boots and her hair dripped into her eyes. Even worse, the cake box sagged from her fingers by a twist of string, waterlogged and threatening collapse. Button would be ticked.

Over the years, her grandmother had worked hard to perfect, and then weaponize, THE LOOK. Her lips would pull downward and her eyes would deepen into pits of sorrow. THE LOOK could penetrate Eve's walls like nothing else, and there was nothing else needed to keep her in line.

Which was why she still lived at home, why she had no social life, and why she kept up the illusion that all was well. That *she* was well. On every one of her birthdays, she'd sit next to her grandmother, choking back coconut cake and watching *The Golden Girls* on their flat-screen TV, smiling and laughing and pretending she was glad she'd been born. She did it for Button, who cried less often but still roamed the house at night in search of some lost object she would never find. Wherever Donna had gone, she wasn't stashed behind the linens in the sideboard.

Lightning cracked, and across the street the courthouse's glass atrium

mirrored the blinding flash. Her mother had died in that building, and Eve wondered if Donna still haunted those darkened courtrooms, unable to sleep until justice had been served.

Shaking off a fresh surge of apprehension, she turned away from the damp wind whipping around the corner. She pulled her scarf over her nose and mouth and breathed deeply of the woollen fabric, hoping to mask the acrid smell of coffee. The scarf still held the clean scent of her moisturizer, which didn't remind her of her mother in any way.

From the corner of her eye, she watched a man step through the sheets of rain pouring from the awning. He wore a long overcoat and fedora. His shoes were square-toed and highly polished. He paused at the door to the coffee shop, turning to her with a friendly smile.

“Eve?”

He looked familiar, and her first thought was that he was one of the art gallery's trustees. She could never keep them straight. Hector had once made her a chart of all the old farts she shouldn't offend. He'd typed their names under their pictures in a screaming red font, as though trying to burn the information into her brain. It hadn't worked.

The man cocked his head to the side, as though waiting for her to recognize him.

“You look just like your mom. Like Button, too.”

Was he one of Donna's old colleagues? But no, he knew her grandmother, as well. Seconds stacked up, and Eve was still drawing a blank.

“I'm sorry, where do I know you from?”

His smile widened to reveal stained teeth and pale gums. “Just take my hand. I'll stay with you.”

She stepped back, pressing against the glass display window. It felt cold and slick against her back, even through the fabric of her coat.

He moved closer, reached for her hand. His ring finger was gone from knuckle to tip, which sparked a jolt of recognition she didn't have time to

process. His eyes were the colour of dark amber. She wondered if they'd spark in the sunlight, like hers did. Donna used to say she had eyes like fool's gold.

"Take my hand," he said with more urgency.

"No," she wanted to say, but never got the chance. Tires screeched, followed by a loud popping noise. Her body lifted from the ground and slammed through the display window, which exploded in a spray of glass sharp enough to pierce even her lie-toughened skin.

Eve flew over people and chairs and tables like a broken missile. The cake box soared from her grip. People scattered for cover. A Rorschach of blood droplets splattered the glass display case. She was above it all, seeing everything but comprehending nothing. She smelled bitter coffee and sweet coconut, tasted the salt of her own blood — all reminders of who she was and the things she'd done.

She slammed to the floor and the air whooshed from her lungs. Her eyes fixed on a brown stain on the ceiling, where a teardrop of water formed. It grew fat-fatter-fattest, wobbled with anticipation, and dropped. It splashed into her right eye and slid toward her temple.

Strangers surrounded her, spoke words she couldn't understand. They had worried faces and sad faces, moon faces and balloon faces.

"It's okay," she tried to say. "I'm not hurt."

To her left, a woman screamed. It was like an electric shock that jolted Eve's body to life. She tried to look, and the bones in her neck ground together with a protesting creak. Her head felt soft on that side. Mushy.

The front end of a silver Lexus wedged through the Starbucks window like a ship run aground. The hood was crumpled, dripping, one headlight smashed. And of course it was silver. Silver like moonlight on a pond, or secrets kept.

