SAMPLE PAGES

The Burning Light of Two Stars

A Mother-Daughter Story

by LAURA DAVIS

What Early Readers Are Saying:

"I quickly ran out of superlatives for *The Burning Light of Two Stars* because so many scenes grabbed me. From the first page, I was fully engaged in Laura's world and didn't want to put the book down. It was as if she was speaking my story, her mother a mirror of my own. I am certain this wise exploration of mother-daughter dynamics over a lifetime will resonate broadly. As I pored over its pages, I didn't want this beautiful, compelling story to end. And for me, it hasn't: Laura's memoir and all of her characters have stayed with me to this day."

— Kay Taylor, author of *Soul Path Way*

"In this riveting memoir, Laura grapples with questions that many of us struggle with: 'How do family members stay in relationship when they can't agree on critical elements of their collective past?' 'How do families overcome past hurts when they need to show up for each other in their hour of need?' And 'Is it possible to risk loving someone you desperately want to be able to love, but who has repeatedly betrayed you?' As a palliative care doctor, *The Burning Light of Two Stars* put me in touch with what the caregiver experience is really like. I enthusiastically recommend this book."

— Shoshana Helman, MD, Hospice and Palliative Medicine, Redwood City, California

"Laura Davis has written a brilliant memoir. *The Burning Light of Two Stars* is destined to become as much a classic as *The Courage to Heal*, her groundbreaking book on healing from sexual abuse. Her memoir, written more than thirty years later, explores Laura's attempts to reconcile with her mother, who continued to deny that Laura had been

sexually abused. Here, a mature writer looks back on the most primal and pivotal relationship in her life. Laura handles the complex emotions and interactions of mother and daughter with deep insight, clarity and compassion. Her storytelling is compelling, poignant and heartfelt. At times gut-wrenching, at other times hilarious, *The Burning Light of Two Stars* is a 'must read.'"

— Adrienne Drake MD, Mission Viejo, California

"Reading this book changed my heart and inspired me to pick up the phone and call my mother for the first time in 18 years."

— Hollye Dexter, author of *Fire Season* and co-editor of *The Shame Prom*

"I finished *The Burning Light of Two Stars* in a bed of tears. What an eloquent and compelling story."

— Abby Stamelman Hocky, Executive Director, Interfaith Philadelphia

"When Laura Davis and Ellen Bass published *The Courage to Heal*, it emboldened a generation of survivors of incest and sexual abuse, likely contributing to the courageous voices for many who are part of today's MeToo and TimesUp movements. *In The Burning Light of Two Stars*, Davis allows us to know the person behind those pages, and the story behind that story. Nuanced, raw, and candid, this memoir does not designate white hat/black hat characters. Instead, it provides a topographical map through the complex landscape of the mother/daughter relationship at the heart of the story, with characters both noble and deeply flawed on both sides of the equation. This masterful heart-filling book is deeply moving and wise."

— Betsy Graziani Fasbinder, therapist and author of *Filling Her Shoes* and *Fire and Water*

"In a culture that produces chasms of disconnection in our most tender relationships, and sanitizes the rawness of life, *The Burning Light of*

Two Stars takes the reader on a journey that reconnects and rescues the beauty of life's messiest realities. It is a story of resistance and rebirth, one that provides myriad lessons on what it takes to transcend deep wounds. Laura Davis has written a brilliant, compelling book that I just couldn't put down. I read all night, and I do not give up sleep easily. The Burning Light of Two Stars fed my soul."

--Eileene Tejada, Ph.D. Professor of English and Anthropology at Napa Valley College

"Laura's story is important because it captures, with authenticity and supreme honesty, the vexed, complicated and tender mother-daughter bonds and because it doesn't hold back the daughter's ambiguity, resentments, wavering, love-hate sentiments. The sincerity through which the story is conveyed took my breath away."

— Rosa-Linda Fregoso, Professor Emerita of Latin American and Latino Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz and co-editor of *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas*

"Laura's book moved me in a very deep place. The vividness of the story shook me to my core; I felt like I was right there in the room. Laura's memoir is about a particular mother and daughter, but the issues Laura addresses are universal. Her book as a stunning achievement. I am certain *The Burning Light of Two Stars* will be used as a discussion vehicle with seniors, in groups dealing with mother-daughter issues, family estrangement, compassionate choices, Alzheimer's disease, and death with dignity, with a facilitator guiding discussion afterwards. Laura Davis has made a major contribution to the literature of aging, death and dying."

— Etiel Herring, Santa Cruz, California

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.

— Mary Oliver

Spark

Summer 1956
Long Branch, New Jersey

I started life in a glass box. I lay alone, barely breathing. Eyelids thin, light stabbing. Body on fire, nerves raw. Beeps piercing my tiny ears. I couldn't swallow. I couldn't suck. Tubes down my nose, wires on my skin.

Where was she—the heartbeat that had answered my own? That soft slippery chest pressed to mine?

For seven months, I'd held my twin in my arms. Even when we had no arms, I held her. She was always smaller, even when we were just a thought, a zygote, an embryo. She grew beside me, quarter ounce by quarter ounce, her pulse the echo of my own.

Weeks went by. Then months. She, floating in the safety of my embrace. Until the walls of our watery home began to squeeze.

Our mother was 28 years old. She'd already had two late miscarriages. She thought she was losing another baby. She had no idea that we were two.

