

# *Part One*



## 1972

On the table in the front hall there rested a pile of fifty envelopes, stamped, sealed, and addressed to a P.O. box in New Jersey. Evelyn swept them up into her hand.

“Darling, I’m off!” she called to Gerald in his study at the back of the house.

“Safe travels!” her husband returned.

“Mailing your entry forms!”

“You’re a saint!”

As she pulled the door closed, he shouted something she couldn’t make out.

Evelyn sighed and went back in.

“What was that?” she said.

Nothing. She hadn’t yet grown accustomed to having him around at nine o’clock on a Tuesday. She walked toward his study—past the parlor, and the living room, and the formal dining room, where she had already set the table for three with a linen tablecloth and her mother’s good china. There was a large crystal vase in the center, which she would fill with tall flowers later this morning. She couldn’t say why she was going to such lengths for her son. After what he had done, she ought to just feed him a tuna fish sandwich on a paper plate and make him eat it out on the driveway. She had always considered her inability to make a scene one of her worst qualities.

In the study, Gerald sat at the desk, his typewriter in front of him, a box of envelopes leaning against his coffee cup.

“More?” she asked with a frown.

“This is for a different contest. A weeklong bicycle tour in Tuscany sponsored by Prince Spaghetti!” His eyes lit up. He looked like a portrait of himself as a child that had once hung in his mother’s sitting room.

Her husband, at sixty-six, did not get a thrill from beautiful women or fast cars, but from sweepstakes and contests of all varieties. Evelyn had always felt sorry for the eager young secretaries assigned to him at the insurance company, who probably thought they would be helping with important deals but instead spent hours on end filling out self-addressed, stamped envelopes.

Since his retirement, the hobby had turned into something of an obsession. He usually didn't win, but on the rare occasion when he did, it made him go twice as hard the next time. Gerald argued that the odds were in his favor, since most people entered a contest only every now and then (*or never*, she thought), when something they really wanted was at stake. But Gerald entered them all. In the twenty-odd years he'd been doing it, he had won just a few things, none of them very exciting: a pair of Red Sox tickets, a kayak, a hideous brown icebox that now resided in the garage, motor oil, a painting of dogs riding on a sailboat, and a lifetime supply of Kaboom breakfast cereal, which neither of them ate.

"*You May Already Be a Winner . . .*" How many times had she seen those words splashed across a page? Most sweepstakes dropped out of sight a few years back, when the Federal Trade Commission issued a report revealing what she had long suspected to be true: the biggest prizes seldom got awarded. These days, the few games that remained were mostly run by grocery stores and service stations as a promotional device.

There was one called Let's Go to the Races in which you picked up a free preprinted betting slip at Stop & Shop and then watched a weekly horse race on TV. If the horse on your slip won, you got the grand prize. Her husband sat before the television each Friday, clutching his ticket, so hopeful. Evelyn couldn't bring herself to mention that the races had probably been filmed long ago, and whoever had created those tickets in the grocery store knew exactly how many winners there would be.

The whole situation embarrassed her. They didn't need anything, after all. But she had come to realize that needing and winning were two entirely different things.

"A bicycle tour?" she said now. "When was the last time you rode a bicycle?"

"I'm sure I was a tot in short pants, Evie, but that's exactly the point—I'm retired! Anything is possible."

"Yes. But on the other hand, now you have to fill out all your own entry forms."

"True enough," he said. "If only I could get my wife interested in the job."

She pointed a finger at him. "Not a chance. Anyway, what were you saying? I couldn't hear you."

"I was just asking if you needed me to do anything while you're out."

Evelyn smiled. Retirement had made a new man of Gerald, though perhaps more in thought than in deed. He had never before offered to help around the house. But the few times she had taken him up on it in

recent weeks, everything went pear-shaped: the dishes were washed and put away with scum all over them, the hedges were clipped to the nubs like a pack of sad poodles.

