

Eva's
Promise



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Eva's Promise

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Dedication



FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS



*Eva's
Promise*

M. L. BULL

EPIGRAPH

“Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.”

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

• PROLOGUE •

Twenty-six-year-old Eva Rose Conway braced herself for the new beginning of her life. It was a cool afternoon, feeling more like early October instead of late August. Bright green oak leaves rattled the gentle breeze, suitable to the present ceremony. She drew a deep breath and exchanged glances with her fiancé's grandfather, holding a colorful flower bouquet tied with a blue ribbon.

Her bouquet stuck out of the white rose scenery like a sore thumb, but it was all she could get before the outdoor wedding. Grandpa Ricardo Felipe Morales was the only father Eva had, never knowing her biological father in Rome. He gave her a lopsided grin, wearing his gray cowboy hat, which matched his thick, western mustache, double-breast suit, and leather boots.

"You look beautiful," he whispered as the hired male pianist played "Canon in D" by Pachelbel.

Eva smiled shyly. "Thank you, Papa." Growing up, she had been self-conscious of her appearance, worried her peers would notice something misplaced.

Or worse, not notice her at all. But today differed from her high school days. As all eyes set upon her, Eva realized she was the guest of honor—and for good reason.

Her wedding dress was a white silk bodice and flowing skirt, sewn with lace embroidery, sheer-and-lace sleeves, and pearl buttons. Her raven-black hair with wavy end curls rested on her shoulders, draped with a hair net veil.

Grandpa Ricardo held her arm and sauntered with her down the mossy lawn aisle scattered with white rose petals. Emily Witherspoon—her daycare student—was her flower girl.

Before Eva's big reveal, she overheard the oohs and ahhs of the guests seated on the black folding chairs. She presumed the little girl had captivated them with her big, blue eyes and angelic smile as she walked the aisle with her mother.

Eva gave a timid wave to a few attendees and co-workers from her job. She locked eyes with her husband-to-be at the decorated altar. He looked so handsome, strong, and confident, towering over the shorter, bald Pastor Joe Tyson. He smiled and watched her every step as she approached him. Her fiancé—Andre Lucas—wore a navy-blue tuxedo with black lapels, a white dress shirt, a navy-blue bow tie, black pants, and navy-blue Stacy Adams.

Though he was a skinny kid of a measly five-foot-four, he had changed much after puberty. Now he was a six-foot, one hundred and eighty-five pounds muscular

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giant. His small haircut of lustrous black curls glistened in the sun, his reddish-brown eyes glinting with tears.

For eight years they waited to marry.

They got engaged right after high school, but Pastor Tyson advised they hold off tying the knot until after finishing college. Eva and Andre agreed, but it wasn't easy. They struggled to keep focus on their studies instead of each other, making small talk on campus whenever they traced each other's paths. Eva finished her education first. As advised by her mother, she earned her associate degree in Early Childhood Ed, deserting the ambition of her true passion.

Though she enjoyed working with kids, sometimes within she kicked herself. But in a single-parent, low-income home, it always seemed her mom knew best. It took longer for Andre to earn his degree, majoring to become a veterinarian. But when he crossed the graduation stage and received his Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine, the gaze he and Eva shared said it all.

Their long wait was finally over.

Eva stood beside Andre and handed her bridal bouquet to her mother, who acted as her maid of honor. She lifted her face to her fiancé, her married name echoing in her mind. *Mrs. Lucas . . . Mrs. Eva Lucas*. Her last name would take getting used to; she'd been a Conway since the day she was born.

Goosebumps rose on her smooth olive skin, her heart

thumping anxiously in her chest. She released a slow exhale and felt her pulse relax as they held hands, but it appeared her fiancé was more of a bundle of nerves than herself.

Andre's forehead beaded with sweat, and his hands were moist and cold as ice. He dropped his shoulders as the soft piano music ended.

Pastor Tyson cleared his throat. "Dearly beloved, we're gathered here today in the sight of God to join this man and woman in holy matrimony. Who gives this woman to join to his man?" He glanced around the outside assembly.

"I do," her mom said, sniffing with a hankie.

Eva glanced at her mother with teary eyes and whispered, "Thanks, Mom."

Her mother having a tight rein on her, she knew witnessing her only child leave the nest formed a pit of loneliness. Ever since her mom was a teenager, she had been under her mother's wings and kept her company after her parents' long-distance breakup.

