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CALIFORNIA DREAMER

THE RELIEF BOAT CAME ONCE a week. This morning it had been a sturdy salmon fisher, hired down from Oregon. The crew had unloaded the usual relief supplies; canned milk and shrink-wrapped cheese, cans of peanut butter and stuff like that. It had unloaded mail.

Mail. Letters. Junk mail, for God's sake. No power yet, no telephones, but the US Postal Service had come through. Neither rain nor snow nor earthquake . . . Ellen struggled to swallow the hurting lump in her throat as she walked slowly homeward. Back on the beach -- the new, Wave-scoured beach -- people were sorting through envelopes and catalogues and cards. Crying and laughing. Britty Harris had gone into hysterics over a postcard from her vacationing brother. Wish you were here, he had scrawled on the back of a glossy picture of Fisherman's Wharf.

Wish you were here. Neither Fisherman's Wharf nor her brother were there anymore.

There had been no ghost mail from Rebecca. The lump swelled, threatening to turn into more tears. Ellen ducked her head and walked faster. Her shadow stretched seaward; a tall, thin caricature of herself. Perhaps she was becoming a caricature; turned hollow and surreal by the rome of the Quake. Changed.

Beanpole, Rebecca had called her, and said, Why can't I be thin like you? at least once a week. Then Ellen would tell her to quit eating so much junk food and Rebecca would call her a Jewish mother and they would both laugh, because Scandinavian-blonde Ellen had grown up Catholic, and Rebecca was Jewish. It had been a ritual between them -- a lightly spoken touchstone of love. As she turned up the walkway to the house, the unshed tears settled into Ellen's stomach, hard as beach pebbles.

It was a cottage, more than a house. Weathered gray shingles, weathered gray roof. Rebecca's house, because she'd always wanted to live near the sea, even though she had called it ours. Scraggly geraniums bloomed in a pot on the tiny front porch. The pot--generic red earthenware--was cracked. Ellen had watched it crack, clinging to this very railing as the earth shuddered and the house groaned in a choir of terrifying voices.

Earthquake, Ellen had thought in surprise. That's not supposed to happen here.

They'd heard it was the Big One on Jack's generator-run radio. But it was only after the relief boats started coming that they got to see the news photos of San Francisco and L.A. Ellen stomped sand from her shoes on the three wooden steps, went inside. A long worktable filled half of the single main room. Boxes of beads, feathers, and assorted junk cluttered the floor, and unfinished collages leaned against the wall. Rebecca's workspace. Rebecca's life. The room looked . . . unfamiliar. The Quake had changed everything, had charged the air with something like electricity. Angles and familiar lines looked sharp and strange and new, as if the unleashed force had transformed flowerpots and people and houses on some subtle, molecular scale.

Ellen set the bundled mail down on the stained formica of the kitchen counter and worked one of the rubber bands loose. Bank statements. Mail order catalogues, bright with spring dresses and shoes. A sale flyer from an art supply dealer. The second rubber band snapped as Ellen slid her fingers beneath it. The unexpected sting filled her eyes with tears. They spilled over and ran down her cheeks. She sobbed once, clutching the stupid, useless envelopes, fighting the tide that would rise up if she let it, and sweep her away.

Mail. It meant that Rebecca was dead. Ellen's tears made round, wrinkled spots on a glossy sportswear catalogue. All these endless weeks, she had told herself that Rebecca had survived, had cowered in the safety of some doorway or park while San Francisco dissolved in rubble and flame. She had told herself that Rebecca was in some schoolhouse shelter, frantic with worry because she couldn't call. As long as Ellen believed this -- as long as she really -- believed -- then, Rebecca was alive.

How could you believe in a miracle, with a sportswear catalogue in your hands?

I have never lived without Rebecca, Ellen thought in terror.

That wasn't quite true. She had passed through childhood without Rebecca, had only met her in college. Rebecca had been struggling through art-majors' bio, as it was called. Ellen had helped her, because she was a bio major and Rebecca's outraged frustration made her laugh. You need someone to take care of you, Ellen had said lightly. They had moved in together a month later. Fifteen years ago. Ellen looked up at the cupboard above the sink.