“I don’t think so, but you’re a dear to ask,” she said.

“All the beds upstairs are made?” he asked. “Where should we put him tonight?”

Evelyn’s body tensed up.

“He’s not staying,” she said.

“No?”

“No.”

She had told her son that they would have lunch, not dinner, for this very reason.

“We have six empty bedrooms,” Gerald said.

Evelyn stared at him. She had conceded many points in this battle already, but on this one she intended to remain firm. It was a good sign that Teddy was coming. She hoped it meant that he had come to his senses. But when Evelyn thought about his wife and children in the house across town, and the fact that he had abandoned them for the past five months, it felt as if someone were twisting her heart like a dishrag.

Teddy hadn’t mentioned whether or not he planned to sleep at his own house tonight. If not, let him stay in a hotel.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—” Gerald started.

“No, no. It’s all right.”

Over the phone last week, Teddy had said he wanted to see them.

“There are some things we need to discuss,” he said. “And we never got a chance to celebrate Dad’s retirement.”

It made her sad to see how much this last part pleased Gerald. Never mind that the firm had thrown a lavish retirement party for him two months earlier and Teddy didn’t bother to come up from Florida for that. Her husband always thought the best of their son, despite any and all evidence to the contrary.

Gerald believed that Teddy was coming home to make things right in his marriage. Evelyn hoped it was true, but she had her doubts. Why had Teddy said that he wanted to come alone when she suggested inviting Julie and the girls to lunch? Gerald said he probably wanted to talk it all through with the two of them before he went to his wife.

“Maybe even apologize to us,” Gerald remarked.

Evelyn just nodded when he said it. She cared a great deal about keeping the peace, at home especially. She and Gerald rarely argued, and when they did she quickly nipped it in the bud, silently reciting an Ogden Nash

poem entitled “A Word to Husbands,” though she thought it applied just as well to wives:

*To keep your marriage brimming,  
With love in the loving cup,  
Whenever you're wrong, admit it;  
Whenever you're right, shut up.*

But these past few months with Teddy had strained things between them. Gerald made it clear that they must stand by him, no matter what, and that if they did, he would realize what he had done wrong. Evelyn had never interfered with her son's dating life when he was a young man. She had bitten her tongue on several occasions. His first girlfriend was a drinker, and together they were thrown out of nearly every barroom in Boston, usually for having screaming arguments with each other. The next one was arrested after getting into a physical fight with her own mother. Teddy had to ask Gerald for the money to bail her out of jail. But then he married Julie, a wonderful girl, and they had two beautiful daughters.

Up until then, Evelyn's biggest regret in life had been that she was only able to have one child. She would have adopted five more if Gerald had let her. But when Julie came along, she felt that she at last had a daughter. They laughed together so much, and traded books and magazines. Julie asked for her recipes, and Evelyn copied them down by hand, giving her the whole collection one Christmas. The ten years since her son's marriage had been some of the happiest of her life. For the first time, the house felt full. They ate meals together as a family once or twice a week. On Sundays after church, the children fed chunks of stale bread to the ducks that bobbed about at the shallow edges of the pond, as she and Julie sat on the patio drinking lemonade and chatting. Once a year, the four of them dressed up and went for tea at the Ritz. The girls brought their favorite baby dolls, and fed them sips of Earl Grey from delicate china cups.

Evelyn and Julie met as teachers at the same high school. In the beginning, she observed Julie from afar. Tall and slim, with pretty blond hair, she seemed so at ease with the students, so delighted by them. In the teachers' lounge, the male faculty members tripped all over themselves to sit next to her at lunch. Evelyn thought immediately of Teddy. This was the type of girl he should be with—someone who loved children, someone steady, with a good heart.

After a few weeks, Evelyn got up the courage to talk to her. Her stomach fluttered with nerves, as if she herself were the one with the crush. She learned that Julie had moved east from Oregon three months earlier and knew few people in the area. She was the oldest of four siblings. Her parents were academics who had settled on a working cherry farm sometime in the fifties.