At birth, a nurse placed me on the scale: two pounds, twelve ounces. A scrawny chicken. As they rushed me to the neonatal intensive care unit, the doctor said: "Hold on, Mrs. Davis, there's another one coming!" That's how she learned about my sister.

Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh. The two of us identical. My twin lived twenty-four hours. I never felt her again.

The rabbi advised, "Don't build a monument to someone who never existed," so my secret sister never had a memorial, a funeral or a grave. But Mom insisted on giving her a name.

Vicki.

For six weeks after my birth, no one was allowed to hold me. And I touched no one. Doctors didn't believe in holding preemies in 1956. I spent the next six weeks in a hard glass box: an Isolette, the perfect name for my healing prison. It isolated me from the broad expanse of my father's chest, my brother Paul's laughter, my mother's eager arms.

Nurses wearing rubber gloves reached in to adjust my tubes, check my wires, change my tiny diaper. The whoosh of machines, the tick-tock of the clock, a pale shadow of the heartbeat that had sustained me, the one that I had sustained. The nurses took notes on hard brown clipboards and moved on to the next tiny baby. They did what they could and left me alone.

Babies my size weren't supposed to survive. If I made it, the doctor said, I'd probably be blind or "retarded."

If I made it, I'd be strong.

A survivor.

My whole life rolled out from that beginning. When I think back now, here's how I imagine it:

A newborn, tiny, weak, and in pain. My twin had died, and I could have followed her. Perhaps part of me wanted to just let go and disappear. But then I felt her—Temme Davis, the woman standing outside my clear glass box. Pulling me to her. Willing me to live. My baby, oh my baby,

let me hold you in my arms. Beaming her life force through those hard walls. *Stay with me, darling. Please be my baby.* She pulled me into her blazing broken heart and claimed me as her daughter. *Stay with me*, she said. *Whatever you do, don't ever leave*.

And so, I said yes to life. Yes, to my mother.

I had no idea just how much of a challenge that was going to be.

CHAPTER 1

Ritual

51 Years Later
Santa Cruz, California

I waited until I knew I'd be home alone. Karyn and the kids wouldn't be back for several hours. This ritual was just for me.

I pulled the giant white binder out from under the bed and carried it to the backyard, along with newspaper, an armful of kindling, and a box of Strike Anywhere matches.

The fire pit in our backyard had been the center of many family celebrations. It was a joyous place. Today it would mark a different sort of occasion.

Sitting on the stone bench, I crumpled pages of the Santa Cruz Sentinel into loose balls and tossed them into the pit. Topped the paper with a pyramid of thin, dry pine with plenty of air space in between.

Lit my pyre with a hard stick match and watched the flames take hold.

It was early June 2008. I'd waited a long time for this day.

The binder had been handed to me the summer before at the Stanford Cancer Center after I walked in, leaning on Karyn, for our meeting with the Tumor Board. As we pushed our way through the front door, we were met with an incongruous, yet comforting sound—a young man playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata on a giant, black Yamaha grand piano.

As we waited to be called, I pressed my shoulder against Karyn's

shoulder, savoring the steadiness of her presence. But I couldn't look her in the eye. When I was terrified, I always reverted to coping alone. So, we sat, side by side, in separate bubbles. At any moment, the doctors were going to inform us whether I'd live to see our children grow up. Lizzy was ten; Eli, fourteen. Just let me see them graduate from high school. That was my mantra.

In neatly divided sections, the stiff binder had laid out all the information I needed as a breast cancer patient. Now, I opened the hard-plastic cover for the last time. I clicked the rings apart, crushed the first page, and tossed it onto the fire. As the carefully tallied list of medications disappeared into the flames, something tight in my chest gave way. I threw in another page. And another. I leaned in. It felt good.

I thought back to the day I'd learned that life can change, just like that.

It was supposed to be a routine annual exam. Twenty minutes max. Then back to my busy life: writing teacher, breadwinner, mother, spouse. As my doctor palpated my right breast, we chatted about our children—they'd been classmates at Orchard School, a tiny rural elementary school where kids ride unicycles to class. We were reminiscing about the pot-bellied pig when she felt it. Something hard. She went back and felt it again. And then again. "I'm so sorry, Laura, but you're going to need a biopsy."

I didn't hear anything she said after that. Just the word she hadn't spoken.

I wadded up the next page—contact names and numbers—threw it onto the fire. The stiff place in my chest loosened a little more. I threw in another page. And then another. The red and yellow flames devoured them all.

It had been a year of waiting. For my diagnosis. For surgery—*just get it out now*. For the wound to heal. The pain pills to work. For my head shaving ceremony. For nurses in lead-lined smocks to drip poison into my veins. For the nausea to end. For food not to taste like rusty nails.

I fed a dozen more pages into the fire. They sparked into the sky and the flames drove me back. I welcomed the surge of heat.

The day my oncologist told me I was cancer free, I floated out of her office into a warm spring afternoon. I imagined Lizzy, racing after school to climb her favorite tree. I pictured Eli, his long fingers folding origami paper into impossible shapes. I'd be here to guide them. To launch them. To see who they would become. I thought about Karyn and the life stretching out before us. The students I might teach. The things I might write. Maybe I had another book in me.

Cancer-free.

I tossed the last page onto the fire. The empty white binder gaped open.

Where did that leave me?