The bottle of pills was up there, on the top shelf behind the glasses, with the aspirin and antacids. Sleeping pills, prescribed for Rebecca years ago, after she hurt her knee skiing. Would Ellen die if she took them all? She had a hard time swallowing capsules. They would stick to the back of her throat; hard, gelatinous lumps of oblivion. She would have to drink glasses of water to get them down.

Someone knocked on the door.

Rebecca? The traitorous rush of hope made her dizzy. "Coming!" Ellen flung the door open.

"Mom's sick." A girl stared up at her, dirty-faced, tousle-headed; a stranger. "Please come."

Not Rebecca. "Who are you?" Ellen said numbly. "Where did you come from?"

"I'm Beth. Our car ran out of gas and we got lost. Please hurry."

Ellen blinked at the girl. Eleven? Twelve? Gawky and blonde, but you noticed her eyes first. They were a strange color; depthless blue, like the sky after sunset.

"All right." Ellen sighed and stepped out onto the porch. "Take me to your mom."

The girl turned unhesitatingly inland, trotting up through the scraggly spring grass toward the forested ridge above the cottage. "Wait a minute," Ellen called, but the girl didn't slow down, didn't even look back. Ellen hesitated, then ducked her head and broke into a ran, was panting after only a dozen uphill yards, because Rebecca had nm every morning and Ellen hadn't.

The girl crouched in the tree shadows, cradling a woman in her arms. The woman's face was flushed and she breathed in short, raspy breaths. Her hair stuck to her face, dark and stringy, as if she had been sweating, but when Ellen touched her cheek, her skin felt hot and dry.

"How long has your mother been sick?" Ellen asked the girl.

"A couple of days. It rained on us and it was cold. Mom let me wear her jacket, but then she started shivering."

"We've got to get her down to the house somehow." This was a crisis and Ellen could handle crises. She'd had fifteen years of practice, because Rebecca didn't handle them. She squatted beside the sick woman, shook her gently. "Can you wake up?"

Miraculously, the woman's eyelids fluttered.

"Come on, honey. Got to get you on your feet." Ellen slid her arm beneath the woman's shoulders.

Another miracle. The woman mumbled something incoherent and struggled to her feet. Ellen kept her arm around her, frightened by her fierce heat, supporting her. Step by step, she coaxed the woman down the slope, staggering like a drunk beneath her slack weight.

It took forever to reach the house, but they finally made it. Ellen put the woman into Rebecca's empty (forever, Oh God) bed. The rasp of her breathing scared Ellen. Pneumonia? In the old days, before antibiotics, people had died from flu and pneumonia. The Quake had smashed the comfortable present as it smashed through the California hills. It had warped time back on itself, had brought back the old days of candles and no roads and death from measles or cholera. Seal Cove had no doctor. Big chunks of the California coast had fallen into the sea and you couldn't get there from here.

"I'll walk down to the store." Ellen poured water into a bowl from the kitchen jug, got a clean washcloth down from the shelf. "Jack can call Eureka on the radio. They'll send a helicopter to take your mom to the hospital. I'm going to give her some aspirin and I want you to wipe her all

over while I'm gone." She handed the washcloth to Beth. "We need to get her fever down."

"Okay." The girl looked up at Ellen, her eyes dark and fierce. "She'll be all right. I love her."

She'll be all right. I love her. That incantation hadn't saved Rebecca. Ellen swallowed. "What's your mom's name, honey?"

"Laura Sorenson." The girl dipped the folded washcloth into the water. "She'll get well. She has to."

Her hands were trembling as she wiped her mother's face. Ellen groped for reassuring words and found only emptiness. "I'll be back in a little while," she said.

CLOUDS WERE boiling up over the horizon again by the time Ellen returned to the house. The wind gusted on-shore, whipping the waves, snatching wisps of spume from the gray curl of the breakers. There had been a lot of storms lately, as if the Quake's terrible power had been absorbed into the atmosphere, was being discharged in raging wind and waves.

"Jack called the relief people up in Eureka." Ellen flinched as the wind slammed the screen door behind her. "They'll send the helicopter for your mom, just as soon as it gets back in." If the weather didn't stop it. She closed the wooden door against the building storm. "How is she?"

"Asleep." Beth hovered protectively in the bedroom doorway. "Better, I think."