Evelyn told her best friend about her plan. Ruth Dykema taught freshman algebra and always spoke her mind.

“Careful there,” she said. “Matchmaking can sometimes backfire on a girl.”

Evelyn tried not to feel hurt, or to wonder whether her friend’s warning had to do with her son’s unsuitability. But Ruthie was so close with her own devoted son that it stung all the more.

Truly, Evelyn was thinking of Julie’s best interest too. In those days, if a woman wasn’t married by her mid-twenties, she would probably never get married. Julie was twenty-three.

“You must come to a little party I’m throwing next weekend,” Evelyn said to her at lunch the next day. She could introduce them there. She knew you couldn’t force these things, but surely you could help them along a bit.

Evelyn was up all night before that party, thinking of the best way to get them talking. If Teddy could sense that the setup was premeditated, he wouldn’t want anything to do with it. To her surprise and delight, they found their way to one another on the front porch the moment they both arrived. When Evelyn opened the door, there they stood, Teddy beaming in a way she hadn’t seen in ages.

They began seeing each other, and six months later they got engaged. Sometimes she wondered if Teddy had told Julie about his past, or if she herself had some obligation to do so. But eventually she decided not to worry. Julie seemed to have rehabilitated him. Evelyn thought then that perhaps he was just slow to mature. She felt relief, imagining that Teddy would become the sort of man Gerald had with time. The girls were born, and she assumed that was the end of the story. No need to worry anymore. She should have been smart enough to remember that in life you could never predict what would come next.

Her older granddaughter, Melody, had first told Evelyn the news of his leaving them last spring.

“Daddy went to Naples on business and he fell in love,” she said plainly, when Evelyn stopped by with tulips from the garden and found her daughter-in-law in tears at the kitchen table.

Evelyn smoothed Julie's hair, and fixed two glasses of brandy. She never drank during the day, but the situation seemed to demand it. She assured Julie that this was just a stupid mistake that Teddy would come to regret and for which he would inevitably repent.

"He called and said he's staying down in Florida for a while," Julie said, stunned. "He said no one's ever made him feel the way this woman does. When I asked him what exactly that meant, he said she makes him feel like a man. She makes him feel free. He sounded so excited. Almost as if he thought I would be happy for him."

"He's lost his mind," Evelyn said.

She made them dinner that night, and stayed until the girls were in bed. "He'll call and apologize in the morning. I know it," she said. She wondered if he was drinking too much again. She felt like apologizing on his behalf, getting down on her knees and begging Julie to forgive him, though she knew there was no point to that.

When Evelyn got home and told Gerald the story, he only said, "What a mess."

"How could he, Gerald? What should we do about it? Should you fly down to Florida and talk some sense into him?"

She had expected him to be on her side, but Gerald shook his head with a sorrowful look. "We need to stay out of it, Evie. It's not right to be plotting with Julie. He's our son."

For a time, she ignored her husband's advice. She talked to Julie every evening, and strategized ways that they could get Teddy to come home. But eventually, Julie seemed to view her as only an extension of Teddy anyway. Now she saw her grandchildren less and less. Julie didn't even want to speak to her.

Evelyn looked at the clock on Gerald's desk. Teddy would arrive at one. That gave her just under four hours to pick up the roast, and the flowers, and the cake, to get lunch into the oven, and to change her clothes.

"I've got to go, sweetheart," she said. "I'll see you in a bit."

Gerald walked over to where she stood.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Whatever the day brings, we'll get through it."

She gave him a warm smile. "I know."

A few minutes later, she started the car up, feeling hopeful. She would try to focus on the positive. It wasn't her way to go borrowing trouble. A week ago, before Teddy called, she had believed that he might just never return. But soon he would be here. One day they might look back on this



as a dark chapter; that was all. Men made mistakes and when they asked forgiveness, women forgave. It happened every day.

