

EVA MARIE
EVERSON

A bride is shown in profile, facing right, wearing a white lace wedding dress and a long, sheer veil. She is positioned in front of a window, with soft, warm light filtering through, creating a romantic and ethereal atmosphere. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the bride.

FIVE BRIDES

five brides... one dress... a lifetime of memories

Advance Praise for Five Brides

“So very charming . . . brought to life by Everson’s smooth prose. She weaves the perfect blend of fact and fiction in this ’50s tale of five brides who shared something rather uncommon, a wedding dress. I found myself smiling, cheering for the young women who sought what we all seek, happiness and love.”

RACHEL HAUCK, bestselling author of *The Wedding Dress*

“One dress, five lives deftly stitched together. In *Five Brides*, Eva Marie Everson tells the stories of resilient young women navigating a time of personal and cultural change. Chasing their dreams, they arrive at different futures, each wrapped in one unforgettable wedding dress.”

LISA WINGATE, bestselling author of *The Prayer Box* and *The Story Keeper*

“Whether you’re about to say ‘I do’ or simply want to reminisce on your own marriage journey, *Five Brides* is just the novel for you. I can’t wait to read more from this creative author, who seamlessly interweaves five very different women’s stories into one pleasurable experience, so rich with sensory detail—clothing, food, etiquette—I felt I was transported to the 1950s. Place this gem at the top of your reading list.”

JOLINA PETERSHEIM, bestselling author of *The Midwife* and *The Outcast*

“*Five Brides* made me fall in love again . . . and again . . . and again. Eva Marie Everson’s richly drawn characters are skillfully woven together like the dress that binds them all. This story deeply touched the romantic in me.”

NICOLE SEITZ, author of *Beyond Molasses Creek*, *The Inheritance of Beauty*, and *A Hundred Years of Happiness*

“*Five Brides* is a beautifully written, moving portrayal of five women finding themselves and love in a time of cultural obligation. Eva Marie Everson has penned an enchanting and emotionally satisfying story that will no doubt capture readers’ hearts.”

KELLIE COATES GILBERT, author of *Where Rivers Part*
(a Texas Gold novel)

“In the tale of *Five Brides*, Eva Marie Everson brings us the stirring story of five young women whose lives intersect in their quests to love and be loved without losing themselves to the expectations of others.”

SHELLIE RUSHING TOMLINSON, the Belle of All Things Southern
and author of *Heart Wide Open*

Five Brides







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Five Brides

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FIVE BRIDES

critique-mavens-of-all-good-fiction: Deb Haggerty, Shellie Arnold, and Jessica R. Everson.

To my family—my husband, children, grandchildren . . . I love you!

And above all, to my Lord and Savior (my bridegroom) Jesus Christ and to His Father God and to the Holy Spirit . . . I am humbled.

Ani ohevet otcha.

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, ornate scrollwork and floral patterns framing the word "PROLOGUE" in the center.

PROLOGUE

June 2015
London, England

The phone on the hotel's bedside table rang, startling Julie Boland from her near-nap. She jerked upright, placed her feet on the plush carpet between the two beds, and reached for the handset. "Hello?" she said, her voice shaking. Glancing at the Fossil watch her husband had given her on her last birthday, Julie groaned before speaking, this time her voice steady. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Boland?" the crisp British voice inquired.

"Yes, this is Mrs. Boland."

"We have the rather large package you've been expecting at the front desk, if you'd like to make your way down."

The door to the bedroom opened, and her daughter Rachel all but flew over the threshold. Light from the living room streamed in past the height of her, brightening the room without the assistance of electricity, bringing a sheen to the room's burgundy and gold accent colors. "Is it here, Mama?"

Julie waved a hand, hoping her daughter would get the hint and shut the door. "I'll be down in a moment," she told the caller.

Julie replaced the handset, then reached for the sleeveless linen

shift she'd slipped out of only fifteen minutes earlier. "Yes, my darling, it's here," she said, standing. She straightened her dress as she turned to shove her feet into the pair of Antonio Melani sandals at the foot of the bed. "Zip me up, hon."

Rachel rushed to her mother and tugged at the hidden zipper. "Oh, Mama, I could just burst from the excitement of it all. To think, in five days I'm going to be Mrs. Jeremy Sullivan, and *today* I *finally* get to see MiMi's wedding dress. Well, *yours* and MiMi's."

"It was Miss Evelyn's long before it was mine." Julie turned and pressed her hands on both sides of her daughter's face. "Miss Evelyn's and Miss Joan's—"

"And the sisters and Betty," Rachel finished for her. "*Hurry*, Mama."

Julie tapped her daughter's upturned nose. "Don't get sassy," she teased, smiling. "Oh, darlin', just wait till you see it in person," she said. "A Carson's original." Julie started for the living room, running her fingers through shoulder-length chestnut hair. She stopped at one of the room's several wall mirrors. "What is it with this hotel and mirrors?" she asked rhetorically, tugging lightly at faint crow's-feet.

