Dear Mr. Cooper,

I could probably contact you more directly by e-mail, but the effort of handwriting will encourage me to choose my words carefully and I am conscious that I am writing to an author.

I wanted to tell you that I enjoyed your book 'Dead Letters' very much. The scene where Harry Gordon eats the peach ('leaning over and holding back his green silk tie with one arm while the juice christened the shirt cuff of the other') introduced a moment of summer into a watery English day. And it reminded me, as well, of the almost decadent pleasure that comes with eating fully matured fruit—sadly, a rarity.

With best wishes,

Eve Petworth

Dear Ms. Petworth,

Thank you for your very kind words. It is always a thrill to hear from a reader and an even greater one to

receive a letter. (Sadly, a rarity.)

I agree with you about the fruit. Mostly, we get the plastic stuff, too. I read once that the underripe kind is only good for what you British folks call jam. I am not a jam maker, but your letter has made me think about the value of putting effort into things so maybe I'll give it a shot.

Sincerely,

Jackson Cooper

Chapter One

"Hellooo."

Jack knew that hellooo, and at any other time it would have irritated the hell out of him, but at five o'clock on an afternoon when you have spent most of the day pondering the recent collapse of your second marriage, any kind of distraction is welcome. It was Lisa Milford. She lived across the street from Jack on Sea Lane.

"Jackson, I just heard about you and Marnie," she said.

She had let herself in, through the kitchen door, just as she had many times before. Lisa was a talker and she had found in the past a listener in Marnie.

"I am so sorry," she said.

Lisa had evidently been playing tennis because she was wearing a tennis dress. She was a petite, glossy brunette, and the dress created an impression that would have been entirely doll-like had it not revealed fine splashes of freckles on her bare upper arms.

Jack, happily relieved of his own company, smiled and greeted her warmly, more warmly than he ever had before. Lisa Milford had, until that moment, been a peripheral

element in his life, like the faint buzz of distant machinery—easily ignored.

This evening, though, they stood awhile and then sat, on wooden kitchen chairs angled away from the table, toward each other—toes aligned, torsos relaxed, conversing easily, like comrades, parents at a school gate, bonded by the sturdy adhesive of shared experience; Lisa's husband had left her, after a lengthy affair, the previous summer. Jack felt that the least he could do was to offer the woman a drink.

And then another.

And then, even in the case of a talker, it seemed, Jack's brain switched off and nature made its siren call to other parts of his anatomy.

Lisa, who was lonely, and who had been aware in any case of the magnetic effect of Jackson Cooper's presence for almost three years, fused to him immediately in response to the first, slight, signaling linger of a hand at her waist, so Jack did not have to be particularly active in the encounter that followed her accidental brush against him as he was pouring their third glass of wine. And then, a few minutes later, in what the realtor had referred to as "the garden room" and nobody had ever referred to specifically since, when Jack eased them both deftly backward onto a daybed covered with blue and white ticking that Marnie had liked to lie on to watch the sunsets, Lisa's two immaculately manicured hands met his chest with keen, and not inconsiderable, gusto.

Jack, while not engaged in this liaison with any more than instinctual enthusiasm, would, nevertheless, have proceeded with it except that, just as Lisa twisted to remove the last, gossamer barrier to undiluted commitment, she emitted a modest, girlish giggle, and the sound punctured something in him. His senses rallied. Or rather didn't. Nature, having previously taken over his physical and mental functioning, suddenly, and entirely, deserted him.

For the moment this development was lost on Lisa. She turned to him again and advanced with neat, energetic intent. But eventually, her breaths slowed and flattened.

"Ja-ack?" She scooted back and looked down at him.

Jack, meeting her face, caught her eyes and saw there a woman, an ordinary woman, too human. He quit, lifting her hips from his groin, and sat up.

"Sorry, honey," he said, pushing hair from his forehead and standing, dislodging her.

Lisa, upright and naked, trembled lightly and said softly, "Don't worry, Jack. *I'm* not gay."

Jack stared.

"And Marnie probably always was," she added quickly and, she imagined, sympathetically. "You don't turn people gay, they just *are*."

Jack, speechless, fastened his trousers and went to retrieve the tennis dress.

"Thanks," Lisa said when he handed it to her, but rather than put it back on, she held it with one hand, bunched against her breasts. "Maybe we should just go to my place,"

she suggested, "and relax—have a drink and sit in the hot tub, or something." She leaned toward him and raised four tender, encouraging fingers to his cheek.