She took a moment to appreciate the crisp fall morning. The leaves were turning, and all over town the trees burst bright orange and red and gold. Evelyn had to be mindful not to stare too long when she was behind the wheel, lest she drive clear off the road.

They had been blessed with three wooded acres in Belmont Hill, a house set far back from the street, and a pond twinkling in the distance. Her entire property had welcomed autumn—the yellow leaves looked lovely set against the stately brick; the recent rainstorms had left the grass a robust shade of green, and the boys from O’Malley’s Landscaping had been out to mow it two days earlier. The high lilac trees and rhododendron bushes were long past blossoming, but still green enough to show well. Years ago, she had planted perennials and a vegetable patch and her roses out back. She loved to garden. She volunteered at the Arnold Arboretum once a week, working as a school program guide and organizing an annual fund-raiser, for which she arranged tours of historic Massachusetts homes, including her own.

Evelyn placed Gerald’s envelopes on the seat beside her, along with her to-do list and her purse, and then opened the windows to let in some air. A tune she recognized and quite liked played on the classical station—Dvorák’s symphony *From the New World*. She turned the volume up as she drove down the long driveway and out into the street.

She stopped first at the post office, popping Gerald’s envelopes into the box. These were going toward a record player. For what Gerald had spent on postage, he could practically have purchased his own, but never mind.

In the town center, she found a parking spot in front of the bookshop. She gathered up her belongings, crossed Leonard Street, and walked toward Sage’s Market a few doors down. When she reached it, out stepped Bernadette Hopkins, holding the hand of a little girl in pigtails. It had been ten years. Bernadette had gained a few pounds around the middle, and she wore her hair high in a bouffant style, but her baby face had not changed a bit. Evelyn never forgot one of her students. So many of them were just marvelous about keeping in touch. Years after she’d taught them, they invited her to their weddings and sent Christmas cards by the dozens with photos of their own babies tucked inside, all of which she saved in a box up in the attic.

“Mrs. Pearsall!” Bernadette said. She turned to the girl. “Rosie, this is Mrs. Pearsall. She was my favorite teacher in high school.”

“You can call me Evelyn now,” she said with a smile.

“Oh no. Never. I couldn’t.”

Evelyn laughed. It was a common response.

“Just home for a visit?” she asked.

Bernadette nodded. “A cousin of mine in Newton had a baby.”

“Where are you living these days?”

“We’re in Connecticut. Darien. My husband’s from there. We met in college—he was a Notre Dame guy. And I was at St. Mary’s, of course.” She turned again to the child. “Mrs. Pearsall wrote my letter of recommendation.”

Evelyn pressed her lips together. It seemed unlikely that the girl could possibly care about a thing like that. Maybe Bernadette had only wanted to let Evelyn know that she remembered.

“Oh, you were everyone’s favorite,” she continued. “Remember my friend Marjorie Price? She works in the editorial offices of *Ladies’ Home Journal* in New York City now. She tells people that you’re the reason she became a writer.”

“I’m honored,” Evelyn said. “Please give her my best. Are you in touch with many of the other girls from your class?”

She recalled Bernadette as a member of the student council, perhaps not the smartest girl in the room, but certainly one of the most enthusiastic. She had been popular, and kind to everyone, a rare combination.

“Oh sure,” Bernadette said. “Wendy Rhodes and Joanne Moore are housewives like me. Each of us has a two-year-old and a four-year-old. Joyce Douglas is a dental hygienist, which is funny when you think about the fact that her brothers played hockey all those years. And I assume you heard what happened to poor Nancy Bird?”

Evelyn shook her head, though she had a hunch what was coming.

“A year and a half ago, her husband, Roy, was home on leave from Vietnam. He told her his commanding officer had assured them that all Americans would be out for good in six months. He went back, and a few weeks later he was killed.”