She faced the pastor as he inquired about her fiancé's consent to their wedding vows.

"I do," Andre said, gazing into her eyes.

The pastor turned toward Eva. "And do you, Eva Rose Conway, take Andre to be your lawfully wedded husband and live together in the estate of holy matrimony? Do you also promise to love, comfort, honor, and keep him, in

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sickness and in health, for richer or poorer; for better or worse . . . as long as you both shall live?"

"I do." Eva wore a dreamy smile.

Pastor Tyson grinned. He opened his bible to a page he bookmarked with his forefinger. "As stated in Mark chapter ten verse nine, 'What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.' By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Andre and Eva faced each other with nervous expressions, hoping they don't embarrass themselves in front of everybody. Neither of them had dated or kissed before—not even while engaged. Now that they could was both scary and alluring. Being six inches taller than her, Andre bent his back to reach her. He gulped and closed his eyes.

"I love you, Eva Rose," Andre whispered, leaning his forehead against hers.

"I love you too, Andre," Eva whispered back.

She closed her eyes and felt Andre's lips touch hers for the first time.

Regardless of the celebrative whistles and applause, to them, time had stopped. They were in their own palace, taken away to a faraway land. They had to exit, but they hated for their first kiss to end.

Pastor Tyson cleared his throat, giving them a cue.

Eva and Andre broke their smooch and blushed.

"Oh, sorry," Andre said with a chuckle, "I guess we got

carried away there.” He shrugged and wore a wry grin.

Eva giggled. She brushed a wisp of her dark hair from her face and embraced Andre’s bicep.

They faced the gathering and waved at them, strolling the aisle as the people congratulated them. Their wedding was the start of a lifetime of adventures. While the pages in their book of marriage filled with memories, there would also be hardships along the way.

Life was unpredictable, a journey down a bumpy road of many twists and turns. But no matter what tests their future held, Eva would keep her word and believed Andre would do the same.

As the crowd followed them to the limo, she looked above at the partly cloudy sky.

She prayed their marriage would survive.

• CHAPTER 1 •

Andre

Seven Years Later

Thirty-four-year-old Dr. Andre Lucas glanced at the wall clock in his clinic every two minutes. He hoped he'd finish treating his animal patients in time to meet his wife at The Redfish Grill, their favorite restaurant. Eva hated him being late for special occasions, and this year he wanted their wedding anniversary to be a moment neither of them would forget.

As he was in previous years, today he aimed to leave work earlier. Besides, after not being there during Eva's agony of childbirth, he owed it to her—big-time. He rushed into the hospital from the showering rain, worried sick about her and their child's health and well-being. Heavy bleeding and shortness of breath were major concerns. Her physician diagnosed her with amniotic

fluid embolism, a rare pregnancy complication. During her contractions, amniotic fluid entered her bloodstream, causing a life-threatening reaction. With only minutes to spare, doctors and nurses worked promptly to save his wife's life and the baby. Thankfully, the delivery worked out, and a year and four months ago, she bore him one incredible, little boy.

Andrew was an angel, always smiling and ready to give a hug to anyone. Their son was one of the best things he'd ever received, and he made it his mission to be the father he'd never had. His father—Derek Lucas, was African American, and his mother—Marie Morales, was Latina. But sometimes he wondered if they adopted him. He acted so much different from them.

His parents were drug addicts and shared a toxic relationship, which resulted in heated arguments and petty apologies. When he was five, his grandfather took custody of him, moving him from Philadelphia to his corn and livestock farm in Garden Ridge, North Carolina. Grandpa Ricardo told him he and Andre's mom were from a northwestern Mexican city called Chihuahua, like the small dog.

Andre and Eva visited the place for their honeymoon, but he wasn't thrilled about boarding a plane. Since he was a little boy, he had a fear of flying. His wife held his sweaty hand the whole two-hour flight there, comforting him when they flew against turbulence. It was easier for

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Eva though, who had flown with her mother to Garden Ridge from Seattle, Washington at the start of their freshmen year of high school.

This was when they met and became friends.

But their love hadn't happened instantly, at least, not for Eva. For a while, she had been drawn to a stellar point guard of the basketball team. His name was Caleb Williams, an attractive jock who was one of the most popular boys of Garden Ridge High School.

It wasn't until their senior year Andre told her how he felt about her. Neither with a date to the prom, they watched *The Grapes of Wrath*, played rounds of UNO, and ate dinner with his grandfather. Outside on the porch that night, Andre had talked to Eva about building a relationship with Jesus Christ.