Jack, removing the fingers by the wrist as if he were extricating a caterpillar from his salad, pulled back from the embrace. "I'm gonna pass tonight," he said. And then he smiled, to soften it, relieved to see Lisa, at last, make a move toward dressing. She looked small, and vulnerable, bending to scoop up her underwear.

"I'm sorry, honey … we'll do something later in the week. I'll call you."

"Promise?" she said.

"Promise," he said.

She was still smoothing the tennis dress against her hips when he opened the door.

Much later, quite a lot drunker, Jack took a postcard from the top drawer of the big, oak desk in his study. On one side there was a picture of the sea, a mass of glorious turquoise. His eye, though, went to a red boat, barely sketched, in the top-right-hand corner. It was an appealing picture, a reproduction of an oil by another of his neighbors, Julie Hepplewhite. She had a studio-cum-gallery setup on Melon Walk. The sort of place, Jack had noticed, that the Hamptons, and especially Grove Shore, lately seemed full of—conspicuously picturesque, and a bit strained, although Julie's—The Gallery on Melon—was better than most, Jack thought. At least she could paint.

But now, looking at her work, flicking the switch on an anglepoise lamp, no warmer aspect of Julie, of Julie herself, came to him. She'd been a vanilla conquest, the counter of this evening's aborted fumble, an effortless progression from a late night meander home after a party, as routine as lacing a shoe. The incident had been all but forgotten by both of them. At the gallery, if Jack wandered in behind the tourist crowd on an aimless Saturday, to scan the walls noncommittally and pick up a few postcards, Julie would smile and say, "Hey, Jack," when she rang up the sale. And he'd say, "Hey, Julie," back. Vanilla.

Jack, turning the card over, took a black pen from an empty coffee can that held, as always, a dozen of them and wrote:

Dear Eve Petworth,
Are you a cook?
Jack Cooper

In the depths of the English countryside, in a house that was an advertisement for the English countryside, Eve Petworth moved a neatly angled, silver-framed photograph a few inches to the left in order to place a crystal bud vase on top of a rarely played piano. She held the yellow blooms it contained briefly, and absently, to her face. It was a vague gesture; she was preoccupied and didn't pay much attention to the scent. In any case, the scent of those roses—*Golden Celebration*, she could have told you—was as familiar to Eve

as that of beeswax, or bay leaves, or lemon peel. Then she turned and watched Izzy.

Izzy, who had entered the room behind her mother, crossed it purposefully. She flipped a window latch and swept back the pane as if to fly through it.

Eve waited, rather meekly, she the child momentarily and Izzy the parent, for Izzy to tell her what to do. She didn't wait long.

"We'll have Campari," Izzy announced. The sunlight, behind her now, emphasized her blondness.

Her indomitable blondness, Eve thought, so dramatic compared to her own faded russet.

"Yes," she replied. She hated Campari.

Afterward, they ate pheasant casserole. Eve had taken the casserole from the freezer that morning, removed it from its plastic container, and reheated it without ceremony, ignoring the sticky label on top, which, in her own hand, stated, "Sauce needs work." The sauce did need work, she thought after her first, testing mouthful. She spooned some salt from the silver dish in front of her and sprinkled it over her plate, but it didn't improve things much.

Izzy did not comment on the sauce, merely ventured with mild, almost unconscious, disapproval that pheasant casserole was a bit wintry for a June lunch. She was right about that, of course. But Eve had found that the will even to cook for this particular occasion had deserted her. They were marking the anniversary of Eve's mother's, Izzy's

grandmother's, death. Virginia Lowell had died on a bright, cool afternoon just like this one, exactly twelve months previously. It had been Izzy's idea to mark the day.

"I'll come down, Mummy," she'd said, shouted almost, over the telephone from London the previous week.

Eve had been able to hear traffic behind her and had imagined Izzy, dressed in some modish work outfit, hurrying from one important thing to another important thing, making steady, thoroughbred headway.

"We should have a nice lunch together at least. We can't just behave as if it were a normal day."

Eve had heard reproach in this and had acquiesced, the way she always did to Izzy, who had rung off, swiftly, leaving Eve with the severed end of the exchange. The plan had been set.

Now Izzy turned to the end of the table. She had brought a small portrait of her grandmother down from the girlhood bedroom she still used on visits, and propped it against the chair with the ghost in it—a wreath at a shrine—to watch over them while they ate. She tipped her wineglass to the vivacious face and said, "Chin-chin, darling." Then she bit back a threatening tear with her usual brickish stoicism.

