

## Chapter One of *The Garden of Eve*, by K.L. Going

### PRELUDE

"Once there was a beautiful garden."

"Like our garden?"

"Almost, but so much bigger."

"Were there trees? Like Father grows? Or just fruits and vegetables?"

"Every kind of tree grew in the garden. There were Maple trees and Oak trees. Fig trees and olive trees. There were orange trees and . . ."

"Apple trees!"

"Yes, apple trees."

"What kind of animals were there?"

"Oh, more than I could name before bedtime. Let's see. There were tigers and rhinoceroses and brilliant white unicorns . . ."

"Unicorns aren't real. Father said so. He says none of your stories are true because if magic were real you wouldn't be sick."

"Is that what Father says? Well, I'll tell you a secret, but you musn't tell anyone else."

"What secret?"

"Father doesn't know everything. He doesn't even know enough to come inside for stories at night and that is very important, now isn't it?"

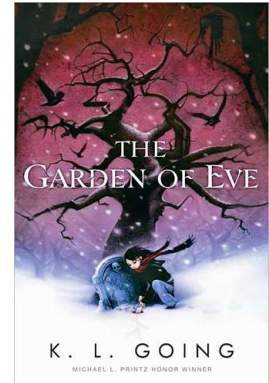
"Yes. Very."

"But you know what? Someday, even Father might find a magical garden."

"Would he take us to see it?"

"He'd bring you, Evie. Father always remembers you, even when it seems like he's forgotten."

"And will he bring you, too?"



“Maybe. Or maybe I will already be there, waiting where the grass is green and the trees are always in bloom, and the cherry tree petals blow along on the wind like the rain.”

“Mom? Was there really a Garden of Eden? Not a story, but an actual place?”

“That all depends on whether you believe. Some people say there was a real garden, but it withered up and blew away. Other people say it was a story. A few people think it still exists, but no one knows for sure.”

“What do you think?”

“Me? I think a real garden would be pretty overgrown by now, wouldn’t it? So maybe someday we’ll each find our own perfect garden instead.”

“But how will we get there?”

“That’s a good question. Maybe we can only go to our garden after we die. Perhaps that’s why we’re not allowed to live forever.”

“Will you die?”

“Yes. We all will someday.”

“Will you find a beautiful garden, Mom?”

“I hope so, Evie.”

“Then I will meet you there. And I will bring Father with me even if he doesn’t believe in perfect gardens and wants to weed instead.”

“Okay, that’s a good plan, but you should only come when it’s the right time. Until then, help Father here with his garden. Promise?”

“Well . . .”

“You must.”

“Okay. I promise.”

But behind her back, Evie crossed her fingers.

Three Years Later . . .

## Chapter One - The Fork in the Road

The final bend on the last road would take them to Beaumont. Father wanted to go straight but there was a fork in the road, so he stopped their old truck, packed full of their belongings, and got out to stare down each darkened, narrow lane. Maybe they were lost and they'd have to turn around and go home to Michigan.

Evie hoped they were lost.

She rolled down the window despite the cold. "Let's go back," she called, but as she said it Father took several steps forward and disappeared into the thick fog. Evie waited, and when he didn't answer she sat up straight in the front seat, her heart pounding in her chest. She pushed at the door, but just as it opened Father reappeared piece by piece, his solid figure emerging from the deep gray.

"Can't tell which way to go," he said, coming back to the truck and leaning on the edge of her open window. He was wearing his padded gardening jacket and thick leather gloves, but his cheeks were red and the skin around his beard was wind burned already. Cold filled the truck. "Fog's too thick, and I sure don't remember there being a fork in the road."

He scratched his chin and took the crumpled directions from his jacket pocket. He'd gotten them months ago before he'd visited the property, scribbling them onto the back of a grocery list because it had been nearest to the telephone. *Milk, eggs, peanut butter, whole wheat bread, take Route 71 east until you reach exit 7, then go 70 miles on Route 77...*

Evie brought her knees up to her chest and shivered in the late October air. Her pant legs rode up her ankles, letting the cold sting her bare skin. The pants were too short, but they were the last ones her mom would ever buy her - the last of her pretty clothes with no grass stains on the knees from rolling down hills or holes in the sides from catching on thorns. She wouldn't get rid of them no matter how small they got. She'd tried to stop growing instead, but it hadn't worked. Her legs were long and gangly, like a boy's.