Gaining back the forty pounds I'd lost, waiting to feel like myself again. Whatever that meant. I had no idea.

So, I resumed my life: carpool, shopping, laundry. My cancer blog was winding down and my writing workshops were picking up. But underneath, nothing felt the same. How could I possibly go back to the old Laura—the doer, the manifester, the woman who added tasks she had already completed to The List of Things to Do, just for the pleasure of crossing them off?

Who am I now? That question haunted my nights and thrummed beneath the surface of my days. But no one in my family wanted to talk about cancer anymore, or the questions that survived it.

I poked at the remnants of the fire. Orange and red embers, radiating steady heat. I held my hands over the glowing coals, took a deep breath and spoke the words aloud: "I am not a cancer patient anymore. I am open to receive whatever comes next."

A deep quiet came over me when I said those words.

I watched the embers slowly fade.

It was time to discover who the new Laura might be. Maybe I'd be more present. Less driven. Less controlling. I hoped so.

I looked forward to quiet months with my family. No bombshells. No lumps. No toxic drugs. No surprises. Just a stable, steady life, so I could recover.

CHAPTER 2

The Call

2,179 Days

Two hours after my ritual, I tasted my homemade tomato sauce, simmering on the stove, added basil and oregano, a generous pinch of salt. A splash of red wine. Karyn was picking up the kids on her way home from teaching reading at Watsonville High. They'd be home in half an hour.

I was about to drop a handful of spaghetti into a pot of boiling water when the phone rang. It was my mother, calling from New Jersey. We were due for a call; we hadn't spoken in several weeks. Cradling the phone between my neck and shoulder, I dropped the pasta into the pot, stirred to separate the strands. My glasses fogged up with steam. I imagined her, curled up with an afghan on the couch in the den, smoking Parliaments. She'd probably just gotten home from her poetry class or her Shakespeare class or her Course in Miracles study group. I could never track her schedule. I set the timer for 13 minutes.

"Laurie, I've got a surprise for you."

"Oh yeah?" I was only half listening, maybe a quarter. I opened the fridge, rooted around for salad fixings.

"Why don't you guess?"

"I dunno, Mom, what's the surprise?"

"Don't you want to guess?" I pictured her lighting another cigarette, residue of the day's lipstick reddening the tip.

"Uh…you went to an audition and got a part in a play?"

"No, I'm afraid my acting days are over. Guess again."

"Just tell me, Mom."

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Of course, I want to know."

"Darling, I've finally made up my mind." She paused for effect. "I'm moving to Santa Cruz. I wanted you to be the first to know."

Blood rushed from my head. I closed the refrigerator. Leaned back against the door. Pictures of the kids and little square art magnets clattered to the floor.

It's true, years earlier, in a moment of generosity, I had invited Mom to move out to California "when she got old." We'd talked about it once or twice, but I never thought she'd actually take me up on it. It had been ten years.

"It finally feels like the right time, Laurie. New Jersey just isn't the same anymore."

That's right. Your friends are dying off, going into assisted living or moving to be close to their children. Oh my God. That's me. My hand tightened on the phone.

My mother and I had been estranged for years. Yes, we'd forged a shaky peace, but 3,000 miles still separated us for a reason. Our reconciliation went only so far.

"I love Santa Cruz. And I love your family."

"Wow, Mom. That's amazing. I mean…great…I'm so…happy."

"Well, that's good, darling, because I met with the realtor today. I've put my condo on the market. She says it's the perfect time to sell a place at the shore."

I collapsed onto one of the red cushy chairs at our yellow Formica kitchen table, stared at the black-and-white-checkered linoleum. The floor needed a washing.

"Laurie, are you there?"

"Yeah, Mom. I'm here."

"You still want me, don't you?"

"Of course, I want you. We all want you. It's just that I never thought

you'd actually do it."

"Well, I'm not getting any younger."

No, she wasn't. Mom was 80 years old and her memory was failing.

"You don't sound very excited."

"I am excited. I'm just surprised, that's all." How could I possibly be excited? The woman who'd betrayed me at the worst moment of my life was moving to my town. And I was the one who'd invited her.

A beep reverberated in my head and wouldn't stop. Mom was talking about escrow and how hard it was going to be to pack. But I barely heard her. She was the white noise in the background. I was hovering outside my body, listening to just one voice—the one screaming in my head taking up every inch of bandwidth: I've finally gotten through cancer, and now this? Why the hell didn't you *ask* me? How about, Laurie, do you remember that conversation we had *ten* years ago? I've been thinking about it more seriously and wonder if you still think it would be a good idea. For you? For me? For us? For Karyn and the kids? Or how about, Laurie, I know you're just getting over cancer. Is this a good time for me to move across the country to live in your town?

"….my friends told me about this gorgeous mobile home park right at the beach in Santa Cruz. De Anza, have you heard of it?"

"Yes, Mom."

"I'll go right from one ocean to the other. So, you'll stop by and talk to the manager?"

"Sure, happy to do that for you."

I grabbed a brand-new yellow legal pad. It had been months since I'd made a list. What would I have put on it? Take toxic drugs. Throw up. Smoke pot so you can eat. Grow white blood cells. Watch West Wing reruns. Survive.

As I wrote, FIND MOM A PLACE TO LIVE: DE ANZA? on the pristine yellow page, Mom said, "Gotta run, darling. I promised your Aunt Ruth a call tonight."

Click.