Izzy had been, Eve knew, not only heartbroken, but shocked by the death of her grandmother—so little happened to Izzy that Izzy did not want to happen.

"But she was *young*," she had protested, over and over, when Eve had telephoned her with the news, although Virginia had been almost eighty. Not that Virginia had ever

publicly admitted her age. And no one who'd met her would have guessed it; she'd been a beauty to the last.

Virginia had been living with Eve, her only child, for seven years by the time she died, but Eve's house, despite its six bedrooms, four bathrooms, generous kitchen, and selection of reception rooms, had never accommodated the pair of them easily. It was a question of personality. Virginia had been a woman with personality for four. "I kept your share, dear," she had said, more than once, to Eve, because, in addition to being a beauty, a wit, and a bon vivant, Eve's mother had been a bitch.

Eve, whose husband had flown the coop early, just as Virginia had predicted he would, had cared for her mother, tirelessly and dutifully, and donated to this enterprise her freedom, her confidence, and her self-respect. But these were things that Virginia had been robbing her of since birth, and particularly since Eve's father's death from a heart attack—a tragedy which his wife had quickly adopted as her own, regardless of their already tense marriage—when Eve was five.

Virginia's widowhood had hosted a variety of lovers and, transiently, a second husband, but her true affections had only ever been roused by Izzy, in whom she had seen herself. Today, Izzy had wanted to sit outside once the drinks were poured, and when Eve had explained that the garden furniture had been repainted the day before and was tacky still, she'd said, "You should have had it done at Easter," in a voice that had brought Virginia, vividly, from the grave.

Thinking back, in the formal, dining room quiet, Eve could not remember a single sincere disagreement between her mother and her daughter. There had been many arguments; days when they'd each complained shrilly to her about the other's shortcomings. Those hysterias, though, had always waned as suddenly and irrationally as they'd erupted. And Eve had been outnumbered, and ignored, all over again.

After a more seasonal slice of lemon tart and some carefully neutral, on Eve's part at least, reminiscing about their very different experiences of Virginia over coffee, Izzy went to visit an old school friend, and Eve, relieved, cleared the lunch things.

Gwen had left for the day so Eve rinsed the dishes and stacked them in the dishwasher. She would have done, even if Gwen had been there. Gwen often said that she did not know why Eve paid her; there was so little for her to do these days. But, in fact, they both knew why Eve paid Gwen to come up from the village three times a week. She paid her for her company, her pleasant, unquestioning company.

Once the kitchen was orderly and pretty, a reflection of Eve herself, though she never would have seen it, she sat at the kitchen table beneath the window with the view of the plum tree and took Jackson Cooper's—Jack's—postcard from the back of the tan leather folio where she kept recipe clippings, and read it again.

Then she went into the library and sat at the rolltop desk, where she had sat to address the invitations to Izzy's

christening and to sign her divorce papers and to make the lists of food she'd need for her mother's funeral, and she flipped open the lid of the slim blue computer that Izzy had brought her the previous Christmas. There was a contact e-mail address on the website.

Dear Jack Cooper,
No, I don't cook professionally.
Eve Petworth

For love then?
Jack

For reassurance, order and comfort. You?

For love.

Jack lifted his beer to his lips and grimaced. "Don't keep buying this garbage, Dex. And if you do, don't bring it to my house. Bring European beer to my house, it tastes like beer. This stuff tastes like something pissed in it."

"Go easy on me tonight, Jack."

Jack, reaching affably for the cue, said, "Okay, I'll bite."

"There's something on my mind," Dex said, taking a relaxed slug of his beer.

"Love, or money?"

Dex laughed. "Do you think that's what it always comes down to?"

"Yes, in the absence of death, pestilence, and war. On the other hand, I may just be extraordinarily shallow."

"Actually, there is a lull in my love life," Dex said, checking his watch. "But it's only been fourteen hours, so I'm not letting it get to me yet. And my financial situation is pretty much status quo—i.e., inadequate."

"Want any help with that?"

Dexter Cameron raised his shoulders in a loose, elegant gesture. A practiced gesture, he was an actor. "Nah, thanks … living broke is like carrying something heavy—you get used to the required stance."

"Okay, well, you know it's there."

"I know it's there," Dex said.

Jack drank to him. And then to redress the sense of off-balance that had been introduced, he asked, "How's Brooke?"

"Seventeen, even better looking than her mother, assessing colleges the way a person assesses colleges when they've got a choice."

"Seventeen?"

"Seventeen."

