

1. *Abandoned*

the kitten

The important thing was to survive. The kitten knew that before she knew anything. Then she learned what feelings must be noticed in order to stay alive. The first was hunger. In the beginning, hunger had meaning only as a pattern that alternated with fullness after nursing. But then there was a time where the teats went away and hunger was all there was.

Afterwards came the gentle touch, the smells that she later learned went by the sounds 'Elias' and 'Eva'. They were unlike the first source of food, but instinct told her that cats lived in survival groups. So even though Elias and Eva were different from herself, they helped her stay alive. They must be her pride, her family.

From them, she learned another feeling critical to survival: fear.

Casa de Pazia, Granada, January 1505

"I have something for you. Close your eyes and hold out your hands," Elias instructed. Eva did so, and felt a soft, warm ball of fluff. She opened them to the most brightly marked orange-and-black kitten she had ever seen.

"Oh Elias! Won't it run away?" Eva loved cats, but so far all her attempts to catch one of the wild barn-cats' kittens had been failures.

He smiled at her pleasure. "If you keep her close until she bonds, you will always be the top lioness in her pride."

"She should be proud! She's so pretty!" Eva stroked the tiny soft head as she cradled the kitten against her.

"Not proud, *hermanita*," Elias used his favorite endearment for her, 'little sister', which meant he was feeling especially protective today. "Pride. It's what you call a family of lions. The kitten will think of you as her family, so she won't run away to mother like the barn kits do."

The kitten mewed and started to climb up Eva's bodice, tangling its tiny claws in the gold brocade threads. Eva carefully detached the little paws. "I shall call her Tabita."

"You'll have to feed her several times a day, milk and meat chopped into bits. She's too small to be weaned yet."

"Where is her mother?"

"Carlos the candle-maker found this litter of kittens in back of his stall; the mother abandoned them."

"Poor thing! It must be awful, to have your mama just disappear. Don't worry, I will be your mama now." Eva kissed the little striped nose and set the kitten in her sewing basket, where it curled up and went to sleep. "I

wonder why the mother cat left?"

"Sometimes mothers care more about themselves than they do about their offspring." Elias' voice was unexpectedly bitter. "Eva, I may have to hide for a few days. But I don't want you to worry." He dashed a hand across his face, and Eva thought she saw a tear.

Her brother never cried. "Why, Elias! What's wrong?"

"Mother won't be coming back from her visit to the Alhambra. I just found out from Rico, their head groom, that mother's horse isn't in the palace stables. It hasn't been all week. Father won't find out until tomorrow, and I am planning to be out of sight when he does."

A familiar feeling of dread gripped Eva. Elias had turned back to his work, adding a column of figures from the account books. His set face said that the subject was now closed. Eva picked up her pen and did the same.

Outside in the main courtyard, the fountain tinkled through the door which was closed against the chill of a Granada January. From the kitchen patio on the other side of the study wafted the wonderful smells of the week's baking. It would have been easier to bear the suspense if she could have been working, helping the servants take the crusty loaves from the great oven.

It was all so unfair, Eva thought. Why must they always walk on eggshells when their father was angry with Mama, as though somehow *they* were to blame? She was afraid of the answers, so her complaint found another target. "Why do I have to practice writing?"

Sometimes Elias ignored her outbursts, but today he seemed relieved at the change of subject and stopped his work to explain. "Because you must be well-accomplished so that you can make a good marriage."

Her toe was rubbing on the side of her shoe. She dearly wanted to kick it off. "I read already, I can embroider better than Blanca, and the master of music says I have a gift with the guitarra. Isn't that enough?"

"Queen Isabella made it the fashion for noblewomen to read and write as an example of devotion to God. Your penmanship will reflect your breeding."

"We're not noble! I don't *want* to be noble! Blanca's noble, and her life is so restricted. I want to be a kitchen maid, like Dolores, or a nurse, like Veronica."

"Hush, you don't want Father to hear you say that!" But it was too late. The well-oiled door opened the rest of the way and Yacov de Pazia's figure loomed in the doorway. Both children rose in fear.

"Where did she go?" he said menacingly, advancing on his son.

Elias took one look at their father's face and bolted out the other door of the study. Yacov de Pazia gave chase. His shouts echoed off the walls of

the formal courtyard. "You knew, didn't you? And you didn't tell me! Faithless, worthless boy!"

