

4. Cat Crisis

the cat

The new dairy-maid belonged to a cat-pride, too. Short-tail took up residence in the buttery and showed Tabita how to beg for milk. The older cat was wise in the ways of cat-kind. Through her, Tabita came to understand the meaning of life.

Kittens were what life was all about. Short-tail knew the proper care and feeding of young, and the dairy-maid's pride grew as a result. To think that when these small beings had come out of her before, Tabita had attacked or ignored them!

That spring, Tabita proudly presented Eva with two new lives. Eva, who was not sexually mature enough to produce any kittens of her own, was suitably impressed.

Casa de Pazia, Granada, October 1507

Anticipation lightened Eva's heart as she skipped toward the front gates. Today was the day she most looked forward to. Every fortnight she was allowed to accompany Fray Hernando Talavera, Bishop of Granada, on his discipline of visits to the poor. She loved his kindness and the way he made her feel known and special, even though he had the whole city in his spiritual charge.

For this purpose only she was allowed to wear the clothing of the poor. The old, undecorated brown Spanish surcote hung like a sack, its much-washed fabric flowing softly against her arms and legs: such a delightful difference from the many constricting layers of dress and underdress that were usually required to demonstrate to the world her father's wealth and rising influence. Even her shoes were plain – although if she were really poor she would have no shoes at all, Eva mused, remembering her favorite quote from St. Basil. That thought made her slip off the jeweled pendant with the family crest and put it in the pocket of her baggy garment, lest the gold chain show above her neckline.

She did not recognize the guard at the gate, a balding brown-haired man of average height whose shoulders were so wide that they strained the fabric of his new de Pazia livery. He turned at her approach, and she saw that despite his receding hairline he was not yet out of his twenties. Why, this must be Manuel!

Eva did not really remember Manuel; he had gone into the King's service when she was only a toddler. But she knew his mother Mencia, the cook's helper. So she knew that Mencia's son was returning from putting down the Moorish revolt at Velez Malaga, and that he had been offered the position of head of the de Pazia guard. His mother had been bragging on him these many years to all who would listen: "My Manuel is avenging his father, that was killed in the siege of Granada," or perhaps, "Manuel is out fighting the rebel Moors for King Ferdinand."

Mencia was especially proud that her son had learned to write, although she herself could not read the scrawled letters that sometimes arrived. She would ask Eva to read and re-read them aloud for her. They were full of hatred, gore, and boastful accounts of the writer's exploits which sounded greatly exaggerated even to Eva's childish ears. But Manuel's mother hung on every word as though it were the very Gospel.

"Hey, little girl! Get yourself back to the kitchens, you've no business loitering around the Casa gates!" Manuel's tone was harsh and self-important, just like his letters. His brows were drawn in a frown and under his beard his mouth turned down at the corners.

Eva drew herself up with dignity. "I am not a little girl. I have almost eleven years. And I have every business here; I am waiting to greet His Reverence Bishop Talavera and welcome him as becomes the daughter of the house."

Manuel pushed her roughly aside. "The daughter of the house indeed! What a tale! Eva de Pazia dresses in silks and fine clothes." He raised a thick arm. "Get yourself from my sight, before I give you the blows you deserve for such impertinence!"

Eva jumped back just in time to miss the cuff aimed at her head. She was shocked speechless; never had she imagined someone challenging her very identity! But Manuel was advancing on her threateningly, and fear overrode her indignation. She turned and fled back into the formal courtyard, not pausing until she reached the shaded walkway closest to the kitchens.

She stopped behind one of the wide pillars that supported the cloister surrounding the courtyard. Peering out cautiously, she saw that Manuel had gone back inside the gate-chamber. She would wait for Fray Talavera here. When the Bishop came and she greeted him, Manuel would discover his mistake, and then he would be put in his place!

As she waited in the shadows, Tabita came running. The cat meowed pitifully, twining herself around Eva's ankles. This was not her pet's usual behavior: it was plain that she needed something.

Tabita ran out into the courtyard, then stopped and looked back. She expected Eva to follow.