She hung up on me.

The timer was still beeping. I looked into the pot. The spaghetti had congealed into a gelatinous mush. I dumped it in the compost and set a fresh pot of water to boil. As I lifted the heavy pot, I knocked my favorite glass off the counter, and it shattered on the floor.

The kids were going to walk in at any moment, and they'd be starving.

I swept up the shards and set the table for four but I couldn't remember which side the fork was supposed to go on.

CHAPTER 3

Fame

19 Years Earlier
Laura 32, Temme 61, Indianapolis

Here's how it felt to be famous. Riding to the auditorium in the back of a black Lincoln Town Car. Periwinkle leather pants on smooth leather seats. Periwinkle leather jacket. Fake pearls. Black patent leather flats. My streaked mullet spiked and gelled in place. Just enough makeup for my face to show under the lights.

Women lined up around the block, waiting to hear me speak.

A year earlier, in 1988, my co-author Ellen Bass and I had published *The Courage to Heal: For Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, a 600-page tome that guided women through the process of healing. From coping to survival to thriving, our book provided a road map. The first. *The Courage to Heal* galvanized a movement.

There were so many requests for us to speak that Ellen was lecturing on one side of the country while I flew off to the other.

Soon I'd be out on stage, every seat full, hundreds of faces turned toward me, drinking in my every word. The thread of excitement winding up my spine competed with the memory of vitriol from my mother's call the night before: "You and your hate book. Traipsing around the country spreading lies about our family on national TV. You published that book

just to destroy me!"

As my driver pulled up in back, a line of women snaked around the corner, standing in small clusters, holding copies of *The Courage to Heal*, waiting for the doors to open. As I slid out of the car, I could still feel the heat of Mom's rage: "You and all the other lesbians. Ninety percent of you say you've been molested. You all hate men. You hate your mothers. It's the 'in' thing. Your badge of honor. Who had it worse as a kid!" Then she hung up on me. The finality of her slam still reverberated as my host rushed up to greet me.

"Let me take you right to the green room, Laura. It's going to be a full house tonight."

I pushed the memory of my mother's voice away. I was not carrying her with me into that auditorium. Some of these women had driven hundreds of miles to hear me speak. My job was to inspire them, to let them know they weren't alone, that healing was possible. I was determined to deliver. I buried Mom's words behind a steel wall inside me.

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As someone introduced me, I waited backstage, doing the vocal exercises I'd learned in 7th grade speech class: rehearsing my first lines in a thick voice with my tongue fully extended—opening my palate, opening my voice.

To prepare myself for the intensity ahead, I pictured a roll of cotton batting wrapped around my solar plexus, protecting me from the raw pain and collective grief of the hundreds of women waiting in the auditorium. I visualized a red rose—for compassion—blossoming in my chest. I imagined my feet rooting down into the molten center of the earth, pulling heat back through my body until it glowed inside me. As I waited in the wings, sweat dotted my spine, and I grew larger. My whole body tingled. Clip a mic on my lapel and a battery pack onto the waistband of my pants, and I slipped right out of my ordinary skin.

Something holy and elemental poured through me those nights, as I transformed from the damaged incest survivor that I really was into the inspiring coauthor of *The Courage to Heal.*

"Let's give a warm Indianapolis welcome to Laura Davis!"

As the wave of applause peaked and subsided, I strode onto the stage into the waiting silence. An "X" taped on the polished floor told me where to stand. The stage was bare: just a tiny table, a glass, a pitcher of water, no ice. And now me. I held a small blue stack of tattered index cards in my hand. Tiny reminders of the stories I wanted to tell. We'd already done the sound check. I knew just how far the spotlight would follow me.

I took a minute to breathe and look out at the women. Some had come alone. Others held the hand of a friend. A fellow survivor. Occasionally, a husband or male survivor braved the female crowd. But mostly they were women. Women who'd been raped and taunted and threatened and filmed and sold, tortured by strangers or people who were supposed to love them. Faces of every color looked back at me. Young women, old women, all kinds of women. Baby dykes and housewives. Accountants and waitresses. Doctors, therapists, and sex workers. They came from all over. They carpooled and took buses, flew on airplanes and crossed state lines. Some had slash marks on their wrists or the inside of their thighs. They carried tear-stained Teddy bears and razor blades in their purses. Women told me that they held one to keep from using the other. They carried dog-eared copies of our book and were prepared to wait an hour or more for me to sign them.

I always began with my story, my cadence practiced and slow. "When I was three years old, my grandfather came into the bedroom to tuck me in. Then he stuck his hands under my nightgown and started to touch me." The only sounds besides my voice: lights buzzing, a gasp, the crinkle of a wrapper.

In the beginning, I told them, healing felt like a cruel joke. "Why did I have to live through it a second time, this time with feelings?" Heads nodded like at a revival meeting and I always made eye contact with the

woman in the audience whose head bobbed in approval the most. "It was as if I was waking up every morning with the giant letters I-N-C-E-S-T in my living room. I couldn't get away from it."

The whole time I was up there, an hour-and-a-half a night, I knew I was saving lives. I knew because the women told me: "I would have killed myself if not for your book."