He'd also told her she shouldn't feel like she had to be popular to be important because she already meant an awful lot to God and him. His kind words had made her cry, overwhelmed since ninth grade, the *one* guy who accepted her was under her nose the entire time.

Andre shuffled a stack of patient records, placed them in his folder, and put the folder into his leather briefcase. He glanced at the ticking wall clock above the wooden cabinets again. *Tick-tock . . . tick-tock . . . tick-tock . . .* It was six-thirty in the evening, and this morning at breakfast he said he'd meet Eva no later than seven tonight. He fastened the latches of his briefcase and toted it along his

side, hustling toward the exit door.

A small knock on the front door froze him.

Andre sighed and glanced over his shoulder at the entrance. *Oh, no. Not again.* He flared his nostrils and opened the door. “Yes?” His tone was flat and weary.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Lucas,” Mrs. Witherspoon said with an embarrassed look, holding her two-year-old son Tyler on her hip. “Emily wouldn’t stop crying until I brought her here again.”

Andre gritted his teeth and scratched his temple. With Eva on his case about managing his time and working late, he wasn’t in the mood for a last-minute checkup. He looked at the nine-year-old girl in a lavender T-shirt and jean jumper dress, standing in front of her mother. Except for her two ponytails and bulky eyeglasses, Emily was the spitting image of her mom.

He imagined her in her puffy, flower girl dress and white rose crown when she was two and couldn’t help but smile. In her arms, she cradled Halo—an orange, seven-weeks-old tabby kitten.

Emily raised her head, her rosy cheeks stained with fresh tears. After three times in a row, Andre understood her obsessed checkups. Her former cat Mittens died in a roadkill accident.

Since she was six, Mittens was Emily’s best friend, and her death to a taxi broke the little girl’s heart for weeks. Recently, her mom bought her a new kitten for acing her

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fourth-grade spelling test in school. Emily named it Halo because the fur on top of the kitten's head glows in the sunlight.

Andre thought the name suited the endearing little tiger, and being as sensitive about animals as she was, he couldn't turn the child away. At the same time, he wanted to relieve Emily of her anxiety and save her the trouble of making unnecessary doctor visits.

Emily sniffled. "Dr. Lucas, Halo is sick."

Andre angled his head and sighed. "Okay. Bring him to my exam table."

Emily and her mom entered the air-conditioned office.

"Thanks for letting us in, doctor." Mrs. Witherspoon sat in a chair and adjusted her sleepy toddler son from her hip to her lap. Her daughter Emily placed her kitten on the exam table in the center of the small room.

Andre released the heavy door and let it close itself. "So, what's the problem?" He walked over to the feline and stood across the table from Emily.

"Umm . . ." Emily nibbled her lip, trying to think of another excuse.

"How about I give Halo a complete exam?" Andre glanced at her mother, and they shared an amused smile, each knowing there was more than likely nothing wrong with Halo again. But if it would ease a little girl's nerves and help her feel better, Andre figured another checkup

before his next annual couldn't hurt.

Emily's face brightened. "Okay."

Andre stroked Halo's head and the back of his fur coat, inspecting for fleas. "Hey, Halo. It's nice to see you again. Your coat looks clean and beautiful. Do you mind if I check your eyes and ears, buddy?" He opened a side drawer of his counter behind him and pulled out his exam instruments.

Emily watched as Andre checked Halo's eyes and ears.

Halo meowed when Andre removed an otoscope from its right ear.

"Looks like his eyes and ears are healthy," Andre said. "No retinal damage, and no ear mites or signs of infection."

"What about his heartbeat, Dr. Lucas?" Emily asked.

Andre smiled. "All right, let me have a listen here." He unclipped his stethoscope from his hip holder and plugged the earpieces in his ears. Andre held the metal diaphragm over Halo's chest, listening to the kitten's heart and lungs. "Halo's heart sounds like a steady beating drum. And I heard no sign of congestion." He linked the earpieces around his neck.

"That's good," Mrs. Witherspoon said. "Emily complained about Halo's breathing before at home. I caught her sleeping by his kennel in the kitchen yesterday morning."

"Hmmm . . ." Andre arched his brow and snapped on

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latex gloves. “Well, let’s check Halo’s mouth, shall we?”

“Okay,” Emily said with a half-shrug.