The chase ended when Father trapped Elias in the great hall. Eva could hear him cursing, his stream of angry words broken only when he had to gasp for breath. He did not notice the small figure that slid into a niche in the women's gallery above him. Eva cuddled her new pet against her chemise to keep Tabita quiet.

Her eyes took a minute to adjust from the bright January sunlight outside to the dimness of the huge shadowed room, the pride of the Casa de Pazia. At first she could see only the lighter rectangle of the great doors that led onto the courtyard against the white-stuccoed walls looming fifteen feet above her perch to an ornate plastered ceiling. Then the recently granted coat-of-arms with its shield and crossed spears came into focus on the wall behind the fireplace. In the space before it stood Elias, defiantly facing his father.

Yacov raised his fist before Elias' face. "I'm giving you one last chance to tell the truth," Yacov de Pazia roared at his ten-year-old son. "Where did she go?!"

"I don't know!"

Eva cringed at the sound of her father's fist striking flesh. She hid her face, unable to look at the scene below. She would have given her life for her brother, but there was nothing an eight-year-old could do.

"Get up!" said the angry voice below. She lifted her head just enough to see her brother rise warily, keeping his face half turned. He had that glowering expression which told Eva that Elias was about to throw caution to the winds.

"Don't, Elias," she tried to send her thoughts to him by sheer force of will. "Don't make him angrier. Please, don't talk back. Keep quiet keep quiet keep quiet."

"That whore tells you everything! You know where she is!"

"I don't! But who could blame her for leaving you. I'd go myself if I had the chance!" Elias dodged out from under another blow and made a dash for the door, but Yacov de Pazia's hand shot out and grabbed his collar, jerking him back and throwing him down.

Beyond the two doorways she could see the house staff crowded behind the shadows, watching but not daring to do anything. Eva did not expect them to. Yacov's goodwill was their livelihood and the only means of support for all their families. Granada had a surplus of people to work. If they lost their position at Casa de Pazia, they would starve.

Metal rasping against stone filled her with horror. Her father was taking a weapon down! What if he killed Elias this time? She risked another

glimpse. Elias was wise enough to stay on the floor where he had been thrown. Yacov had one of the spears from the coat-of arms in his hands, holding it like a staff.

“She left with the Garcia family, didn’t she? By God, when I catch her I’ll kill her!”

But Elias’ caution was gone. He got up off the floor again, eyes blazing. “Kill me first, why don’t you! Then you can get some other son to learn your accounts and show off your fancy horses to buyers!”

“You’re no son of mine!” The staff of the spear struck down on her brother’s head with such force that he was knocked to the floor. “Your whoring mother betrayed me! Six toes are a sign of consorting with the devil!”

This time Elias did not reply. Eva saw her brother’s still form lying on the tiles that paved the hall. Bright red blood was spreading through his black hair. “God, don’t let him be dead,” she prayed. “Please, please God, I’ll say the whole rosary every day if you just don’t let him be dead!”

A clatter of wood and metal echoed through the room as the spear dropped to the floor. Her father rolled Elias over with his foot, but the boy was unconscious. Eva could see his still face, the olive skin going white in the gloom of the hall, and her heart stopped. That last blow must surely have killed him.

Yacov de Pazia looked for a long time at the beautiful face that was the image of their mother’s. “Miriam, Miriam!” His voice was choked and barely discernible to the girl who watched from her hiding place in the gallery just above him. If it had been anybody else, Eva would have thought he was about to cry.

The man below turned suddenly and strode out of the room. “What are you staring at?!” he snarled to the servitors in the doorway. “Get back to your work!”

Eva stuffed the kitten into the neck of her chemise and flew down the hall from the women’s gallery, nearly crashing into Veronica, her nurse, at the top of the stairs. The woman steadied her. “I know, *cariña*, I know,” she said. “See, I have a basin ready, and some clean cloths. We will do what we can.”

“Oh, Nurse, this time he’s dead,” Eva sobbed. “Elias stood there and dared Father to kill him, and the staff hit so hard!”

Eva helped Nurse Veronica carry Elias to her room. They washed the blood from his head and bandaged it. Then she settled at the end of the bed with the kitten and her rosary, saying the promised prayers and adding one between each ten beads that Elias would wake up.