Evelyn felt the weight of this. Poor Nancy, still so young.

“How is she?” she asked.

“She’s a wreck. She has a baby boy now. She found out she was pregnant a week before Roy died.”

Evelyn was startled for a moment, a function of age having turned her into a fuddy-duddy: when she was young, no one said the word *pregnant* out loud.

She made a mental note to write Nancy and see if there was anything she could do to help.

Bernadette's voice took on a breezy tone now. "When I heard you'd left Belmont High, I felt so sad for my nieces, who would never get a chance to have you in class," she said. "My sister's still living in town. Same block as my mom and dad."

For a moment, Evelyn thought to ask whether she might know Julie—they would be about the same age—but Bernadette rolled on without stopping for breath. "You look great, by the way. You always were so pretty. I remember all the boys had crushes on you, even though you were so—"

"Old?" Evelyn suggested.

"Older than us, is all," Bernadette said. "But truly, you look just the same."

They all said this, too, even though it wasn't true. Evelyn had worn the same long skirts with high-collared blouses since just after college, and she usually kept her hair up in a loose bun. It had been blond for most of her life, like Julie's and the girls', but it had recently turned a not unpleasant shade of silver. She was tall for a woman, five foot nine, and thin, but never skinny. She had been a swimmer all her life, and even competed when she was a student at Wellesley.

She had retired nine years ago, when her first grandchild was born, so that she'd be around to help Julie whenever she needed her. Evelyn was happy to do it, but she missed being a teacher. Her favorite day of the year was the first of September, the day she finished her summer vacation and returned to school to set up her classroom. She could still recall the sheer pleasure she took in the smell of unused chalk, the sight of the literary quotations written on construction paper, which she hung on the bulletin board each year, and the blank grade book with the names of every new student running down the edge of the page, full of promise.

She taught sophomore and junior English. Other teachers she knew would do anything to avoid children that age, but she adored them. Even the most troubled or vexing among them had something to offer if you just looked hard enough. Some teachers never wanted to get involved, but she had a passion for it.

The only child she could never reach was her own son. That was her greatest failing. It was expected that she would quit her job after marriage, as most women did, and she did quit, for a while, to be with Teddy, and to open up a job for someone else during the later years of the Depression. There was real bitterness aimed at working girls at that

time, especially the ones with husbands. Most schools in the country wouldn't hire a woman anymore.

But she longed to be back in the classroom, and after Gerald returned from the war she started teaching again for the first time in more than a decade. It was uncommon for a man of her husband's station to have a working wife. But Gerald understood her better than anyone, and he knew what teaching meant to her.

The children changed as the years passed. It was strange and enlightening, being the human stopping place for all the fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds in town. The parents changed as well over time, and for the better. She understood that bad parenting came from having a bad childhood. It was just a vicious cycle. But still, she loathed the parents who were cruel, who sent their children into school with bruises on their arms and legs, without feeling so much as a hint of shame. She had never hit her son, or allowed Gerald to do so, even though everyone did it back then.

Her friend Ruthie was still teaching, and kept her abreast of all the latest changes. She had recently stopped by with a pamphlet the PTA had distributed called "How to Tell if Your Child Is a Potential Hippie and What You Can Do About It."

Evelyn thumbed through the pages of warning signs:

1. *A sudden interest in a cult, rather than an accepted religion.*
2. *The inability to sustain a personal love relationship—drawn more to "group" experiences.*
3. *A tendency to talk in vague philosophical terms, never to the point.*
4. *A demanding attitude about money but reluctance to work for it.*
5. *An intense, "far-out" interest in poetry and art.*
6. *Constant ridiculing of any form of organized government.*
7. *A righteous attitude, never admitting any personal faults.*
8. *An increasing absentee record at school.*
9. *A tendency to date only members of different races and creeds.*