Andre opened Halo’s mouth and examined the kitten’s tiny white teeth, tongue, and tonsils “Nope. No signs of cleft palates or inflammation. Everything looks good.”

Halo meowed again as Andre picked up the squirmy critter and felt around the kitten’s abdomen. “No signs of umbilical hernia. I guess there’s one thing left to check.” Andre put Halo on the table, raised his tail and coated the kitten’s rectum with Vaseline from a jar. Finally, he inserted a baby thermometer to check Halo’s temperature.

The thermometer chirped.

Andre removed it from Halo and read the digital degrees. “His temperature is . . . a hundred and one point five, which is normal for kittens—unlike humans. Halo’s healthy as a horse and caught up with his vaccinations according to my records. No worries here.”

“I told her, doctor.” Mrs. Witherspoon wrapped a lock of her straight, blonde hair behind an ear and rocked Tyler in her arms.

“Here, you go.” Andre smiled and handed Halo back to the little girl, who held him in her arms.

“Thank you, Dr. Lucas.” Emily grinned hard, revealing her missing front tooth. She scratched her fingers behind Halo’s pointed ears, making him purr.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” Andre replied, smiling, “but try not to worry yourself. Sometimes we can think

something is wrong to the point we expect to find something. I know you're scared something bad will happen to Halo. But if you take good care of your kitten—which you clearly have been doing—Halo should be fine, okay?"

Emily nodded and wiggled her glasses up her nose. "Yes, Dr. Lucas."

Her mom stood with Tyler in her arms, who was still fast asleep, sucking his thumb. She smiled and held out a hand. "Thank you, Dr. Lucas, for your patience."

Andre grinned and shook her hand. "No, problem, Mrs. Witherspoon."

Mrs. Witherspoon watched Emily walk a distance away toward the entrance door and whispered, "I'm sorry we bothered you. I know you have special plans tonight."

Andre waved a hand and smiled. "That's okay. I understand Emily well. I was close to animals as a kid too. It's why I became a veterinarian."

"You know," Mrs. Witherspoon said, "it's her dad. He gave her Mittens on her sixth birthday, and she misses him, but she isn't alone. I can't wait until Neal can visit home. Every day I hope and pray he's safe." She sighed wistfully. "You're lucky to have the one you love close to home."

"No, Mrs. Witherspoon . . . I'm blessed," Andre corrected. "I hope everything goes well with Neal's visit."

"Thank you," Mrs. Witherspoon said, smiling, "and happy anniversary to you and Eva."

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Andre's expression glowed. "Thanks. Have a good evening."

"You too." Mrs. Witherspoon turned her attention to her daughter. "Let's go, Emily. I need to get groceries at the store." She walked toward Emily and exited the office.

Andre pulled his cell phone out of his lab coat pocket. He dialed the number of the flower shop he ordered roses from for Eva. They were to arrive at their home in the afternoon, and he hoped his wife didn't go shopping or anywhere else after leaving work at the daycare. It would be terrible if the flowers got stolen.

They cost fifty bucks.

Someone answered his call.

"Hello, my name is Andre Lucas. I ordered a bouquet of white roses to one-forty-three Pasture Road. Have they delivered? . . . They have? . . . Great, thank you."

Andre ended the call and glanced at the ceiling. "God, please let Eva get them. I work so hard for my money." He checked the wall clock for one last time.

6:38 p.m.

Meeting deadlines had always been a struggle for him, especially when it came to spending private time with his wife. Somehow, he had to keep his promise. He needed to prove to Eva he meant those vows to love, comfort, and honor her always, and he had faith in God's sovereign power of wondrous miracles.

Anything was possible to those that believed, even if one doesn't know how the result will turn out. Andre grabbed his briefcase and rushed out of his office, striving to fulfill his wife's expectations.

Not showing up could break Eva's heart forever.

• CHAPTER 2 •

Eva

Same Evening

Thirty-three-year-old Eva Lucas sniffed the fresh-cut, white roses in the vase and placed them on the dresser in their bedroom. A gentle smile inched up her face and traveled to the deep walls of her heart as she read the small, greeting card:

Whether near or apart, you'll be the only girl who holds the key to my heart. Happy Anniversary to the most beautiful woman I know!

