CHAPTER 1

Nothing in the world could have prepared Jeremiah Blades for the loss of his young, golden-haired wife, Eve, and the broken heart that followed.

In May 1970 Eve gave birth to their only son Gideon. But instead of riding his Hog back to their New Hampshire cabin and having a full and restful celebratory sleep, which was what he knew damn well he should have done, Jeremiah turned west and walked down the block to a local tavern where, instead of handing out cigars, he talked and drank too much with a woman whose name he never asked, and whose overpowering perfume, mixed with the disorienting effects of hard liquor, numbed his conscience within minutes. Confronted with the reality of being a father and the seductive flattery of a professional barfly, he threw back a pint of Jack Daniels a jigger at a time and told her he loved her. She asked him, “Shouldn’t you go home?” and he said, "Yes, I should, but I don't want to." Then through blurring eyes he declared, “I want you; I want you so bad.” With that, she took him by the hand and led him out the door of the bar.

And so, for the price of that left turn down the street and an unplanned night with a stranger, Jeremiah lost everything. Wound up a patient in I.C.U. the next morning in

the same hospital as Eve, the victim of a thieving hooker and a run-in with the grill of a newly polished black Cadillac.

When Eve heard about her husband's accident, she was frightened for him at first. Then she was puzzled, quickly turned suspicious, and finally, morphed from an expletive-spewing woman scorned to a calm and calculating follower of Zen. She hung around long enough to be certain that Jeremiah was not going to die from his injuries, and once she was assured by the doctors that he would recover fully— this barely two weeks after he had become a father —Eve announced she was calling it quits and leaving town. Said she was taking the baby and a few of her things and heading for the miasmic, psychedelic kaleidoscope that is California. To “find myself,” she said.

“Eve, I screwed up,” Jeremiah pleaded. “Please, don’t go.”

“Screwed up, screwed her . . . You made a fool of me, J. Everything was there for us, and you blew it.”

“I’ll make it up to you, Eve, I promise. There’s no need to trip out and leave me behind.”

“It’s an individual journey now, Jeremiah,” she said. “I don’t have to trip out and leave you behind, you’re right; I don’t have to drop out and turn on and live in a commune to be able to articulate who and what I am, either. But it’ll help.”

“Eve, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m begging you, don’t go.”

With a touch of scorn in her voice, Eve said, “Look, Jeremiah, I’m grateful for the time we’ve had together. I really am. It’s been a groovy trip. And I don’t know if you can get behind what I’m about to say or not, but you fucking that hooker isn’t why I’m splitting. It only served to open my eyes to a reality I was missing. I’m saying goodbye be-

cause if I stay I won't be anything but an appeaser. I won't be your old lady; I'll just be a legal whore. I'm like you; I need space. I need to be free."

Soon after that, Eve was free. As in, dead. Forever young.

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These days— or rather, nights —Jeremiah saw her face in every star. He heard her voice in every swish of the wind through the branches of the trees. Nothing about the distance of seventeen years had diminished his sense of loss or eased the pain that living without his Eve and Gideon had brought. He thought about them every day and night and suffered immeasurably, it seemed, for his sin. Yet, he was growing tired of missing Eve, growing tired of aching for her; the loneliness had made an aging hippie even older. It was his gone-in-time son he yearned to see again. Eve's ghost came to visit frequently, but it was the hypnotic dream of someday reuniting with his son that got him out of bed in the morning. He knew that somewhere out there Gideon was still alive. Eve, forever young and forever gone, was not. Were it not for her ghost he might have forgotten her completely by now. Not stopped loving her; just put her out of his mind as permanently as it was possible to put a dead lover. Not once in all the years since Eve had left had Jeremiah slept well; rarely did he make it through the night without waking at least once. Tonight was no exception.

As he stumbled down the dusty wooden stairs to the basement and its awful, eerie silence, Jeremiah felt agitated, irritable; there was something different in the musty basement air this time, something more than the thump that had woken him at first.

"Eve?" he called down the dark stairs. "Eve, is that you?" He flicked on the light.

No one answered. Jeremiah assumed it was Eve he had heard upstairs in his half-sleep, but now he was starting to doubt himself. Eve rarely left physical evidence of her ghostly visits, yet her afterimage always coerced him back into bed, retracting his legs with a satisfied grunt, as she lay there beside him, transparent, content in her own form of sleep to say without saying it, *C'mon, Jeremiah. Let's make love*.

Perhaps, after all these years, she was on the move again, restless, trying to tell him something. Ghosts have no sense of direction or time, he reminded himself, especially sad, confused ones. Eve had always been afraid of the dark and couldn't find her ass with both hands when she was alive, so it made sense that her spirit had taken a wrong turn down the basement stairs in the middle of the night and panicked. What scared him was knowing that it probably wasn't Eve at all- he had always assumed her visits were a manifestation of his troubled mind and the residual effects of what he euphemistically referred to as his "voluntary indulgence in the chemical experiments of the 60s." More likely, it was some demented, homicidal crack addict breaking into the house to take whatever he could find and sell it to supply his drug habit, or it might have been Antoine's men.