The last page of the pamphlet contained a note from a psychiatrist, which Ruthie had read aloud in a bad fake accent: "*Naturally, some of these signs may be observed in perfectly normal adolescents. But it is when the majority of the traits are present that the child is on the way to becoming a 'hippie.'* There are also the fairly obvious signs like shaggy hair and mod clothing. But those alone do not make a 'hippie.' Sometimes it's just a fad. There must be a great deal of dialogue—sometimes very painful dialogue—to establish a new position of belief for the young people. They will deny they're hostile until

*their last breath. Until that underlying hostility is brought out, the children will be keyed to rebel. Have a good understanding and be more tolerant. Adolescence is at best an extremely disturbing time.”*

Ruthie had laughed, but Evelyn thought of her older granddaughter, Melody, how in just a few years she would be confronted by all of it. She feared that this was the hardest time in history to be a teenager.

Bernadette’s daughter was getting antsy, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Let’s go, Mama,” she said.

Bernadette kept smiling, as wide and steady as a jack-o’-lantern. She ignored the child. “Are you keeping busy?” she asked.

“Oh yes,” Evelyn said. “I’ve got two granddaughters.”

In truth, she didn’t have much to do these days. Before Teddy left, she picked the girls up from school twice a week, and usually watched them on Saturday nights so he and Julie could go out. She always had an activity planned—papier-mâché in the backyard, or cookie baking in the kitchen. She loved to read to them, from the same books she herself had read as a girl. She made up stories, too, and was pleased when they liked one well enough to ask for it again and again. But Julie hadn’t asked her to watch them in two months. When Evelyn invited them over, Julie said they were busy and didn’t have time to come.

Evelyn let the cleaning lady go, since it seemed absurd to ask someone else to scrub her bathroom and make the beds when she had all the time in the world to do it herself. Gerald’s mother, God rest her soul, would have been appalled, but then she had always thought that Gerald and Evelyn acted far too common. Though they lived a certain way, Evelyn never had any interest in the Junior League or things like that, and while Gerald enjoyed the occasional round of golf, they both preferred the comforts of home to the tedium of social functions. She’d go out only if it was for one of her favorite charities, or with a select few couples from their circle whose company they enjoyed, and one Sunday a month, for lunch with Ruthie.

Since Julie had begun to keep the children away, Evelyn was alone much of the time, a sad sensation that reminded her of her own childhood in New York. She had been raised by governesses, more or less. The youngest of four children, separated from the second youngest by fifteen years. An afterthought, perhaps, or more likely just a mistake. Her father was always working. Evelyn saw him for half an hour each night while he drank his sherry; she would be whisked in by invitation and then whisked out just as quickly.

Her mother seemed slightly annoyed by her existence. She had hoped

to be on to her own life by then. Evelyn could still see her now, tall and striking, ready for a suffrage lecture in a long, dark velvet dress and white gloves, a sable cape draped across her shoulders, and black boots on her feet. Atop her head, a black hat with a black ostrich plume. Perhaps her parents had been in love once, but the only time she ever saw them interact was when they were arguing.

As a child, Evelyn found comfort and friends in the pages of beloved books—mostly novels about plucky heroines who possessed great imaginations. Her favorite was *Little Women*. She must have read it fifty times. She pretended that the March sisters were her own.

These days she usually managed two books a week. She loved the Victorians, especially Dickens and Eliot. She adored Jane Austen. Her greatest indulgence was to spend an afternoon sitting by the pond, reading the poetry of W. B. Yeats or Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

When she was pregnant with Teddy, she feared that she'd give birth to a child who disliked reading. It would be like giving birth to a foreign species. Well, that was one of Teddy's strengths. He did like to read, at least as a boy. He had loved *The Secret Garden* most of all, a sign, she thought at the time, of his sweet sensitivity and empathetic nature. And he carried around that stuffed lamb, which he called Lambie Pie. He didn't understand when she wouldn't let him take it to school. He wept. He had those curls, those blond ringlets, which she could not bear to cut. When had he become so hardened?

