

Florence My Love



ALSO BY GRACEANN K. DETERS:

Three Loves
Divine Betrayal

Florence My Love

The Remarkable Life of a Chautauqua Star

Graceann K. Deters

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To Florence's Son, Bill Deters, My Love

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am often asked why I would want to write the story of Florence Poling, my mother-in-law.

The story began when I asked my husband, Bill, to write an autobiography for our three daughters. I had published my own autobiography, *Divine Betrayal*, mainly for them, and I thought it would be nice for Bill to share his family stories. After several months, Bill asked me to read what he had written. It was very interesting and shocking to me to learn that in all the pages he wrote, Bill only mentioned his mother once or twice. I could scarcely believe it. Bill's mother was one of the most remarkable women I have ever known. Therefore, I set out to tell her story myself.

However, after writing about Florence, I can now see how her son would mainly remember his father. Florence was driven, over-committed, lived her own life, and found little time left over to be a mother or, especially, a grandmother. Florence was also a very private person. Once, Bill asked her to write the story of her life, mainly for her granddaughters. The following week she gave us two double-spaced pages. That was all she was willing to share.

When I decided to start this project, I actively searched through the boxes we had saved from Florence's apartment. I was amazed. She had

albums with pictures of her family, her high school days, college days at Simpson, teaching at Wayland Academy, and more. She had saved letters, cablegrams, and programs from various concerts she attended, performed in, or directed. She had a separate album and scrapbook of her trip to Europe in 1930, from arriving in New York to the ship to accounts of how she felt during this adventure until the day she returned to Wayland Academy. Every facet of her life was in these albums.

A week after finishing the draft of my book, I discovered a huge album I had never seen with hundreds more programs. Florence must have saved these from every single recital she had ever performed in or directed. Most fascinating was the fact that clipped onto these programs were the newspaper articles written about them. I realized then that I could have written many more stories, and I was tempted to return to the completed manuscript and add more detail about Florence's endless successes and the profound difference she made in people's lives.

Ultimately, though, I think my story paints the picture I intended, just as it is. It shows what a remarkable person Florence was, and how she lived according to her most indelible belief: that music changes the world.



Florence Poling

PART I

If I cannot fly, let me sing.

Stephen Sondheim

CHAPTER 1

Florence Poling was born in America's Midwest, surrounded by never-ending emptiness: sky, land, water. Surrounded by farmland in its stark and unrelenting presence, and a horizon so expansive it could swallow you whole. Even now, all these years later, if you drive 50 miles from the depths of any midwestern city, you'll be devoured by rolling hills and flat expanses of fertile soil. Florence found it unnerving, all that emptiness, at once gorgeous and devastating. But here it was that her roots were planted.

Florence grew in her mother's belly like the crops that grew in her father's fields until, finally, beneath the depth of a million pinpricks of light in an endless mid-September sky, Florence's mother, Elizabeth, held Florence for the first time. They were tucked away together in the back bedroom. The Poling farmhouse, perched on 375 ½ acres of prime Iowa farmland, was a sturdy box with modest windows, worn white wood, and a narrow porch. Elizabeth sat in a wooden rocker with long spindles and a solid wood back carved with forget-me-nots. She shifted Florence instinctively into the newborn-shaped space between her elbow, breast, and thigh, and a soft wind rolled over the dark fields and brought the smell of something earthy and complicated—sun-ripe hay or corn and, beneath that, autumnal decay—through the cracked window.

The youngest of eight, Florence was born to a mother whose other children had already taken a harsh toll on her body—and perhaps a similarly harsh toll on her taste for motherhood. By the time of Florence, Elizabeth was mostly bird bones and spinning spells. She spent the last month of her pregnancy in bed with the curtains drawn, filtered afternoon sun stretching across her quilt.

Elizabeth would assume this same post—door closed, curtains drawn—for months at a time throughout Florence’s childhood. Florence, in turn, would condemn Elizabeth’s frailty, rail against the fear that locked her mother away from the world. Ultimately, though, she would grow to resent her mother’s presence as much as her absence. Unsurprisingly, she would also eventually leave the farm. She would travel on buses and trains and planes. She would see beautiful cities of the world. She would know love and heartbreak and loss. She would dance beneath the stars and stand under bright lights and watch as the whole world unrolled itself before her. Still, no matter how far Florence roamed, and no matter where in the world she found herself, the brush of warm velvet nights and the tang of once-living things returning to the earth would transport her to those barefoot years in broken fields, eyes closed, voice raised against the wind.

It wasn’t so much that Florence had a love of music. Rather, it was that Florence herself *was* music. Music, it seemed, had gotten naturally entangled with the essence of Florence’s being. Even her first babbles as a baby held a pleasing rhythm and tone. As a toddler, she sang herself to sleep. Each night she would begin dutifully carrying the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” her words eventually slipping into nonsense as she drifted further into dreaming. As Florence grew, so did her voice. Soon, it was strong enough to fill the house and the fields with music. A constant trail of song followed as she bounded up the staircase, or down the hallways, or out the door to the open road.

One night as Florence’s oldest sister, Ina—who was relied upon with increasing frequency to step into the role of “mother” throughout the first decade of Florence’s life—came by the farmhouse. She and Florence walked the fields and talked about Ina’s young children, and the farm, and the changes soon to come when Florence and her brother Paul and their parents would leave the farm and move to the city.

“I’ll be sad to see the farm sold,” Ina confided, “but none of the boys can keep it. Not with Walter working his own farm now, and Rex and Clifford both settled in North Dakota with their own farms and families. And Paul, you know, Paul is—”

“Well, I won’t be sad,” Florence interrupted. “Not one bit! I’ll have a new school and friends and I’ll get to see what a real city is like. It’s all very exciting, in fact. The beginning of an adventure—a whole new story. And our father said I can start singing lessons with a voice teacher. I don’t see what I should possibly miss about all *this*.” Florence spread her arms and looked back and forth as if to emphasize the nothingness all around them.

And in that suspended moment came the slightest flicker of movement in the field. Florence paused, and she and Ina watched together as their mother moved in the distance—she was guiding Ginger, her prized horse of twenty years, into the stables. Elizabeth patted the horse’s shoulder gently as they walked. Ina, in mimicking gesture, patted Florence’s shoulder. “This place holds stories too, dear,” Ina said quietly. Then she turned and continued down the dirt path.

The farm sold quickly—and for top dollar. Prime Iowa farmland (with cattle and horses included!) was a rarity. By the middle of August, less than nine months after James and Elizabeth had decided to sell, the Poling family was settling in their new home in Indianola. Two tidy rows of nearly identical homes in a variety of modest colors marched up and down the quiet block full of families. The Poling home was a simple story and a half, with two cheerful windows perched over the door and a long narrow bedroom on the second floor. They arrived to the welcoming sound of bikes on pavement and children laughing.

Paul and Florence clamored out of the car and began heaving boxes across the small patch of dry grass that was their lawn. They worked steadily and efficiently, Florence carrying boxes from the car and stacking

them neatly on the open porch, and Paul hefting each box down the hall and up the staircase that led to their new rooms. They were both eager to get everything in order so they would have time to meet the other children and explore the neighborhood before supper.

Indianola, just fourteen miles south of Des Moines, was a small town, but growing quickly, so that the air itself was charged with a sense of possibility. “The population has nearly doubled in the last ten years,” clucked Mrs. Peterson, the self-proclaimed neighborhood busybody. She’d popped over to greet the Polings that first evening, warm cobbler in hand.

“We feel lucky to have found such a charming home here,” said Mr. Poling.

“You’re lucky, indeed,” said Mrs. Peterson. “Our local economy is positively booming. Breath of fresh air, if you ask me.” Then she gestured at the cobbler and said, “These apples came straight off the branch of the tree in our back yard, and you’re welcome to more. Also, we have monthly meetups, sometimes barbecues, other times luncheons, and you can sign up to host once you’re settled. Nothing too fancy—usually we just throw together a little something at the last minute. We have some volunteer committees, too, if you’re of the mind. And once a year the whole block gathers for a potluck, usually in the fall. I can bring the church social calendar by tomorrow if you like.” These last few comments were directed at Elizabeth, who had stepped out to offer coffee or tea.

“Oh, yes,” Elizabeth replied with a slight nod of her head, but Florence could tell that her mother was not tracking the intricacies of Mrs. Peterson’s detailed explanation.

“Alright then,” Mrs. Peterson slapped her knees and stood up. “I’d better let you get back to it. Lovely to meet you both, and welcome to Indianola!”

Florence, for her part, was elated. She loved everything about her new life: her house, her neighbors, and the hustle bustle of Indianola’s quaint

main street, with its library on one end and five-and-dime on the other. Also, her new church: *The First United Methodist Church of Indianola*, where the choir included three full rows of singers whose strong, beautiful voices bounced off the high vaulted ceilings. On the Polings' first Sunday service, the pastor invited them to join him at the pulpit so that he could introduce them to the whole congregation. Florence planted her feet firmly on the ground and pressed her shoulders back—this was just the beginning, she thought.

A few short weeks later, Florence and Paul walked on a carpet of orange and yellow and red to their new schools. Florence to the middle school—she would be starting eighth grade—and Paul to the high school across the street. There hadn't been a high school near the farm, but under Elizabeth's guidance and home tutoring, Paul had easily passed the tenth-grade entrance exams and was eager to throw himself into his studies. Florence, though, felt a flutter of nerves as she kicked up crumpled leaves before entering the school's double doors. Soon, she stood alone—in the homemade plaid dress Ina had sent with her before the move—facing an expansive sea of unfamiliar faces in the school's auditorium. "Go on, introduce yourself, dear," said the teacher to Florence's left. With that command, Florence pushed her fear right down—knowing all too well what fear could do to a person—and jutted her chin out to say, with confidence and pride, "Hello, my name is Florence Poling, grade eight."

After that, Florence made friends quickly and easily. She had a particular way about her, a sparkling balance of charisma and vigor that was irresistible to teachers and classmates alike. Beneath the sparkle, however, was something stronger, a kind of gravity with which she was able to pull people, places, and things around her a little closer. Florence, it sometimes seemed, was surrounded by a magnetic force of her own—and this force soon grew even stronger. You see, that October, Florence began her studies

with Miss Johnson, and that fateful beginning was the portal to her entire future.