The Courage to Heal was a talisman. Women slept with it under their pillows. Spent months mustering the courage just to crack the spine. "I know you wrote it just for me." We heard that thousands of times. Women called it their Bible. Our post office box overflowed, some letters only addressed to: *The Courage to Heal,* Santa Cruz, California, the town where Ellen was living at the time. One woman wrote that she got so enraged, she stabbed her copy of the book, and when that wasn't enough to vent her fury, she barbecued it. She assured us, "I was first in line at the bookstore the next day. I had to get a new copy."

I had no idea how to handle the weight of that responsibility.

The moment I walked off stage, Mom's accusations pressed up from inside, but I shoved them away. Someone escorted me through the crowd to the book-signing area: a molded plastic chair and a table. Stacks of our book all around me.

I'd gone from barely paying the rent in a shared flat in San Francisco, working three part-time jobs to pay for gas, to having a best-seller and an agent booking my speeches on the road.

I'd become famous overnight for the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

Women stood in line for me to sign their books. They often held several. One for them, one for their cousin, one for their daughter, one

for their best friend. The line wound through the auditorium and they waited patiently for their time with me, arriving with their books already open to the title page. They told me about the abuse they'd survived: "It was my stepfather." "My brother." "It happened in the car on our way to buy milk." "Then he pulled out his camera." I listened, then asked how to spell their names. I wrote a personal message to each of them. "Don't let the bastards win, Melanie." "Gina, please stick around. We can't afford to lose any more survivors. We can't afford to lose you." "Maria, the only way out is through. Hang in there. You'll make it." "In the spirit of healing, Laura Davis." They came seeking hope and to express their gratitude. I felt honored to meet them.

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Here's the part I never told anyone before:

Sometimes, the raw pain in the room was so overwhelming, it felt as if hundreds of souls were climbing on my shoulders, hoping for salvation. But I was no messiah. There was no way I could hold all that anguish. So, as I signed their books, hugged them, and reassured them, I hid my vulnerable, wounded parts deep inside me, behind a locked door.

I was the hope machine, but the hope machine was running on empty.

After the final book was signed, I climbed back into the Lincoln Town Car and rode to my hotel in silence. Alone, I ordered room service: skirt steak, a glass of red wine, chocolate cake. But I could barely taste a single bite.

After shedding my periwinkle pants, I slipped into my flannel pajamas and wiped off the makeup I wore only on the stage. As soon as the trappings of that Laura Davis were put away, a huge hole opened in my chest. Panic mushroomed in my gut. Hold on, Laura. Hold on.

At times like these, there was one thing I could count on: writing. As I grabbed my journal from the nightstand, a light blue envelope fell out. Addressed to me. I stared at it. Reached for it. Hesitated. This wasn't

the first time I'd read it. Or the second. Or the fifth. I'd read it so many times, the creases were wearing thin. I'd promised I wouldn't do this to myself, but the letter lay on the bed, staring at me like an accusation. As I slipped the letter from its thin paper sheath, I shrank into my skin. Mom's familiar handwriting, scrawled in blue ink:

> *This is the final straw. You pile one blow on top of another on me. I have become your scapegoat for whatever is going wrong in your life. I was responsible for your father deserting you. Okay, you were a kid then. I swallowed that. Then you throw away all your academic brilliance. Another blow to swallow. Then you run away to Guru Maharaj Ji and I become your "hated one." Then you wait for a joyous family gathering to spring your gayness on me. Gone is my motherly hope to see my daughter happily married. When I try my best to accept that, you lay on the next blow—trying to destroy the image of my dead father. Then you accuse me of not protecting you 25 years ago. So, I was a rotten mother even then! Keep away from me until you have something good for me. I have enough to cope with in my life without all of your shit.*

She hated me. And it wasn't just Mom. All the relatives on her side of the family had lined up against me. I'd been erased—no longer invited to weddings, holidays, bar mitzvahs. When babies were born, the birth announcements did not come.

I'd gained the world and lost my family.

I stared at the blue stationery and floated back into that Isolette where no one could touch me. I wasn't the person all those women thought I was. Not by a long shot. I was a survivor, too, and I could barely save myself. So, after those long evenings on stage, channeling spirit or whoever it was who spoke through me those nights, I stared at the light on my hotel room wall and disappeared, just like I did as a little girl with my grandfather.

CHAPTER 4

Lifesaver

For the first quarter century of my life, I bragged about the great family I came from. Yes, there'd been a divorce, yes, my brother and I had joined a cult, and yes, our father had dropped out to become a hippie, but Paul and I came from a great home. Everyone said so.

Our father, Abe Davis, had been a major in the Air Force, stationed in France during World War II. Our mother, Temme Ross, a brainy beauty queen from an immigrant family on the Lower East Side, skipped two grades and graduated from City College of New York at 19. She met her future husband when her older sister married his older brother. As a teenager, Temme grew enamored of the wartime photo of her dashing brother-in-law in his military uniform. When he returned from the war, they courted and married.

My parents lived in a sixth-floor walk-up in Greenwich Village while my father studied music at NYU on the G.I. Bill. He became a communist and my mother paid the bills, working as a New York City social worker. Five years later, they moved to Long Branch, New Jersey, my father's hometown, to start a family.

My father became a school band leader and music teacher. Under the baby grand piano in our living room, a dozen instruments sat ready in their cases. When Dad's recorder ensemble met at our house, I hid at the

top of the stairs in my footie pajamas, savoring baroque melodies.