Evelyn hadn't been listening to Bernadette.

"How old?" Bernadette asked, clearly for the second, or maybe even third, time.

"Pardon?" Evelyn asked.

"How old are the grandkids?"

"Nine and seven now. Two girls. They live here in town."

They chatted a while longer before bidding each other farewell. Evelyn stepped out of the sun, into the crowded market, and made her way to the butcher counter, where four young women stood in line. An older lady up front was taking her time, demanding to be shown each piece of meat.

"Undercut roast for eighty-nine cents a pound?" she was saying. "Well, is it any good?"

Evelyn gave a weak smile to the girl at the back of the line, and stood behind her. Gus, the butcher, waved, and she waved back. She checked her watch. Teddy's flight was supposed to have landed at Logan by now. Despite everything, she said a silent prayer that he had gotten in safe.

She began to twist her engagement ring back and forth on her finger, a nervous habit of hers. Evelyn had been wearing the ring for so long now that there was a permanent line of smooth white skin beneath the band, as if the ring provided a shield from age and dry weather, sun and wrinkles, and all.

She had never been much of a jewelry person, but her ring was the exception. She loved it. Even after four decades of marriage, she would sometimes find herself staring. It was a unique piece, with two large, round old European cut diamonds set in what was called a bypass style. The two sides of the band came up over the top of her finger, but instead of meeting to form a circle, they wrapped around the stones, like vines made up of tiny diamonds. There were three small marquise diamonds on either side, which to the careful eye resembled leaves. Most engagement rings contained one large diamond, or possibly three. But two were a rarity, and to her it made perfect sense—the two of them, herself and Gerald, set in stone for all eternity, their love strong and solid as a diamond.

Years ago, she left the ring to Julie in her will.

It was made by a jeweler in London in 1901, and came from Mrs. Pearsall's personal collection. She had wanted Evelyn to have it. The diamonds themselves went even further back than that, to at least Gerald's great-grandmother. Gerald told Evelyn she could choose a ring of her own at Tiffany's, but wanting to please her new mother-in-law, Evelyn had accepted the gift. The Pearsalls were the kind of people who believed in keeping jewels and art and furniture in the family, and she liked that about them.

"I think it suits you," Gerald said the day he gave it to her. "It's supposed to be a flower, isn't it? And look, this makes it truly yours."

He pointed to the inside of the platinum band. He had gotten it engraved with his nickname for her: EVIE.

At times, the ring had made her uncomfortable. It was beautiful, but so opulent that she was afraid to wear it to school, or in front of her students' parents. She didn't want to give the wrong impression. Of course, there was only one impression a ring like that *could* give: that she and Gerald were well-to-do. It was made for a much more delicate woman, the kind who had a staff and never made a bed or wrote on a blackboard. The stones sat so high on the band that she was forever snagging them on things, and getting fibers from her sweater or a strand of hair stuck beneath a prong.

For years after she married Gerald, the engagement ring from her first



marriage hung on a chain around her neck. But on a trip to the Greek Isles when Teddy was a boy, she took the necklace off to go swimming. When she returned to her towel, it was gone. In that moment she felt as though her first husband, Nathaniel, had died all over again. People were funny about certain possessions. That ring was just a simple gold band with a tiny emerald—her birthstone—yet she had cherished it as if it were worth a million dollars.

Eventually, she reached the front of the line and paid for the six-pound rib roast she had ordered a few days earlier. Gus wrapped it in butcher paper, and placed it in a brown paper bag.

“That’s usually a Sunday thing,” he said, as he gave her the change. “Is it a special occasion?”

“We’re retired now. Sunday, Tuesday, it makes no difference to us!” Evelyn was trying to sound jovial, but her own words struck her as depressing.