Brooke, the dynamic progeny of one of Dex's insubstantial romances, had been a toddler when he and Jack had first met. Her mother had moved to New Mexico soon after the child's second birthday, but Dex had kept in touch with them, and visited regularly.

"You still call her every Tuesday?"

"Every Tuesday."

"You're a good man."

It was Dex's turn to raise his glass. He did, and the conversation could have ended. They were two men who'd been friends for a long time and who, early in that time, had found an unquestioning, and only ever mildly competitive, ease in each other's company. They could have sat, as they had sat many times before, looking at nothing in particular, talking about nothing in particular. The tide was in and the even sound of the waves on the shore beneath the house beat through to them. But Dex said, "*You*, that's what's on my mind."

Jack, caught by the backtrack and detecting a level of inquiry in it that he did not want to address, stood without replying and went into the kitchen, where he poured out his beer and took a fresh one from the refrigerator. Coming back into the room, where Dex had propped his bare feet on a low table near the open French doors, he held the bottle up and said, "For your edification—C-Z-E-C-H. Look it up sometime."

But Dex's eyes indicated that he wasn't going to be so easily diverted.

"I. Is. Fine," Jack said, forcefully chipper, but his voice and motion of his sitting, opposite Dex in a high-backed Swedish chair, were enfeebled by underlying insincerity.

"What's the deal with Marnie?"

There was just enough breeze to swell the white muslin of the curtains. Jack, watching them, said, "I don't know and I don't care."

"Yes, you do."

"No, Dex, I don't." He rested his beer on the table that housed Dex's feet and got up again, returning a moment later with a wooden bowl full of nuts. He put it down, next to the beer, dislodging the feet, with full-stop emphasis.

"So is she living with this other chick, or what?" Dex said.

"She's living with this other chick. Her name is Carla. She's a librarian from Wisconsin. Now let's drop the subject."

Dex leaned forward and scooped a handful of the nuts with a tight eye on Jack. He'd never, in fifteen years, seen him look the way he looked now: low. Dex was the one who got low, got drunk, got crazy. He shot a few of the nuts into his mouth. "Whooa, these are good," he said. "What'd you do to 'em?" He opened his hand, gazed admiringly, then ate the rest.

"I rolled them in melted butter and honey and salt … like you care. Just eat them."

Dex smiled and stared out at the horizon and Jack stared out at it, too.

Then Dex asked, "You writing?" Although he knew better.

"Let's drop the subject," Jack said for the second time.

Later, Jack heated oil and butter in a cast iron skillet and waited till it began to smoke. Then he dropped two steaks onto the pan and flipped them. He had floured the steaks lightly and the flour muddied. He took the meat from the pan, and the pan from the heat, and he pushed the kitchen

window open wider before adding a generous, steady pour of red wine to it from the large glass on the counter. Then he put the pan back on the heat, lowered it, and while he waited for the liquid to reduce, lifted the glass again and drained it. Then he stood gazing for a moment at the familiar view of emerald lawn and low hydrangea bushes and ocean, but he didn't see it. He saw his fiftieth birthday coming straight at him like a freight train.

Eve had found the card three years previously on a grim, three-day trip to Cornwall with her mother. They had stayed at an agreeable hotel where the food was outstanding, but Virginia had found nothing to her taste. And with the exception of the half hour she'd spent flirting each evening with the embarrassed young waiter who brought them their six o'clock cocktails, she had been miserable company. Eve, wandering along the picturesque bay front one afternoon while Virginia napped, had bought the card and a small box of fancily packaged fudge. Not because she had any particular purpose for them, but because she had felt self-conscious alone in the shop. She had given the fudge to Gwen and tucked the card into her desk, ready for some occasion that had never arisen.

Now she was struck by the similarity between the picture on her card and the picture on the postcard that Jack Cooper had sent her, a picture with which she was by now extremely familiar. She turned both the cards over and compared the names of the artists, but there was apparently

no connection. Then she opened her card to its pristine interior and wrote:

Dear Jack,

Your memory is almost right about the underripe fruit. Jam fruit should be ripe, but not too ripe. If it is, the jam does not set well. I hope you will make some. In the winter, in the absence of peaches, preserves let in a little light.

Eve

She slid the card into its envelope and addressed it and put it in her desk. She'd ask Gwen to pick up some stamps tomorrow.

Upstairs she could hear voices. Izzy and her boyfriend, Ollie, had driven down late the previous evening. Eve had gone to bed, leaving them plates of cold chicken and salad in case they wanted any supper, but she had heard them arrive; the thud of the car doors and Izzy's instructions—issued with a bluffness that gave no concession to the hour—to Ollie about their luggage.