Ellen edged past her and bent over the bed. She was worse, struggling to breathe, burning with fever. The woman's eyelids fluttered and Ellen shivered. There was a disinterested glaze to her eyes; as if the woman was on a boat, watching a shoreline recede into the distance. She is dying, Ellen thought and shivered again. "Beth?" Distract her. "Come have something to eat, okay? I don't want you getting sick, too."

"If you want." Beth sat reluctantly at the kitchen table. "What a pretty woman." She nodded at the watercolor on the wall. "Did you paint it?" she asked with a child's transparent effort to be polite.

"No." Some art student had painted it, years ago. Rebecca was smiling, head tilted, one hand in her dark, thick, semitic hair that had just been starting to go gray. The student had caught the impatience, the intensity that kept her up all night working, sent her weeping into Ellen's bed in the dawn, full of exhaustion and triumph and doubts. Tell me it's not awful, she would whisper. God, El, I need you. "It's a picture of my friend." Ellen busied herself peeling back shrink-wrap and slicing the yellow block of salmon-boat cheese. "Is a cheese sandwich all right?"

"Fine."

Silence. The rasp of the dying woman's breathing filled the kitchen. "She was an artist," Ellen said too loudly. "She did collages. When they started selling, I quit my job and we moved out here." You supported me, Rebecca had said, grinning. While I was a starving artist. Now you get to be my kept woman. "I took care of her. She needed a full-time keeper when she was working."

Beth nodded politely, eyes on the bedroom door. "Where is she now?"

"She's dead." The words caught Ellen by surprise. "She was in . . . San Francisco. When the Quake happened." She set the plate of sandwiches down in front of Beth with a small thump, aware of the pill bottle up on the top shelf. "I'll get you some water."

"I'm really sorry." Beth touched her hand. "That your friend died."

"Me, too," Ellen whispered.

Storm wind whined around the comers of the house, banging a loose piece of gutter against the eaves. Shadows were creeping into the corners. She switched on the fluorescent lantern, hung it on its hook above the table. The shadows cast by its gentle swinging made the watercolor Rebecca smile, but her eyes looked sad. "In a hundred years, we'll have forgotten how California looked before the Quake," Ellen murmured. "Everything will seem so normal."

"We lived in Berkeley." Beth lifted a corner of bread, stared at the yellow slab of cheese beneath. "We had an apartment near the doctor's office where More was a nurse. I was across the street telling Cara about Mr. Walther's giving me a referral at school and all of a sudden we fell down. I saw our building sway, like it was made out of robber. Pieces cracked out of it and started falling. Cars were crashing into things and Cara was screaming. Her voice sounded so small. All you could hear was this giant roar. I thought . . . Mom was dead."

"She wasn't dead." Beth had won that terrible lottery and Ellen had lost. Outside, the wind rattled the screen door against its hook. Beth was trembling and Ellen's twinge of anger metamorphosed suddenly into sympathy. "C'mon, eat." She put her arm around Beth's shoulders. Eat, she had said a hundred times a week to Rebecca. You can't live on corn chips and pop, you idiot. "Take your time. I'll check on your more," she said.

The lantern streaked Rebecca's bedroom with dim light and shadow. Beth's mother -- Laura -- lay still beneath the light sheet. She didn't react as Ellen wiped her hot face with a washcloth. Her breathing was shallow and uneven. Outside, wind fluttered the shingles with the sound of cards riffling in a giant hand. No helicopter would land to save her.

"Ellen?" Beth's butterfly touch made Ellen jump, raised gooseflesh on her arms. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me." Beth's face was pale. "You think she's dying."

Ellen opened her mouth, but the lie wouldn't come.

"She can't die," Beth whispered. "She can't. I need her."

Need couldn't save the one you loved. "Your mom's sleeping and you need some sleep, too." Ellen steered Beth firmly out of the room. "You can sleep in my bed tonight. I'll sit up with your room."

"She'll be better when she wakes up." Beth's shoulders stiffened. "She has to be."

"I'm sure she will be," Ellen said, but Beth's eyes told her she knew the lie for what it was.