Mom sang me lullabies every night, and when our family went on road trips, we sang in the car. My mother was the leading lady in our local community theatre group, and when she went to rehearsal, my father dished up the veal scaloppini or hot dog and bean casserole she'd left warming on the stove.

My father drew whimsical creatures and curvy designs, filling sketchpads with tiny pen-and-ink drawings and watercolor. We spent hours in the basement together, making art on the old ping pong table. As we listened to Ella Fitzgerald and Miriam Makeba, Dad taught me to carve woodcuts and silkscreen.

I grew up in a house full of stories. My parents read to me every night, and later, I hid under the covers with a flashlight. Dad made up stories about a character named Rebopslip, and Paul invented a superhero named Frinkman who time-traveled and lived in a garbage can. We lived on a teacher's salary, but my parents invested in a brand-new set of Encyclopedia Britannica. In our house, education was king.

Paul and I grew up in a home with parents who loved us, wanted and planned for us. We always had a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs, food on our table. My mother helped me with homework and sewed Girl Scout badges on my sash.

Each month, we piled into the car to drive to Manhattan to visit my mother's parents. We called it, "Going to BPNY—Bubby Poppa New York." My favorite part was driving through the Holland Tunnel. The moment we entered on the New Jersey side, Paul and I had a contest to see who could hold our breath the longest. Coming out the other side, we emerged into another world. Steam billowed out of manholes in the street. Dad laughed: "The Devil's having a barbecue."

The worst part was crossing the Bowery. We always got stuck there at the longest red light in the world. Men with scraggly whiskers, dirty hair and baggy clothes lurched up to our car, spat on the windshield and smeared it with a dirty rag, hoping for a quarter. I kept my window rolled

up tight, cowering on my side of the imaginary line that divided my half of the back seat from Paul's. I couldn't wait for the light to change.

When we got to Bubby and Poppa's Lower East Side neighborhood, Mom checked and rechecked the car doors to make sure they were locked. Dad carried our big suitcase over the dirty sidewalks as I shooed pigeons out of our path. Mom called their building a tenement, a word that made me think of rats. Bad words covered the brick walls. Old ladies like Bubby talked on benches outside, wearing shapeless housedresses, black tie-up shoes, and support hose. They spoke Yiddish, which I didn't understand.

High above us, crisscrossing the courtyard where nothing green ever grew, clotheslines poked out from windows on every floor, stitching the narrow strip of sky with a ragged web. Paul and I ran up to the building and tilted our heads back. The top was so far away, it made us dizzy.

The entrance to BPNY was solid metal, the door so heavy it took all my weight to wrench it open. When it slammed shut, it clanged. The second we got inside, I pinched my nose shut—the halls smelled like cabbage, onions and pee.

Sometimes we took the elevator, but it was tiny, too small for four of us and a suitcase, so we usually walked up four flights. On each floor, there was a slot in the wall where people threw their garbage down into the incinerator. I imagined a big fiery monster down there—when we opened the slot, we could hear it roar.

At the end of the echoing hallway, Paul and I argued about whose turn it was to crank the doorbell: a little oblong piece of metal that made a harsh grinding sound. It took Poppa a long time to undo the bolts, the deadlock and the chain. Standing there in the doorway with his shock of white hair, a white button-down shirt stretched over his huge belly and tucked into baggy trousers, Poppa barely tolerated our affectionate greetings. He didn't like hugging or kissing. Instead, he turned me around, reached down and pinched my "donkey," the part of me everyone else called my tuchas or tushie. Touching my tushie was the way Poppa said hello. Everyone in my family thought it was funny, but my face burned.

Once, my cousin and I shoved books down the back of our pants to keep Poppa's hands away. Everyone thought that was funny, too.

Bubby gave me a hug and lots of kushenkepela—kisses on the forehead. "So, how are you darlingka?" She kvelled over how much I had grown and told me I was a good girl. Bubby was small and stooped and always old. Her hands, thick and transparent, like a layer of glue had been poured on them. A sparse bun captured her thin grey hair. Despite her hearing aids, Bubby still couldn't hear well. Or see very well either.

Being at Bubby and Poppa's was like visiting a museum full of unfamiliar things: books with strange letters that read from right to left. A single Yiddish newspaper strewn over a chair. Ancient sepia photos in convex frames: pictures of my great-grandparents from the Old Country. A dirty glass window latticed by metal bars. The only modern thing in the apartment was a small black and white TV. BPNY was a dark, serious world, with two little bedrooms, a living room, a tiny galley kitchen and a bathroom where I accidentally burned myself on the exposed radiator. Being there was different. The smells were different. The sounds were different. Shouting voices, yowling cats, and music from transistor radios rose from the streets below.

Bubby and Poppa were Orthodox Jews, and we weren't, which meant there were lots of rules to remember. At sunset every Friday, Bubby put a small, white lace cloth on top of her head, lit the Shabbos candles and sang the blessing: Baruch atta adonai eloheynu melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvo sov, vitzyvanu la hadlik ner, shel Shabbos. Poppa stood, and swaying from the knees, chanted the Kiddush, the ritual blessing over the wine. He sang fast. Afterwards, he prayed over the challah, the twisted egg bread. Then Bubby tore it in pieces and handed one to each of us. It tasted like sweet yellow fluff.

Poppa was a kosher butcher, so we always had steak with potato latkes. While Bubby broiled the meat and grated the potatoes, Poppa yelled at her because she never did anything right.