Love you forever,

Andre

Her husband was always sweet and kind to her since they first met in high school. She could still picture the teenaged boy he was. Buried in a gray, oversized, 76ers

sweatshirt with knee-grass-stained, denim jeans, he helped her open her locker. After she moved from Seattle, being a new, shy student in a different school was difficult. But meeting Andre on her way to Mrs. Chapman's ninth-grade English class was one of the best times of her life. Since then, it began a friendship that grew stronger each summer vacation they had spent together.

They shared many similarities the more they knew each other. They both were biracial, caught in the middle of failed relationships, and moved away from the city to North Carolina. She didn't know he did chores early in the morning on a farm before school. But based on his clothes, she presumed he was careless of his appearance or wore his older brothers' hand-me-downs.

When her mother Melanie was seventeen, she met Andrew Martello, a young, Italian landscape artist during a college summer trip to Rome. Their relationship started through their artwork, but they quickly fell in love with each other. Holding strong traditions, Andrew's mama disapproved of him getting involved with a black woman.

After the breakup, her mom returned to the States a broke, pregnant art student who had no clue where neither she nor her baby's life was going. Eva grew up living on welfare, but her mother's skilled hand and artistic talent also helped them through poverty. Eva walked over to the front of the queen-sized bed, wrapped in her lilac, downy robe. Piles of fashionable dresses on hangers lay

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across, covering the bed's comforter. Although Eva was a shopaholic, tonight finding the right outfit was like trying to pull a stubborn tooth. She tucked her left forearm under her right elbow and nibbled her index fingernail, scanning her row of best outfits.

"Hmm . . ." Eva shifted her eyes from her black, maxi dress to her peach wrap dress her co-worker Louise bought for her birthday. Either of these would be perfect, but she couldn't choose between them.

"Mrs. Flowers! Can you come here, please?" Eva called.

Mrs. Violet Flowers was their next-door neighbor across the street from them. She was a heavysset woman who embraced her African heritage. Her gray hair stayed in a braided crown bun. Being a widow, she appreciated getting company from the Lucas family.

"Yes?" The elderly woman waddled through the door in a long, silky, purple-and-yellow kaftan dress and strap sandals.

Eva sighed and rounded her shoulders. "I can't decide what to wear."

Mrs. Flowers jerked her head back and chuckled. "What? You have enough clothes to open a store. You ought to be able to find something nice." She tilted her head and studied Eva, as if she were scrutinizing her inner soul. "It's nerves, honey. You and Andre ain't been out to dinner in a while."

Eva slumped her shoulders with an exhale and glanced

at Mrs. Flowers with a wry smile.

This was true.

Aside from a light goodnight kiss, there wasn't much time for her and Andre to do anything special together after their busy schedules. Since their son was born, they were always tired, rushing to get shuteye before Andrew awoke them for a bottle-feeding or changing.

"I guess I'm a bit nervous." Eva raked a hand through her wet, shoulder-length tendrils. She sighed again. "I thought to wear my black or peach dress. What do you think?" She held each dress by its hanger and placed them against her average height, petite frame, switching between them.

"Well . . ." Mrs. Flowers curled her upper lip. "I like the peach better, but the material's kinda thin and you may be chilly without a light sweater. The weatherman said it's supposed to be cool with clear skies tonight." She shrugged. "How about you wear your wedding dress?"

"My wedding dress?" Eva raised her brow and chuckled. "It's been seven years, Mrs. Flowers. I'm not sure if I can fit it anymore."

Mrs. Flowers sucked her teeth and waved a hand. "Oh, please, honey girl. You don't look like you've gained a pound since Andy was born."

A light bulb lit above Eva's head. "Andy! He's by himself. We're in here talking and he—"

"Don't worry," Mrs. Flowers said, raising her hands

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and interrupting Eva's nervous jabbering, "that little fellow ain't wandering anywhere. He's in his playpen busy as a little bee."

Relief suffused Eva's features. "Oh, good."

"Now you get dressed while I go downstairs and warm Andy some mini ravioli."

Eva smiled. "All right, but don't do the dishes. I'll get them when we come back!"

Mrs. Flowers exited and closed the door.

Eva walked to the large closet and slid hanging clothes on the rack bar. She found her old wedding dress in the back covered in plastic. Eva pulled it out and studied it for a moment, teary-eyed. Through the years, she marveled how their life had fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

With her husband's well-paying job, they never worried about providing their daily needs or keeping up with bills. They were also fortunate to have their beautiful home, and Grandpa Ricardo, a caring patriarch who was always there if they needed him. Finally, they had their adorable son Andrew who was a special gift and the latest chapter in their lives.