Ellen found an extra nightshirt and tucked Beth into her own bed. Such bitter, bitter irony, to survive the Quake just to die from the busy breeding of invisible bacteria. "Go to sleep," Ellen whispered. "Your more will be fine."

"She was making fudge." Beth looked up at Ellen, golden hair spread across the pillow. "She always makes fudge on Wednesday, because Wednesday's her day off and fudge is our favorite thing in the whole world. The corner where our apartment is cracked and just fell down. This big chunk of concrete landed on a man and you couldn't even see what happened to him. Just dust, lots of dust. It hid everything and then there was smoke and fire and Cara was screaming that everyone was dead, that Mom was dead. She ran away, but I waited for the firetrucks. They didn't come and then the whole building fell in and Cara's building was on fire and I had to run away after all."

Terror filled those depthless eyes. "It's all right, honey." Ellen stroked her face. "Your morn got out, remember?"

"Cara was lying," Beth said shrilly. "She always lied. I knew Mom wasn't dead, but I couldn't find her. I saw a body lying in a pile of bricks. It was a man with black hair. He didn't have any pants on and one of his legs was gone. Some firemen in yellow coats told me they'd help me, but they didn't. They took me to this park and it wasn't even in Berkeley. There were tents and lots of people. I told them I couldn't stay, that I had to look for my mother, but they wouldn't listen to me. There was a fence around the park. And soldiers. They wouldn't let me out. They said that Mom would come look for me there, but how could she know!"

"She found you. She's right here, Beth." And dying. Ellen put her arms around the shaking girl, held her close, rocking her gently.

"I found her," Beth whispered. "We're going to Grandpa's house, up in Oregon. We'll be safe there. You think she's dying." Beth pushed Ellen away. "She's not dying. I won't let her die."

"There, there," Ellen soothed, but tears stung her eyes. "You sleep now." She kissed Beth gently on the forehead. "I'll take good care of your more."

"She won't die." Beth turned onto her side and closed her eyes.

BUT SHE was dying. Ellen sat beside her bed, wiping her fever-hot body with the wet cloth. Had Rebecca's last moments been full of terror and pain? Had she bled to death, trapped under fallen ceilings and walls, or had she burned, screaming? Outside, the wind hurled itself inland, slamming against the house with the Quake's absorbed power, shaking it to its foundations. Ellen rinsed the cloth. It was warm with the woman's heat. She didn't look like Beth. She had dark hair and an olive tint to her skin. The lantern cast long shadows across the floor and something creaked in the main room. Rebecca's ghost?

Need shapes our lives, Ellen thought dully. Need for food, for attention, for power. The need for love. That's the foundation, the rock on which we build everything. "How can I live without Rebecca?" she whispered.

The woman's eyelids twitched. "Joseph?" she whispered. "Have to get back . . . Love . . . don't worry . . ." The feeble words fluttered to silence.

Joseph? Ellen wiped the woman's forehead. Beth's father? Beth hadn't mentioned a Joseph or a father.

Ellen woke to gray dawn light and the morning sounds of surf. Her head was pillowed on the sick woman's thigh and the wash cloth made a damp spot on the quilt. Afraid, Ellen jerked upright.

"Hello," Laura Sorenson whispered.

Still alive! "Good morning." Guilty and relieved, Ellen stifled a yawn. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. How are you feeling?"

"Tired. What . . . happened?"

"You're in my house. You've been sick." Ellen touched the woman's forehead. No fever. "Beth's here, too, and she's fine. Your daughter's a brave girl."

"Beth? I . . . don't have a daughter." She clutched weakly at the sheet. "Why did you call me Laura? That's not . . . my name."

"Just take it easy." Ellen patted Laura's shoulder, hiding dismay. "You had a high fever."

"Oh." Fear flickered in the woman's dark eyes. "Did I hit my head? What day is this? I feel as if . . . I've been dreaming for a long time."

"You were just sick," Ellen murmured. "It's March 25. Don't worry about it now. I'll get you some water, or would you rather have some orange juice?"

"March?" the woman whispered brokenly. "It can't be. Why can't I remember!"

In the kitchen, Ellen spooned orange crystals into a glass from a white can, trying to recall the effects of a prolonged high fever. Seizures, she remembered, but Laura hadn't gone into convulsions. Amnesia? Ellen shook her head, stirred the fake juice to orange froth. She carried the glass back to the bedroom and found Beth already there, her arms around her mother.