"Eve?" he called.

No answer.

"Eve?"

Tentatively, he took a step, stopped; took another, stopped; and slowly made his way down the stairs one step at a time, the old wooden treads creaking under his weight as he cautiously descended into the darkness of the basement.

"Eve, if that's you, give me a sign, baby. Say something."

Stupid, he thought. *If she was going to say anything, she'd have said it by now*.

Hesitantly, he took another step, then another, then another. When he reached the base of the stairs he took hold of a dry, dusty length of two-by-four leaning against the cinderblock wall, just in case.

Not once in seventeen years of erratic visitations had Eve ever appeared suddenly to frighten him into bulging eyes and trembling lips. Maybe he deserved to be terrorized; maybe she ought to have had him stuttering at her gauzy grey image, begging for forgiveness and frightened out of his shorts. But that was not her *modus operandi*. Instead, she usually appeared in their bedroom at the foot of their big brass bed, grinning coyly.

"Eve, is that really you?" he had asked the first time she appeared, a year after her death.

"Yes," she said, coming toward him and reaching for him with her wispy, diaphanous hands. "I've come back to be with you, Jeremiah."

Jeremiah rubbed his unbelieving eyes. "No. No, you haven't. I'm dreaming, that's what it is." He shook his head to clear it. "God, what am I doing dreaming about *her*?"

Then he felt the misty chill of her touch on his bare shoulder; he could have sworn he detected the sweet aroma of marijuana wafting from the image standing before him. "Oh, Jeremiah," she said, "you have no idea. Forever is an unbelievably long time." She sat on the edge of the bed without making a dent in the mattress, as weightless as a breath. "The truth is, baby, I'm terribly lonely without you."

"But you *can't* be with me, Eve. You're— you're dead."

“That's not true. I can never be dead.”

Then she bared her transparent, lovingly sinister smile. That should have been enough to send him running for the front door, screaming down the middle of the winding dark road until he was out of breath, exhausted, lying in a ditch, pale and shattered. But if that was the effect she had intended, it didn’t work. Instead, Jeremiah put on his tattered robe and went outside for a long slow walk in the chilly night. Eventually, he caught up with himself and walked back to the cabin, albeit tentatively, and shut and locked the front door. Convinced it was all his chemically tainted imagination, he went back into the bedroom, dropped his robe on the floor, and threw himself on their stale, sticky bed, cowering with his head under the pillows. “Please, Eve,” he begged her as she filtered through the footboard, “leave me alone!”

“But I don’t want to, Jeremiah,” she whispered seductively. “I want to be with you. I miss you.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t! You’re not even real. You’re just a memory.”

Then he sensed her sliding in between the unwashed sheets next to him, pressing her cold foggy body against his, cooing in his ear, slipping her long transparent fingers between his legs, and taking breezy hold of him. Horrified, and yet drawn to her by the irresistible power of her memory, he tried at first not to want her; he tried to resist her. But when he turned to see the pleasure in her eyes, knowing that for strictly carnal and ghostly reasons she had taken a shortcut through time and headed him off before the years had had a chance to wear down his muscles and soften his bones, he gave in. She handed him his life as it was before he ran it through the afterburners of the 1960s and into the void of the decades that followed.

“I want to make love with you,” she cooed. “I really, *really* do.”

Then a damp, slippery feeling awakened every nerve ending in his body; his pulse quickened, he warmed and swelled to meet her. In a kind of psychotropic maneuver he pushed through Eve’s ghostly, lithe body and imagined he could feel himself inside her.

Suddenly, after way too short a time, his eyes flashed open- as they always had when she was alive, just when the passion boiled over and he found himself wondering yet again who *was* the beauty and who the beast -and he realized he was awake, dry humping the pillow and sweating profusely. On all fours in the middle of the bed over no one, he collapsed under the weight of his own sheer idiocy, the supreme humiliation of nocturnal desperation, and acknowledged once more his stultifying, debilitating fear of loneliness- a fear so real it was as if he were a fugitive running from a sure death sentence.

Without exception, every visit since that night had been the same. Until tonight.

The basement, lit dimly, was musty and still. There were no open windows, no rustling noises in the shadows, nothing out of order.

Jeremiah sat on the old vinyl couch across from the water heater and surveyed the basement in its pale yellow light. He thought about Howard Turnbull’s sudden and wholly unexpected appearance at his doorstep that morning. Somehow he knew tha Howard and the strange noises down in the basement tonight- Eve or some other ghost -were connected.