

A woman in a white lace dress is shown from the chest up, holding a large bouquet of flowers. She is wearing a pearl necklace. The background is a soft, warm tone. The text is overlaid on the image.

*the*  
ONE  
TRUE LOVE  
*of*

ALICE-ANN

EVA MARIE  
EVERSON

Praise for *The One True Love of Alice-Ann* and  
other novels by Eva Marie Everson

*The One True Love of Alice-Ann*

“In true Eva Marie Everson fashion, *The One True Love of Alice-Ann* treats readers to another sweet story of love, light, and all things beautiful. A redeeming message that reminds us there really is a grander plan in the works, even when life doesn’t go as we expect.”

JULIE CANTRELL

*New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of  
*The Feathered Bone*

“*The One True Love of Alice-Ann* is the type of novel you want to devour in one sitting, which is nearly what I did, as I read it on the way to my eighth wedding anniversary trip. The timing was so wonderful, as Alice’s intriguing story caused me to pause and contemplate the difference between infatuation, which inevitably falters in the light of real-world events, and the true, committed love between husband and wife that will never end. A beautiful gem of a book!”

JOLINA PETERSHEIM

Bestselling author of *The Alliance*

“Everson has a knack for finding the readers’ heartstrings and giving them a tug. In days when more and more veterans of WWII are slipping away, Everson has written a time capsule of a story that celebrates our everyday heroes and their not-so-everyday struggles. *The One True Love of Alice-Ann* is a priceless snapshot from a time that shaped a generation.”

SARAH LOUDIN THOMAS

Author of *Until the Harvest*, a 2016 Christian Book Award finalist

“A warm and reflective coming-of-age story set in small-town Georgia in the midst of World War II. Everson’s beautiful prose wraps around the reader like the old quilts in this story of a young girl growing into womanhood and learning what ‘true love’ is all about. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this well-researched historical with its subtle, rich characterization of Alice-Ann, a precocious and naive teen who develops into a generous, God-fearing young woman. I’m still savoring it days later. Lovely.”

ELIZABETH MUSSER

Author of *The Long Highway Home*, *The Swan House*, and *The Sweetest Thing*

“With careful attention to setting the stage with an artist’s eye to detail, in *The One True Love of Alice-Ann*, Eva Marie Everson transports both mind and heart to an era not so long ago, not so far away, but closer on an emotional level than most readers will realize until the story has already overtaken them.”

CYNTHIA RUCHTI

Speaker and author of *Song of Silence* and *As Waters Gone By*

### *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*

“*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*



*The One True Love of Alice-Ann*





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 Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois

EVA MARIE  
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*The One True Love of Alice-Ann* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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## CHAPTER 1



**BYNUM, GEORGIA**  
**DECEMBER 7, 1941**  
**2:20 P.M.**

Alice-Ann Branch stood in front of her bedroom dresser, eyes focused on her reflection in the large oval mirror hanging before her. Her foot tapped to the rhythm of a Glenn Miller tune that played in her head as her slender fingers wound frizzy light-brown hair, first from the right side of her face, then from the left. She secured both sides—as best she could—with the new tortoiseshell combs she’d purchased the day before at Hillis’s Five & Dime with money Grandmother Branch had sent for her birthday.

She blinked hazel eyes, large and plain, then frowned at the overall vision looking back at her. “Silly ole freckles,” she said, leaning closer. “I bet Shirley Temple doesn’t have to put up with these things.” Or if she did, they were covered by stage makeup. Oh, if only she lived in Hollywood, California, instead of stinky ole Bynum, Georgia.

Or if she could only have skin like Claudette’s, all peaches

and cream and naturally blushed. Or a shapely figure like Maeve's. Even at sixteen, Maeve's curves put Rita Hayworth's to shame.

Alas, what God had given her two best friends he'd somehow managed to skip right over when the doling-out time came for her.

In her case, the time hadn't come. It simply *went*.