"Mom, it's me," Beth was saying in a broken voice.

"It's . . . coming back." Laura stroked her daughter's back. "Beth. Honey, it'll be all right."

There was a tentative quality to the gesture and a frightened expression in her eyes. "Here's your juice," Ellen said, holding out the glass. "How are you doing?"

Beth almost snatched the glass from Ellen's hand. "I told you she'd get well," she said.

Voyeur, outsider, Ellen watched Beth help her mother drink. Side by side, they looked even less alike. There was a protective possessiveness to Beth's posture; a confidence that was lacking in Laura. Beth might be the mother; Laura the fragile child.

"Thank you." The woman sank back on the pillows, trying for a smile. "Thank you for taking us in. We must be a horrible burden."

"Not at all." Ellen collected the empty glass. "I'm just glad you're better."

Laura stroked her daughter's hair. "Beth said I was in our apartment when it happened. I'm . . . starting to remember." She spoke hesitantly, like an actor groping for half-learned lines. "What about . . . Joseph? Oh . . . God, Joseph!"

"What's wrong? Who's Joseph, Mom?" Beth stroked a strand of hair back from her mother's face. "Someone at the office?"

"No. I . . . don't know. I don't know a Joseph, do I? It was a . . . dream, I guess. From the fever." She squeezed Beth's hand, her fingers trembling.

"You'll sort it out." Ellen touched Laura's shoulder, moved by the anguish in her face. "I've got to run into town." She had almost forgotten the helicopter. "I'll be back in an hour. There's more water in the jugs beside the kitchen counter."

Laura nodded weakly, but her eyes never left her daughter's face. She is afraid, Ellen thought.

Of what?

At the store, Jack eyed her over the fake tortoiseshell rim of his glasses as he called Eureka and canceled the helicopter. "They were busy anyway," he drawled. "Guess the storm hit real bad up there. Your visitor wasn't too sick, huh?"

Dumb woman, his expression said. Don't know just sick from dying.

"She was dying," Ellen snapped, but she hadn't died, had she? "I guess I was wrong" she said lamely. "Thanks for calling Eureka." She turned away from Jack's cool, judgmental face. She had no real friends in this Godforsaken town. Ellen-and-Rebecca had been a complete and seamless universe. She could feel the shattered bits of that universe crunching beneath her feet. "I'd better get back," she said.

"Oh yeah." Jack crossed his arms on the top of the old-fashioned wood-and-glass counter. "Aaron McDevitt was in yesterday, to pick up his share of the food. He said he found a car up on the old logging road across Bear Ridge." He cleared his throat. "Aaron brought this in." He fished around behind the counter, laid a brown handbag on the scarred wood, put a woman's wallet down beside it. "Wasn't no money in it," he said.

Aaron would have made sure of that. Ellen picked up the leather wallet. The bag was leather, too. It looked expensive. She opened the wallet. Credit cards from stores and oil companies. A check guarantee card. All in the name of Julia DeMarco. Ellen started to say that it didn't belong to Laura, but she closed her mouth without speaking. Laura's dark, oval face smiled at her from a California driver's license.

Julia DeMarco?

"This is . . . her bag." Ellen folded up the wallet, stuffed it back into the bag. "I'll take it to her. Thanks," she said too quickly. "Thank Aaron, too, when you see him."

She left the store, feeling guilty, as if she was partner to some crime. There were hundreds of reasons to lie about your name -- some good, lots of them bad. Ellen stopped at the bottom of her driveway and opened the bag again. It held the usual stuff; checkbook, wallet, makeup items and a leatherbound datebook. Ellen found a leather card case full of business cards, printed on creamy stock.

Julia DeMarco

Attorney at Law

The address was San Francisco. Beth had told Ellen that her mother was a nurse in Berkeley. The datebook listed court dates, appointments, and reminders to pick up dry cleaning or visit the dentist. Ellen paged through it. Joseph's Birthday was written neatly at the top of the page for next Wednesday. Joseph. A dream, Laura had said with her face full of anguish. Ellen stuffed everything back into the bag and hurried up the lane to the house.