"Take my hand now. It's time. Let me help you." The old man bent toward her. He'd lost his fedora and his hair was a gossamer cloud around his head.

She opened her mouth and felt a gush of something hot and wet spill over her lips. She remembered the trail of vomit on Donna's cheek, and the dead man in the forest, and how quiet the river had seemed once the screaming stopped.

“Take my hand.”

At the touch of his fingers, the top of her skull popped open. The inside of her head became a wind tunnel spiralling toward a blinding, horrifying white light.

Like the last pea in a can, she shook loose from the centre of her brain, spun in nauseating circles, and was sucked up into the whirlwind. She whipped to the opening, toward light that screamed — and somewhere beyond, she felt certain she would find her reckoning. No way was she ready for that.

She skidded along the curved bone of her skull, moving faster and faster. Desperate to burrow back into herself, she kicked backward and dug into the meat of her. She slowed to a stop and the light flickered and went out. A tidal wave of pain slammed her back and down, flooding her with inky silence. Like a spider swept toward the bathtub drain, all she could do was curl into a ball and hang on. When she tried to scream, her mouth filled with salt water. Or maybe it was blood.

# TWO

## Eve's Sixth Birthday

"IT'S A DOLL!" Sara said before Eve had even finished tearing off the pink wrapping paper. Her new friend bounced on the couch, full of cake and soda.

"Do you like it? I wanted to get you an American Girl doll, but Mom said we couldn't spend that much money so we got you a cheap knock-off instead."

"Sara!" Mrs. Adler said.

"What's a knock-off?" Eve asked. "Is that like when you play Scat?"

The adults laughed and she felt her face grow hot. "You know, like how you have to knock when you get thirty-one?"

"It's not like that." Mr. Adler's voice was kind. "It means that your doll isn't actually an American Girl doll."

"Oh. I like her, anyway. She's got curly hair like me."

"I knew you'd like her! Wanna play dolls? I'll go get Fiona." Sara jumped up and ran from the room.

Donna leaned forward. "What do you say to the Adlers?"

"Thank you," she said, trying to free her doll from the box.

"Leigh!" Mrs. Adler said. "Bring the scissors from the kitchen, would you?"

"It's so kind of you to have us over like this." Button placed her empty cake plate on top of the pile of boxes they used as a coffee table. "And that was delicious. I hope you didn't go to too much trouble."

"It's just a mix." Mrs. Adler waved a long-fingered hand in dismissal.

“Well, it’s a treat. And I think the girls are getting along nicely.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Adler said. “We were worried Sara would have trouble making friends. New school, new neighbourhood. She can be shy, so it’s been a hard transition for her.”

“For all of them,” Mr. Adler said.

“I can’t find them!” a boy shouted from the back of the house.

“Check the junk drawer!” Mrs. Adler turned to Button and Donna.

“Moving is the worst, isn’t it? On Sara’s first day at the new school, Eve ran right over and invited her to play.”

“How nice,” Button said.

“They’re not here!” the boy shouted.

“Oh for heaven’s sake. Dear, would you mind?”

Dutifully, Mr. Adler got up and left the room.

“Sara was so thrilled to make a friend so quickly.”

“Eve usually isn’t very good at making friends,” Donna said. “She’s so awkward.”

Eve’s head snapped up from the box she was having no luck opening in time to see Mrs. Adler’s eyelids flutter.

“She’s just choosy,” Button said quickly. “Some of the girls in their class aren’t very kind.”

“How do you know? She’s never invited anyone over for us to meet.”

“I know because I listen to your daughter,” Button said.

“And you believe everything she says.”

“*Du fangst shoy n on?*” Button said in Yiddish, and Donna’s jaw tightened. Turning to Mrs. Adler, Button asked, “How many children do you have?”

Mrs. Adler let out a breath. “We have three girls — Sara’s the youngest, Margie is eight, and Danielle is ten — and one boy, Leigh, who’s eleven.”

“You certainly have your hands full,” Donna said.

“Yes.” Mrs. Adler turned in her seat. “Have you found those scissors yet, dear?”

“Here, Mom,” a boy said, loping into the room. “Catch!” He pretended to throw and grinned when the adults ducked. “Just kidding.”