Manuel had his back turned. Eva stepped out after the cat. Tabita led her to the massive old cypress tree around which the courtyard had been built, and Eva gratefully dodged behind it. High in the branches came the exhausted mew of a kitten. Tabita rubbed against her ankles again, and Eva understood.

As the largest lioness in the pride, Eva was often called to get Tabita's kittens out of scrapes. Another mew. The tree's flat, scaly, evergreen branchlets were so dense that she could not see beyond the bottom limbs. A pathetic feline whimper confirmed that the kitten was stuck somewhere up in the tree.

Could she reach it? For once, it would not matter if she damaged her dress. The formal courtyard was empty at the moment. The servants would all be occupied in the kitchen courtyard preparing the elaborate meal her father always insisted on serving important people who visited, however many times Fray Talavera might protest. It was early; there was plenty of time. Eva kicked off her shoes, climbed on the back of the ornate marble bench that framed the tree's wide roots, and grabbed the lowest branch.

The pungent smell of cypress-wood surrounded her. Cobwebs and flat dry needles stuck in her hair and tickled down her neckline as she wriggled her way up through the dense old cypress. At last she found Tabita's kitten: Stormy, the gray one, always too adventurous. He was a pathetic ball of striped fluff wedged between two high branches.

Eva reached out and gathered Stormy to her, and the little thing came gladly. She tucked him into the breast of her gown, softness and tiny pricking claws sliding on her skin until the kitten landed against the rope belt. There he curled contentedly in his makeshift pouch. The miniature rumble of a broken purr vibrated her waist.

On the way back down, Eva became aware that it was impossible to keep her clothing modest. The pressing branchlets insisted on sweeping her sack-like dress upwards. Well, that did not matter while the dense evergreen foliage hid her, but she would have to be sure no one was in the courtyard when she climbed down the last few limbs.

As her groping foot found solid purchase in the crook of the thick lowest branch, she heard activity at the gate. The now-respectful voice of Manuel greeting Bishop Talavera! Eva froze. Then came the sound of the study door opening, Yacov de Pazia's hearty welcome.

But the next words were worse. "You can bring the meal out here and serve us in the courtyard, Nicolás," her father was saying. "After you set up the table, you may go. His Reverence and I would speak of matters that are private."

"Oh, St. Basil! Help me again!" Eva prayed silently. She spent so much

of her life hiding, trying not to attract attention. She never set out to eavesdrop. Should she climb down right now and reveal her presence before they began their conversation? But that would mean exposing her legs before the Bishop, for the branches had a firm hold on the fabric of her skirt. And her feet besides! Father Talavera did not know about her toe!

Eva winced as she heard Nicolás set up the table right in front of the bench that surrounded the tree. It was one of her father's favorite places to seat his guests, looking down the shallow rectangular pool toward the imposing front gates of Casa de Pazia. The diamond spray of the fountain led the eye upwards above and beyond the gate, where the Alhambra hill, topped with its ancient fortress, reminded the viewer of Yacov's powerful connections.

Another thought added to her distress. Her shoes! She had kicked off her shoes and left them, right down there by the bench! No wonder St. Basil had allowed her to be caught like this; it was the first time in two years that she had broken her vow to always keep her shoes on in public. Fray Talavera sat down right next to them and one of his feet nudged the stray footwear out of sight under the bench.

Eva smiled. Fray Talavera was always kind. She looked fondly down at his shiny bald tonsure fringed by white hair and the long beaky nose. If it were not for her father's presence, modesty or no she would climb down to greet him and show him Stormy. The savory odor of pastilla, a favorite meat-pie, was tempting. She wondered how angry Father would be?

The priest's first sentence drove everything else out of her head. "Yacov, I must speak to you about sending Elias into the church. The boy does not have a vocation."

"Abbe Matias swears he has. Eat, your reverence, the cook has made this especially for you," Yacov replied, piling rich food on his guest's plate. "Besides, the boy himself desires it most eagerly."

"As a recent convert, I understand why you might think it advisable to have one of your children enter the church." Bishop Talavera's voice was gentle and persuasive. "But of the two, I would choose Eva. She has the gift of mercy."

