

Go To Liberty

By Patricia Hilliard

Chapter One: Eva Makes a Decision

From the beginning of its life, a bird knew it was a bird, and knew exactly what a bird should do. Eva watched as sunlight glinted off the metallic-blue wings of a tree swallow. The slim fast-flying bird arced over the fresh-cut grass with one wing pointed to the sky and the other pointed to the earth. Instantly, it turned like a stunt kite and circled back in the opposite direction. Eva walked toward the bird then stopped. She stood and watched as the bird merged with several other swallows darting back and forth over the park lawn.

Eva hugged herself and smiled. The birds were so beautiful. They flew so gracefully. How wonderful it would be to fly. Birds made flying look easy, made life seem so simple.

If only life could be so simple for humans. Eva was facing the complicated decision of what to do with her life. She was eighteen years old and needed to choose an occupation so she could earn money to buy life's necessities. She understood this. Mom had explained how important this is, but Eva wanted an occupation that was important, where she could do something for the greater good.

Was that too much to expect?

Eva looked around. Today, she was in a beautiful park at sunrise. Looking to the northeast, she saw the tall glass-and-marble buildings of New York City. Looking to the southeast, she saw the Statue of Liberty. Its torch gleaming in the morning light. On the path before her stood a small group of gardeners, their heads bowed as they gazed at the flowerbeds before them. The flowers were ragged and broken from last winter's heavy snow.

“Eva, can you stop bird watching and come help?”

Eva turned her gaze toward her mother, Colleen Kaufman.

“I’m coming,” Eva said as she ran to join her mother. Colleen handed her a pair of rubber gloves in preparation for spring gardening. Their work today was voluntary; the beauty of the flowers that they planted would be their only compensation.

Eva stood ready now and waited.

From the group came a tall, big-boned woman. Eva watched her take a position among the gardeners. She lifted her shoulders and looked each one of them in the face. She looked at Eva, too. Eva watched as the woman’s gray hair lifted in the gentle breeze.

“I’m Amanda Walters and I want to thank everyone here today. Your dedication and hard work is appreciated by the many park visitors from around our country and from around the world. We are able to garden here today due, in part, to the dedication of the Friends of Nature and their success in persuading the park management to let the community participate in beautifying the park.”

The newcomers rested their hands on their hips. The experienced gardeners paused and leaned on their hoes.

“As you know, this area was once an industrial site. Railroads once crisscrossed where we are standing, but look at it now.” She waved her arms around at the flower beds, lawns and trees, “Thanks to the Corp of Engineers and the Parks and Forestry Department, they moved the railroad ties away and planted grass and trees so that now we have this beautiful park. It’s a place where people can come together to garden in harmony with nature. This is the Commons; this is the people’s land. We must struggle to hold on to this, the land of the common people.”

Eva was delighted to see the gardeners cheering and clapping their hands. She was

impressed that the park meant so much to them.

“So let’s get to work,” one gardener called out, raising a gloved fist into the air.

Park employees began unloading tools from the back of a truck and gave them to the volunteers.

Soon the sound of shovels and spades clanging against the rocky soil gave a percussion beat to the musical laughter of the gardeners. This song of spring echoed throughout the park.

Eva had grown up in this metropolitan area, a place with lots of cement and sharp edges. The park was where people could return to soft earth, flowing grass and blowing leaves. When Eva joined the Girl Scouts, they went to the park every week to learn about wildflowers, trees and birds. Eva learned to identify these wonders of nature. She earned three badges. The thrill of this accomplishment sent her on a mission to learn more. That is when the park became her very special place.

Today, they were in the park for a new reason. Eva was not familiar with gardening and the tools it required. She picked up a hoe and looked at it, then she looked at her mother. Her mom had grown up on a farm. The joy of working in the soil was all over her face; in fact, a streak of mud had already painted her forehead.

“I’m so glad they’ve started a gardening program at the park,” Colleen said. “I’ve wanted to do this for years.”

Eva realized she was seeing something in her mother that she had never before known.