“Leigh!” Mrs. Adler barked, clutching her chest. “That’s not funny.”

The boy looked down at his feet. “Sorry, Mom.”

“I thought it was funny,” Eve said, feeling bad for him. Being yelled at in front of strangers was no fun, she knew.

Turning toward her, he smiled. “You must be Sara’s new friend.”

“Yeah.”

“Yes,” Donna said.

“Happy birthday.” He sat on the carpet beside her, turning his back on the adults in a way that made them seem suddenly less there. He tucked his long legs to the side and hunched down so he was on her level. “Do you want some help with that?”

She handed him the box and watched as he cut her doll free. He had to keep pushing his hair out of his eyes and his arms were long and skinny, his knuckles covered in healing scrapes.

Handing her the doll, he asked, “What are you going to name her?”

“I don’t know.” Eve rubbed a finger over the doll’s hair. It felt coarse, and she touched her own curls for comparison. She was glad her hair felt much softer. “What do you think?”

“Hmm.” He scrunched his brow in concentration. “Gertrude?”

She shook her head, stifling a giggle.

“Henrietta?”

She slapped a hand over her mouth and shook her head emphatically.

“I know. Persephone!”

She laughed. “That’s not a name!”

“Sure it is. She’s the queen of the underworld.”

“Really?” Eve rolled the name around in her head. She kind of liked it.

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t frighten her, Leigh,” Mrs. Adler said. “He did a school project last year, and now he’s obsessed with Greek mythology. Would you like more coffee?”

As the adults turned back to their conversation, he leaned close enough that she could smell his bubblegum. “When she was just a young innocent girl, she was playing in a valley with all her friends. She saw the most beautiful flower. But when she bent down to pick it, the earth under her feet broke open and this chariot burst out, pulled by giant black horses. It was Hades, the god of the underworld. He wanted to marry Persephone, but her mom had said no. So, he grabbed her and dragged her down to the underworld.”

She blinked at him, feeling a thrill of fear. “What’s that?”

“It’s the kingdom of the dead.”

“Is it scary?”

“It’s really dark and there’s all kinds of beasts. Like centaurs and Gorgons.”

She didn’t know what those were, and decided she didn’t want to know.

“What happened to her? Did she die?”

“Hades made her his wife. Kind of romantic, right?”

She didn’t know what the word *romantic* meant, but sensed he was testing her. Maybe he was waiting to see if she’d burst into tears or tell her

mother that he was scaring her. But she wasn't a baby. Straightening her shoulders, she looked him square in the eyes. "Persephone. I like it."

He smiled at her, nodding his approval. "You're cool, Eve."

Her cheeks heated with pleasure. "I know," she said, and then flushed even more when he laughed. But his laugh was like an invitation into a private joke, so after a moment she joined in.

"Eve!" Sara bounced into the room, clutching a doll with yellow hair to her chest. "This is Fiona. Wanna come play in my room?"

Jumping up, she looked to her mom for permission.

"Ten minutes," Donna said.

Turning to Leigh, who sat on the carpet with the empty box in his lap, she held up her doll. "Persephone says thank you."

He gave her a grin and a little salute. She bounced out of the room on Sara's heels.

"It's my birthday in a week," Sara said as they climbed the stairs, moving around boxes and toppling piles of clothes still attached to their hangers. "I asked for another doll. And I want a bunk bed for them to sleep in. I saw one at Walmart that has pillows and blankets and everything. This is my room. It's green right now but Daddy said we can paint it any colour I want."

"It's big."

"Yeah," Sara said. "Hey, it's cool our birthdays are so close. It's like we're princesses and this whole week is about us."

"We should get cake every day for the whole week."

"Yeah! And presents." Sara jumped onto her bed and started bouncing. "We need secret princess names."

Eve climbed onto the bed and bounced beside her. "My name is Princess Doodlebug. My superpower is that everything I draw comes to life!"

“You’re a superhero and a princess? Cool! Um, my name is Princess Gumdrop, and my superpower is that everything I touch turns to candy!”