It was no use talking to God the Father; fathers were stern and unfor-giving. Maria, the mother of God, was less vengeful, but not very powerful.

Eva associated the Virgin with her own mother.

Maria de Pazia had little time for her daughter; she doted on Elias. Which was quite right, Eva thought; Elias was a strikingly handsome boy, while she was plain, with their father's frizzy reddish hair and freckles that sprang up on her olive complexion at the least touch of the sun.

Her mother used to sigh and shake her head when her daughter was brought to her all dressed up. "What can we do about that nose? It is a good thing your father is rich enough to buy you a husband!"

If Mother had gone away and left them, that was her fault, too.

Jesu had no time for her. He was busy hanging on a cross in the Cathedral of Granada, paying for her sins. He always looked very sad, and Eva herself had given him plenty of reasons to be. She was wicked beyond other children, for in her secret heart she hated her father.

Now, looking at her brother and hoping desperately that he would not die from this last beating, she hated him even more. Which was wrong, she knew. The fifth commandment was 'Honor you father and your mother'. Yacov de Pazia was the head of the household; he had the right to beat Elias, who was often rebellious. He had the right to beat his wife, Maria. Eva shivered. Why should she hate him so much when she alone was seldom beaten?

It was a father's duty to discipline and provide for his household. Certainly the de Pazia family lacked nothing! Eva tried to feel grateful for her father's provision, her eyes lingering on the rich embroidered hangings that surrounded the bed, the silver-plated pitcher and bowl on their ivory-inlaid rosewood stand, the wrought iron brackets for torches on the plastered walls, covered with bands of geometric designs by Granada's finest craftsmen. There were no filthy rushes on the tiled floors of Casa de Pazia: even the family bedrooms boasted beautiful oriental carpets from some land east of Constantinople.

And they were clean. Yacov hired a host of retainers to keep every building and patio in his spacious villa spotless, from the kitchen storage rooms to the stable-yards and the servant's housing, not just the living quarters of the family. The daughter of the household did not have to lift a hand. Eva concentrated hard on all the people who depended on her father, how many he employed in this city and fed from his table. She *should* be grateful.

Even in the bad harvests of the last few years, when hunger stalked the streets, she had plenty to eat. And her father gave his children coins to scatter among the beggars every Sunday when they went to Mass. Why, he had even purchased the best pew that a man not born into the upper classes could own, money which had built the magnificent altar of the ca-

thedral and the cross where the suffering Christ hung in agony to pay for her ingratitude.

Eva tried to make herself feel grateful, like a good daughter. But as soon as she stopped thinking about it, the hatred came back and resentment with it. She would rather do her own work than be waited on. And as for all these showy things! They meant nothing to her.

She said another Pater Noster. But the bad thoughts came back as soon as she finished. Now, of all times, she must be good. What if Elias died because of her ungrateful, wicked heart?

Casting around the room for something she could appreciate, Eva's eyes fell on the expensive new Book of Hours that she had received from her father this past Christ-Mass. Every page was for a different week of the year, with the devotions appropriate to the holy hours. On the opposing page was a colored painting of a saint whose festival fell that week, and a quote to meditate on.

She had not even had time yet to look at all the wonderful pictures. Eva picked up the heavy book and opened it. January 1, the day of St. Basil. She read what the man of God said:

“The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of him who is naked; the shoes that you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money that you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity that you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit.”

Such a good and holy man, devoted to the poor, must have the ear of God. Why, the date meant he must have been dead for a thousand years, which meant he had had plenty of time to get on close terms with the Creator. Eva decided she would pray to St. Basil for Elias' healing. She put down the sleeping kitten, knelt on the floor and folded her hands properly so that the Saint would notice her pleading down here in Granada.

“Dear Saint Basil, please ask God and Jesu to heal my brother. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.” Eva re-read the quote. The word ‘shoes’ caught her eye.

She had many pairs of shoes, all of which she hated wearing. The one thing both her parents seemed to agree on was that she should never go barefoot. They had warned her that the six toes on her left foot were not to be seen by anybody, ever. It was a shameful thing for which she was somehow responsible. Many of her shoes rubbed the extra toe painfully, but that was no excuse; there were others that did not. Rebellious child that she was, she ran barefoot whenever she could.