Inside, the watercolor Rebecca glowed on the wall. Ellen tossed the bag onto the cluttered worktable and went into the bedroom.

"Hi." Laura smiled wanly at Ellen. "Beth went to get more water. She said she saw a pool up above the house."

"The spring," Ellen nodded. "That was nice of her."

"Beth's a good kid. She had to grow up a little too early. There was a divorce -- a custody battle. I think . . . it was ugly. I think it . . . hurt Beth,"

Again, the sense of lines being recited. "You're remembering?" Ellen asked.

"I don't know." Laura's eyes flickered. "I remember scenes or faces -and I don't know them, but I do. I'm not making any sense, am I?" Her laugh was fragile, edged with hysteria. "Did our building bum down? I remember it burning and . . . I remember picking up pieces of a broken vase and thinking how lucky I was. I keep wanting to remember that it was a house, but it was an apartment, wasn't it?"

Ellen took a quick breath. "Who's Julia DeMarco?"

"I . . . don't know. Do I?" Laura whispered. "Joseph . . . ? Oh, God." She buried her face in her hands. "Why do I want to cry? What's wrong with me? I don't even know where we are or why we're here."

"Take it easy." Ellen stroked Laura's back. "You'll straighten everything out eventually." Would she? Who are you? she wondered, but she didn't say it out loud.

"Hi, Mom." Beth stuck her head through the doorway, a wet jug in each hand. "What's wrong?" She dropped the jugs, ran to the bedside. "Mom, what's wrong!"

"Nothing . . . nothing." Laura straightened, struggling to smile for her daughter. "I'm still feeling . . . shaky."

"Oh, Mom." Beth clutched her mother. "You'll remember again. You have to."

"Of course I will, sweetheart." Laura buried her face in her daughter's hair. "It's all right, Beth. Really."

Was it? Ellen tiptoed out of the room. Perhaps it would be all right. Perhaps Laura Sorenson would wake up tomorrow and remember the burning apartment. And what about Julia DeMarco? What about Joseph? Not my business, Ellen told herself fiercely. Not at all. She got a pot down from the kitchen cupboard, filled it with water from the dripping jug.

"What are you doing?" Beth asked from the doorway.

"Fixing brunch."

"I'll help you." Beth perched herself on the table. "What can I do?"

"Nothing just yet." Ellen measured dusty flakes of oatmeal into the water. "Why were you going to your grandfather's house? Half the roads in the state are closed. Why didn't you and your more stay in San Francisco?"

"We . . . couldn't."

Aha. "Why not?"

No answer.

Ellen lit the little white-gas camping stove, set the pot of oatmeal on to boil.

"They wouldn't let me go," Beth spoke up suddenly. She sat rigidly straight, hands tucked beneath her thighs, eyes fixed on her knees. "I saw her one afternoon, but she was outside the fence and she didn't see me. When I told them, they said she was dead, that she'd died in our building. They said I'd have to wait for my father to come. He'd never let me go back to Mom. Never. The firemen told me they'd help me find Mom, but they lied. They just took me to that place." She looked at Ellen at last. "The man at the gate hit me, when I tried to run after her."

Such terrible eyes, dark as the Quake-storm yesterday. They were full of desperate need. Full of power. Power to tear apart the landscape of reality, to reshape it like the Quake had reshaped the hills? A hissing startled Ellen and she snatched her gaze away from those depthless eyes, grabbing a potholder. Sticky oatmeal foamed over the lip of the pot and bubbled down the side.

Oh, yes, she understood the power of need. Ellen stirred the boiling cereal, Rebecca's absence a gaping wound in her heart.

"Grandpa won't let Dad take me," Beth went on in a flat monotone. "He won't let them take Mom. We'll be safe there. We'll be happy. They want to take her away." Beth's voice cracked suddenly, became the cry of a frightened child. "They can't!"

"Honey, it's all right." Ellen's arms went around her. She knew that terror, had felt it every dark, post-Quake night, as she waited to hear from Rebecca. It had seeped into the marrow of her bones and would never go away. "It's all right," she murmured. Beth was sobbing, her thin body shaking as Ellen held her close.