Eva held her breath, awaiting her father's answer. If her father said yes, then she could be a nun! She would like to spend her life caring for the poor and sick. And then she would not have to marry some noble who wanted the de Pazia money and wear tight, hot clothing and spend her life among those to whom such things were important, pretending that they really were.

Her father was silent. Fray Talavera pressed his point. "King Ferdinand is dedicating a new Franciscan convent right at the top of the Alhambra, in memory of Queen Isabella. Having your daughter enter there would be most

prestigious. In time, she might even become Abbess.”

“Oh please, St. Basil, let Father say yes!” Eva sent up another silent prayer. She would stay nearby, where she could still see all her friends, Nurse Veronica, the servants and the poor. And for years still, Elias would be with her at home.

Eva heard the knife clink as Yacov set it down on his plate. “Eva’s dowry has already attracted considerable interest. Even though she is not yet eleven, already Viscount de Badalona has made inquiries on behalf of his son. And I have been given to understand that the Conde Balazote is interested for himself.”

Eva’s jaw dropped in horror. She had been made to sit next to Don Renaldo, Conde Balazote, at a dinner last month. He must be fifty! He had pinched a bruise on her bottom and exhaled bad breath all over her while making sly remarks she did not understand. She had not been able to eat a thing after he had blown his nose on his fingers and wiped them on the tablecloth. Badalona or his son she knew nothing of, but there was a town of that name on the map in the study, far, far to the east, almost in France. She would never see Elias or Nurse Veronica or any of her friends again if she were married to someone so far away!

Fray Talavera persisted. “If Elias goes into the church instead of Eva, you lose your only male heir! Who would carry on your family line?”

“I am not that old. If I marry again, I could get more sons.”

“That is another matter I wished to speak to you about today.” Eva could not quite see what Fray Talavera was reaching for, but she heard the rustle of paper. “I have received in my office your petition for a divorce from your wife, Maria de Pazia, on grounds of desertion.”

The girl’s heart turned into ice. Divorce! That meant there would be no hope of her mother returning. Fray Talavera’s tone became stern. “Surely you know that in these cases, the church recommends that the husband pursue his erring wife and do everything in his power to reconcile with her.”

Yacov flung out his hands. “Maria deserted me two and a half years ago! How can I reconcile with her when I don’t know where she went?”

“As to that, I have many friends among the conversos, and I have made inquiry as to her whereabouts.” The priest withdrew a letter from somewhere in his robe. “According to my source, your wife Maria was staying last year with other refugees of your people in Avignon, France. You can write her in the care of Abbe Jean-Pierre.”

Eva’s heart leaped with hope. She might see her Mama again! Oh, if she would come back, if Father would forgive her—!

Yacov’s answer crushed her. “There are more grounds than desertion, Father. Even the church recognizes adultery as a valid reason for divorce.”

“That is a grave accusation, of which you have presented no proof.”

Yacov got up abruptly, jarring the table. “I have proof! Neither of her children are mine!” Eva was stunned at her father’s outburst. “Both Elias and Eva were born with six toes. What more final proof is there?”

Now Fray Talavera’s gentle voice was beginning to sound impatient. “I have discussed this with you once before. That is a heathenish superstition. People are born as God wills them.”

Yacov became more conciliatory. “Of course I would not want to send my son into the church a beggar. I plan to settle a large gift on Holy Cross. Perhaps to fund another hospice for the poor of Granada.”

Fray Talavera stood, unmistakably angry. “Yacov, you cannot buy my consent no matter how large a gift you give. As to your son, you may disregard my advice; Abbe Matias is in charge of Holy Cross and it is outside my jurisdiction. But for the sake of your own soul, and so that your prayers are not hindered before God, I urge you to write to your wife and seek reconciliation. While I am bishop of this city, your divorce will not be granted.”

He stumbled suddenly and grabbed the stone bench to support himself. Eva could see veins standing out on the back of the hand; his other was pressed to his chest. For several long minutes there was no sound but the harsh breathing of the two men below her perch in the cypress.

“I will write her then, Your Reverence.” Her father’s growl did not hold much promise of forgiveness.

“I am sorry, but suddenly I am not feeling at all well. Please tell your daughter that I beg her pardon, but today we will not be visiting the poor together.”