“Do this Eva, see, use the hoe like this,” Colleen said as she jabbed the corner of the hoe into the soil tearing loose the stems and roots of weeds. Colleen then bent her tall thin body down to grab a clump of roots and shook the dirt out.

Eva bent down. Her long brown-hair, braided into a single strand, dropped over her

cheek. She stood up and tucked it under her hat. She picked up the hoe and attempted to imitate her mom's actions. "How do I know which plants the gardeners want to keep?" she asked.

"Don't worry about it. What's coming up now is all weeds," Colleen replied.

Eva bent again to look at the small yellow flowers just beginning to form on a tall green stalk. They were bright, yellow, and sweet smelling. From her Girl Scout training, she knew this was wild mustard.

"But these wildflowers are so nice." Eva said, pleading in their defense. Why was Mom insisting that she tear them from the earth? To stall, she looked over at her older sister, Judi. Judi had found a less troubling and cleaner task doling out cookies and cups of water to thirsty gardeners.

"Nice easy job, Sis. You're doing your best, I can tell."

Judi wrinkled her nose at Eva. "An army travels on its stomach," she said. "I wanted to do my volunteering this way."

Eva smirked at her. Then seeing another plant that lacked flowers, she lifted her hoe and tore it out of the ground. Poor thing.

On this beautiful spring morning, birdsongs beckoned Eva from every treetop. Here a house finch, there a robin, next a delightful song from a song sparrow. She listened again to confirm its identity. The song rolled and twirled in the air. Yes, it was a song sparrow. Eva's interest had become a passion. She started with birds, but learned that their lives connect to plants and trees. She expanded her studies to include these. A day in nature was a busy time for Eva. When she heard birds singing, she listened and dedicated the bird's song to memory. When she walked past trees, she called out their names in her mind. She searched the meadows for new wildflowers she had never seen before. From this, she had gained a reputation as the

nature expert in her scout troop. Being an expert set her apart from the others. She liked the feeling.

Eva thought about herself again. At eighteen, she needed to choose an occupation. Should she go to college? What should she study to be? She wanted a meaningful life. Why was it so hard for her to make a decision? The question kept turning repeatedly in her mind, nagging her, even in times and places where she should be able to escape for a little while.

“Eva, are you going to help with the gardening? You are so obsessed with birds.”

Eva looked at her mom. A tree swallow dashed between them. There was just no explaining to Mom that she would rather pursue another avian wonder than dig up hearty yellow wildflowers from the face of the earth.

“I wish I had brought my bird book and binoculars today,” Eva said. “We are so close to the river and on the fly-way during the spring bird migration. There could be some rare warblers coming through the park today. How did I let you two drag me out here without my binoculars?”

In the distance, Eva heard Judi laughing, “Really, Eva, you need to give up some of your weird hobbies. How are you ever going to find a husband or build a career?”

Eva frowned, “Judi, I like nature, but I’m not into finding a mate right now or building a nest. I think people should do more than just reproduce. I think we need to find meaning in life.”

Eva saw a look of contempt on Judi’s face.

“And what do you think life is about anyway?” Judi asked, “It’s about mating and building a nest.” She tossed her blonde ponytail with an arrogance that always irked Eva. Then Judi added, “You could learn from the birds you are always watching.”

Eva sighed and looked at her big sister. Judi was always following the traditional ways, the normal way. Eva hated how Judi seemed to think this proved her superiority over Eva. All

this just because Judi was older. Why should that even matter? Eva looked at Judi and wondered if Judi was really just a selfish, shallow person with no concern for others. How had the two of them turned out so differently? Eva knew she had to go beyond the limits. She wanted to fight the good fight for a worthy cause. With sadness, she was beginning to realize that most people were not interested in this challenge. They did not care about the greater good.

A large bright red bird flew into a nearby apple tree.

“There’s a cardinal,” Eva exclaimed. She was thrilled to see the bright red bird with its prominent topnotch. She saw Judi and Colleen laughing at her.

“Ok, so it is a cardinal,” Judi called. She pulled the hair band out of her long blonde hair, and scooping it up again, refastened the band to refresh the ponytail. When she tossed her head, her hair whipped across her shoulders and sparkled in the sunlight.