At the flower shop, she tried to cheer herself by buying dahlias, orchids, and roses, spraying forth in a bouquet almost too large for her to hold in one arm. She would have to drop off her loot at the car before heading to the bakery. She had ordered a coconut cake from Ohlin’s. Usually, she would just make it herself, but she had been so conflicted about this lunch that every time she thought of it she decided something else was far more urgent—the summer clothes needed to be put away, and the winter ones taken out of storage. The windows needed a thorough cleaning.

She reached the car and placed the flowers and the roast on the backseat. On the floor, she spotted a shiny pink bow, one that she had seen her granddaughter June wear in her hair on countless occasions. Evelyn sighed and picked it up, running her fingers over the fabric, even lifting it to her nose to see if she could catch a trace of June’s sweet scent. After a moment, she slipped the bow into her purse. Best not to think too much about it now.

She planned to make an avocado dip to have before lunch, since that’s what all the young people seemed to like these days. And she would serve her usual cheese balls and stuffed celery, and a Waldorf salad. She was going over the ingredients in her head when she passed by the bookshop, turning her face toward the window for a glimpse at her reflection.

There, on the other side of the glass, stood Julie. Their eyes met. Evelyn smiled and went toward the door.

Julie turned away and walked to the back of the store.

Evelyn felt stung, but she pressed on, approaching Julie from behind and putting a hand on her shoulder.



“Hi.”

“Evelyn, please go,” she whispered.

“Julie. Darling.”

Now Julie swiveled back to face her. Evelyn could see she had been crying.

“Do you know he’s coming to town?” Julie demanded.

Evelyn nodded.

“And what he’s asked of me?”

She cringed. “No.”

“He wants a divorce.”

Evelyn could feel her heart crack like a thin sheet of ice.

“There have to be grounds for it,” Julie said. “Someone has to have committed adultery or desertion or be impotent or perpetually intoxicated or cruel and abusive.”

*Adultery*, Evelyn thought, but Julie went on: “He hasn’t seen his children in five months, or even called them, and when he finally does call, it’s to say that his lawyer suggested the abuse approach. Apparently, it’s the easiest to prove because whatever you pick, there has to have been a witness. He said they’d do me the courtesy of not making me say that I’d caught him in bed with someone. The courtesy! He wants me to get on the stand and say he gave me a black eye, punched me in the face, and threw me up against the wall. I’m supposed to have a friend or a neighbor testify that they saw the whole thing. He even suggested you might do it.”

“That would be perjury,” Evelyn said.

“He said people do it all the time.”

She felt overcome with shame, as if she herself were to blame for what he had asked. How could her son want his own wife to lie about something so horrible? Had Evelyn really believed he was coming here to make amends? He had robbed her of her family. Robbed his children and his wife. Evelyn was aghast at his selfishness. Almost forty years old, and Teddy could not fathom that this decision was about all of them, not just him.

“Julie, this is absolutely crazy. Teddy has lost his mind.”

“I’m taking the girls to Eugene to be near my parents,” Julie said.

Evelyn nodded. “I think a visit would be wonderful for all of you. While we sort this out.”

Her daughter-in-law looked her in the eye. She thought she could make out a faint hint of tenderness on Julie’s face.

“We’re leaving for good, Evelyn.”

Evelyn felt like she had been struck.

“Don’t leave,” she said. “It’s not too late. You can tell him you won’t accept a divorce. He doesn’t get to make all the rules.”

“I know you mean well, but please. I am begging you. Go.”

“But—”

“Please,” Julie said again. “There are lawyers involved. I’m not supposed to talk to you.”

Evelyn wanted to say that she would testify on Julie’s behalf if it ever came to that. She wanted to say that later this afternoon she would convince her son to come home for good, through whatever means necessary.

Instead, she just nodded and made her way toward the door. She managed to pick up the cake at the bakery, and back the car out onto the road, but once she was driving and at a safe enough distance, she began to cry. Long, sorrowful gasps, the sound of which only made her cry more. She let herself keep going until she reached home.