“Of course, Your Reverence.” Yacov raised his voice. “Manuel! Get the two-man litter for the Bishop!”

Eva’s thoughts whirled. How could Yacov de Pazia not be her father? Everybody said she looked just like him! She did not know whether the idea that she was not related made her happy or sad. But Father Talavera said Yacov was wrong. She saw flashes of activity as the litter with the family coat of arms was brought and Talavera, looking very pale, helped into it. “St. Basil, please make him well,” she prayed, trying to stifle her disappointment that today she was to be denied her small time of ministry at his side. “Bring him back next fortnight.”

The great gates clanged shut behind the litter and its bearers, but Yacov still stood in the courtyard staring after it. He angrily kicked over the tray-table, dishes smashing against the tiles. “Six-toed Devil’s spawn!”



Manuel was no longer at his post, so Eva scrambled down from her hiding place. If she could not go with Fray Talavera, at least she could gather a

bowful of meat scraps to give Tabita and her kittens from the ruined meal.

Clutching her bounty, she hurried off through the kitchen courtyard, past the garden rows and the stables where she had made a nice nest for Tabita and her barn-cat mentor behind the tool shed.

Just beyond the shed she could see Nurse Veronica coming down from the orchard, her apron full of pears. Eva was about to call her to come admire the kittens when she heard the voice of Manuel. "Sweet Veronica! You are as shapely as ever."

Eva crouched in the tall dry weeds by the shed and became very still. She did not want another meeting with this rough new man, not until she was properly dressed and with somebody powerful.

Nurse stepped to one side, but Manuel blocked her path. "I thought to myself, 'perhaps during siesta Veronica will give me an appropriate welcome home.'"

Nurse Veronica turned away angrily. "You know I am married now. I didn't really like you then, and the wars haven't improved you."

"Ah, but my station in life has improved a great deal. Haven't you heard that Señor de Pazia has made me head of the household guard? If you play nicely, I could make many good things come your way. But if you show yourself unfriendly, I can make your life, and that of fat Tomás, your husband, miserable." Manuel reached out to grab the woman as she pushed past.

"Take your hand off me, you pig!" Veronica slapped Manuel with a resounding crack.

"You'll pay for that in like coin!" Manuel threw Nurse right up against the tool shed wall.

"Tomás! Help!" Nurse Veronica sounded really scared now.

Eva rose from her brushy camouflage like a small fury and went for the big man, kicking his ankles and pummeling his back. "Leave Nurse alone! You big bully!"

In his surprise at the unexpected attack, Nurse Veronica was able to break free. She ran back up the hill towards the orchards, calling Tomás to come help.

Manuel spun around, astonished at seeing Eva again. "The brat who bothered me at the gate!" This time she was not able to duck fast enough to avoid a cuff from his heavy hand. The pendant in her pocket clanked against its chain. Metal chinking on metal caught Manuel's attention.

He gripped her by the shoulder, his hold painfully tight. "So you are a thief! You will just hand over whatever is rattling in your pocket."

Eva's head had barely stopped ringing from the blow. A surge of indignation gave her strength. "I am Eva de Pazia, the daughter of this house! I am going to tell my father that you struck me! You will be dismissed at once

when he finds out how you have treated his family!”

“You already tried that tale, little liar.” Manuel reached over and ripped her pocket off. To Eva’s mortification, the old fabric of her dress tore away with the pocket, revealing chubby lower limbs. Stormy tumbled out, clawing frantically, his tiny paws leaving long scratches as he slid down her bare leg.

Eva crouched, speechless, trying to cover herself with her arms as Veronica ran up, Tomás behind her. “Evita! What has he done to you!” Nurse snatched off her apron and wrapped it around the shaking girl, while Eva burst into tears. “What is the meaning of this? Will you even molest the daughter of the house?”

Tomás, normally silent, waved his spade. “You will be sent packing, when the master hears!”

Manuel became apologetic at once. “I thought she was just a beggar child— her clothes—” he trailed off. His explanation was punctuated by a tiny yowl; one foot had stepped on the tail of Eva’s favorite kitten, the Tabita look-alike who had raced out to eat Eva’s fallen bowl of scraps.