Maybe, she reckoned, when elements of grace were being passed out, God hadn't been able to locate the farmhouse where her mother—God rest her soul—had brought her only daughter into the world. Oh, sure, the Almighty had done quite well when it came to her older brother, Nelson. He'd grown up to be tall and lanky like their father, with the olive complexion of their mother. Why, even his eyelashes were long and naturally curled. He was all Cary Grant with a dollop of Clark Gable. Or maybe a dash of that new radio star, Frank . . . what was his name?

Alice-Ann dashed out of the bathroom and down the stairs to where her family—Papa, Nelson, Nelson's bride Irene, and Papa's older sister Aunt Bess—sat around the living room Zenith, listening to a Sunday afternoon football game. The shouts of the fans nearly drowned out the announcers, not that she could make much out of what they were saying anyway.

Football had never been of much interest to her.

Well, except when Mack played for the high school team, back when he and Nelson and Maeve's brother, Carlton, had been in school.

"Hey, Irene," Alice-Ann said, stopping just inside the wide opening between the expansive shotgun hallway and the living room. "What's the name of that—?"

“Hush now, Alice-Ann. Can’t hear with you blabbering on,” her father scolded. He scooted up in his chair, his pipe clutched tight between his teeth, and rested his elbows on his knees. He still wore his Sunday-go-to-meeting slacks, but he’d changed out of his one good shirt, replacing it with a long-sleeved flannel.

“Sorry, Papa.”

“. . . *on the twenty-yard line* . . .” Alice-Ann managed to catch the announcer’s words from the crackling of the radio her father had purchased only a year before during an after-Christmas sale in town at Smitty’s Department Store.

Alice-Ann scooted over to where Irene sat next to Nelson, flipping absentmindedly through the latest *Ladies’ Home Journal* magazine. Irene didn’t bother looking up, even as Alice-Ann squatted beside her. “Hey, Irene,” she whispered. “What’s the name of that new singer with the Tommy Dorsey band? Frank somebody? The one you showed me in that magazine?”

Irene sighed heavily. “Sinatra.”

“Alice,” Aunt Bess said from the chair angled in the far corner of the room, away from the clamor of the radio and others. She held knitting needles in her hands and worked gold yarn furiously between them.

Alice-Ann stood. “Yes, ma’am?”

Aunt Bess jerked her head in a “come here” motion.

Alice-Ann sighed. Here she was, all of sixteen as of today, and still she felt like a child in the presence of her family. “Yes, ma’am,” she said, skirting around the sofa to the chintz chair.

*That chair.* It had been a favorite of her mother’s, and Alice-Ann could still see her sitting in it. Feet shed of shoes and curled up under her, hidden by the folds of a floral-print dress. In spite

of the six years that had passed since her death, whenever Alice-Ann walked past it, she smelled hints of the gardenia perfume that wafted from the lotion Mama always wore. Still saw the beautiful Earlene Branch, with her soft waves of blonde hair and her oh-so-perfect smile framed by bubble gum-colored lips. And whenever she dared sit there—typically in the earliest hours of morning when everyone else slept—she felt her mother’s arms, heard her voice singing along to her favorite songs and speaking of long-ago stories.

*“Tell me again, Mama. Tell me about meeting Papa and falling in love . . .”*

*“Your papa was such a handsome man. And funny! Oh, so funny.”*

*“Really, Mama? Papa was funny?”*

Even as old as nine and ten years of age, Alice-Ann could hardly imagine her no-nonsense father as being anything but crotchety.

*“So funny, Alice-Ann. He always made me laugh. Still does, when it’s just him and me. Alone.”*

*“And he asked you to the dance and . . .”*

*“He and my brother Joe were good friends. They had come up to the church one day while I was practicing my solo for the next morning—that was shortly before the Spring Fling. I remember how he looked at me that day, there in the church. Like he was seeing me for the first time. And when the dance came around, and—hmm. Well, there was another little complication, but he asked Joe if he could take me along as his date anyway.”*

*“And Uncle Joe didn’t like it one bit.”*

*“No, he didn’t. But your papa was relentless—”*

*“What’s relentless?”*

*“Relentless means he wouldn’t give up. Said he couldn’t give up*

*on the idea of holding me in his arms and swinging me all around the dance floor. Maybe stealing a kiss or two."*