Poppa cut the meat with a knife that was always razor sharp. At BPNY, we got to drink Pepsi with dinner, something we never had at home.

After dinner, we had applesauce. Even if the dessert was something else, Poppa still called it applesauce.

As the youngest, I always went to bed first. Mom helped me into my nightgown and made me brush my teeth. After I kissed everyone goodnight, Bubby held my head in her hands and gave me a kushenkepela. "Sleep well, darlingka." Then I headed into the back room and Poppa came to tuck me in.

The spare bedroom, where our family slept, had twin beds pushed together, a tall wooden dresser, and a fire escape that folded up like a giant, mechanical praying mantis. In front of me on the wall, an old porcelain light with a pointy bulb was lit. It was Shabbos so it couldn't be turned off. That was one of the special rules.

After I climbed into bed, Poppa sat beside me. In the street below, teenagers laughed and joked in Spanish—the sounds outside always louder than the pale echo of voices from the kitchen. Pulleys screeched on squeaky wheels as mothers pulled laundry from clotheslines. Soon they'd be folding tee shirts and pants, fresh from the line.

It was story time.

In broken English, Poppa told me the story about a skunk and a railroad car. At the end, the skunk sprayed. That was the punchline. Each time he told the story, he folded the blanket back—one fold, two folds, three folds—and I sent my mind out onto the fire escape, soaring over the clotheslines. I stared at the burning light that stayed on because it was a holy time. If I stared hard enough and scrunched my eyes tight, I could forget I had a body. That way, when Poppa reached under my nightgown, I wasn't really there.

I came back as he fastened his belt and folded the blanket on top of me—three, two, one. Quiet as a stone, I watched him open the top dresser drawer to pull out our special blue roll of Lifesavers. Peppermint. I opened my mouth wide, and with rough fingers, Poppa placed a single, round candy on my tongue.

Paul and I each got a box of Chiclets gum when we left BPNY, but the Lifesaver was special, just for me. It was our secret. Poppa never had

to say, "Don't tell." He didn't have to. The sweet melting candy was my yes. And so, I never told anyone. I never told Mom. I never told Dad. Not that night and not all the other nights. I buried the memories so far inside that I could no longer reach them.

Once the Lifesaver was centered on my tongue, I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep so Poppa would go away. This part of the ritual was mine and mine alone. Lying perfectly still, I let the candy dissolve. That was my rule: Don't crunch it or bite it or crush it, even accidentally. I kept my mouth relaxed on the inside and made my tongue go slack, so the little wafer could get thinner and thinner without cracking. Swallowing was not allowed. I had to make the Lifesaver last until it melted completely, but no matter how hard I tried, it always broke. Sometimes it lasted all the way till the last moment, when it was so thin it almost disappeared, but by then there was so much saliva in my mouth that I had to swallow, and the pressure of my tongue on the roof of my mouth—even for a second—split the slight sliver in two.

I've often wondered, what if Vicki had lived? If there had been two of us in that bed, would my whole life have been different? One girl is vulnerable. Would two have been safe? If Vicki had been with me in that back room, would I have had to drift out the window? If we'd both heard the skunk story, together in matching nighties, would he have touched us both? Even if he had, I wouldn't have been alone. With twin Lifesavers on our tongues, we could have competed to see whose candy lasted longest.

But Vicki wasn't there. So, I coped as many children do, dissociating from the pain, burying the traumatic memories deep in my body where my brain couldn't find them.

Two little girls had lived inside my mother; now, two little girls lived inside of me: the good one who got straight As and the broken one who hid for more than 20 years. Until one day, she came out of exile and whispered in my ear.

CHAPTER 5

Aftershock

2,179 Days

Ten minutes after Mom's call announcing her big move, Karyn and the kids burst through the front door. I pulled Karyn into the bathroom for a moment of privacy.

She looked at me, concern and exhaustion dogging her eyes. "What is it?"

"You won't believe it. Temme's moving here for good!"

"Hold on. What do you mean?"

"She put her condo on the market."

"That's great news." Karyn actually smiled. She loved her mother-in-law. "Can't we talk about it over dinner? Your sauce smells great."

I made no move toward the kitchen. "I don't think I can do this."

A series of expressions crossed her face: impatience, frustration, acceptance. "Laura, this was your idea. You're the one who invited her here."

"That was a dozen years ago! I never thought she'd take me up on it."

Karyn took my hand. Her grasp, warm and familiar. "You'll do just fine." But her words didn't reach the frightened child cowering inside me. "I know things were bad, Laura, but they've changed. You've got to change with them."

Easy for you to say. You're not her daughter.

Over dinner, I broke the news to the kids. Lizzy, with long straight blond hair and a tree-climber's body, looked up from her plate of white food: pasta with butter and two slices of sourdough. An eager smile spread across her face. "Really? Grandma's moving here?"

Eli poked at his second serving, pushed his glasses up under a mop of straggly curls. I was still adjusting to his deep voice and the way his features had sharpened. "How long is she staying this time?"

I struggled to keep my voice light. "This isn't a visit. She's moving here for good."

Eli reached for more bread with his long, slender fingers. "Why is she coming?"

"Because she's getting old. Old people need a lot of help." Mom hadn't even left New Jersey; I had her doddering behind a walker already.

Karyn shot me a warning look and addressed the children. "Grandma Temme loves it here and wants to be near you kids."