Eva bowed her head and clasped her hands again. “St. Basil, please tell God that if he makes Elias better, from today on I will never, ever go

barefoot again. And I will give the shoes that I do not wear to the poor. And some of my other things besides, whatever doesn't make Papa mad. And I will feed the hungry, too."

She opened her eyes and looked at the page. It almost seemed as though there was now an expression of approval on the painted face in the picture.

A small mew came from the bed. There was someone who was hungry she could feed right now. The priests said God cared for the sparrows; surely cats were worth more than sparrows!



Warm strokes of a tiny, raspy tongue on her throat woke Eva. Tabita was tucked under her chin. She opened her eyes to sunshine on the floor of her room, where she lay on a straw-tick Nurse had set for her.

She remembered yesterday: Elias was in her bed. She rose and flew to her brother's side. He was waxen and still, and she was dreadfully afraid that he had died in the night. With a choked sob, she picked up the hand that lay relaxed on the tapestried coverlet to find it still warm. Her brother's eyes opened.

Eva was giddy with gratitude. "Oh, Elias, Thank God!"

A frown creased his forehead. "Am I still here?"

"My room was closer, and Nurse said you could stay where I could watch you and call her as soon as you woke," Eva explained. "She made up a pallet for me on the floor. It was no trouble. Does your head hurt very much?"

"I'll be fine." He closed his eyes for a second, plainly still in pain. Eva did not press him. Elias did not like to admit it when he was in pain. She admired his ability to bear trouble in silence; she bawled like a baby whenever she was hurt.

"You can hold Tabita while I feed her," Eva offered. She put the kitten on her brother's chest and got the bowl of milk-soaked breadcrumbs from the washstand. He smiled briefly and cupped a hand around the cat, who began to purr. Animals liked Elias.

After the kitten finished the soggy bits and licked her milky fingers, the one pressing question that had plagued Eva since yesterday rose in her heart until it seemed that it would burst. She dreaded knowing, but she must ask. "Elias, will Mother ever come back?" Her voice was so small that for a moment it seemed her brother had not heard.

His mouth tightened at the corners, the brows coming together in anger over his intense black eyes. "No."

Eva looked down in despair. The first thing she saw was her deformed left foot, and remembering her promise, she hid it behind the other. "It was

because of me, wasn't it?"

The frown vanished. "Why would Mother leave because of you?"

"You know," Eva whispered. "My toe. I heard Papa shouting that six toes are from the devil."

"Eva! He was talking about me, not you!" Elias moved the covers aside and stuck his own left foot out from under the coverlet. "See my foot? I had an extra toe once, but they cut it off. It got so infected that the next one went with it. You were so small you don't remember. Mother told me it's just something that runs in her family. See, Tabita has extra toes, too."

The kitten was feeling playful and pouncing on a fringe of the coverlet. Eva untangled the baby's claws, counting the toes in wonder. Six, on all paws! She stared at her brother at this new revelation. Her horrible foot was almost never discussed in the de Pazia family. Of course she knew that Elias had only four left toes, but Nurse had said it was because of an accident. Which was another good reason she should keep her shoes on.

"Then can you write to Mama and tell her that I will be very, very good, and stay out of the sun, and I will do everything she tells me to if she will come home?"

"Eva." Elias took her hand and assumed a tone much older than his ten years. "Mother didn't leave because of you."

A terrible thought struck her. "Was it because – because she loved another man like Papa said?"

"No. She went because she was afraid of the Church."

Eva's eyes opened wide. "The Church? You mean Granada Cathedral?" The tall, brooding arches that soared up into holy darkness had always given Eva a sense of awe bordering on dread. "Is it haunted?"

Elias sighed. "Eva, you've been so sheltered. I meant the Inquisition."

"What's the ink-causation?" Eva went to Mass all the time. How could some part of the Church she had never even heard of make their mother abandon them?

"It's an arm of the Church which investigates secret Jews."

"But we're Christian!"

"Twelve years ago, when Granada surrendered, all the Jews were ordered to convert to Christianity or leave Spain, penniless. Father decided to stay, but he still needed the Casa de Pazia banking contacts with Jews in other countries."

No more explanation was needed. Their father loved his wealth above all else; he would do anything to advance it.

"Promise me you will never, ever tell anyone this. All our lives could depend on it."