*"And then one day he asked you to marry him."*

*"That's right. Said he only had this old farm of his daddy's to bring me to, but one day it would yield a right nice crop. It has, too. We survived hardships because your papa's worked hard."*

*"Because he loves you?"*

*"Because he loves all of us. You and Nelson and me . . ."*

"Alice," Aunt Bess said, her piercing brown eyes never leaving her handwork. "We've managed to eat a cold lunch, and Irene and I have gotten the kitchen cleaned up, and all so your party can start on time without a hitch. Your friends will arrive within the next two hours." Only then did she glance up and cock a brow. "So why don't you go check the back room and make sure everything is set up like you want for your party and stop worrying your daddy. Least you could do, considering how much Brother hates cold cuts for lunch especially on a day as nippy as this one."

"Yes, ma'am." Alice-Ann stepped back, pulled the sides of the plum-colored dress Aunt Bess had made special for her celebration, and spun around. "But before I do, what do you think, Aunt Bess?" she asked, keeping her voice down. "Do I look all grown-up like you said I would?"

Aunt Bess had returned her attention to her knitting but stopped long enough to size her up. She gave Alice-Ann a generous wink. "You'll do in a pinch," she said with a smile.

"Oh, Aunt Bess." Alice-Ann leaned over to give her maiden aunt a tight squeeze, but not without protest from the family's matriarch. "I'm absolutely about to burst with excitement about my party." She kissed Aunt Bess's dry cheek, which with Aunt

Bess's size, also tended to be fleshy. "Thank you for convincing Papa."

"Stop this foolishness now," Aunt Bess said, her voice filled with a lilt. "You'll ruin this afghan I'm working on."

Alice-Ann pulled herself away. "Yes'm. I'll go check on things." Not only because her aunt had asked, but more because she wanted everything to be perfect. Better than perfect. Because tonight—oh, *tonight*. Tonight, when everyone was laughing and dancing and drinking punch and eating Aunt Bess's cake, she'd tell Mack—Boyd MacKay to be exact, the most handsome man alive and one of her brother's best friends—that she'd loved him since she'd been a girl of twelve and that, if he'd only give her a chance, she'd devote herself to loving him for eternity. And if he turned her down, she'd . . . she'd . . . well, she'd be *relentless*.

Her thoughts were nearly drowned out by her father and brother, both of whom had drawn upright, staring at the large radio against the wall and in front of the sofa. "Come on, now," Nelson hollered, his fist in the air. "Run, now. Run!"

"He's gonna do it," Papa added. "That son of a gun's gonna make it."

Even as little as Alice-Ann knew about the game, the wild cheers from the spectators—those thousands of voices that rose from across the miles of wire and somehow managed to infiltrate their Sunday afternoon living room—told her something spectacular and exciting had happened. She looked over her shoulder and winked at Aunt Bess, who shook her head at what she called "tomfoolery."

Alice-Ann reached the opening to the hallway and foyer when the tone of the broadcast changed. She turned instinctively,

resting her hand on one of the spindles that rose from the half wall between the living room and foyer.

*“We interrupt this broadcast to bring you this important bulletin from the United Press—”*

“What in the world?” Papa asked, clearly agitated. Sunday afternoon sports were one of the few things in life he looked forward to.

Even Irene glanced up, and Aunt Bess stopped her knitting.

*“Flash: Washington. The White House announces Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—”*

Alice-Ann looked at her father as he and Nelson locked eyes. “Sweet Lord, have mercy,” he said. “Well, Son. No doubt about it. We’ll be going to war now.”



Alice-Ann ran the near mile between the farmhouse she called home and the next farmhouse over, the one belonging to Mr. George James, his wife Miss Josephine, and their two sons, George Junior and Pete. She and Pete were in the same class at Bynum High School.

As soon as she passed through the squeaking gate of the unpainted picket fence separating the yard from Miss Josephine’s winter garden, the family’s mutt dog scampered off the porch to meet her, tail wagging as if there were nothing wrong in the whole wide world.

Alice-Ann reached down to pet the hound between his ears. “Hey there, Sniffer,” she said, her voice strained from the knot in her throat. She took several deep breaths. “You may not know it, but we’ve got a mess on our hands.”