“It’s a male cardinal,” Eva stated. “You can tell by its brilliant red feathers.”

“So what?” Judi asked. She picked up some litter from the snack table and threw it into the trash bag.

The bright red cardinal tilted its head back and sang louder. Eva listened and watched. She wondered what the presence of this bird meant. Was the environment here better than elsewhere? Had the berry bushes blossoming nearby been the source of food that kept it alive during the winter?

Eva saw Judi looking at her and pointing. “That bird is singing for you. If only you were a bird, you could lift your wings and join him in the tree top.” Judi laughed. “Then you would be in love, my dear sister. Maybe if I fix your loose braid, your hair would look neater. You could finally catch someone’s eye.” She stepped toward Eva and reached for the braid that had fallen down again from Eva’s hat.

“Leave it alone; I don’t need any fussing from you,” Eva said, moving away.

Eva looked up again at the bright red bird and frowned. She was not thinking of love. She had to be practical right now; she was still thinking about her career. If she knew what to do with her life, like a bird knows how to sing, then she would know the song of her own soul.

“Good morning ladies,” came a greeting from Amanda Walters, the group coordinator.

“Good morning.”

“You must be enjoying the sunshine here today in Liberty Park. We are glad you are contributing your time and energy.”

Eva watched as Colleen stood up and leaned backward to stretch. “It’s hard work, but it’s a joy to do, much easier than my nursing job.”

“We do appreciate everything you are doing,” Amanda said handing Colleen a flyer.

“Let me tell you about another activity here in the park. There’s going to be a meeting soon. It’s a public hearing about expanding the park.”

“But this is such a big park already,” Colleen said.

“Yes, we have over one-thousand acres here,” Amanda responded. “But we live in an urban area that is so built-up and covered-over with concrete. You see that stretch of trees over there. That is not the park. It is industrial wasteland. Recently, a foundation donated it to the park. Come to the meeting. Help us decide how to convert it to parkland.”

Eva watched with curiosity as her mother took the flyer.

“Oh, sure, you can count on us,” Colleen said.

Eva laughed and signaled to her sister, “Here we go again, Judi. Mom is getting involved with something else.”

Judi laughed. “Mom loves getting involved. Do you remember when she was president of the parent-teachers group?”

“I certainly do. Mom can’t sit still and let her community go off track.”

The daughters laughed, but their laughter soon ended in resignation. They knew their mom would expect their commitment as well.

“Tell me more about your family, Colleen. Two daughters? You are so lucky,” Amanda said.

Eva looked up at Colleen who turned and looked back at her.

“Yes, I have two daughters. They may be going to college soon. They need summer jobs. I wish I knew where they could get some work. Eva, here, is the naturalist.”

Eva stood proudly, expecting to hear more description and praise about herself, but Colleen turned to Judi. “Judi is my sophisticated lady. She’s such a socialite.”

Eva looked at Judi, who wore black tights and a sweater with sequins decorating the neckline. Then Eva looked down at her own practical jeans and sweatshirt. You could tell the difference between the two of them, right there. Eva looked at Amanda to see what kind of person she was. Amanda was dressed in baggy wool trousers and a bulky sweater with a jacket hanging open as if it were too small to zip closed.

“And your girls say you were president of the parent-teachers group?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Good, we need activists like you. Our group is called the Friends of Nature, so come to the meeting and join.”

“Ok, I guess we can do that.” Colleen looked around at her daughters. “Yes?”

“Yes, Mom, we’re in,” Judi responded.

“It’s decided. Now, let’s get back to work,” Eva suggested.

“Work? You’ve hardly done any yet today,” Judi whined.

Eva laughed. She bent down and grasped the stalk of a plant at her feet. “Does this get removed?”

“Yes, everything here gets pulled out,” Colleen advised.

Eva looked at the plant in her hands. It was amazing how the grass could grow such a resistant fiber out of soil, sun and air. Eva reached for a trowel and dug into the ground under its roots.

“Eva’s more interested in saving nature than domesticating it,” Colleen said. “She knows the names of trees, flowers and other plants, but only because they are the habitat of birds. She loves birds and can identify them by sight and sound.”