Rachel practically skipped beside her, forcing another smile out of Julie even as she said, "I wish Edwin hadn't insisted on taking in a tour this afternoon. But your daddy's going to do what your daddy's going to do." She exhaled in the fashion of every Southern woman she'd ever known from childhood on.

"You know what I wish," Rachel said, putting her arm through her mother's as they crossed the room to the outer door, her voice suddenly quiet and reflective. "I wish MiMi had lived long enough to see this. She'd have thought it something that I'm marrying an Englishman."

Julie stopped to look at her daughter. "You look so much like

Miss Evelyn, you do. Same soft features. Same eyes.” She tousled Rachel’s bangs. “Same light hair.” She sighed again. “Miss Evelyn never saw herself as beautiful, although I don’t know why. I always thought she was quite something, just by the way she carried herself.” Julie cupped her daughter’s chin. “You, however, should have *never* doubted *your* beauty. You won enough beauty pageants to fill our house with ribbons and trophies, and your grandmother’s besides.”

“*Mama*,” Rachel laughed, nudging her mother out the door. “Hurry *on* now.” She looked at her bare feet. “I’m not dressed to go down, or I’d have gone and been back ten times already.”

“In those shorts and that tee you look more like you should be the junior bridesmaid than the bride.” Julie pointed to the middle of the room. “Park it over there on the sofa, young lady. Your mama will be back in a minute with your grandmother’s wedding gown.”

She’d made it halfway out the door when Rachel called out to her again. “Mama?”

Julie turned.

“You’ll tell me the story then? As *soon* as you get back? You always said you’d tell me the whole story—start to finish—the day I was fitted for my own wedding.”

Julie smiled. “I will tell you exactly what Miss Evelyn told me the week before I married her son. Start to finish. How they all met in Chicago, how they saw the dress for the first time, and about the days each of them wore it.”

Rachel beamed. “Who will you start with? Which one of the brides?”

Julie pondered a moment, her fingertips touching lightly on the doorknob. “I believe I’ll tell you the story the same way Miss Evelyn told me. Starting with Miss Joan, her English pen pal . . .”

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, swirling lines and floral motifs framing the text.

CHAPTER 1

October 1951

Chicago

An early morning wind whipped around the right-front corner of the medieval and French Renaissance building on Chicago's south side. Once the splendid home of one of the city's most respected doctors, it now served as a temporary home for young women in transit. Women like nineteen-year-old Joan Hunt.

She stretched under the weight of a starched sheet and a thick blanket that smelled of mothballs and time, then pulled her left arm out from under the light weight. The chill in the air drove gooseflesh up and down its length. With the fingertips of her right hand, which only peeked out of the covers, she turned the Timex double-mesh banded watch to view the face, then blinked. She'd slept over ten hours.

"Well, no wonder," she mumbled, returning the covers to her chin. Squeezing her eyes shut, she whispered, "Good morning, Lord. We've a lot to do today, now, don't we?" Then, as though her life depended on it, in one movement she threw the covers to her feet and sat upright.

Up and out of bed, Joan opened the battered trunk at the end of the twin cot in the narrow room she'd been assigned the evening before. Her clothes—neatly folded in short stacks, skirts on one

side, blouses on the other, lingerie in a satin case beneath them all—smelled of home, of lavender and England, and a long but exciting week on the *Mauretania II*.

She removed the cedar cubby shelf filled with a collection of framed photos, two of her favorite Agatha Christie novels, a small leather address book, and the paper she'd written for a contest in which the young ladies of Leigh, Lancashire, England, were to write an essay titled, "The Man of Your Dreams." It had been simple enough for her to pen. Even at sixteen.

"The man of my dreams will be able to do things," she'd written. "Lots of things. And be creative. And," she'd added, "it would be nice if he were six foot two, had blue eyes, and lots of dark hair."

Joan smiled now at the reaction her mother had given her. "I'm so sure, Joan. God is going to create some man out of clay just for you."

Joan now lowered the shelf to the industrial-white tile floor, then slipped her hand behind the skirts and withdrew a stack of correspondence bound by a wide pink ribbon. The swirl of her name in Evelyn Alexander's penmanship brought comfort, welcoming her to Chicago and her temporary home. It also helped her to know she'd done the right thing in journeying here.

"Just come," Evelyn had written from her home, which Joan had always pictured as having a wide wraparound porch dotted with wicker furniture and surrounded by lush lawns.

Come to Chicago. If your father says this is the best place to find a job here in the States, then it must be true. If you dare to board a ship and cross the Atlantic, I'll dare to take the train up the Eastern Seaboard.

Joan had dared, all right, the scariest part of her journey having been the announcement to her mother—the truest of all

Brits—that she wanted to return to America, the land of her birth. She had endured Mum’s shock and calmly said, “I know, Mum,” after she’d reminded her that “dual citizenship is not possible, you know. You cannot belong to both the king *and* the president.”

And Joan endured it again when her mum stoically cried, “I don’t know if I can bear this.”

Difficult as it was to hear Mum cry, the idea of remaining in war-ravaged England—of merely enduring her days until some poor bloke asked her to marry him—was more than *she* could bear. While she wanted her future groom to be able to do things, first *she* wanted to experience life. Then, she wanted bride and groom to do so many wonderful things *together*.