Miss Johnson was Indianola's most renowned music teacher by far—in fact, students came from three towns over to study with her, and Florence knew she was lucky to have a spot with someone so sought after. At Florence's first lesson, Miss Johnson asked her to sing warm-up scales and a familiar piece while she herself sat to the side and accompanied on the piano. After the lesson, Miss Johnson left Florence in the small studio room. "Gather your things, dear, and I'll be back shortly," she said, taking Mr. Poling by the arm and pulling him aside into the adjacent waiting room. The sliding doors rattled slightly as she shut them, and motes of dust swirled in the afternoon light as Mrs. Johnson lowered her voice and said, with obvious urgency, "Mr. Poling, I suspect you don't know quite how special this child's voice is—especially with no formal training! Florence is truly gifted, and she is going to need all the support you can offer in order to blossom fully into her potential. I'm very glad you've brought her to me, Mr. Poling. Very glad, indeed."

Under Mrs. Johnson's careful guidance, Florence progressed quickly, taking on more and more challenging pieces and singing with groups well above her age. And how she loved Sunday mornings! After all, she'd joined that church choir she admired so much. Such enthusiasm she felt each Sunday as she pulled on her silky black choir robes in the dim back room of the church, standing on those worn wooden risers in front of the congregation, feet planted firmly, shoulders pressed back, breath pulled up through her diaphragm as the sanctuary filled with song. Sometimes, she believed she herself might lift right off those risers into the ether. Indeed, Florence felt her voice rise straight up to the top beams of the church during her solos. And she could feel the eyes and energy of the whole room rise with her. But, most of all, she loved to look out and find her father's

handsome face, beaming with pride, as he watched his youngest daughter sing.

Somehow, no matter where Florence was performing—at a church or a school auditorium or a community center or a performance hall all the way across town—her father was always there. All through her high school years, he never missed a single concert. He liked to take a seat right in the middle of the third row, so that Florence could look up and find him if her nerves got the better of her. Elizabeth, however, continued to take ill more often than not. She frequently secluded herself in her bedroom for weeks on end, barely cracking open her door, and only roaming the hallways with her silent footsteps to fetch a glass of water or retrieve another cold compress.

I will never be like her, not ever! Florence promised herself. Where her mother was fearful, she would be brave. Where her mother was timid, she would be strong. Where her mother was reserved, she would be outgoing. Watching her mother wither away only deepened Florence's determination to get every single thing that she wanted for herself, every exciting and good thing out of her one and only life.

CHAPTER 2

One afternoon in late March—when the sky and the ground seemed to merge into a single stretch of endless gray, Florence set out walking. Indeed, she hustled down Ashland Avenue toward Fifth Street with a fierce determination. Not once that day—not in the soft morning light sipping black coffee and flipping through the morning paper with her father, not in the hallway between classes when she had reluctantly agreed to help Fiona Meyer with her solo for the upcoming recital, not in unbearably long hour that was Mr. Jordan’s history class—not once had she wavered in the decision that had been brewing in her over the last several days: Florence was going to enroll in college. Never mind that she didn’t know a single woman with a college degree. Never mind that none of her closest friends were planning to go to college, and only a handful of girls in her whole senior class at Indianola High were doing so. Never mind that it was going to be exceedingly difficult financially. Florence’s mind was made up—it was unavoidably clear that college was the only action that made any sense at all.

Before her decision to enroll in college, Florence had been sure of only one thing—that she would be famous. For that, music was all she needed. One way or another, her life would revolve around music. At first, she was unclear on exactly the steps from here to there: what she would do musically, where she would live, with whom she would spend her time. But once she envisioned her plan, it became clear as polished crystal. After graduation, she would continue her training as a vocalist and performer. To do this, she would need to attend college. And thus, on this afternoon

of March 23, she marched with purpose toward the Simpson College campus.

On the mile and a half walk across town from the high school to Simpson, Florence saw Indianola, the place she had lived much of her life, in a whole new light. The square lawns and angular parks, the tree branches still mostly bare from winter: everything was at once the same and irrevocably changed. The future shimmered on the surface of everything now, like an iridescent film over the whole town. With her raw talent and college level training, Florence would be able to fulfill her potential and achieve her wildest dreams. She would earn respect and recognition as an opera performer. She knew she would.

Florence heaved open the door to the student affairs building—it was unexpectedly heavy, and she had to press her shoulder awkwardly against it to negotiate her body into the entryway. She paused to brush nonexistent wrinkles from her skirt before continuing down the hall to the admission office.

“Florence, dear,” Mrs. Olson exclaimed. “What a treat!”

“Mrs. Olson! Yes, how lovely,” Florence said. She was surprised to see a familiar face, though she shouldn’t have been. In her prolonged daydream while walking across town, she had lost sight of the fact that Mrs. Olson, who was a close friend of her parents and the youth group leader at their church, coordinated admissions at Simpson. “I’d like to pick up an admissions packet, Mrs. Olson,” Florence said. “I’ve decided to attend Simpson College next fall.”

“Well, well,” Mrs. Olson said. “How enterprising of you. A tremendous idea, if I don’t say.” She was already crossing the small office, weaving between rows of filing cabinets, “Yes, here we are. You bring these home and fill them out—you’ll need some information from your father as well. And as soon as you have them finished, bring them back to me and I’ll add you to the new student roster.”

Florence practically ran the mile home, bursting to show the admissions packet to her father. Simpson College would be her doorway into a new story, one that would carry her to places she couldn't yet imagine. One that would catapult her into the limelight she knew awaited her.

When Ina and her girls came for their summer visit that July, it was in part due to Elizabeth's deteriorating condition. "Thank you, Ina," Mr. Poling said as he welcomed his daughter. "Your mother's been having a terribly difficult summer." He had asked Ina to come, thinking a visit with the grandchildren might cheer Elizabeth up—although she barely had the energy to have them to her room, let alone play with them.

One warm night during Ina's stay, Florence and her older sister stayed up late on the porch to see the stars come out. Ina's girls were already fast asleep inside on beds made up of couch cushions and blankets on the floor. Florence sat between Ina's knees as Ina combed and braided her silky hair, just as she had when Florence was young. "Ina," said Florence dreamily, "do you believe music has the power to change the world?"

"I don't know, maybe," said Ina with a smile.

"It does," Florence said emphatically. "Music does have the power to change the world. I know it's true because I've felt it. Music changed me. It got inside of me and now it's a part of me just as much as my arm or leg are a part of me."

"I'm glad for you," said Ina, tucking a strand of Florence's hair behind her ear.

"It's good that you have something you love so much."

"Yes," said Florence. "I love music second only to God. Come to think of it, music is even like God—the way it has a power over us. Anyway—the point is, music can change the world. Because music can change people, and if you change people, you change the world." Ina smiled, focusing

mostly on the pattern of the Dutch plaits, but amused all the same by Florence's exuberant musings.

The rest of summer was a hazy blur of trips to the swimming hole, the girls splashing and wading up to their waists in the dark blue waters, the boys hurling themselves from the cliffs above, and endless errands for Mrs. Johnson to the music shop and corner store and the produce stand, all followed by sunsets on the porch stretching endlessly later and later into the black night. Before Florence knew it, she was sitting cross-legged on her bedroom floor surrounded by piles of partially folded clothes. She held up a white blouse with a collar and delicate buttons and pictured herself walking into the first day of classes. She considered for a moment exactly who she might become.

Finally, one unseasonably cool day at the end of August, Mr. Poling drove Florence across town toward Simpson College—her two suitcases loaded neatly into the trunk of the car. She rode in the passenger seat, pressing hard into the stiff automotive upholstery with her hands tucked beneath her thighs. She felt more nervous than she had expected—a hard lump had lodged itself firmly in the middle of her throat. *Come now*, she scolded herself silently. *You're ready for this. You are!* With that she took a deep slow breath to calm her nerves, just as she had a million times before her own recitals. *I'm on my way*, she thought as she stepped out of her father's car and waved good-bye.

Simpson's campus was compact, charming, and shaded by the expansive elms that lined the square. Florence's dorm, on the east side of campus, was in a stout brick building with white paned windows. Her room was small—indeed, a shoebox! It held a bed and desk and window that looked out over a small grassy courtyard dotted with maples and crab apples, wrought-iron tables and burgeoning flowerbeds, all crisscrossed with brick paths. That first afternoon, Florence dutifully unpacked all her

belongings, stowing contents of her two suitcases into the small dresser and desk. She threw herself onto her new bed and looked around contentedly. The lump of nerves from before—the one that had lodged in her throat—was long gone, replaced by a warm and radiant joy.

The president of the college, James Watson Campbell, addressed all new students on the knoll at a welcome assembly the next day. He was a sturdy man with a thick beard and round glasses, and his voice bounced off the brick of the student center behind them. “You are joining a long line of thinkers, intellectuals,” Mr. Campbell said. “You are joining citizens dedicated to the pursuit of progress.” Florence looked at the other young students gathered around her—so many men, and so few women!—and couldn’t help but feel pride welling up inside her. She was exactly where she was meant to be.

When classes began two days later, Florence clutched her paper schedule—Music Theory on Monday and Wednesday, the History of Opera on Thursday afternoon, Voice I on Tuesday morning, plus choir practice every day. Always a top student, driven and dedicated, Florence found her attitude and habits perfectly aligned for success in college. She approached her first year of classes with the same dutiful concentration as she did her nighttime recitations of children’s songs as a toddler—attention focused, brows slightly furrowed, sights set on the goal that seemed to pull her steadily forward.

CHAPTER 3

The Polings came from a long line of hardworking farmers. They always had enough, but they didn't come from money. So, although they valued education, Florence would be the first Poling to attend college. Luckily, Ina had counseled Florence from a young age that if she wanted to make something out of her life, she would need to be disciplined and work hard to get it.

Perhaps this was why Florence had always been so frugal. She was not only careful about her money, she was also wise. She didn't get distracted by catalogs or other things her friends pined over. Who needed such trivialities as another new handbag, the latest shade of lip stain? Instead, Florence saved every dollar she earned, along with the money her father had set aside for her from selling the farm. When you save your money for what matters, you have the power to follow your dreams. And pay for a full year of college tuition! Being frugal allowed Florence to spend her first two semesters focused exclusively on her studies. In the back of her mind, of course, she knew she would soon need to find a job to support herself. Which is why she could scarcely believe her eyes the morning she saw the flyer behind the glass on the student message board:

Local Chautauqua Assembly Informational Meeting
"The most American thing in America." – Teddy Roosevelt
Meeting this Thursday, 7pm in Anderson Hall
Find out more about upcoming events and auditions.
Join the most influential movement of our time!