Now Izzy was luxuriating in her favorite claw-foot tub in the big bathroom off the hall and talking. Izzy's was a voice that had an authority in it, Eve thought, even when she was lying naked in a bath full of almond oil. Almost twenty-eight now, she was an art appraiser at a big auction house. She'd had the kind of career path people describe as "meteoric." Eve supposed it had stood her in good stead, that voice. "Everything about her is compelling," she said

to herself as she got up and walked back down the hall, through the kitchen, and out the back door to the garden. She wanted to pick some mint for the lamb that she was going to roast later for lunch.

"But what does she do all day?" Izzy lifted one foot out of the bath and onto a fat white bathmat. Then she shook the second foot behind her like a sleek animal clearing a fence and reached for a towel.

"She volunteers at that shop, doesn't she?"

"Once in a blue moon. I don't think the Red Cross are exactly dependent on her."

"Friends? Bridge or whatever?"

"Not anymore. She used to do a few things like that, but I don't think she really does now. And she only really putters in the garden these days."

"She's not very old," Ollie suggested, tilting his chin to shave underneath it. "And she's good-looking. Maybe she's got a man."

If Izzy had responded to this, rather than simply reacting as was her tendency, she might have seen, in the patch that Ollie had cleared with his palm in the steam-fogged mirror, that he was smiling when he looked down to rinse his razor. But she didn't.

"Don't be grotesque, Ollie," she scolded, tucking the towel across her chest and flipping her head forward to wrap her hair in a second one. "Honestly, the idea."

Eve salted and chopped the mint and left it to steep in sugar and water. Then she moved a jug of daisies into the center of the kitchen table and laid cork mats for a casual breakfast. Through the window, at the very edge of the garden, where the woodland backed toward the house, she could see a white foxglove. Eve loved white foxgloves; the genteel loll of them, the defiant brilliance among their more common purple cousins. She stood looking at this one and a small, silent bond blossomed between them for a moment until Izzy and Ollie joined her, dressed as they always were on their visits in studied country garb of expensive jeans and oversized sweaters.

Eve saw immediately the reason for the impromptu trip. Izzy was wearing an engagement ring. Catching her mother's eye, she flashed her hand up.

"Ta-daah," she said flamboyantly, although the gesture and the twitching, dangling fingers it burgeoned were suffused with self-consciousness. But then, powerfully candid suddenly, she dropped her arm and burst out, "I wish Gingin were here. The wedding won't be right without her."

The protest drowned Eve's "Congratulations," and she didn't know how to respond to it, so she sent Ollie to fetch some champagne and busied herself for a moment squeezing orange juice.

Izzy, recovering quickly, sitting, and finding that firm ground again between ersatz and heartfelt, went on, "And you needn't ask. I'm not."

Eve washed the orange juice from her hands and set the

husks aside for candying. In fact, it had not crossed her mind that Izzy might be pregnant. Izzy had known the circumstances of Eve's own marriage because Virginia had told her—at too delicate an age, Eve had always thought. But she had felt at least that the knowledge might discourage Izzy from marrying for only that reason. Not, she realized now, that Izzy would. Times were different and Izzy was different. Different from Eve.

"I won't be waddling down the aisle like a hippo," Izzy announced, straying back into false notes, but nevertheless confirming Eve's thoughts.

Eve did not respond. The issue done with, she initiated the toast, Ollie had opened the champagne, and "Congratulations," she said again. "Here's to many happy years." She lifted her glass to the two young faces. Too young probably, she thought, and yet older than I was.

"He'll be wandering before the end of the honeymoon," Virginia had said. Eve had heard the click of her gold compact case through the cubicle door in the ornate powder room of the restaurant where Simon Petworth, her husband-to-be, debonair beyond his years, had treated a group of friends and family to dinner to celebrate their engagement.

"Oh, I don't know," Dodo, Virginia's only close friend, replied, "She's very pretty. And you can never tell with those quiet types."

Eve, holding her breath for fear of discovery, which would

have made the ghastly overhearing even ghastlier, could imagine them, intent on their own reflections, fiddling with their hair and applying lipstick.

"Believe me, I can tell," Virginia's voice went on. "He can't keep it in his pants and she's as exciting as boiled cabbage."

Eve, nineteen years old and nine weeks into her first trimester, had thought that she might faint then, but she hadn't. What she had done was to resign herself, over the sound of her mother's laughter, to the swift loss of her husband's affections. Like a bird, whose heart gives out before the cat has killed it.