

THE SECRET BATTLE OF  
**EVAN PAO**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# EVAN

When they reached Virginia, their tenth and final state, Evan took out the three Jolly Ranchers he'd been carefully saving since Indiana and passed them out. Sour apple for Mom and himself; cherry for Celeste.

“To celebrate making it to Virginia,” he announced. It'd been hard to save the last bit of candy, but it was worth it. They'd been in the car so long that any little new thing felt like relief. He popped the candy into his mouth, letting the sweetness spread over his tongue.

“We're not in Kansas anymore,” quipped Celeste as she unwrapped the candy.

“Technically speaking, we never went through Kansas,” said Evan. “We did, however, go through Nevada, Utah, Wyoming,

Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana . . .” Evan had designated himself the navigator for the trip. He liked knowing where they were, what was coming. He traced his fingers along the route.

“It’s a quote from *The Wizard of Oz*,” said Celeste. “The moment when Dorothy goes outside after a tornado and discovers Oz. The point is, she’s not home. Kansas is beside the point.” She pulled on a strand of hair, already bored by her own explanation.

Evan tried to switch to sitting cross-legged, which necessitated moving an old box of french fries and not spilling his water. For a while, it felt like the car was a spaceship and they were adventurers making their way across the country, watching the landscape change shape and color. Spring looked different everywhere, but Evan had to admit that spring in Virginia was the prettiest, with green grass and trees blooming with pink and white flowers. When they first started, Mom had all sorts of ambitious plans, like keeping a cooler filled with healthy snacks and practicing Chinese. But after six days of nonstop driving, the car felt more like a trash can at a fast-food restaurant and the only new Chinese phrase Evan was certain he’d learned was *zhīshì hànǎo*, “cheeseburger.”

“Old movies are weird,” said Evan. The candy clacked around his mouth as he talked. He didn’t really think that. He just wanted Celeste to put her phone down and talk to him.

“It’s a classic,” said Celeste. “Everyone should see it. There are so many references to it. The Wicked Witch. The Tin Man without a heart.” Being three years older, Celeste had a lot of opinions on things *everyone* should know, or do, or think.

“It’s not as important as *Star Wars*, though,” argued Evan. “The Force, Darth Vader. Jedi.”

During the course of the trip, they had argued over the best Marvel movie, the tastiest pasta shape, the right way to tie a shoe, and whether cats were smarter than dogs. Mom sighed. “Almost there, guys.” It was her way of saying, don’t start fighting. “We’re almost at the end.”

*It’s almost the beginning, too*, Evan thought. He wasn’t sure if he felt happy or nervous about that. He pressed his face against the window. Tree. House. Tree. House. Roadside stand. They passed a house with a girl throwing a Frisbee to a black-and-white dog. “At least Dorothy had a dog,” he said.

Mom sighed. “You know that things have just been too unsettled to get a dog.” Evan disagreed. It was always a good time

to get a dog. Maybe you needed a dog the most when things were down.

“You mean, Dad taking off and us moving all the way across the country to a town where we know exactly one person? That kind of unsettled?” said Celeste. “Or did you mean something else?”

“That would be it,” said Mom quietly. From the back seat, Evan watched his mom’s shoulders hunch over. He nudged Celeste and tilted his head toward Mom.

“Sorry,” said Celeste. They had an unspoken agreement not to talk about Dad, but sometimes it just popped up, like a ball being held underwater.

“We’ll be okay,” said Evan. “We’ll un-unsettle.” He paused. “And then we’ll get a dog.”

“Hope springs eternal for Evan,” said Mom. She shifted in her seat, trying to find a way to be comfortable.

“At least when it comes to dogs,” said Evan.

They stopped at a gas station. Mom said it should be the last fill-up they needed. A man came out of the store and cocked his head sideways at them, watching them stumble out of the car to stretch and get the feeling of the earth beneath them again.