Nothing was all right. The Quake had shattered the earth. It had shattered buildings and freeways, it had buckled lives, smashed them into ruin. So much power, but it was an innocent power; destruction without choice or anger. The sky had absorbed some of that power, had transformed it into the wild, unseasonable storms that were battering the coast. Children were such sponges. They absorbed experiences so easily

Beth's sobs were diminishing. Ellen stroked her hair back from her damp and swollen face. "Why don't you ask your morn if she wants honey or canned milk on her cereal," she said.

"She puts milk on it." Beth hiccupped. "And brown sugar."

"I think I have a little brown sugar left." How did Julia DeMarco like her oatmeal? Ellen fished in the cupboard, found a plastic bag with a few brown lumps left in it. It didn't matter, she thought as she crumbled rock hard lumps onto the steaming cereal. Beth's mother had liked brown sugar on her oatmeal and Beth needed her mother. Desperately. With all the power of the Quake.

She had found her, on the other side of a barbed-wire fence. She had reshaped Julia DeMarco into Laura Sorenson, as innocent and destructive as the Quake that had reshaped California.

"I'll fix yours," Beth said gravely. "Do you want honey and milk on it?"

"Thank you," Ellen said. She picked up the tray, carried it into the bedroom.

"I could eat at the table with you." Laura sat up straighter as Ellen put the tray down on her lap. "I'm feeling much better."

She wore a gold wedding ring on her left hand. "You can get up any time." Was Joseph searching frantically for Julia DeMarco, praying that she was still alive?

"I'll come eat with you." Beth came in with her bowl, her eyes bright with love.

How many days had Beth huddled behind the barbed wire of a refugee camp, filling the black hole of her loss with the Quake's power, waiting for a mother who would never come? Ellen tiptoed into the kitchen. In the bedroom, Beth laughed and Laura joined in tentatively. Maybe Julia had been a volunteer at the refugee center, or had been hired to untangle the miles of legal red tape. Ellen wondered why Beth had chosen her. Perhaps the choice had been as random as the Quake's violence.

She's not dying, Beth had said and those words had been an incantation. This woman couldn't die any more than she could remain Julia DeMarco. Beth needed her mother. Julia DeMarco had had no choice at all.

A bowl of oatmeal cooled on the table, flanked neatly by spoon and napkin. With honey and milk. Sunlight streamed through the window into the cluttered room, and the watercolor Rebecca smiled gently from the wall. "I will always love you," Ellen whispered to her. Standing on her toes, she took the bottle of pills down from the cabinet shelf.

The helicopter from Eureka landed at dusk. The blades flattened the grass in the front yard and whipped a small sandstorm into the air. "In here," Ellen told the tired-looking paramedics who climbed out of the hatch. "She's unconscious." She had put three of the sleeping capsules into Laura's hot chocolate, had been terrified that it might be too much.

The paramedics took Laura's blood pressure, shone a light into her eyes, frowned, and asked Ellen questions. "She seemed to be getting better," Ellen told them. "And then, all of a sudden, she just collapsed. I had Jack call you right away."

"Does she have any ID?" the taller of the two men asked her. He had black hair and dark circles beneath his eyes.

"She had this." Ellen handed them Julia DeMarco's handbag. "Off and on, she'd forget who she was. She was confused. I don't know how she ended up out here."

"Lady, we've seen stranger things." The dark-haired paramedic shrugged. "She's pretty unresponsive. We'll take her in."

They lifted her onto a stretcher with remarkable gentleness and loaded her into the belly of the waiting helicopter; Laura Sorenson, Julia DeMarco. Tomorrow, she would wake up in the Eureka hospital and for a while, she would wonder where she was and who she was. But she would remember. Someone would contact Joseph. He would hurry out to Eureka in an ecstasy of fear and relief, and he would help her to remember. Happy birthday, Joseph.

Outside, the helicopter thundered into the sky. Ellen left the lantern on -- a flagrant waste of precious batteries, but she couldn't face the darkness. The room looked strange in the feeble glow of yellow light --streaked with shadows and memories. Each item, each tool in Rebecca's cluttered workspace, carried echoes of laughter and tears and life. Memories. Ellen picked up a leather-gouge, envisioning Rebecca bent over her work table. How can you be sure that what you remember really happened? She tucked the gouge into a box and reached for a basket of feathers.