Chautauqua! Florence simply could not believe it. Chautauqua! The most prestigious performance movement in the entire country! Even Mark Twain and Susan B. Anthony had performed with Chautauqua. Florence knew everything about Chautauqua—how it had begun in a campsite on the shores of Lake Chautauqua in upper New York State fifty years earlier, how it had quickly spread across the country to become the most influential and well-respected artistic movement in history. How even President Teddy Roosevelt had said Chautauqua was the most American thing about America. And not just because it reached millions and millions of Americans, holding assemblies in tens of thousands of towns across the country. But also because of its mission. The Chautauqua movement, unlike most theater and art, was not aimed at the wealthy and the urban. Instead, it was about bringing art to regular people. The performers were a mix of thinkers, entertainers, and artists, all united in their goal to make art more accessible and to bring culture beyond the limits of New York and Los Angeles and Chicago, and instead carry it into towns like Indianola and even smaller.

Florence felt a flutter of awe and desire in her stomach. Could she audition for Chautauqua? She'd never considered it before, mostly because it seemed a foolish and perhaps even childish dream. But why? Why *not* Florence? In an instant, she knew that what she wanted more than anything was to become a Chautauqua performer. To become a Chautauqua *star!*

At the information session, representatives from the Chautauqua local chapter talked about what it meant to perform with Chautauqua—the honor, the legacy. The privilege of bringing art to families in every corner of America. Florence could barely contain herself. Every fiber in her body, down to the soles of feet, tingled with the rightness of it. The representatives told everyone that the regional Chautauqua circuit performance would be stopping in Indianola on their way to another small town in

just two weeks. Florence listened patiently for information about the audition schedule, but it never came. The meeting ended and groups of students began to shuffle out into the courtyard, papers in hand. But Florence stayed in her seat until the crowd thinned even further—then she approached one of the student organizers. “Excuse me,” she said. “On the flyer it mentioned auditions. Do you happen to know if the local chapter is taking any new acts for the season? I am a performer—I sing opera. I am very interested in auditioning if that’s a possibility.”

“Oh, right!” said the student. “Auditions! I should have asked the chapter reps before the end of the meeting. Let me get your information to see whether the director can arrange a time with you.”

When the student organizer came by the next day, Florence was eating lunch in the cafeteria. “Excuse me,” the organizer said. “I’ve been looking for you! The Chautauqua reps are interested in hearing you sing, and they have time for an audition next Saturday after their matinee performance at Buxton Park Arboretum. Can you make that work?”

“Can I make it work?” Florence laughed. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me away!”

If accepted by Chautauqua, Florence would be able to join the circuit with a singing act and spend the summer performing—for pay!—in towns and cities across the Midwest. A dream come true. Florence ran immediately to her choir director, Mr. Hedberg, and told him about her chance to audition for Chautauqua. “Florence, this is the opportunity of a lifetime,” he said. “You’re going to need to prepare. And I can help you.”

Every single morning during the weeks leading up to her audition, Florence woke before dawn to trudge across campus to work with Mr. Hedberg before her morning classes. In the gray of those predawn hours, surrounded by empty desks and hollow hallways, Florence’s voice rang out, filling the building until even the air seemed to vibrate. She chose the romantic aria, “My Heart Opens to Your Voice,” from the opera *Sampson*

and Delilah. It was composed in 1877 by Camille Saint-Saens and would have been an impressive undertaking to learn and polish over the course of several months, let alone several weeks. But with dedication and laser-sharp focus, Florence was able to master the difficult arrangement. After one of her final rehearsals, with the slant of early morning just beginning to radiate on the bottoms of the windows and reach toward the back of the piano, Mr. Hedberg sat for a moment, allowing the silence to fully reclaim the room before saying simply, “No notes, Florence, my dear. You are ready.”

On the afternoon of her audition with Chautauqua, Florence wore a light blue dress with small yellow flowers and mother-of-pearl buttons up the front. Weeks filled with fits of nerves and frantic preparation had led to this big day, and when Florence arrived at the gleaming white tent—the group had set up on the outskirts of Buxton Park—she had several minutes to spare. Punctual, as usual. She took a moment to center herself, closing her eyes and feeling the shape of her own breath in her body. Then she turned on her heel and marched through the tent’s wide-open door.

In the front row sat a panel of three, the head regional Chautauqua director, the music coordinator, and the creative director. Florence handed her sheet music to the pianist and took her place at the center of the stage. She stood, hips squared, and felt the sturdiness of the stage beneath her. Then she nodded and the music began—starting slowly then building to a swell. Right in the microsecond of a pause as the pianist suspended her slender fingers ever so briefly in midair, Florence inhaled. Then, she did what she did best: she sang.

In the silence that emerged in the wake of Florence’s last note, the panelists erupted into applause. Florence was accepted immediately and invited to join the circuit and begin performing that very summer. Florence agreed ecstatically, accepting the invitation on the spot. She was

thrilled, and she was stunned. She would actually spend her summer touring with Chautauqua!

The rest of the spring flew by—every morning began with a pre-dawn walk across campus for chamber rehearsal, afternoons were classes and assignments and projects, and evenings were spent alone in the practice rooms in the music building, rolling the pieces she planned to perform that summer over and over in her mouth like waves to a sharp stone, grinding the difficulties down until the notes flowed perfectly. And immediately after finishing her first year at Simpson—passing all her classes with high marks—Florence set about preparing for her long, exciting summer on the road in earnest. She finalized the set of songs she would begin the season with, then carefully packed her sheet music, along with folded dresses and socks, into her leather suitcase. She was eager to start making her own money, and Chautauqua would pay her a whopping fifty dollars a week! With that kind of income, Florence would easily be able to save enough for the school year. Meanwhile, she would be living her dream—using music to change people’s lives, and to become the star she knew she was meant to be.

Florence’s first performance was in a town not far from Indianola, at a small amphitheater in the public square. The June evening was clear and warm, and the fresh smell of green filled the air. Students and families clustered on benches, and children squirmed in their parents’ laps or chased each other in circles on the crisp grass. Florence listened and watched as the performers ahead of her finished. Then, as the applause subsided, she made her entrance. She had performed hundreds of times before, but there was a weight to this first performance with Chautauqua that she hadn’t thoroughly anticipated. An audience full of strangers—except her father, who had driven up from Indianola—and all eyes pinned on Florence. She knew the power of music, the way it could tie them all together and open

their imaginations to what the world could be. Envisioning her voice as that golden thread that could bind them, Florence inhaled, then began.

Before Florence knew it, the summer was half over. The experience of performing and being on the road was utterly exhilarating. To be surrounded by like-minded artists—who could want for more? And Florence didn't mind the travel one bit. She also didn't mind the young men who began following her from town to town to catch her performances. By the first week of July, a small pack of ardent admirers were trailing her on the circuit. She was, it seemed, becoming a celebrity, and not *just* for her singing. Word of her beauty, too, had spread from town to town. Sometimes the men would leave gifts on Florence's dressing room table—bouquets of wildflowers, chrysanthemums and daisies tied with silk ribbons, single roses, small boxes of chocolates wrapped in gold foil. Other times they would wait around after the show just hoping to catch her and ask her out for sodas. And Florence *was* beautiful—there was no denying it, the way her perfectly curled dark locks framed her face. But there was more to it than beauty. It was also the way she stood straight and tall as she walked onto the stage, the way she took up more space than expected. It was that gravity of hers—that pulsing power—and the way her voice entranced all who heard it, drawing them deeper and deeper into something otherworldly, a place of mystery from which they could not escape.

Oh, that Jefferey Stoddard, Florence sighed to herself one morning as she examined her face in the mirror one last time before rehearsal. Jefferey was one of the boys who followed Florence like a puppy. He'd been doing it all through her first summer with Chautauqua. She couldn't decide if he was good looking or not, tall and thin as he was. It was as if he'd never quite gotten caught up to himself after his growth spurt in

the seventh grade. His shaggy brown hair grazed his eyelashes and his lanky arms hung at his sides in a way that made you think he wasn't quite sure what to do with them. Jeffrey studied at Simpson as well, as a junior majoring in business and economics—but his true passion was music. And for that, Florence could appreciate him. After all, he loved opera and orchestra and, as far as Florence could tell, he loved her. She was convinced he'd started falling for her the very first time he heard her sing at Simpson during her freshman student recital.

Florence enjoyed the way Jeffrey's eyes lingered on her as she walked off stage, the wide smiles he flashed when he greeted her in the halls. But at the same time, she was dedicated to her studies and performances. She simply didn't have time for dating. Jeffrey, nevertheless, seemed determined to have it otherwise. He pressed on utterly undeterred, with the single-mindedness of a man who knew exactly what he wanted.

Not only did Jeffrey attend every single one of Florence's performances, but he also invited her out after each and every one. Finally, one evening in mid-August, after a particularly spectacular show, Jeffrey ran to catch up with Florence, arms swinging and breath catching in jagged rasps by the time he caught up to her several blocks from the concert hall. "Florence," he panted, "what a show! You—you—" he paused to steady his breathing. "You get better and better each week. What do you say to dinner with me, Florence?" His eyes shone with hope in the glow of the streetlamp. "It will be my treat!" Maybe it was the high of her performance, or the amber of the evening, but Florence had to admit that Jeffrey's face looked somehow broader—so tan and inviting. He wasn't necessarily handsome, but he had an easy charm. With the energy of the audience still surging in her, Florence leaned a little closer to Jeffrey and said, "Let's say lunch. Thursday?"

The café near campus was cozy and bright, and through the picture windows Florence could see that the goldenrod on the boulevard bloomed

a lazy sunshine-yellow and the sumac was already descending into deep red. When Jeffrey arrived, he sat across from Florence in the booth and beamed. “It’s just lunch, Jeffrey,” Florence said, and they both laughed. As they chatted about school, and music, and their respective plans for the future, Florence noted that Jeffrey was rather quick-witted and the conversation flowed more easily than she had expected. She told Jeff about her family and the farm in Iowa, about how she wanted to continue touring and introducing people to music, about her envisioned future as an opera star. Jeff, meanwhile, told Florence about his childhood. About how his father, a prominent banker in Minneapolis, had pushed him to pursue a degree in business rather than liberal arts.

“I understand where the old man is coming from—I really do,” Jeffrey said, pausing to take a bite of his strawberry Danish. “But Florence, these classes, good gracious. You wouldn’t believe how dull they are. Just imagine how ‘The Art of Business’ compares to what you get to study.”

When the check came, Jeff insisted on paying, even though Florence made her own money and had more than enough to cover her half. And when she stood to leave, he held the heavy glass door open for her, so that as passed under his outstretched arm, Florence could feel the closeness of him, could feel how he wanted more. *No*, she thought. *I will not lose focus*. Florence’s studies were her key to the future, and her future was music, and music was her ticket to fame. She knew she would need to discourage Jeff from acting on his feelings for her. Still, she enjoyed his company all the same and was happy to have made a true friend on campus.