“You folks lost?” he asked. There wasn’t any particular concern in his voice. It was more like amusement, Evan thought.

“We’re fine,” said Mom. “Just need some gas.” She unhooked the nozzle and stuck it into the car.

The man took a couple steps toward them. “I heard your tires when you came in,” said the man. “Might be something wrong with your alignment. You oughta get ’em checked out.” He jerked his head toward the garage. “I gotta free bay. I could run your car up on the rack for you.”

Mom hesitated. Dad usually took care of car maintenance. Had taken care of car maintenance. “If your car’s out of alignment and you keep driving, you’re going to get uneven wear on the tire, maybe damage the CV joints . . .” said the man.

Mom threw Evan a look. Evan didn’t know about cars, but Mom’s question was different. Evan shook his head, barely. *No. Don’t trust him.*

“We’ll have our mechanic take a look,” said Mom. “But thank you for pointing that out.” She smiled. It wasn’t Mom’s real smile, but the man didn’t know that.

The man sighed, as if they had disappointed him. “Suit yourself. That’s a nice car.” It was a nice car, a Mercedes-Benz SUV. It was one of the last vestiges of their old life.

Mom paid for the gas and they got back in the car. “What was that about?” said Celeste. She kept her voice low, even though the man could not hear them. “Why was he saying there’s something wrong with the car? You had it checked out before we left California.”

“He probably saw the out-of-town plates, figured he might make a quick buck,” said Mom. “Right, Evan?”

“He didn’t feel right,” said Evan. That’s all he knew, usually all he ever knew. The reasons and the motivations, that was beyond his perception.

“Then why were you so nice to him?” asked Celeste. “If Evan said he was lying?”

Mom flipped the turn signal, changed lanes. “We’re never going to see him again. Why anger him? Put your head down and don’t cause trouble.”

Evan had a sense for lies. When he was younger, he didn’t know what it was. He had started feeling sick after baseball games. Mom and Dad had thought it was the stress of pitching but it was more than that.

It was the coach, Mr. Nelson, saying that he didn’t care

if they won or lost, clapping his hands and cheering on the team, but Evan could see that he really did care. His jaw became tight when the team started to fall behind, and he stopped talking so much. When they won, Mr. Nelson liked hanging around, soaking up the win, but when they lost, he jumped in his car and left as soon as possible. Once, he left an equipment bag behind because he was in such a hurry.

During the playoffs, right before they ran out of the dug-out, Mr. Nelson gripped Evan by the shoulder and told Evan that he was a good pitcher, and that he'd be proud of Evan no matter what happened. Just go out there and do your best.

The words were like a punch to the head. Evan felt dizzy, as if he were seeing double. In one frame, the coach was smiling and supportive, *You're a great pitcher! Just do your best!* In the other frame, the coach was tense and unhappy, whispering, *Just strike these guys out, okay? I really want to win.* The coach wasn't really saying those words, but Evan could hear the words of what the coach really wanted, slithering underneath the words he was saying out loud. There were two movies, playing side by side, but he could not get them to come into one coherent image.

Evan promptly ran out to the mound and threw up.

“You should have told us you weren’t feeling well,” Mom said on the way home. Evan was in the back seat, holding an empty jumbo soda cup, in case he felt sick again. Evan ended up not pitching, but he stayed in the dugout, watching.

“It came on all of the sudden,” said Evan sadly. The coaches put sand over the throw-up, but the damage was done. Evan’s team lost.

“Don’t worry about it, buddy,” said Dad. “You’ll have plenty of other games. This is just one.” Dad reached over and handed Evan a mint. Dad always kept a tin of Altoids in his pocket. “The peppermint will help settle your stomach.”

After a few more incidents—none with throwing up, at least—Evan figured out what was happening. He was sensing the disconnect, the mismatch between what someone was saying and what they were really feeling. He got better at managing it, so now the sensations became more like a warning.

What he could never figure out, though, was why he never noticed that his dad had been lying to them the whole time.