She removed the wrinkled plastic and stroked her hand on the shiny, smooth material. The last time she touched it was after she and Andre returned home from their honeymoon, and she washed and hung it in the closet. Feeling her dress brought back good memories, memories she was sure she and her husband would never

forget. For a whole week, she and Andre vacationed in Chihuahua, Mexico, staying in the Wingate hotel. They played golf at the San Francisco Country Club and ate fine dining at the 'Època restaurant. But Eva's favorite spot was touring the breathtaking Copper Canyon. She smiled and giggled, remembering the first night of their honeymoon.

Excited about their married life, Andre had hurried their luggage like a silly klutz into their room. With an amused smile, Eva propped her head with a hand and waited for him on the luxurious, king-sized bed. As the last tote bag slid off Andre's shoulder, he caught his breath, holding her gaze. His lopsided grin was priceless, closing the door behind him with his foot for their privacy.

Finally alone, their wedding day had struck home, and they took the golden opportunity given them. It was already dark by the time they flew into Mexico, and they couldn't think of a better time to carry out their romance. Eva had melted in Andre's affection. The second his arms embraced her; she knew she had a gem.

When their bodies joined, their hearts sang in perfect harmony. Eva closed her eyes and sighed, brushing her dress against her cheek. Because neither of them had experienced it before, she had cherished their first time most of all. Eva's iPhone on the dresser rang, interrupting her muse. "Oh, hello?"

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“Hey, it’s me, Andre. I’m calling to let you know I’ve closed my clinic and I’m about to get to the parking lot.”

Eva grinned and played with her damp, wavy, long hair. “Okay. So, how was work?”

“Perfect.” Andre sighed and paused before making his next comment. “Emily came with her new kitten again.”

Eva angled her head and turned down her mouth. “Aww . . . poor little girl.”

“Yeah,” Andre said, “but hopefully it’ll be for the last time until necessary. I talked with her to resolve her problem. So, did you get the roses I ordered you?”

“Yes—” Eva handled one of the roses and sniffed it—“and I got the note you sent with them. It was thoughtful, considering the fact the delivery man sent me the wrong bouquet on our wedding day. They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Andre said. “You know, I’ve got another gift for you too.”

Eva beamed. “Really? What is it?”

Andre laughed. “Do you think I’m gonna tell you over the phone? It’s a surprise. I’ll show you at dinner.”

“But—”

“Eva,” Andre interrupted sternly, “you’ll get it at the restaurant.”

Eva giggled. “Okay, I’ll wait.” She untied the strap of her robe. “Well, I’ve freshened up, and I’m about to get dressed. Mrs. Flowers is already here to babysit Andy.”

“Okey-dokey. I’ll see you soon.”

Eva sulked and cleared her throat. “Humph, I hope so, *Dr. Lucas.*”

“Honey, please, don’t talk like that. I’ll be there, okay? No more excuses.”

Eva sighed over the line and made a half-shrug. “Sure, okay.”

Her husband broke the silence between them. “*Bebe, te amo . . . tanto.*”

Eva found another smile and blushed. She always liked when he spoke in Spanish to her. “I love you too . . . but please, don’t be late again. It’s so embarrassing.”

Andre chuckled over the phone line. “I won’t I promise. Goodbye.”

“Bye. Love you!” Eva pressed the end-call button. She exited the master bedroom and skipped down the hallway into the bathroom. Born with her father’s good hair, Eva blow-dried and styled hers in a matter of minutes. When she finished, she returned to the bedroom. Her wedding dress fit her like a glove, so Mrs. Flowers was right about her not gaining much weight.

Of course, it wasn’t a surprise. Eva had always been thin as Olive Oyl since she was a small child. Her mother worried she wasn’t eating enough and always packed her two bologna sandwiches in her school lunch instead of one. Times were tough back then and made her more appreciate what she had now.

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Ironically, she had a big appetite for a person so little, and especially for pasta and seafood. Eva dropped her cell phone in her leopard clutch purse and snapped it. She took a last look at herself in the dresser's oval mirror and fingered a couple of loose strands of her hair into place.

Then she trotted downstairs to the first floor of the house. In the living room, an episode of *Barefoot Contessa* was on the flat screen above the electric brick fireplace. Mrs. Flowers enjoyed watching her cooking shows on Food Network whenever she was over at their home.