She spent the night sorting through shells, beads, and tools; sorting through the moments of their life together. On the wall, Rebecca's watercolor eyes were full of life and love, full of death. Ellen packed everything into the cartons left over from hauling home the relief supplies. In the gray predawn light, she stacked the last of the filled cartons in a corner of the shed out behind the house.

The first beams of sunlight streaked the sparse grass in the front yard and stretched shadows westward toward the beach. In a few weeks, they would have power again, and running water. Slowly, the scars would be covered by new buildings, new grass, new roads, new lives. Scars on the soul were harder to heal. Ellen closed the shed door, snapped the padlock shut.

Beth waited in the neat, uncluttered house, a little unsteady on her feet. "What are you doing? Where's Mom?" She rubbed at her eyes, words slurring a little.

A whole capsule had been just right. "I couldn't sleep." Ellen's heart began to pound, but she kept her tone casual. "I thought I'd clean up Grandpa's house."

Beth's eyes widened.

"I was going to take a walk on the beach," Ellen said quickly. "Do you want to come along?"

Beth nodded slowly, silent and wary.

THE RISING sun burned on the rim of the hills as they walked across the smooth white sand. The Wave had washed out the road in some places, left it hanging like an asphalt cliff in others. Beth remained silent, her twilight eyes full of shadows and unconscious power. I should be afraid, Ellen thought, but she wasn't afraid. She had lost her capacity for fear when she had contemplated the pills, with her hands full of mail.

The watercolor crackled as she pulled it from her pocket and unfolded it. Rebecca smiled at her, eyes sparkling in the morning light. "Rebecca, I love you," Ellen whispered. "I will always love you, but you were the strong one. Not me. I am not strong enough to use the pills and I am not strong enough to live without you. Forgive me." She wrapped the stiff paper around a beach stone and fastened it with one of the thick rubberbands that had come on the mail. The rising sun stretched her shadow seaward as she drew her arm back and hurled the painting-wrapped stone far out into the offshore swell.

The Quake had released so much power. It charged the air like electricity, it shimmered in Beth's twilight eyes. Innocent power. The power to reshape reality, like the Quake had reshaped the land. Rebecca had needed her, but Rebecca was dead. Beth needed her mother. Ellen could feel that need seeping into the hole Rebecca had left in her life, filling her up like the tide. Behind her, waves curled and broke, dissolving the painting. She didn't want to look at Rebecca's face one day, and see a stranger.

What will I remember tomorrow? Ellen reached for Beth's hand, shivering a little at the cool touch of the girl's fingers. She could feel the change shuddering through her, an invisible Quake across the landscape of the soul. "There's chocolate in the cupboard. We've got margarine from the last relief boat and canned milk," Ellen smiled. "We could try to make fudge. It's Wednesday, after all."

Beth's slow smile was like the sun rising, bringing color to the gray world. "It is Wednesday." She put her arm around Ellen's waist, face turned up to hers, eyes full of twilight and love. "I'm so glad we're here," she said.

"Me, too," Ellen whispered. She could almost remember it -- the apartment and the doctor's office where she had worked. Tomorrow, or the next day, she would remember it. Beth needed her. She would take care of her daughter and they would be happy together.

Beth had said so.

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By Mary Rosenblum

Mary Rosenblum's second novel, *Chimera*, appeared last fall from Del Rey. Her third will be published this fall. Because she has turned her attention to novels, her short stories are rarer, and that makes them ever more precious. We are lucky to have this gentle sf piece

"'California Dreamer' was both on a trip to San Francisco some time ago," she writes. "I visited the Marina district where the worst of the earthquake damage occurred. All the debris and burned-out buildings had been cleared away. The streets were clean and empty. Most of the buildings were still unsafe, so it was a small ghost town within the tush of downtown San Francisco. I found it very eerie to walk down those empty streets and see the glyphs the rescue teams had scrawled on the doors and walls. Searched. No bodies . . .

"Those quiet streets disturbed me more than the media scenes of fire and death had done. Perhaps it was because evidence of such tragedy lurked beneath a skin of normalcy . . . 'California Dreamer' grew from that . . . I began to wonder just how deep and far reaching the effects of human cataclysm might be."

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