“All right!”

“Eve, it’s time to go,” Donna called from below.

“Aw, so soon?” Sara said.

Eve knew better than to argue, so she jumped off the bed. “Coming, Donna!”

“Why don’t you call her Mom?” Sara asked.

She grinned up at her new friend. “Because she’s not really my mom, she’s an evil queen who wants to keep me locked in a dungeon.”

“Cool,” Sara said. “Is your dad an ogre?”

Button and Donna argued a lot when Eve was supposed to be sleeping. Once she’d heard an argument about her dad where they called him the Donor. She didn’t know if that was his name or if it meant something else, but whatever it was, it didn’t sound good. She liked Sara’s idea of an ogre better. “Yeah, he’s a big green one with black teeth.”

“Woah,” Sara said.

“Eve!” Donna called again.

“Coming!”

Sara jumped down from the bed. “Can you come play some other time?”

“For sure.”

“Sorry you got stuck with my brother for so long. I couldn’t find Fiona. Maybe we can play dolls next time?”

“Yeah! And it’s okay. He’s really cool.”

Sara rolled her eyes. “He smells like socks.”

# THREE

“EVE, CAN YOU HEAR ME?” The man’s voice warbled somewhere in the distance, and she moved toward it.

For either hours or decades, she’d been lost in a field of quicksilver plants just like the one she’d avoided for most of her childhood. It was foggy, icy water dripping onto her head and the back of her neck. It hurt her lungs to breathe and made it impossible to see more than a few feet ahead.

A woman walked nearby, calling out to her from time to time, trying to get her attention. Eve wanted nothing to do with her. All she wanted was to find a way out.

As she moved, silver leaves left slug-trails across her skin. Branches loomed out of the fog to snag her clothing. She yanked herself free and kept going, not caring if her clothes tore. If she continued downhill, she should come out near the pond.

“Eve, squeeze my hand if you can hear me.” His voice was a soft rumble, which brought to mind the St. Bernard in those cold-medicine commercials, the one who braved snowy nights just to help someone battle the sniffles. At the sound of his voice, tendrils of fog drifted up toward the sky.

“Urrrrrr ...”

“Don’t try to speak. Your jaw is wired shut.”

The world around her came to life, like those slick moments just before dawn.

“Do you know where you are? Squeeze my hand once for yes and twice for no.”

Did she have hands? She felt like her body was a balloon. It swelled with panic, and the fragile shell bulged with explosive threat. What would happen if the pressure mounted? Would she burst right out of existence?

“Ouch! No need to break my hand.” He chuckled, and she felt a pinprick

of relief. If she'd hurt him, she must still be real.

“You're in the ICU at St. Vincent's,” he continued. “You've been in a medically induced coma for almost three weeks.”

His voice was familiar. It was like the kiss of cool water on sunburned skin, and mud between her toes. It was the taste of strawberry milkshakes and tears.

“Don't try to move! You've still got casts on, well, just about everything. Do you remember the accident?”

Accident? Eve remembered the smell of bitter coffee and coconut cake. And was there something about a man in a fedora?

“That's okay, some things are worth forgetting. There was a storm, and this guy was driving while on drugs. But what's important is you survived. It was touch and go there for a while. They're doing everything they can to put you back together.”

A chair squeaked and she sensed he'd moved closer. “I'm doing everything I can, too. We're going to get through this.”

His voice. Recognition seared her skin, awakening her from fingertips to heart and spreading like brushfire down her broken body. It also awoke the pain, which ripped down the fault lines of her mending bones. For the moment it didn't matter. She knew the man behind that voice, could taste his name on her tongue, could feel the thrill it had given her to let it escape her lips — so quick and breathless the syllables blurred together: Leigh Adler, after all this time.

He must have felt her jolt of recognition, for he squeezed her fingers in acknowledgement. Her hand still felt so small within his grip. She could picture him standing before her, not as he must have looked now, but as she'd known him years ago. Before what happened to the man in the forest fused them together. Before Sara's death tore them apart.

“You remember,” he said.

Instead of squeezing his hand, she opened her eyes.