Joan pulled the top letter from the stack, returned the rest, and placed the shelf over her clothes. Her fingertips brushed across a photo of her family, all eleven, clustered together in their Sunday best, wide-eyed and smiling. Her index finger rested over the place where her mother’s heart beat, and she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, remembering the cries that pierced the halls of the American offices in Manchester when she boldly repeated, “I denounce the king and all his rights, and swear my allegiance to the United States of America.”

She exhaled as she stood, shaking away the memory as she laid the last letter from Evelyn at the foot of the bed. She grabbed her robe from the lone black spindle-back Windsor chair and shoved her arms into the sleeves, tied the belt around her too-thin waist, stepped into slippers, and darted out the door toward the bath and showers down the hall.

Minutes later, with her teeth brushed and hair combed, she returned to her assigned room, closed the door behind her, and walked to the window.

The previous night, after a week on the ship and another

twenty-four hours on a train, she'd been too tired to eat. But now, as she pulled the muslin curtains away from the room's single window, her stomach rumbled.

"There's a restaurant just down the block," the man behind the desk had said when she arrived, and she wondered how he'd known she stood there praying she wouldn't collapse in the lobby. "They're open until nine."

"I'm afraid I'm just too worn out to walk there and back." She chuckled with all the energy of a turtle at the end of his race. "Pathetic, isn't it?"

The young man—tall and lanky with a full head of dark curls—scratched along his temple before holding up a finger and saying, "Tell you what." He ambled over to the desk behind him, piled high with papers and files of all sorts. He pulled out a drawer and dipped his hand in, retrieving a candy bar. "Do you like Baby Ruths?"

She honestly didn't know, but nodded anyway. "Thank you," she'd said as he handed her what would be dinner.

"Be back down before eight in the morning and get yourself some coffee and a nice hot breakfast. We start serving at six."

Now, with her nose pressed to the cool glass and peering at the street below where cars already rolled past, her stomach declared that the meal of peanuts, caramel, and chocolate had officially worn off.



Joan dined alone in the expansive cafeteria of the YMCA. Fine by her; she wanted to read Evelyn's last letter again before the first order of business—embarking on her job search.

If you arrive on the 16th of October, you'll have to go it alone for a few days. I cannot possibly be there until

the 20th. Perhaps not until a couple of weeks after that. I'd hoped to meet you in New York and we could take the train together, but I have had to handle Mama with kid gloves.

Joan understood. All too well. Though their situations were similar, they were also vastly different. Joan had to denounce the king and travel to a country she hadn't seen for years, not since the Great Depression. Her father, a fun-loving Irishman, and her mother, a gentle Englishwoman, had packed up all their belongings and their brood of children and returned to the United Kingdom from their Chicago home. Evelyn, on the other hand, had never been to the "Windy City." She'd been to Atlanta once, she'd said, but that was as far "north" as she'd traveled.

Still, if I don't do this very brave thing . . . if I don't square my shoulders and tell Daddy how desperately I want to leave on this great adventure . . . I just know, Joanie, that I'll regret it for the rest of my life. I can feel it in the marrow of my bones. Every morning I wake with one thought: You must do this, Evelyn. This is your one opportunity.

Indeed, Joan thought, swallowing the last of her tea and toast. *Mine as well.* Being the middle child of nine, she'd felt she had to come to America. Create her own adventure. Write her own story. Or simply burst from the need. For something . . . something more than England could offer.

Something. Although she couldn't say quite what. And if she didn't find it here, she reasoned she would have to return across the Atlantic to seek it elsewhere.

Joan stood resolutely and brushed a few crumbs from her

skirt. The time had come for her to find a job. And find it quickly. Today. She had only thirty-seven dollars to her name, and, as comfortable as her room at the Y seemed to be, it was only a room.

It wasn't home.



For her first day in Chicago, she chose a simple blue over-the-knee pencil skirt and a white shirtwaist. Her only accessories were a strand of pearls, a small hat with a net that she pulled back, and a pair of gloves the color of midnight. She'd taken stock of herself as best she could in the small mirror in her room, but now, in front of one of the wide front windows of a four-story office building, she had a better view. And, if she said so herself, she made a rather smashing reflection.

Joan adjusted the clutch she carried under her arm. It held Evelyn's letter with suggestions for employment, and her cash for safekeeping. The building she stood in front of appeared squatty in comparison to those around it. But the brass address plate indicated it contained a number of businesses within, including Hertz, which she had heard of. Seemed a good place to start.

And if you land a job, Joanie, promise me you'll save a spot for me.

No "if" about it. She *would* land a job.

Joan entered the lobby off of South Wabash, which was austere by every definition of the word. Only a few ordinary chairs flanked the perimeter between office doors. A receptionist's desk sat smack in the center.

"Hallo," she said to the young blonde on the other side of it.

The woman looked up from her work with wide blue eyes made bluer by the dark liner that curled from the ends of the lids. “May I help you?”

Yes, she absolutely could. Joan straightened her shoulders and smiled. “I’m here for a job.”