I could see Eli calculating square footage in his head. Was he going to have to give up his room? "She's not going to live with us, is she?"

"No, Eli, definitely not." His face relaxed. He was just as relieved as I was.

A new awareness broke across Lizzy's face. "Does this mean we're not going to New Jersey anymore?"

I'd been taking the kids to the Jersey shore to see their grandmother for two weeks every summer for as long as Lizzy could remember—eleven years. Mom's condo was at the beach, with an indoor and outdoor pool, a shuffleboard court, an elevator, snack bar, and the warm Atlantic Ocean. But every visit ended with Mom yelling and me withdrawing. The fight could start over anything: how I spoiled the children by letting them openly express their feelings; how terrible it was that we didn't have a TV; Mom commenting on Lizzy's "terrific figure."

"Grandma will be living here full-time. She won't be in New Jersey anymore." The words "full-time" felt like an anvil in my belly.

Eli chimed in. "No more Broadway shows? No more Freddie's pizza?"

Lizzy frowned. "What about Strollo's?" The best soft ice cream on the Jersey shore.

I remembered those balmy summer nights. Three generations walking on the Boardwalk with cones, ice cream dripping down our fingers. "I'll miss Strollo's, too."

"It'll be great," Karyn assured them. "Grandma will come to all your plays and events." Then she looked at me. "It will be great, Laura, for both of you."

I hoped she was right.

❧

While Karyn did the dishes, Eli played his allotted hour of World of Warcraft, and Lizzy listened to Harry Potter cassettes, I threw on a sweatshirt and carried our portable phone out into the backyard—the only place I could speak in private. The fog had rolled in, and the temperature had dropped twenty degrees since my afternoon ritual. I sank into one of the aged Adirondack chairs that surround our fire pit and dialed my brother's number. As I waited for him to pick up, I stared at the riot of flowers in Karyn's garden: coreopsis, lavender, and a blazing stand of orange and purple dahlias—her favorite.

I wasted no time on preliminaries. "Paul, have you talked to Mom lately?"

"Yeah, she called last night." Great. So much for "I wanted you to be the first to know."

"She didn't even ask me." I gazed over at Karyn's yurt, with its French doors and canvas walls. She used to weave rugs in it; now she used it to practice yoga.

"You and I have talked about it, Laura. We knew if Mom ever actually moved, it would be out to California."

"Yeah, well that was theoretical."

"It is pretty shocking."

"It's a lot more shocking for me than it is for you."

"She'll be closer to me, too."

"C'mon, Paul. You'll still be a plane ride away. You know, I think I'd like to be that person. Maybe we should rethink this. Arizona is great for old people."

"Except I hate Arizona. I'm planning to leave."

"We had a deal, Paul."

Two decades earlier, Paul and I had gone hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park during the height of my estrangement from our mother. I'd told him there was no way I could take care of her when she got old. He'd agreed to do it. I said I'd take care of our father. And I had. I'd been there for all his heart attacks, his long slow decline. Paul had lived 1,000 miles away. "When Dad was sick, you flew in when it was convenient. Now you're going to do it again?" I stabbed at the ashy remains of my cancer notebook.

"You and Karyn are settled. You've got grandchildren Temme can still enjoy. Sonya is all grown up already. You have roots in Santa Cruz."

"Yeah, because it was as far from Mom as I could get without crossing an ocean. You've always had a better relationship with her."

"That's because our soul contract is different than yours. She's always helped me on the material plane, and I've helped her connect with spirit. That's why I incarnated as her son."

I picked up a leftover piece of kindling and jabbed the burnt tip against the cement until it snapped. Paul's New Age beliefs always raised my hackles, but I was not heading down that rabbit hole. "Look, we're talking about this plane—who's going to take care of Mom now and for the rest of her life. The fact is, you get along with her and I don't."

"But things are better between you now. They're good, right?"

"This isn't just a winter visit."

"You know Mom. Once she gets there, she'll get so busy with her own life, you'll hardly see her."

I swallowed hard and hugged my sweatshirt closer. "Look, Paul, I can't do this. You know our history."

"History is in the past, Laura. This is about the future. You'll be

fulfilling your karmic tie with Mom. My karma with her is different." I rolled my eyes and stared out into a vibrant patch of yellow yarrow. Part of me wanted to believe him.

"Lucky you." Which sounded awfully close to fucky you. As I gazed out at the vegetable garden, I choked up. "This is me and Mom together for the rest of her life."

"It's not like you're going to do it alone. I'm your brother. I'll be there for you."

I picked at the wood on the armrest of the chair. "You'll come when I need you?"

"Absolutely. I'll have your back."

"You promise?"

"I promise, little sister. We're in this together."

After we hung up, I stared out at the metal rooster I'd bought Karyn for her birthday. It had grown rusty. Garden art slowly disintegrating into the geraniums.

This ends the sample of *The Burning Light of Two Stars*

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Laura Davis the author of seven non-fiction books, including *The Courage to Heal, Becoming the Parent You Want to Be* and *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again*. Her groundbreaking books have been translated into 11 languages and sold more than 1.8 million copies. In addition to writing books that inspire and change people's lives, the work of Laura's heart is to teach. For more than twenty years, she has helped her writing students find their voices, tell their stories, and hone their craft as writers. She loves creating supportive, intimate writing communities online, in person, and internationally. *The Burning Light of Two Stars* is her first memoir.