The front door rattled open and Alice-Ann looked up to see Pete—all six feet and big ears of him—standing in the opening behind the screen door. “Hey, Alice-Ann,” he drawled. “You heard, I guess?”

Alice-Ann nodded. “I’ve come to use your phone, if you don’t mind.”

He pushed the screen open. “Sure thing.”

She gave Sniffer a final pat and started up the front porch steps, the dog at her heels.

“Go lay on down, dawg,” Pete said.

“He’s not bothering—” Alice-Ann started, but Sniffer had already found his spot on a pile of blankets thrown onto the gray-painted planks of the wide porch.

She entered the house to the scents of fried chicken and pumpkin pie. As in the home she’d left minutes before, the family sat around the living room radio. Mister George looked as if he’d topple off the edge of his chair at the slightest breeze. At the sight of a visitor—even a neighborly one—Miss Josephine stood, wringing her hands in her bib apron. “Alice-Ann,” she said. “It’s awful. Just awful.”

Alice-Ann nodded. She tried—truly, ever since she heard the announcer breaking into the football game—to think about the men and women who had undoubtedly lost their lives way over there in Hawaii. But right then something else weighed heavy on her heart, not that she could easily share it with any of the adults in her life. One word from her torn heart would send her from the “you’re nearly grown” ranks and right back to “you’re still just a child.”

“Miss Josephine,” she said, “I need to use your phone, if

you don't mind. I was—I was to have my birthday party this evening—”

Josephine James brushed imaginary wisps of hair from her high forehead as she crossed the room. “Where’s your coat, hon? I can’t believe Bess let you out of the house without a coat.”

Alice-Ann looked down at herself, still dressed in her party attire. “I ran out in such a hurry.”

Pete had joined George Junior on the worn floral-print sofa. He cracked his knuckles and declared, “I’m signing up, Daddy. I’ll go get them Japs.”

Alice-Ann gasped. Only then did it dawn on her . . . *Nelson*. Would he be required to sign up? To go to war? *If* they went to war? And surely they would. Papa had said so.

Her brother hadn’t been required to register the year before when President Roosevelt signed the Selective Training and Service Act. At twenty, he’d been too young, though he’d be twenty-one soon enough. But what about now? And what about—*Mack*?

Mack, whose father and mother—Mister Lance and Miss Myrtle—ran MacKay’s Pharmacy, Mr. MacKay being the pharmacist. Only a few years ago, he’d wanted nothing more than for Mack to follow in his footsteps, and while Mack had toyed with the idea—even going to school for a while—he’d never really settled in.

“Come on, Alice-Ann,” Miss Josephine said, startling her. The doe-eyed woman placed her hand on Alice-Ann’s arm. “I know, hon. This has put me in a terrible state too.”

Alice-Ann nodded, saying nothing, and followed along behind like old Sniffer had trailed her only moments earlier.

“Miss Josephine,” she whispered as they entered the bright kitchen at the back of the house. The room remained warm from Sunday dinner; still, Alice-Ann shivered as she crossed her arms. “Do you think—?”

Miss Josephine turned to look at her. “Something to drink, Alice-Ann? Some hot tea perhaps?”

“No, ma’am.” She swallowed. “Miss Josephine, do you think that—that we’ll go to war?”

“I don’t know,” Miss Josephine answered, looking down at her sensible brown shoes. The woman who had always been a paragon of fortitude in Alice-Ann’s eyes now seemed frail and unsure. “My George said we would, soon as he heard the news.”

“So did Papa. He said there’s no avoiding it now. No pretending the rest of the world isn’t falling down around us.” She glanced over her shoulder. “But what about—do you think—anyone from *Bynum* will have to go?”

Miss Josephine’s lips, still tinted red from fixing herself up for church that morning, drew into a thin line. “I don’t know, hon,” she said. “But if I had to guess, I’d say probably so. We certainly lost enough young men back in the Big One. What’s to keep it from happening again, I wonder.”