The furious mother cat launched herself at Manuel’s leg. He shook her free and backed away while Tabita took her injured kit by the scruff of its neck and hauled it, big as it was, off to the shed.

Nurse turned on him just as furiously. “Wait until I tell the master how the man he hired to protect his house struck his young daughter and stripped her nearly naked!”

“But you won’t tell Señor de Pazia,” Manuel said, his voice low and menacing. “Because I have tales to tell of you. And there are others who can back me up. Or don’t you remember how you used to behave? I am in mind of a certain night, a certain flamenco performance ‘Wild Veronica’ did for all the stable hands.”

Tomás looked at his wife and dropped the shovel.

“That was almost twelve years ago,” Nurse Veronica protested. She looked at her husband. “Tomás, I was young and foolish, and drunk besides.”

Eva peeped from the folds of Nurse’s skirt at the dreadful new man. He seemed to relish the trouble he was causing. “And now you are married to fat Tomás, and have no more children. Who knows, except for that night, you might never have been in the fortunate position you were, ready to step in as wet-nurse for Doña Maria’s daughter.”

Eva wondered what they were talking about. She could feel her beloved Nurse beginning to tremble. Manuel lowered his voice to a whisper. “What if Señor de Pazia knew about your past? Would he want a woman of such low moral character to have charge of his only daughter?”

For some reason Nurse Veronica was afraid, although Eva could not guess why; Nurse was the most moral person Eva knew! She tugged on Nurse's hand reassuringly. "I would never let Father dismiss you!" But she knew as well as her nurse that she had no say in such matters. She could only hope that Manuel was not aware of how lightly Yacov regarded his children.

Veronica hushed her and spoke to Manuel. "All right, Tomás and I will overlook your behavior. Eva will too, because she can see that you really did not know who she was. Isn't that so, Eva?"

Eva nodded reluctantly, wondering why Manuel made Veronica so afraid.

"Remember, then." Manuel gave Eva a curt formal bow, "Your pardon, Señorita. I will treat you with all respect due in the future." But his eyes were cold, and Eva shivered at the look he gave her.



Later, in her room, Nurse Veronica wet a cold compress and put it over the side of her head where Manuel's blow had fallen. "Thank heaven he didn't strike your face. I will be sure to comb your hair carefully, and the bruise will be gone in a few days." Then she put a shaken Eva to bed, still visibly disturbed. "You won't tell, will you, *cariña*?" she whispered. "It could cost me my job, and I promised your mother, the night she left, that I would always be here to look after you. Since the day I first put you to the breast you have been like my own child, little Dolores that died just after you were born."

"Oh, Nurse," Eva held onto Veronica tightly. "I wouldn't do anything to make Father send you away. You are one of the people I love best."

"Then go to sleep for now. I will lock the door and come back at the end of siesta. I must go speak with my Tomás. He will be angry at Manuel, but he mustn't do anything foolish."

Sleep would not come. Eva lay staring at the door. Suddenly she realized that the latch was turning, ever so quietly. She sat up in panic, clutching the coverlet to her as the door opened.

Manuel slipped in. "Good. You are awake. I had to return this." He set her jeweled pendant with the de Pazia crest on the wash-stand.

Eva nodded, shivering with dread. Apparently the key to her room was part of the head guard's key ring.

"Nurse Veronica says you will not tell your father about my unfortunate mistake today," he went on, his voice soft but somehow menacing. "But I wanted assurance from your own lips."

"I won't tell," Eva tried to keep her teeth from chattering in fear.

"Swear it."

“I sw-swear by St. Basil that I will ne-never tell,” Eva stuttered.

A small noise came from Manuel’s pocket. He brought out Stormy, Tabita’s little gray kitten that had fallen from her dress when he tore it. “Everyone says you are fond of cats.” He took the kitten by the scruff, ignoring its pitiful shriek, and brutally wrung its neck before her horrified eyes.

He leaned in close, holding the still-warm lifeless body of her pet in front of her face. “If you ever tell your father about today, this is exactly what I will do to your favorite cat, the bright orange-and-black tabby.”