"I'm ready," Eva announced, strolling into the kitchen. She found Mrs. Flowers standing in front of the double-basin sink.

Andrew was sitting in his blue highchair, eating his small plastic bowl of Chef Boyardee's ravioli. Tomato sauce stained his cheeks and 'Daddy Loves Me' bib, but after many failed tactics and tantrums, Eva was just glad he wasn't using his hands. She gasped with enthusiasm, her hand over her heart. "Is my little Andy using a spoon?"

"Mm-hmm," Mrs. Flowers said over her shoulder, washing out one of Andy's sippy cups with a scrub brush. "Andy and I had a little one-on-one talk about using good table manners."

"You're growing into a big boy," Eva said, smiling at her son.

"Raa-vee! Raa-vee!" Andrew grinned and tapped his saucy spoon on the tray of his highchair.

“Yes, I see,” Eva said with a grin, nodding. “Is it good?”

Andrew ate another spoonful and jiggled like he’d gotten an electric shock. “Mmm, Mommy . . .”

Eva and Mrs. Flowers laughed at the little boy’s wit. Although he couldn’t speak too many words, he was an intelligent toddler who understood what others were saying to him. Eva glanced away from Andrew, realizing Mrs. Flowers was washing the dishes.

She frowned and walked to the old woman, her hands on her hips. “Oh, Mrs. Flowers . . . I told you I’ll get them when Andre and I come back home.”

“It’s all right, Eva,” Mrs. Flowers said, focused on her scrubbing, “staying busy helps me forget.”

Eva dropped her shoulders, sighing. She knew what Mrs. Flowers meant by her remark. She was talking about her husband Clyde, the one and only lover in her lifetime. Two years ago, he was called home after a lost battle with Alzheimer’s disease. He was a veteran of the Korean War who enlisted after high school.

Clyde sent money to Mrs. Flowers and her family to help save their farm. Often Mrs. Flowers told Eva long past stories of their young courtship and how she never stopped waiting for her war hero’s return. Eva wrapped an arm around the old woman’s shoulders. “I’m sorry. Mr. Clyde was a good man. I know his loss is tough for you.”

“Yes, very. I still miss him,” Mrs. Flowers said. “You

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know, true love never dies. One might try to replace it with other things or people, but it never dies." She felt tears form in her eyes and blinked them back. "Well, I don't want to spoil your happy day. You and Andre enjoy yourselves." She patted Eva's arm around her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Flowers. I appreciate your kind help. Good night." Eva turned her attention to Andrew. "Good night, baby. Be good for Mommy, okay?" She kissed the top of her son's curly black hair and added, "Oh, make sure you call if you need me for anything. My cell number's on the refrigerator."

"Girl, if you don't get outta here—you know I always do," Mrs. Flowers said, smiling.

Eva giggled. "Okay, take care." She exited the house. Outside gripping the gold knob, she placed her other hand to her stomach. A bad, queasy feeling caught her off guard, like a foul smell down a country road, making her feel like throwing up.

She took a deep breath of the cool air and locked the front door. *Don't embarrass me, Andre. Please, be on time.*

• CHAPTER 3 •

Andre

Andre barged through the swing exit door of Pet Friends Veterinary Clinic and felt a drizzle tap his forehead. Thunder crackled and rolled in the distance. He paused in his tracks and frowned at the sky. Giant, thick clouds smothered the fiery sunset, casting a shadowy, gloom over the wide parking lot.

A thunderstorm? Though a forty-percent chance was in effect, the weatherman was wrong this time. Andre took a long breath of the damp, earthy air. His heart skipped a beat. He had to get to the restaurant before it rained. He left his umbrella home, and the last thing he wanted was to arrive with his navy tuxedo soaked, not to mention double pneumonia.

Andre jogged toward his 2017 blue velvet Chevy Impala and unlocked the doors with his keychain remote. He plopped in the driver's seat and shut the door. Andre

EVA'S PROMISE

let out a sigh, slipped his cell phone out of his hip holster, and placed it in the car holder clipped to an air vent. More thunder clashed, startling him as he pressed the six-speed engine button. Lightning flashed twice behind the monstrous clouds, giving a quick illusion of a bright summer morning. Andre buckled his seatbelt and glanced at the clock on the panel screen of his car.

6:43 p.m.