Alice-Ann’s hands flew to her mouth. George Junior, having turned twenty-one recently, had been required to enlist. That meant—

The older woman pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and sat. “My George says Mr. Roosevelt will probably drop the age down to eighteen, what with all this. Pete will be spared, but George Junior will—if we go—George Junior will for sure

now—” Her eyes filled with tears. “Eighteen or twenty-one won’t matter for him.”

Alice-Ann rushed to sit next to the woman who’d been as much like a mother to her as Aunt Bess, and she grabbed her hands. “Don’t worry, Miss Josephine,” she said. “If our boys have to go, this war will be over before they have time to get their boots dirty. They don’t know who they’re messing with over there. You’ll see.”

Miss Josephine gave a weak smile as tears slipped down her cheeks. “Such hope and optimism in someone so young.”

So young. Sixteen wasn’t young. Sixteen *that day*. How could those Japanese do something like this on *her day*? And what about her party? Ruined. Her night of declaration of love for Mack. Destroyed. All because people over there in a far-away country wanted more than God had given them by rights. “Miss Josephine.” Alice-Ann’s voice returned in a whisper. “I have to use your phone now. Aunt Bess says there’s no sense in trying to celebrate anything tonight, and if I don’t make some calls right away, everyone will show up at the house before too long.”

“No.” Miss Josephine shook her head. “No sense at all.” She jerked her head toward the back of the kitchen. “You know where the phone is, hon. Go make your calls.”

Alice-Ann stood, her hands slipping from Miss Josephine’s. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Miss Josephine looked up as she brushed the last of her tears away. “What an awful thing to have happen on your birthday,” she said as though the notion suddenly struck her. “And your party spoiled too. Who will you call first?”

Alice-Ann didn't have to think long. "Boyd MacKay," she said, then felt heat rush to her cheeks. "Because he has a phone, what with his daddy being the pharmacist and all, and he can make some calls for me." She spoke the words too fast, even by her own estimation.

Miss Josephine smiled, and Alice-Ann wondered if the woman had gone wise to her motives. "That's true," she said graciously. "Then I daresay you should call your friend Claudette after you hang up with Boyd. With her gift of gab, that girl won't *need* a phone to let the others know."

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



“How much of you is in this story?”

I hear that question a lot. Truth is, there’s a little bit of the author in every novel. But it’s not always *our* story. Ideas often come from the moments in our lives. They also come from the moments in the lives of others.

We cannot help it. We hear something—we novelists—and suddenly a story forms. The words *what if* somehow get mingled in with that little tidbit of story, and away we go. And so it was, many years ago, when an older couple who lived next door to my husband and me invited us in for Christmas cookies and tea. As they showed us around their warm and lovely home, I happened to notice a Purple Heart, framed in a shadow box. I asked about it, and . . . well, I got a story. A few years later, I heard another WWII story—this one from my great-aunt, who told me she married my great-uncle shortly after he enlisted in the war and, thinking he’d be home soon, set about to make a life for the two of them. But his return didn’t happen for *four years*. I couldn’t imagine marrying my one true love only to have him leave for war and not return until four years later.

Years before hearing these two stories, when I was about ten years old, I sat in a Sunday school class and listened intently as

my teacher said, “You can’t choose whom you fall in love with, but you can choose whom you marry.” Now, I have *no* idea what that had to do with the lesson (maybe that week’s lesson was on Solomon . . .), but the wisdom (pardon the pun) of those words *never* left me.

So it was that when the idea for this book came to me (ironically, the title came to me first), the World War II stories folded in with the wisdom of my Sunday school teacher, and . . . I had a story. Or at least the bones of one.

I read dozens of books and watched lots of memoir-inspired videos on World War II, and I learned something significant: there’s a reason that generation was called “the greatest.” As I developed the story line and dug into the characters, I was also reminded that God has a plan for each of us, and if we trust him (and listen to him) with that plan *within* the days and minutes and seconds of our lives, he will never lead us down the wrong path. Or to the wrong love.

With that in mind, I sincerely hope you enjoyed the somewhat-true story of *The One True Love of Alice-Ann*. And I hope you’ll let me know what you think by visiting me at my website: [www.EvaMarieEversonAuthor.com](http://www.EvaMarieEversonAuthor.com).

*Eva Marie Everson*