CHAPTER 4

As the first color of fall continued to take over the last green of summer, Florence's tour with Chautauqua came to a close. She returned home to spend the last few weeks of break with her family. Her father had spent much of the summer trailing Florence's circuit, making his way to every performance, just as he had through her high school years. His pride for her was a beaming light that Florence basked and reveled in. It was something special to have a father like James Poling—something very special, indeed. Even if Florence's mother couldn't muster the energy to care much one way or another, Florence's father would never let her down.

The truth was, Elizabeth had spent most of the summer inside and hadn't attended even one of Florence's shows. Her pain and dizziness were flaring up, she said. It was a terrible struggle even to leave her bed, she said, let alone the house. Florence felt disgusted at her mother's helplessness. And even at her most compassionate, Florence felt, whenever she entered the house, the weight of her mother's quietude filling the halls just as it had done when Florence was a child. That heavy silence triggered a mix of emotions in Florence that she didn't quite understand, but mostly it just made her want to keep pressing forward toward her own future, a future far from the dank, helpless life her mother led.

Despite Elizabeth's bed-bound frailty, Florence enjoyed her last few weeks of summer all the same. She especially loved mornings with her father. The two of them would sit at the kitchen table, James with two pieces of buttered toast and orange juice and Florence with a cup of black coffee. Over this simple breakfast, they would read the morning paper

together. The ritual was mostly silent, save for the occasional rustle of pages or comment about an article. Nonetheless the calm togetherness of these mornings provided a great comfort that extended over many years, and Florence was filled with a sense of peace and ease to start her days this way.

Fall falls with such a splash—the colors themselves almost too bright to bear, almost audible in their need for attention and applause. What a grand thing it was, Florence thought, that nature could create a visual display almost as powerful as the sound of music. *Almost*. But nothing was quite like music. These were Florence's fleeting ruminations as she began her sophomore year at Simpson, determined to not only match her achievements of the previous year, but to outdo herself.

Florence's seriousness was unparalleled. And yet, as fall turned to winter and winter melted into spring, Florence discovered along the way that friendship didn't have to interfere with her studies. To the contrary, she could excel at both. Jeff, especially, made a point of seeking Florence out. He fell into a pattern of meeting her after her evening rehearsals to walk her to the dining hall. Soon enough they were spending most weekend afternoons strolling the heavily wooded path behind campus. "After graduation I think I'll move back to Minneapolis," Jeff told Florence on one such afternoon. "My father's offered me a position at his bank, and it is just too good of an offer to pass up." Although Florence would never have admitted it, she was a little relieved to hear Jeff would be moving away that summer. She would miss his camaraderie—but she was quite sure he was in love with her, and that simply would not do in the long term. Some geographic distance wouldn't hurt.

The morning before Jeff drove up to Minneapolis, Florence met him outside the dorms. Jeff crooked his elbow and knee as he leaned casually against his car. Several boxes and suitcases were piled in the backseat. "It

always amazes me how small a life can get,” Florence commented as she approached the car, “when condensed.”

Jeff flashed his lopsided smile, “No kidding! Four years and a million and one stories all sorted into a box or two.”

Before she knew it, Florence was lifting up on her toes to plant a quick kiss on Jeff’s cheek. “You drive safely now, Jeffery Stoddard,” she said with a smile as the tops of his ears turned pink. The two of them laughed as Jeff closed the front door behind him.

Another summer with Chautauqua. Another fall at Simpson. Another summer with Chautauqua, and just like that, WWI had ended, and it seemed like the whole country, the whole world, was bursting open with life and creativity. A new decade was unfurling, and the energy of change was in the air.

Florence had thoroughly established herself as the most accomplished and talented undergraduate opera singer at Simpson. Everyone in the music department knew who she was—and so did a great many people outside of the school, thanks to her performances. As a matter of fact, by her senior year she had garnered a large following—and not just young male admirers, either. Choir directors and singers from across the region knew of Florence Poling, and they would often travel to catch her Chautauqua shows when she was near their towns. Sometimes it felt to Florence as if everything was finally becoming possible—everything.

One afternoon as she returned from her last lecture of the day, Florence noticed a group of women gathered on the knoll. One of them, a small woman with short hair and pointy features, was standing on a picnic table shouting out to the whole group.

“Now is *not* the time to sit idly by,” the woman hollered. “Now is the time for what? Yes! Action! Now is the time to fight for what we know is

right!” As Florence got closer, she could read the banners other women were holding—*Simpson College Women’s Suffrage Coalition*. Once picnic-table-woman had climbed down, Florence introduced herself. “It looks like you’re in charge,” Florence said. “I’d like to get involved in any way I can. Just tell me what to do.”

“Ada Morrow,” said the young woman. “And I’m not in charge of anything, really! I’m just committed to the cause. Why don’t you come to one of our weekly meetings? There’s always lots to do, and we’d be happy to have you.” As it turned out, meetings were the place where members of the coalition planned rallies and marches to fight for women’s right to vote—but more than that, they discussed their lives, their aspirations, what they hoped it might one day mean to be free women in America. Florence, who had always been fiercely independent and confident, fit right in.

The trees that August went yellow early—the summer had been dry—and Florence liked to lie on her bed with her feet pressed against the wall watching the maples sway against the blue of endless possibility. This is just what she was doing, her fan whirring lazily on her desk, when Ada came bursting through her door one afternoon. “Florence!” Ada said. “Come quick, did you hear the news? We did it! It passed! The nineteenth amendment—they voted this morning and it passed!”

Soon the hall was filled with young women in motion, hugging and cheering and running. They rushed together onto the knoll. Some carried banners, others started chants and songs, all joined in celebration. They marched across campus and spilled into the street as they made their way into the center of town. Florence felt herself being carried by the crowd, felt herself dissolving into the bodies around her, united in this victory. She couldn’t have been prouder of the work she and her classmates and

all the women in the movement had done to make this possible, and she knew it was just the beginning.

After the march, Florence and her friends returned to campus where they gathered in groups in the dorm lobbies. Florence and other music students threw their arms around each other's shoulders and celebrated with an impromptu performance, which they ended by leading the crowd in song. Their many voices, joined as one, rose high on the heavy air and rang clear against the black of the night. Nothing, Florence thought joyfully, would ever be the same.

Florence looked through a gap in the heavy curtains and saw her father and Ina seated near the front of the audience. Her mother, she noted, was absent. It was spring of 1921, and after six years at Simpson, Florence had finally finished her studies and was graduating. She had taken six years not because she needed them, but because she was reluctant to bring this era of her life to a close. Florence *loved* her time at Simpson. She loved her classmates and teachers and her summers with Chautauqua. But she knew she had to move on, and she was ready for what would come next.

Earlier that morning, against a painfully bright blue sky, Florence and the rest of the graduating class had dawned black robes and square hats and gathered behind the auditorium stage. Florence hadn't expected her mother to attend. Why would she? It had been years since she'd left the house at all. Still, it stung to see the other girls waving and blowing kisses to their own mothers through the gaps in the velvet drapes. Certainly, Florence and her mother had never been close, and their relationship had been especially curt since Florence had moved out to attend college, but despite all of this, she had hoped, in some faraway part of her heart, that maybe, just maybe, her graduation might draw her mother out from the depths of her quilt cover. *No matter!* Florence threw her shoulders back, closed her eyes, and exhaled. In that same moment, Ada's voice burst forth

from behind her. “Florence!” Ada squealed, wrapping her arms around her friend. “I could barely push my way back through the line to find you. Can you believe this is it? I can’t!” But even as Ada professed disbelief, Mr. Hedberg began leading the orchestra and junior choir in the “Pomp and Circumstance” march, and the graduates scurried frantically to get themselves back into alphabetical order. With P as her last initial, Florence had to wait for what felt like an eternity before her name was called. When Florence’s moment to take the stage finally arrived—her moment to take the same stage she’d stepped onto dozens and dozens of times for recitals and performances over her years at the college—a wave of emotions overcame her. There was so much to be excited for, so much waiting for her after graduation. And yet ... all she could feel in the moment was something like sadness, sitting heavy on her chest.

CHAPTER 5

One early November morning during Florence's first year after Simpson, it happened—the thing Florence always knew was coming. She was sitting in her dressing room applying makeup before a matinee performance when the secretary came to find her. Since graduation, she'd been with Chautauqua as a full-time performer, touring all over the Midwest. "Florence," the secretary said. "There's a call for you in the director's office. It's your father on the line—you better come quick." When Florence got to the office she looked at the director and knew instantly that her mother had passed.

"It happened in her sleep," her father told her, "She is finally at rest now."

The next month back in Indianola was all tears and drawn shades, neighbors' hushed condolences, cards and flowers and baked casseroles, nieces marveling at the sparkling frost on the grass in the weak sun of early winter. James's grief was profound—even the shape of his face seemed to have changed, like a caving in from the brow through the upper lip. And Florence was surprised by how emotional she herself felt about losing her mother. Elizabeth's life had been filled with pain and hardship. Maybe her passing really was a release from this physical realm of suffering. But, somehow, even though Florence couldn't wait to get back to Chautauqua, she felt a certain heaviness now. Something had shifted. This too, perhaps, was a doorway.

In the months after Elizabeth's passing, James made a habit of trailing Florence's troupe on their performance circuit. He would drive several hours one way just for the chance to hear his daughter sing. Florence loved

knowing that no matter what, when she looked out into the lights before a performance, her father's face would be there. Of course, so would another familiar face—Jeffrey Stoddard. Somehow, Jeff was managing to appear at nearly every weekend show. Certainly, back in the Simpson days, when Florence had toured each summer with Chautauqua, Jeffrey had found a way to attend the shows that bordered the Minneapolis area. He'd also found a way to chat with Florence after shows, meet her for the occasional coffee, convince her to spend time with him here and there. But since she'd graduated and started performing full-time, Florence noticed Jeffrey not only at the shows near Minneapolis, but at nearly *every* show. And she couldn't help but tease him sometimes, as he rushed to find her after the last act. "Mr. Stoddard," she said once, "I have a question for you. How do you even hold down a steady job, the way you gallivant all over tarnation just to catch an afternoon Chautauqua performance?"

Jeffrey laughed in that easy way he had and teased back, "Miss Poling, I have a question for you. How is it that you're still single with a voice and a face like yours?"