“You know how to identify birds? Amanda asked. “What kind of bird is that over there?”

Eva gazed at the black bird sitting on a light post. “It’s a crow.”

“Very good,” Amanda responded. “A friend of mine is teaching me about birds. He says we have two types of crows here in the park. There’s the larger American crow and the smaller fish crow. We really have to hear its caw before we can be absolutely certain which it is.”

The two women looked at the bird and waited. Soon it gave a caw, but it did not sound like everyone’s idea of a crow.

“That’s a fish crow,” Eva declared.

“Very good. You do know your birds by sound. You should apply for a job at the park. They can always use people with knowledge about nature.”

Eva felt Amanda looking deep into her eyes, as though Amanda had found something extra valuable in Eva. Eva turned and looked over at her mother.

“Where should she go to apply?” Colleen asked.

“Over there,” Amanda said as she pointed to a building in the distance. “They hire young people for the summer to lead wildlife tours and assist tourists.”

“Thank you for telling us,” Colleen replied, “Eva, what do you think? I’ll leave the decision to you.”

Eva looked up at her mom. “I think I would like that. Yes, let me go there and try for summer work. It might be good.”

“It’s NOT for me,” said Judi.

Eva saw a look of fear in Judi’s eyes. She was ready to resist if their mother insisted that she do the same.

“I want to do something that pays very well, I really want to run my own business someday,” Judi announced.

Eva frowned at Judi “Typical of my big sister.”

“Well,” Judi continued, “I could get into flower arranging as a hobby. But only as a hobby.”

“Thank you, Amanda, for giving us this idea,” Colleen said. “Eva might really enjoy working in the park.” She turned to Eva. “This is very exciting, isn’t it?”

Eva smiled with a sense of relief. Maybe there was a job she could do and enjoy.

After the volunteer gardeners finished removing the weeds, they raked the soil smooth. They dug holes for the sets and placed seeds in the rows. The sun climbed higher in the sky and, as it climbed, it burned hotter, making park beautification a daunting task.

“How is it that volunteering could be so grueling?” Eva asked her mother, looking up at her with sun-reddened skin. Could her mother not see how she was suffering?

“Let’s have a snack and get some water to drink,” Colleen said as she laid aside her tools. They went to Judi for refreshments.

After a short rest, they joined the other gardeners in the task of filling buckets with water. They poured the water on the pansies and daisies they had planted in the flowerbeds of the park.

“It will be wonderful to see how these grow and bloom,” Eva said.

The summer held more promise than she had expected. After the gardening, she went to the park administration office, filled out an application and immediately got an interview.

“Do you come to this park often? Do you know your way around it?” The park superintendent asked as he looked at her dirt-covered jeans. “Looks like you joined our volunteer gardening crew this morning.”

“Oh yes, I did and I know the park well,” Eva replied.

“Besides gardening, what else have you done here?”

Eva told the superintendent about the many family picnics she had enjoyed in the park. She explained how she had earned her Girl Scout badges identifying birds, trees and wildflowers in the park. She stopped short of telling him about the many discoveries she had made. Her sister Judi had just laughed at these. Now, Eva wondered how the superintendent would react if she told him. As he browsed her application, she decided to take a chance.

“I’ve found three types of native American wildflowers in this park. I don’t think anyone else knows about them.”

She looked at the superintendent and waited.

He nodded, “Yes, I know about those.”

“And I saw a rare bird nesting in the park. It was a yellow-crowned night heron.”

She saw a look of amazement appear on the superintendent’s face.

“You saw the nest? Are you sure? The County Bird Watchers Association was reporting the bird as a sighting, but no one has reported any nesting of that bird here in the park.”

“I can tell you where the nest is. It’s in that part that’s all grown over and has no paths.”

“You were in that part? The public is not supposed to be there. That land was just recently acquired. The yellow-crowned night heron is nesting there? This is good news. I’ll look into this. Listen, you’re hired. You can start to work next Saturday,” he said.

When Eva heard these words, she felt as if she could fly.