

## Prologue

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THE WOMEN WERE NERVOUS as they drove down the dirt road to the farmhouse in Charlotte, Michigan, that summer day in 1982. Ten years of work for the Equal Rights Amendment had come up short of victory. And now the Republican Party had chosen a candidate for governor who loudly opposed them on every issue that was dear to their hearts.

"Mother" was waiting for them at Holiday Hill. It had been twelve years since Elly Peterson stepped down as the top woman at the Republican National Committee and three years since she had cochaired ERAmerica. Still, she was the leader to whom they turned.

As they turned onto Tirrell Road, some had memories of happier days, of rollicking parties and backyard barbecues at the farm. For some, the memories went back nearly two decades, to the time when they had backed "Elly" for the U.S. Senate.

But this time was different. The women convened quietly, discreetly, many of them fearful that their professional and political futures were at stake. The farmhouse offered privacy, a place where no reporter would stumble onto their bumper-stickered cars.

They were all moderate Republicans, elected officials and activists, women at different stages of their lives. More than twenty years later, one recalled that it felt like she was going to a meeting of the Symbionese Liberation Army because it was so "under cover." But at Elly's farmhouse, she remembered, "the women who came felt safe."

The question now before them: should they throw the equivalent of a Molotov cocktail into the heart of the Michigan Republican Party?

The week before, Richard Headlee, a conservative insurance execu-

## 2 ELLY PETERSON

tive, had won a surprise victory in the Republican gubernatorial primary. Headlee was a vociferous opponent of both abortion rights and the Equal Rights Amendment.

Each news cycle only seemed to add to the women's outrage. Told that female voters were concerned about economic issues such as day care, Headlee responded in all sincerity, "I understand that. And that's why my goal is to make every household a one-income household where the mother can stay home with her children."

The old friends weighed their options. And for one last time, Peterson was willing to be their general. Over the course of twenty-five years in politics, she had learned how to count votes and play the press. She knew how to deliver the kind of quote that made a reporter's story sparkle.

At times in her career, she had kept her mouth shut—and sometimes paid a price for doing so. But she was sixty-eight now. There were no more campaigns to run, no more fences to mend. And if *she* spoke, someone was still bound to listen.

But timing was everything in politics, and timing was important now. And so she advised the women that they needed to be patient. They needed to wait for just the right moment and then make the most of it.

"You can only do this," she reminded them, "if you are going to win."<sup>1</sup>