Florence brushed the comment off as playful banter. After all, she and Jeffrey had been good friends for many years. Surely his notions of wanting more from her had faded long ago. But then one night at dinner—they'd found a charming little Italian café following her performance in Albert Lea and had just finished paying the tab—Jeffrey reached suddenly across the black linen tablecloth and took her hands in his. "Florence," he said, "you know I can't see enough of you. My love for you grows every day, and in no way is it diminishing. Please, won't you just give me a chance?" Florence stood then and Jeffrey followed suit. She looked straight into his eyes, holding his gaze for a long moment. The bustle of the restaurant, with its hum of happy voices and warm candlelight, seemed to fall away as Florence began to speak. "I care for you, Jeffrey, you know that. I care for you deeply. But I am completely committed to my career. I simply am

not interested in romance. I cannot afford to be distracted. Besides, I've recently accepted a position teaching at Wayland Academy. This fall, I'll be leaving the Chautauqua circuit and moving to Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. I'm going to direct the music program there!"

Jeffrey's expression didn't darken a bit. In fact, he grew more animated as he opened the door for Florence and followed her through it into the evening air. "That's great news, Florence," he said. "I'm thrilled for you!" He paused as Florence adjusted her sweater. Then he said, "And Beaver Dam isn't so far away at all."

"Oh, hush now, Jeffrey. You know where I stand on this." Florence pushed his shoulder playfully, hoping to leave it at that. But Jeffrey pressed his hand into the small of her back and whispered, "I do know. But here's something for you to know, too, Florence Poling. I am a very patient man. And I do hope one day I'll have a chance with you." He leaned down and gave Florence what seemed to her a kiss filled with the passion of something he feared he'd never have again.

Florence spent the rest of July on the road with Chautauqua. In August, she would return to Indianola and prepare for her big move to Beaver Dam. Her last performance took place on a still night at a small city park. The crowd was small—just twenty people or so. And what of it? Whether singing to a thousand people or to one person, the magic is the same, Florence thought. When she stepped onto the stage, she scanned the night sky and the horizon below it, breathing in the boundlessness of the world. When she began to sing, time seemed to fold in on itself, so that when it was over, it felt as if no time had passed at all. The audience was so spellbound that they didn't move for many long minutes after Florence disappeared from the stage. Even after their clapping finally stopped, the audience remained in their seats, starstruck.

The truth was, Florence was in a hurry that night. Her director had asked her to meet briefly at a nearby café—that sweet place on the corner

of Chapel Street—probably to discuss the terms of her last paycheck, Florence thought. And while she was eager to get home, it was good to tie up loose ends quickly. She had plenty to do in the morning.

What she could never have guessed as she stepped into the café was the rush of gifts and flowers and accolades awaiting her from her director and fellow Chautauqua performers. They'd planned a surprise party to celebrate her last show, managing to keep the entire thing a secret from Florence, who hadn't wanted any fuss. She didn't care for goodbyes or nostalgia. But she enjoyed herself all the same. After all, she did appreciate a good party. And she didn't mind being the center of attention.

It was a night to remember, with dozens of late summer bouquets of daisies and chrysanthemums, a gorgeous layer cake topped with a chocolate treble, and the praise and appreciation for Florence from her troupe. These were not just her colleagues. After nearly eight years of performing together, they were some of her closest friends.

Florence was pleased to have a chance to celebrate with them, but the next morning she set out early. She didn't intend to waste her life looking back.

Three stacks: Take, Give, Store. That was Florence's system for sorting her belongings back in Indianola as she prepared for her move to Beaver Dam. When the interminable sorting was finally complete, she packed her suitcases, knowing that she could only take what she herself could carry. Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, the Island City, was more than 350 miles away from Indianola, and the nine-hour bus ride included several transfers. She was excited to start out on her own and begin again in a new town.

Florence's father insisted on waking at five in the morning on the day of Florence's departure. He would drive her to Des Moines, Iowa, where she would board a bus to Dubuque. In the half light of autumnal predawn,

Florence's father moved quietly and efficiently, avoiding looking Florence in the eye. He was devastated to see her go—any fool could see that. Since Elizabeth's passing, he had relied on Florence even more as a balm for his loneliness. And Florence would miss him, too. She knew she would. They drove the full hour in near silence, the car cutting cleanly through the morning mist that shrouded the hills. Florence's father's voice, too, cut clean through the haze of Florence's thoughts when they arrived at the bus station. The way he sounded when he told her how proud he was, when he told her he loved her, when he told her how deeply he would miss her. If she acknowledged his damp cheek against hers when he hugged her tight, Florence herself would lose all the control she'd worked so hard to maintain through these last several weeks of preparation and packing. She couldn't let that happen. Instead, she turned on her heel, a suitcase in either hand, and boarded the bus.

Florence sat next to a window near the back of the bus. She enjoyed watching the endless expanse of moving land through the glass—she wanted to have an idea what 350 miles looked like. So far, the answer was hypnotic. And before she knew it, she was startled from her sleep, her forehead indented where it had been pressed against the window, as the bus came to a stuttering stop in Dubuque. She barely had time to buy a sandwich and soda before hurrying onto the next bus, the one that would bring her to Beaver Dam.

You must be Miss Poling," the woman in the light, long wool coat said softly. Then she said, "Pleased to meet you," and extended her hand. "I'm Miss Olson and I'll be driving you to campus." Florence would be living in the teacher's dormitory, where Miss Olson lived as well. As the two toured around the campus, Miss Olson told Florence about the Academy's history. Wayland was home to nearly one hundred-and-twenty-five high school students and staff who lived there year-round. The

bustling campus reminded Florence much of her time at Simpson. She thanked Miss Olson for the tour before settling into her room, which was also not so different from her dorm at Simpson, except that it was on the fourth floor, and out her window she could see out over the treetops and down the main street. At dusk she walked a mile to the corner of Beaver Dam Lake, which butted up against the edge of town, and watched alone from a park bench as the whole sky turned pink and purple. The familiar thrill of newness pleased her as she opened herself to this new home, and she pulled a small notebook from her purse and began composing a short letter to James:

Dear Dad,

I hope you are fine. I just wanted you to know that I arrived safely in Beaver Dam. It is a long and hard trip. When you come to visit, and I know you will, you must give yourself at least two days to recover after an all-day trip. I am thrilled with the school. There are loads of trees and grass, and the buildings are what I expected. Everyone I have met is very friendly. I will give you plenty of notice when I am performing or when there is an interesting musical event.

*Love you,
Florence*

CHAPTER 6

Between her classes, directing the school's music programming, and overseeing community performances, Florence was never *not* working. Luckily, Miss Olson, or Marj as Florence came to know her, lived in the room right next to Florence's. Not only did they take most meals together, they also took long walks through town to discuss their lessons and students and to gossip about the various dramas around campus. There were plenty to keep them entertained. "Oh, don't deny it," Marj said one afternoon that fall, as they walked arm in arm around Tahoe Park, "you *must* have noticed the way he looks at you."

"I have noticed no such thing!" Florence said emphatically. Even though she had, in fact, noticed a look or two from Charles Duncan, she was not about to admit it. The last thing she needed was to get a rumor started. Once those rumors got going, there was no end to them.

"Okay, whatever you say," Marj quipped, taking Florence's hand playfully. But she twisted her smile to the side in a way that told Florence this wasn't going to go away quite so easily.

Teaching was almost as rewarding as performing. And directing the music program was like a cross between the two. Day after day, Florence could see the impact she was having on the quality of Wayland's musical offerings. Clearly, to make a real difference with music, one must teach. Suddenly the path forward clarified itself, as it had done so many times before: Florence would pursue a graduate degree at the Chicago Musical College. She could complete the program during the summer seasons, taking classes three days a week June through August.

But then there was performing—oh how she missed it. Performing, her first and deepest love. The answer, Florence decided, was to continue performing with Chautauqua during the summer months, as well. Sure, she would have to commute from Chicago to towns around the Midwest for the shows, but that was nothing. What was the point of sitting still? Rest was overrated, as far as Florence was concerned. More important than rest was the chance to build the life she so clearly saw for herself. She laughed thinking of her goodbye party the summer before. It turns out, she thought, that we never really know when things are beginning or ending.

Even as Florence's world expanded at a dizzying pace, so, too, was James's world changing. "Florence, my dear," he told her on a phone call one afternoon, "I have news for you."

"Yes?" Florence said hastily. She was preparing for a community performance for which the organizers were anything but organized. She loved calls from her father, but she was caught in a decidedly harried moment. Which is why his next words barely registered until he said them twice.

"I have fallen in love, Florence. I have fallen in love. Her name is Sarah Burnett, and I am going to ask her to marry me."

I barely had a mother the first time," Florence told Marj. "And I'm certainly not interested in trying it out again with Sarah. I can't imagine spending much time in Indianola now. It's as if I really have no true home anymore. I'll see my father at my performances. I guess that will have to be enough."

Marj was staying at Florence's tiny apartment in Chicago, as she often did during summers, sleeping on the floor on a pile of loose bedding. "Oh, Florence," Marj said as she folded another blanket. "Try not to bring down your verdict so swiftly. You haven't even met her. Let's go for a walk.

Nothing like a walk to make everything better. We'll embark on one of our explorations!"

The two had made a habit of these walks, what they called "explorations," and Florence never needed convincing to set out on one. Indeed, she rarely needed convincing to do anything at all other than sitting still. "I'll bring my pocketbook," said Marj, "and we can stop for coffee on the way back." Florence was first at the door, opening its heavy locks, and soon the two were hand in hand as they walked and talked through the heat of the city. They meandered down narrow side streets and wide avenues without any particular route or destination until they emerged on the shores of Lake Michigan. All the while they chatted—about the shops they passed, the museums they'd seen recently or wanted to see soon, the best new restaurants in the city, the worst teachers at Wayland—everything under the sun except James and his impending marriage. Marj knew better than to press, that much was obvious to Florence, and it was part of why she loved her friend so much. It was enough for them to simply be together, enjoying this majestic city, where so much history and art and culture had already happened, and so much more was yet to come. All Florence wanted was to feel a part of all that. "Look at this lake," Florence said, dropping Marj's hand as they leaned against the iron railing. "You could stare all day and never understand it, this kind of wild horizon. It's like an invitation to everything, Marj."

One of Florence's favorite Wayland students, and one of the most talented, was a surprise in more ways than one. For one thing—he was a man. Which was shocking only because Florence had always been more drawn to her female students, the ones who reminded her of herself. For another thing, he had barely ever taken music lessons before and was a generally poor and lazy student who had failed out of the local high school. But despite all of this, on his first day in Florence's introductory

choir class, he showed that he had something different, something special. Something Florence hadn't seen in her other students.