Evie pulled her socks up as high as they would go and tugged at her winter coat to bring it lower. She peered down each road, only they both looked the same. Nothing but trees on every side stretching as far as the eye could see - a thick forest between two great mountain ridges. The day was bleak, and the trees stood like sentries standing guard.

The truck door opened and Evie's father slid back into the driver's seat.

“I wrote down ‘straight’,” he said, pointing toward the crumpled paper. “I’m certain it was straight until town. It’s the strangest thing.”

Evie twisted her hair into a curl, but it fell flat again as soon as she let go. Mom’s had never done that. She sighed, and a flock of crows lifted up at once, as if released by her breath. They spiraled into the fog and their calls filled the air like a thunderous warning.

Evie shivered.

“We should go home,” she said again. “We must have made a wrong turn.” She thought over the drive from Michigan to New York, and each turn seemed like a wrong turn. How could they move so far from Mom?

Everyone thought Father was making a mistake. Everyone. She’d heard them whispering, and no one had come to help them pack or see them off because Father wouldn’t let them. Not even his own mother had been allowed over.

“I don’t intend to take help from the same people who are talking behind my back,” he’d told her, but it had felt awful to leave with only the neighbor next door waving from his front window. After that there’d been highway after highway and an overnight stay in a hotel that didn’t have a TV and smelled like stale crackers.

Father had tried to say it was an adventure they were on, which wasn’t like him at all, but Evie only scowled and stared out the window, occasionally kicking the dashboard. Adventures were things that Mom went on, not Father, and they didn’t begin at five thirty in the morning with a stalled truck that took half an hour to start and empty roads going nowhere.

“This is all wrong,” Evie muttered, but Father shook his head.

“Nah,” he said, “this is it.”

His dark eyes flashed the way they did when there was trouble to be figured out. They’d flashed that way the day he’d told her about buying the land. Only seven months after Mom died, he’d come to dinner all excited about a phone call from an old man.

“Fifty acres, Evie, and he’s practically giving them away because the orchard hasn’t been producing fruit. People around there think it’s a curse, but they’re just superstitious, that’s all.” Father had paced around the kitchen, waving his arms as he spoke.

“They talk themselves into believing in curses and bad luck, but that’s just foolishness. It was disease that made those trees sick and it’s hard work that will make them better.”

Evie didn’t care whether the stupid trees got better. Why should trees get better when people didn’t? Even the old man had died not long after that phone call and she’d crossed her fingers and toes that the deal would fall through but it hadn’t. The old man’s sister had sold them the property instead, just as her brother had wished, and now three months later they were on their way.

Evie frowned and stared out the window.

“I hope we never get there,” she mumbled, but Father just glanced across the front seat of the truck and sighed. He reached over and smoothed the hair from Evie’s forehead. Her bangs hung in her eyes because Father never got around to cutting them -- not even when Evie asked him to. “Tomorrow,” he always said. “I’ve got a sick tree that needs attention, but I promise to do it tomorrow.”

Except tomorrow never came and now the scissors were packed along with everything else. Evie pulled away and Father put his hand back on the steering wheel.

“We’re almost there,” he said, real soft. “I’d guess another five miles will get us to Beaumont, provided we pick the right road.” He paused, then looked over, catching Evie’s eye.

“You pick, Evie.”

Even now her stomach still turned somersaults.

*“You pick, Tally.”*

It was Mom’s job to pick. Always had been. Father said she had a perfect sense of direction, but Mom always said the wind told her which way to go. Evie could picture her mother getting out of the truck to inspect the fork where the roads met. She would stand still and tall, her spiraled hair pulled back in a headband. She’d be wearing the cargo pants Evie loved, with all the pockets in them and the thick leather sandals she wore all year long, even in the winter. Then she’d wait, breathing long and full until she knew which choice to make.

*“The answers are always out there, Evie, she used to say. You just have to wait until they whisper in your ear.”*

Evie wanted to get out and stand in the exact spot where she'd pictured her mom standing. The wind was blowing strong and seemed to have something to say, as if this time when Evie stood still, she might hear something other than deafening silence. She wanted it so badly her insides stung like scraped knees on pavement, but already she could feel her muscles tightening and her ears closing until even the sound of the crows faded into the distance.

"Go on," Father nudged, but Evie shook her head.

Father's hands gripped the steering wheel. Then at last he turned the key in the ignition and the old truck rumbled to life. He breathed out long and loud until it seemed that all the air had escaped his lungs.

"Left it is then," he said at last. "One choice is as good as another."

© K.L. Going