Time was always a key factor, wondering and questioning if he trusted God enough to have another child. Would he finally take a leap of faith? He couldn't disappoint his wife again, and he wouldn't. He hadn't told her all his romantic plans for them, but after dinner, she would find out in the hotel suite he booked for them. There were seven minutes to spare. Maybe he wouldn't be late. Andre shifted the gearstick in reverse, speeding out the parking space.

But he was too late.

Steady rain pitter-pattered the windshield and sunroof of his car, blurring his view. Andre turned on the wipers and stared hopelessly, clutching the steering wheel. Ever since he got his license at eighteen, he never liked driving in the rain, but within seconds, the dry road across from him became a slick, black stream. *Please, God, not again.* From his wedding anniversary to his son's baby milestones, his number of tardies was ridiculous.

He hoped Eva and Andrew knew how much he loved

them, and how important they were to him.

Andre bit his lip and shifted into drive, cruising down the sloped, paved entrance to the clinic. He glanced up Lime Street, his attention caught by a long line of several cars and blowing horns.

Traffic was jam-packed.

Just great. Andre gritted his teeth. With the weather against him and traffic crowded, going the longer route was the only option. He turned onto Colonel Highway, taking a backcountry road. He rode past his grandfather's farmhouse and nearby cornfields. As he made a sharp, smooth turn onto Pasture Road, he flicked on his high beams to better see the flooded street.

Andre drove by a yellow deer sign and the old Thomas family's place, the rugged remains of a small, wooden shack. Fifty years ago, it caught fire after a lightning bolt struck the rooster wind vane during a thunderstorm. Its roof had collapsed from the burning flames, but the ancient house was still standing despite the tragic disaster.

Andre's mobile phone in the holder vibrated. He stole a glance at his cell while steering his wheel.

Eva sent a text message: *Please hurry. I'm hungry. Waiting @ The Redfish Grill.*

Andre replied via Bluetooth, keeping his hand on the wheel: *On my way. Love you!*

He peeked at the clock.

Five minutes to seven.

EVA'S PROMISE

Andre's smile dropped as he looked up from his phone again. In the burst of lightning, a deer leaped in front of his vehicle in the middle of the street. He gasped and stomped on his brake, his heart pounding against his ribcage. His tires squealed, sliding into the white-tailed animal.

"Aaaah!" Andre closed his eyes tightly, gripped the wheel, and braced himself for the collision. There was a hefty thump of an impact. The deer smashed through the windshield and knocked Andre in his head. Shattered glass flew inside the car's interior. He slumped over in his seat and lost control of the wheel. The car swerved and scraped against the metal guardrail.

Sparks sputtered from the railing as the car screeched off the road and crashed into a neighbor's front yard tree. Thick, gray smoke spewed from the crushed car like carbonated fizz down a shaken-up soda can. Andre's eyes were open, nothing more than slits.

His vision blurred at the lifeless touchscreen between the front air vents. His body was stiff and ached with excruciating pain, leaning against the passenger seat. He squirmed and attempted to straighten himself, but the deer's weight on his lap pinned him down.

Andre winced and exhaled shallow breaths in a panic. He reached a cut, bleeding hand to his crown and felt a deep gash on his head. Andre studied his hand and nearly fainted from the sight of his blood.

“Help . . . somebody . . . help me,” he said breathlessly. No one could hear him. Except for the thunder and rain pelting his car, he heard nothing. It seemed all hope was lost. After waiting for what felt like infinity, someone knocked and shined a flashlight on his face inside the car.

“Hold on, sir! We’re gonna get you out!” a policeman said, his voice muffled against the passenger window. The officer spoke to his colleagues and walked off from the car wreckage. Fire truck and ambulance sirens rang and approached the accident scene. Motor equipment zoomed off, and metal bent and broke apart as personnel of firefighters rescued him.

Breathing heavily, Andre moaned and fluttered his eyes at the bright lights of the emergency vehicles, raising his bloody hand to his face.

In an instant, his whole life flashed before him: his drug addict parents arguing over him in their rundown apartment, his five-year-old self playing on the tire swing at his grandpa’s farm, his school and college graduations, he and Eva’s first kiss on their wedding day and flight to Mexico, and Andrew’s birth when he first held his son. Tears fell from the corners of his eyes, silently mouthing his lips.

Words had become harder to grasp. He was a fish without water. He wanted to speak again—to call for help, his thoughts and memories slipping away like sand flowing through an hourglass.

EVA'S PROMISE

But as gentle as wind, darkness settled in and would remain for weeks.

END OF NOVEL EXCERPT