He was a strong baritone—rare—and had the type of raw talent that is impossible to teach—even rarer. Florence would have to convince him to join her extracurricular chamber group. He simply must! But first she needed to get to know him a bit, get a sense of his background with singing and his time at Wayland. Figure out what might motivate him. So, she motioned him to her desk one day after class, planning to ask him a few questions. Instead, as he approached, she found herself dry-mouthed and speechless. He had the type of handsomeness and charm that was undeniable. A firm jaw and broad shoulders and a smile that could stop you dead in your tracks—as it did Florence that sunny afternoon, right in the middle of her practice room. There are times when being a brilliant performer comes to the rescue. Without outwardly missing a beat, Florence managed to say, “Can you remind me your name, young man?”

“I'm John, Mrs. Poling. John Deters.” He extended his strong, graceful hand to greet her.

“John,” Florence said, involuntarily tasting the name in her mouth. “It is very nice to meet you. And it is *Miss* Poling, not Mrs. Poling, but that is beside the point. How long have you been singing?”

“Since I was a kid, I suppose. Never took lessons, but I was always in choir at church. I love music.”

“That's wonderful to hear. You have a tremendous voice, John. I think you could become a very talented singer.”

Over dinner that evening, Florence asked Marj if she'd heard about the new transfer student. “He's amazingly talented,” Florence said.

“Oh, I've heard *all* about him,” Marj said. “He flunked out of his sophomore year and his parents forced him to transfer here. The idea is, he's somehow going to take his studies more seriously in a new school.

He doesn't exactly sound like a musical prodigy to me. And good luck getting a seventeen-year-old boy to care about opera. He's probably all about swing."

Despite Marj's predictions, Florence mentored John patiently, and by the fall of his junior year, his classmates were of the mind that he was Florence's "teacher's pet" because of the way he hung around outside her studio and came in early to ask her questions or show her what he had been working on. With the extra hours of voice lessons and musical tutoring from Florence, John progressed just as quickly as Florence had anticipated he would, especially after she insisted that he take piano lessons to help in his understanding of music theory. As to the matter of his grades overall—Florence had always been a strict choir director. She required students to have passing grades in all of their classes in order to join and perform in her choir. By Thanksgiving, John had totally transformed as a student.

"Well, I don't think it hurts that his favorite teacher is such a beauty," Marj joked as Florence updated her on John's progress.

"Oh, come now!" Florence retorted. "I've put too much sweat, blood, and tears into turning that young man around to have all the credit given to a silly old schoolboy crush."

During the same autumn in which she intensively mentored John Deters, Florence also began spending more and more time with Charles Duncan. The truth is, no matter what she kept telling Marj, she suspected that Charles wanted to have his way with her from the very moment they first met. She could tell from the way his smile turned up *just so* when he asked her questions. Men are so easy to read, if you learn to pay attention to the subtle signs—and the blatant ones. When it came to Charles, Florence very much enjoyed his company, their shared glances, and the way his strong, elegant hands gripped the steering-wheel of his 1923 Model T Touring Sedan as he drove down the highway toward

Milwaukee. They had a habit of escaping Beaver Dam together to enjoy picnic excursions on the gorgeous shores of Lake Michigan, and Florence looked forward to these outings. She was rather impressed by the fact that Charles had his own car. Of course, she understood he couldn't afford the car himself on his history teacher's salary—it had been, he said, a graduation gift from his parents, who deeply valued education. But no matter the origin of the car, there was something exhilarating about getting away with Charles. And any fool could tell he was growing fonder of Florence by how he draped his arm over the back of the passenger seat, how he leaned over the picnic basket toward her, how his eyes took her in hungrily, lingering in all the right places. Despite these many signs, Florence was admittedly surprised by what Charles suggested one afternoon as they sat together at the Coffee Cup on campus. "Florence," he said, "how about we get away this weekend?" His eyes sparked with excitement.

"For a picnic by the lake?" Florence said.

"Yes, but perhaps we could—I was thinking we might stay the night, enjoy some sights in the area, perhaps a hike. I know of a stylish hotel and could arrange accommodations for us."

How grand, Florence thought. A weekend away at a hotel! Without hesitation, she met Charles the next day after class with her small leather overnight bag in hand. As usual, Charles drove fast and confidently, and Florence leaned back in her seat to watch the autumn reds and golds unfurl beyond the windshield in a dizzying blur. The hotel clerk greeted them pleasantly, then provided Charles with a single large brass key. "Second floor, end of the hallway to the left," the clerk said. "Elevator is right behind you."

A single room key? Florence couldn't quite believe that by "accommodations" Charles had meant a single room. The clerk must surely have assumed them to be a married couple. With no time to think of anything to do or say, Florence simply followed Charles to the elevator. Perhaps theirs

would be a suite with two adjoining rooms. But when Charles unlocked and opened the heavy door to room 209, the bellhop right behind them with their satchels, the first thing Florence saw was the spacious bed, its rich mahogany headboard centered on the wall to the left. Straight ahead, along the exterior wall, tall paned windows stretched nearly floor to ceiling, providing a dramatic frame for the color-soaked woods that stood beyond the thick stream edging the hotel's grassy back lawn. To the right, a generously appointed sitting area with two armchairs, footstools, and a coffee table. An open door on the far wall of the sitting area revealed the powder room.

As much as Florence had suspected that Charles had his sights set on her, she never presumed he would be quite this bold. To be perfectly honest, she wasn't too sure how to feel about it. But she was sure that the room was extremely elegant and must have cost him a pretty penny. Clearly, he was trying to impress her. "Charles this is too much," she said. "It must have cost you a fortune."

Charles pushed his shoulders back and beamed. "Nothing too good for you, Florence." He put his arm around her shoulder. "And I've made dinner reservations for us downstairs, as well. Six-thirty seating. A bit early, I know, but the best we could do on short notice, and the restaurant is said to be outstanding."

The bathroom was lovely with its opulent wallpaper—gold pinstripes against a creamy base—and Florence appreciated the flattering light as she outlined her lips with a deep red liner, blotting them on a bit of tissue. She pinched her cheeks and applied just a touch of rouge to each. The dress she'd packed was navy wool blend with three-quarter sleeves and a deeply scooped neck that framed her necklace perfectly between her collar bones. "All set," she said, stepping into the sitting room with a

flourish. Charles's whole face lit up, and his eyes lingered an extra beat on her pendant—or perhaps the creamy expanse of bare skin beneath it.

Florence held Charles's arm as they exited the elevator toward the dining room, which itself overlooked the stream and woods. Their table was directly on the window, and in a private corner, no less. Charles ordered an extravagant meal—steaks with steamed beans and green salad, and the most decadent chocolate mousse for dessert. All through the meal the two spoke nonstop about Florence's music, Charles's work, the beauty of the fall evening light as the shadows deepened between the trees. When they returned to their room, darkness had fallen completely. A single, small lamp burned on the bedside table, casting an amber glow on the wide expanse of creamy linen that dressed the bed. Florence took it all in, the soft light, the linen, and Charles himself, as he pulled her close from behind and whispered urgently into her hair, her neck. "Florence, please," he begged, "I can't stand it a minute longer. I need you." He spun her around and pulled her into him with the perfect balance of force and gentleness. Then he planted a passionate kiss squarely on her lips. She was shocked—not by the suddenness of it all—but rather, by her own desire for him. She kissed him back long and hard, and pressed her hips forward into him as he unzipped her dress. Before that moment, Florence hadn't planned to let Charles have his way—not that night or at all. But as he led her toward the bed, she felt strangely at ease and perfectly sure of what she intended to do.

The next morning, in the half-light of the unfamiliar room, Florence was no longer *quite* so sure of herself. In fact, she wasn't even sure where she was. Only slowly did the details of the previous night stitch themselves together in her minds' eye—her stylish navy dress and subtle blush, the extravagant dinner downstairs, Charles' hands—rough but careful against her skin—and her very first time making love. She didn't

feel ashamed, but she did find herself lost in a swirl of thoughts all through the morning and into breakfast. Again, they sat near the window overlooking the stream and woods. The sky was cloudless, and in the light of day, the autumn leaves burst bright against the blue sky. She watched as a pair of squirrels darted back and forth across the outdoor patio, closed for the season. Charles gently brushed her hand. “It’s too lovely a day not for us not to be outdoors together,” he said. “What do you say we explore the stream and trails before we hit the road?”

In the woods behind the hotel, a small dirt path wound between the oaks and maples, long branches arching above their heads, occasional patches of blue peeking through. Florence reached for Charles’ hand as they walked, feeling the sturdiness of his grip as crisp leaves crunched beneath their feet. She didn’t regret what had happened the night before. She knew the feelings he had for her, after all. And she was very glad to know of her own desire. Desire for Charles, yes, but also something more. She was glad to know there was something urgent in her—a glowing thread of fiery sexuality, pulled taut like the string of a piano vibrating deep within her being.

Later that night, Marj and Florence sat together on Florence’s bed as Florence confided what had transpired in Milwaukee. Marj listened intently, nodding and mmm-hmm-ing here and there, but mostly letting Florence work out her own feelings. After Florence went quiet for a moment, Marj finally said, “Listen, I think Charles should have made his intentions clear. But I think it’s true that you have feelings for him as well. And he is a good man, Florence. He’s clearly crazy about you. I think it could be a good match.”

As the weeks of autumn cascaded one into the next, like so many falling leaves, Florence and Charles found a rendezvous hideaway all their own in that little inn next to the woods. But they also started holding hands,

seeing each other after their classes, and going to dinners and movies and shows together in Beaver Dam. Soon the faculty dorms were a-flutter with word of their budding relationship.

On the one hand, Florence discovered that she'd been right all along. Romance *was* a distraction. It took considerable time and energy that could otherwise have been spent preparing classes or performances or even dreaming into bigger and better things down the road. But she had to admit there were upsides, as well. She liked the way she felt around Charles, and she liked the way he made her feel when he ran his hands up her thighs or down her back. Maybe it was possible to remain dedicated to her career *and* let herself explore her own desires at the same time.

One night as she lay with Charles in his rumpled bed after making love, their bodies still comfortably entangled in one another, chatting lazily about this and that, Charles surprised her when he said, "Oh, Florence—I've been meaning to tell you! That young man who sings so well? John Deters? I think you are having a very positive effect on him. He got a nearly perfect score on his last history exam. He's really been studying the material. His effort is obvious. Just goes to show what a talented and inspirational force you are." Charles planted a kiss on Florence's forehead. She nuzzled against him then, pleased by the comment, not only because she wanted John to succeed, but also because it showed how highly Charles thought of her. It showed that he cared for her, yes, but respected her as well.

