

# One

MY BIOLOGICAL MOTHER was seventeen when she had me in 1952, and even that was more than I wanted to know about her. I had no romantic notions about the coupling that had produced me, not about her being cheerleader to his football captain or au pair to his Rockefeller. When I thought about it at all, this is what I imagined: two faceless and cheap teenagers doing it listlessly in the unfinished basement where they jitterbugged unchaperoned.

'Adopted' was never a label that made me flinch. Its meaning within our family was 'hand-selected,' 'starcrossed,' 'precious.' I loved the story of my parents' first glimpse of me at the agency, how I solemnly studied their faces – hers, his, back to hers – then grinned. I was raised to be glad that the unlucky teenage girl couldn't keep me; the last thing I wanted was some stranger for a mother. Still, I slept with a light on in my bedroom until I was twelve, afraid she'd exercise her rights.

Later it annoyed me. The teenage girl annoyed me, nothing more. Could she ever have worn real maternity clothes or taken a single prenatal vitamin on my behalf? Here is where I remember to feel relief and gratitude and say, no matter. I am healthy, happy,

better off. It is a lucky thing she didn't keep me. I'd barely have finished high school. I'd have become a beautician or a licensed practical nurse, and I would think I had a glamorous career. The grittier I made it the more righteous I felt. I invented these jitterbugging teenagers when I was in junior high school, as my adoptive parents began to look old. I voted against the irresponsible kids, emphatically for the Epnors. My story suited me and I grew to believe it. I did not attend support groups for adoptees and I did not search for anyone.

Then she found me.

## Two

A *BOSTON GLOBE* staff photographer took the picture on a sunny, Sunday. ‘One more time,’ read the headline. ‘April Epner, 3 1/2, makes her displeasure known as swan boat ride – first of the season – ends. Parents Gertrude and Julius Epner of Providence promise another.’ In ponytails and clutching a miniature pocketbook to my chest, I howl adorably. Trude and Julius smile at each other over my barretted head, the smile of doting parents whose Sunday outing has succeeded beyond their fondest hopes. Wire services picked up the *Globe* photo and sent it out on the national wire with a new headline: ‘Make way for ducts.’ It was used by newspapers all over New England and in odd spots where harbinger-of-spring photos were in short supply. Julius wrote to the *Globe’s* photo librarian expressing his interest in a glossy print, which he matted and framed alongside its grainy, newsprint twin.

In downtown Boston, Bernice Graverman passed the brass plaque that read ‘Florence Cohn Agency’ on a lunch-hour excursion. She thought, It’s fate that made me get off the trolley at Boylston. I didn’t mean to, but now that I’m here I must go up. She was pleased

with the way she looked that day in her camel's-hair coat from the store's Washington's Birthday sale, and she had good news. She checked her brown pageboy, her lipstick, and the seams in her stockings before taking the elevator to the fourth floor. 'Is Mrs Prince here?' she asked the receptionist.

'There's no one here by that name,' she was told.

'Yes, there is,' said Bernice. 'She was my social worker and it wasn't that long ago.' She touched her stomach. One hundred sit-ups a day. As flat as ever.

The receptionist frowned and retreated, 'You mean Mrs Price.'

'Isn't that what I said?'

'She's no longer here.'

'Did she get fired?' the girl asked.

The receptionist pursed her lips and asked for Bernice's name at the time of her association with the Florence Cohn Agency. She opened a dark wood door and passed through into inner offices. After several minutes, an impeccable-looking woman in cream-colored wool followed the receptionist back to the waiting room. The woman offered her hand, introduced herself as Mrs Mazur. Bernice rose eagerly to take it and made a mental note about the effects of gold accessories against cream-colored wool.

'Why don't we go into my office,' said Mrs Mazur.

'Love to,' said Bernice.

It was Mrs Price's office, she noticed. Same sappy photographs of well-adjusted children on the walls; same repeating medallions on the green wallpaper. Mrs Mazur sat behind her desk; Bernice took the visitor's chair.

'I bet you wonder what I'm doing here,' she said.

'Would you like to tell me?'

## Then She Found Me

‘I was just passing by and I said to myself, Maybe they like to see what happens to their mothers. See how they’re doing and how they’re adjusting. If they’re happy, and stuff like that.’

Mrs Mazur’s clasped hands rested on the girl’s manila folder. Bernice saw her name typed on a label; she saw the itch in the social worker’s fingers. She knew their need to read words on paper, to perform evaluations, to study folders well before the client sat down to talk. ‘Mrs Prince always made notes when we talked, too,’ said Bernice. ‘I guess anything you’d want to know about me is in there.’

Mrs Mazur’s fingers grazed the edges of the folder.

‘Go ahead,’ said Bernice. ‘How else are you going to know how well I’m doing?’

Mrs Mazur hesitated – agency policy – then opened the file and scanned.

‘I’m doing great,’ Bernice continued. ‘I’m starting Northeastern in January and I’m going to study merchandising.’

Mrs Mazur murmured her approval while she read.

‘I’ve gotten three raises in two years at Jordan Marsh and everyone says I’m management material.’

Mrs Mazur looked up, smiled anew, and closed the folder. ‘I’m so glad. I see it’s only been five months since the adoption.’

‘It’s going to be work-study, so I’ll be earning my tuition practically at the same time.’ She sat up straighter. Her navy voile blouse had tucks on the bodice; she wanted this nicely dressed Mrs Mazur to appreciate its workmanship and notice the navy taffeta slip underneath. ‘I figured you like to know these things . . . write them down in your official records.’

‘We certainly do,’ said Mrs Mazur automatically. She wrote nothing in the folder. Bernice hated this one too.

‘Can you tell Mrs Prince I came in, and about my getting into college? And that I’m fine? I know she’d remember me.’

A buzz from the phone. The manila folder sat unattended on the desk blotter. Bernice stood and smiled, pretending to have been dismissed. In a second she slipped the folder toward her; she had opened and closed it even before the social worker lunged to its rescue. ‘Sorry,’ Bernice said, flipping it back.

But she had seen the name – on a white card stapled to the inside of the file, first thing a person saw. How stupid could they be?

Her daughter’s name was now Epner. Her daughter was with the Epners.

‘Don’t get excited,’ said Bernice. ‘I didn’t see a thing.’

There were no Epners in the Boston phone book. The operator said no, there did *not* have to be anyone by that name in the city, no matter how much the young lady insisted, and would she like to talk to her supervisor?

‘It’s not as if I want to call them or anything,’ answered Bernice.

Two years later Bernice Graverman found her daughter in the *Globe*. There was that name, Epner, and this little girl, just the right age. It was clear to Bernice that this fair and Polish-looking couple could not have given birth to this dark, sharp-faced little girl. ‘April,’ they had named her, of all things. Awful. Bernice cut out the picture, which she folded lengthwise, put in an envelope, and placed in the bottom of her jewelry box. She called information in Providence and got a phone number and address for Julius Epner. She added this to her jewelry box.

She had no plan. She was twenty years old and no more interested

## Then She Found Me

in unwed motherhood than she had been three years before. Semiannual phone calls to Providence – polite requests for phony names, apologies for a wrong number, in which she learned that the parents had German accents and the little girl answered eagerly a step ahead of them – were all Bernice Graverman did about her daughter, her only child, for thirty-three years.