CHAPTER 7

Busy as ever in the spring of 1928, Florence found herself juggling a romance with Charles, teaching, graduate classes, and, of course, her own performance calendar. But even in the midst of all this, she was able to accomplish something she would never have imagined possible. She received her graduate degree from Chicago Musical College. None of her family were able to attend the graduation ceremony, but James was so overcome with pride that he sent a formal announcement on thick velvety stationery to the entire Poling extended family.

Marj and Charles were at the commencement—it would have been unthinkable for them to miss it!—and after the ceremony, Charles treated the three of them to a fantastic meal at one of Chicago’s finest restaurants. He held up a glass of sparkling juice and said, “A toast to Florence, the most amazing woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing!”

“Here, here!” Marjory cheered.

Florence smiled and lifted her glass, which was filled with delicate bubbles rising above a long, elegant stem. In that moment, in the presence of the two most important people in her life, her graduate degree in hand and another summer of performing with Chautauqua ahead, she couldn’t have wished for more.

What’s wrong?” Marj prodded as the two of them made their way to the mess hall for supper. The spring grass was soggy, and mud squished up the sides of their shoes as they trudged across the courtyard. *Great*, Florence thought. Now she would have to wash her shoes as well.

“Nothing is wrong,” Florence said. “I’m tired—this number with the choir is a mess and reports are due next week. And Charles is, well, Charles is fine. Everything is fine. I think I am just hungry.” Florence knew full well she was lying. Well, not lying exactly, but choosing to omit the fact that she had been up half the night arguing with Charles—and this had not been their only fight that week, either. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Marj with the truth, she just didn’t like discussing her personal affairs with anyone. Why should she? After all, that was the meaning of the word *personal*.

“Well, you do look tired,” Marj replied, grabbing hold of Florence’s arm. She pulled her along into the dining room. “You know you really *must* start taking better care of your skin—you were blessed with that face, but you’ll age just like the rest of us.”

“Why thank you dear friend, for your uplifting cheer,” Florence said. She rolled her eyes upward and flashed a sideways smile. “Now that’s enough about me and my skin care, or lack thereof. Tell me, how did your students come out on their midterm exams?” But before Marjory was halfway through her response, Florence’s thoughts had already returned to the night before. To the arguing with Charles. To the exhaustion and futility of it. She was trying to trace her way back to the real root of the conflict—but all she could seem to remember was a casual comment he had made about performers and vanity. A comment that had made her instantly angry.

“I just am not sure how to get through to him,” Marj said. She was going on about David, a young student of hers who seemed to inspire equal parts fascination and frustration. “He reminds me of that student of yours from a few years ago. John, wasn’t it?”

The mention of John snapped Florence out of her spinning thoughts—John! Marj was right; John Deters had graduated and left Wayland, and Florence hadn’t thought of him in some time. “Yes! John Deters,” Florence said, now fully reengaged in the conversation. “What

a phenomenal baritone. One of my all-time favorite students to this very day.”

“I know, I know, his voice. It’s all I heard about for years—that baritone voice of his,” Marj continued. “But what I can’t remember is how you got through to him in the end. How did you motivate him in his studies?”

“Oh, well, there wasn’t much to it, really. I simply acknowledged his talent and set high expectations. The rest was the power of music—it got to him eventually, just like it got to me.”

Back in her room that night, Florence lay on the bed jotting notes in her journal. She wasn’t much for writing; she had never had the stamina or patience for detailing what happened to her every day. Why look backward when there was so much to do in the days ahead? But she did find it helpful now and again when she was feeling particularly vexed or needed a way to refocus her attention.

I feel as though I am stuck. Stuck and sinking—like everything is in slow motion, like moving underwater. Teaching the same classes, sharing the same meals, having the same quarrels. Repeating over and over. I don’t believe in boredom and yet that is the only word I can think of to describe how I feel. I’ve been having this dream—every time the same. I am back on the farm running down a steep hill. It is summer and the gravel is sharp and hot under my bare feet. My lungs burn with each breath as I keep gaining speed, my legs moving faster and faster beneath me until it feels as though I won’t be able to keep up with the pace of my feet and all at once, I am falling or flying. And then I wake up. I don’t know what it means or if it means anything at all. I don’t even like running.

Then summer: the open road, the high of an audience's rapt attention, the freedom and space to do what she pleased, when she pleased. Something came over Florence when she was on the road, as if the shroud of her ordinary life melted away and herself—her true self—that bright warm light that radiated out from her core, was able to shine through her translucent skin. When she was touring with Chautauqua, Florence knew her power—she could feel the energy of it pulsing under her eyelids when she closed her eyes on stage. She knew she was a star, and she loved it.

One evening before a show in La Crosse, Florence sat on a stool in front of a mirror touching up her makeup and running over a particularly challenging bridge in her head. Val, a tall slender girl, slipped through the curtains into the dressing area. Florence didn't notice her at first. Val was notoriously light-footed and almost as well known for startling people as she was for her incredible talent as a pianist.

"Hey, Flo," Val said. "Someone gave this to the usher boy." She held out a slightly crumpled piece of paper with messy handwriting scrolled across it at a slant. "They said it was for you."

Florence took the note absentmindedly and set it next to the pile of sheet music she was reviewing. "Thanks, Val," she said. Then she reached out and touched Val's hand. "Say, she said, 'do you have a minute to listen to this section of my new piece? I feel like I keep losing the tempo. Either that, or I'm losing my marbles.'"

"Of course," Val said. She perched herself on a nearby stool. "Let's hear it." And with that, Val sat quietly, her slender finders twisting and untwisting a strand of ashy hair. When Florence had finished singing the bridge, Val said, "I think you've just missed the half-note rest there at the apex—here, try and count it like this." Val looked over Florence's shoulder at the music, fingers tapping out the beat of the four-measure bridge, moving up and down the table as if there were keys underneath. Then, suddenly, she exclaimed mid-beat, "Miss Poling! Look there, he's come all

the way from Beaver Dam just to see a teacher perform? What a dedicated student!”

“What in the heavens are you—” Florence said. Then she followed Val’s gaze to the note:

*Miss Poling,
I'd love to see you after the show tonight. Break a leg!
John Deters*

John Deters! Two full years had passed now since his graduation from Wayland, and Florence had not seen him since. She felt a sudden pang of excitement. After the show, she waited in front of the stage as fans fluttered around her. Some offered small tokens, others simply wanted to share their congratulations or tell her about this or that opera they particularly loved. Florence didn’t mind this type of chatter. It always felt energizing to connect with people after a performance. But her true reason for going out into the audience was to look for John—and there he was at last.

“You really are quite the celebrity Miss Poling,” John said. Then he threw her a grin as he sauntered down the aisle. “You sang wonderfully tonight.”

“First of all, John, I am no longer your teacher, so please call me Florence,” she said. “Second, thank you very much. It was such a lovely surprise to get your note!”

“May I ask you to dinner, Florence?” John said. “I must confess that I have missed my old school days ... and most of all, I have missed you, and hearing you sing.”

“Well, it’s already a bit late for dinner, and I’ve already eaten,” Florence said. “But there is a soda shop around the corner. They have every flavor you can imagine, from grape to cherry to cream, you name it! And they’re

open till ten. We can walk over together. I'd love to hear about your life and how you've been."

As they stood in line, Florence noticed how John seemed to have settled into himself. He had always had a presence, which was part of what made him such a compelling performer, but now his shoulders were straighter across his back and his gait was more even and steady. He had the confidence of a man, not the exuberant bounding quality of a boy.

A gusty breeze swept away the oppressive heat of the day and left the night air soft around the edges. Clusters of young people, friends and lovers in groups of twos and threes, waited in a line beside Florence and John at The Pearl Parlor.

Florence observed the young girls around them—arms tucked neatly behind their backs, or linked through one another's elbows, legs crossed, a sway in their hips, their squeals and giggles rising over the crowd in regular intervals. It wasn't that she was judging them, she had just never understood the feminine impulse to appear docile or fickle in order to attract men. She didn't know any of these girls, yet she felt as though she knew everything about them—the smallness of their dreams, the dullness of their futures. An involuntary chuckle rose in her throat as she shook her head.

"What is it?" John asked.

"Oh, nothing." Florence wasn't even sure how to describe what she found so tragically amusing about the scene around them. "It's just that—John, do you ever think about how predictable, how inevitable, some people's lives are destined to be?"

"Back on the farm, that's all I ever thought about," John said. "When I was a kid, everyone around me had their whole lives planned out from the minute they were born. They knew exactly where they were going to live and what they would do. It made me itchy."

“Yes! That’s just it, exactly.” Florence didn’t know what she had expected John to say, but it wasn’t this. “I’ve never had the patience to stay put—my father says that even when I was a small child, I couldn’t stay still. I’d always be moving my fingers or tapping my toes. Like running water, he used to say.”

The two ordered cream sodas in thick glass bottles and sat at a shiny leather booth in the back of the parlor. The shop was filled with the chatter and bustle of summer, and an infectious energy permeated the air. Their own conversation jumped from topic to topic effortlessly, looping back in on itself without either of them losing the thread of connection. And even when the thread circled around John’s decision not to attend college, he didn’t balk.

“I gave it a shot,” he said. “I promise Miss Poling—I mean, Florence—really, I did.” John’s eyes were sincere, and his strong hands opened wide on the table in front of him as if to emphasize his point. “But it just wasn’t for me. I didn’t feel driven at Elmhurst the way I did at Wayland. And I hated feeling so financially insecure. Being constantly short on money was exhausting. I quit school for good and got a job. And I haven’t regretted it for one minute.”

“Oh, I understand,” Florence said. She gave three quick nods to assure him she wasn’t harboring any teacherly judgment of his choice to drop out of college. “I’ve always had a fear of financial insecurity myself. I worked all through college. Now, I save every penny I earn. Where are you working?”

“Northern States Powers Company,” John said. His tone was so official that they both burst into laughter. “They’ve got me stationed in Hastings, Minnesota, for now. I like what I do, and I make good money.”

“Excuse me ma’am, are you finished?” The soda jerk had approached their table with a rag in one hand and a bus bin in the other.

“Oh my!” John exclaimed. “Is it already closing time?” Florence hadn’t even noticed that the shop had nearly cleared out around them. Workers

were already stacking chairs on tables and pushing wet soapy mops across the tile floors. Apparently, John hadn't noticed, either.

"We'd better leave them to it," Florence said as she rose from the table. John followed suit and, before Florence could protest, collected her purse and sweater from the booth and draped them over his arm.

"How very polite of you, Mr. Deters!" Florence teased as they made their way to the door.

Under the glow of streetlights lining La Crosse's Main Street, they walked side by side to Florence's hotel. "John, thank you again for coming all this way. Truly, it was lovely to catch up with you and hear how you've been," Florence said.

"You know very well the pleasure was all mine," John said. He stopped to light his cigarette. "My mother hates these things," he confessed as he exhaled. "She even *forbade* me from smoking them at home or in the barn or anywhere in her presence. Can you believe that? Old maid just doesn't understand the times."

"Mothers," Florence replied curtly. "I believe they exist simply to give the next generation something to rebel against."

Later, alone in her room, Florence hummed as she ran her fingers under the faucet to test the temperature of her bath. She was surprised to find herself in a truly delightful mood. And as she slipped into the bath, she realized she was very much looking forward to the breakfast she had agreed to with John the next morning.

CHAPTER 8

As always, the end of summer brought with it a sudden and inescapable pang of panic. Florence could feel the open road and the opportunity for performances and rapt audiences collapse around her as the world pulled into greater darkness and chill. As she sat on a bench overlooking the Mississippi river, Florence tried and failed to fight off the dread and instead enjoy the late August sun falling through the oak trees overhead and the curve of gold that was the river below.

“Itchy” is what John had called it—another name for the same energy that had always compelled Florence to look to the horizon. The only solution, in this moment anyway, was to think of what was right in front of her: a performance that evening at The Sheldon Theater in downtown Red Wing. Florence had splurged on a gorgeous dress just for this occasion. The Sheldon was one of the more beautiful venues Chautauqua performed at—with its marble columns, ornately decorated walls and ceilings, and heavy red velvet curtain. Florence wanted her attire to live up to this special theater. The dress she chose—white with silver beads—featured a neckline that draped off her shoulders into half sleeves. Florence was delighted with how she looked in the mirror backstage. Her style beautifully mimicked her collection of saved clippings featuring opera stars in New York and Paris.

“Goodness gracious!” Jeffrey said when he saw her after the show. “Florence, you’re simply radiant! And as talented as ever.” Florence’s old friend couldn’t stop himself from gawking at Florence’s gorgeous dress. He had come down from the Twin Cities to see her perform, as he always

did—still—whenever she was in the area. For her part, Florence was happy to see a familiar face.

“Oh, come now, Jeff,” she said now. “No need to put on such a show. We’re just a couple of old friends walking by the river.” Florence smiled wryly. Even though it had never been reciprocal, she secretly didn’t mind basking in the flame that Jeffery still held for her. All around them, as evening fell softly, the streetlamps glowed orange against the hush. Florence breathed deeply, almost contentedly.

When Jeffrey finally spoke again, it was sudden and a bit too loud. “Florence,” he said. “I’m engaged to be married.”

“Congratulations!” Florence said. She tried to control her expression, but she could hardly believe it. She knew Jeffrey had been seeing Irene Nielson for several years—yet, the idea of Jeff actually *marrying* someone seemed distant and unfathomable. She felt immediately compelled to share some exciting plans of her own. “I suppose I have news, as well,” she said. “I’ve been thinking of Paris again. It’s a big stretch financially, considering the state of things. But I think I have enough saved to make it—”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Florence, but I have something else I need to say,” Jeffery blurted.

“Oh?” Florence replied curtly, eyebrows raised. She was annoyed at having been interrupted and even more annoyed by Jeffery’s apparent disinterest in her plans to go abroad. But that annoyance quickly faded to concern when she looked up and saw Jeff’s face. He was pale and his forehead was sweaty. He looked as though he were about to vomit.

“I want you to have this,” he said as he pressed something hard and round into Florence’s palm. “It may seem, I don’t know—it may seem, unconventional—but I know how I feel for you and even if you never feel the same about me, and it will mean a lot to me for you to have this.”

Florence opened her hand. There in her palm back was a sparkling diamond ring. “Jeffrey!” she said. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“There’s a whole world waiting for you, Florence Poling,” Jeff said. “You just have to reach out and take it.”

At Christmas that year, Sarah had decorated not only the tree but the whole house in shiny garlands and tinsel. “So festive!” she said. “I love the beauty of this season.” But Florence found Sarah’s decorations tacky. She liked traditional holiday decor, a simple tree with candles and stars. Nevertheless, she held her tongue. She was only home for a week and didn’t want to waste time cleaning up the relational damage once Sarah took their differing aesthetic preferences as a personal attack. Which she certainly would do. So instead of making any fuss over the tacky tinsel, Florence sat at the kitchen sink helping Ina wash green beans and parsnips for supper. Their brother Walter and his whole family were coming over for Christmas dinner that night. As was a special friend of Florence’s: John Deters!

“Who is this John character, again?” Ina wanted to know. “He was a student of yours, wasn’t he?” As she spoke, Ina used two forks to cut butter into the pie dough.

“Yes, he was, and a marvelously talented one, at that!” Florence said. “John has a friend studying at Simpson, a friend who’s away for the holiday break, so he arranged to visit me while I’m here. He’ll be staying at his friend’s place at the college.”

If Ina raised an eyebrow, Florence couldn’t detect it. She seemed utterly sincere when she said, “Well, isn’t that just lovely, what a—” and then she interrupted herself abruptly. “Mary Ann!” she said, “you stop right there. I told you, not one more—” Ina whipped around just as nine-year-old Mary Ann dipped her fingers into the crystal candy dish to retrieve

another piece of ribbon candy. “You’re going to spoil this beautiful dinner we’re working so hard to make for you,” Ina sighed.

As the afternoon wore on, the house filled with chatter and laughter and the sound of children’s feet running. Florence’s father loved the hustle and bustle—it reminded him of when his children were young on the farm, the whole wild lot of them running through the house and fields. Now, he was struggling to maneuver a bench through the narrow stairwell downstairs into the dining room to accommodate everyone when suddenly a knock came at the door. “Just a moment,” James called down the stairs, abandoning the bench mid-move. He opened the door to find a young man standing with an easy smile and outstretched hand.

“John Deters,” John announced, holding out his hand.

“James Poling,” Florence’s father replied, giving John’s hand a firm shake. “Come in, come in.” He shifted to let John pass into the entryway.

John peered up the stairs at the awkwardly propped bench. “Need a hand?” He grinned and pulled off his boots.

“Oh, no, no. It’s no trouble,” Florence’s father protested. “You just go on and relax. Make yourself at home. Sarah can get you something to drink.”

John spent much of the evening entertaining the children and charming the ladies.

He and Florence even gave an impromptu performance, which stunned everyone into a certain state of awe. Even her father—who kept a polite but firm tone with John for most of the night—couldn’t help but be impressed.

The next morning, Florence and her father were the first two up. They took their posts at the kitchen table. As her father sipped his coffee, Florence regaled him with the plans she had made with John, including tours of Indianola and the Simpson campus. But before she was even halfway through the itinerary she’d planned for the day, she could tell—by

the way James was crossing and uncrossing his legs—that something was bothering him.

“Okay—out with it,” Florence said. She set her half of the newspaper on the table in front of them. “What exactly has got you in such a state?”

“Oh nothing,” her father said. He took a sip of his coffee. “It’s just this John fellow. He’s clearly very fond of you.”

“And I am fond of him,” Florence replied. “So?”

“Well. It’s just—he’s quite young, isn’t he?”

“Not as young as you might think,” Florence replied.

“And is he not a former student of yours?” James pressed on. “I’m just not sure it’s appropriate,” he said.

“Appropriate! What I’m not sure is appropriate is you trying to dictate your grown daughter’s friends and acquaintances.” Florence’s cheeks reddened with anger. But with great effort, she took a breath and softened her stance. “Father, he really is just a friend. And you saw how charming he was with Ina’s girls. He is smart and kind and generous, and I should be lucky to have a friend like him.”

Back in Beaver Dam, in the quiet in-between time as teachers prepared lessons and classrooms and students continued their holiday festivities, Florence couldn’t stop thinking about John and their time together. She couldn’t believe how mature he was, or how easy and free she had felt in his presence. Her mind kept pulling her back to his smile, and the electric spark that jumped down her arm when his hand had brushed against the back of her neck. Florence had known what had to be done for some time, but the visit with John pushed her to finally call things off with Charles.

“I think we’ve both felt the distance growing between us,” she said when she broke the news to him over a spot of afternoon coffee. “And

now with our separate plans—you, joining the board, and me, planning for Paris—I think it is time.”

“But Florence, my love,” Charles said. His eyes were solemn and deep. “We have always had dreams all our own. You know I support you completely. I would never ask you to stop pursuing your career for the sake of our relationship. I only ever ask that you let me share in your light .”

“Charles, my dear.” Florence kept her tone soft but steady. “We have been through this before, haven’t we? I need to be able to live my life with complete autonomy. I just cannot do that if you and I continue our liaison.”

“I know, I know,” Charles said. He turned away from Florence, pulling intently at a bit of string that had come loose from the button of his jacket. “I also know I will always love you. And if you ever change your mind, I will be here. Waiting.”

A few months following her conversation with Charles, on an afternoon in early spring, Florence hurried across campus in the rain to the teacher’s dormitory, where the smell of wet earth that clung to her wool sweater rose in the heat from the radiators like a dense, warm cloud. She shook off her coat and flipped through her mail on her way upstairs, smiling suddenly at the sight of a familiar slanted scrawl.

Against the frightening backdrop of the economic downturn—the whole country had fallen into a relentlessly terrible state of affairs since the market crash of 1929—John’s letters were one of the two bright spots that kept Florence afloat. Those letters arrived like clockwork in her mailbox every week. John certainly couldn’t afford, in this hideous economy, to take time off from work to come visit her in person, but with pen and paper and the sharing of the mundane and magnificent moments of their lives, they were building a rapport that Florence found quite alluring. Another bright spot for Florence was the anticipation of her summer

abroad, and the time she was devoting to fleshing out a detailed itinerary for herself. She could scarcely believe she would have this opportunity—a whole summer in Paris! She had dreamed of Paris since she was just a high school girl clipping news stories from the paper. And now it was finally coming true, at the least likely moment, as the rest of the country pinched pennies and saved tinfoil just to survive.

Regardless of the dismal economy, Florence knew it was time for her to take this leap. She had always been a saver—it was just her nature. And between her salary at Wayland and what she earned during summers on the road with Chautauqua—combined with her frugality and common sense—she had squirreled away an impressive “rainy-day fund.” On top of her savings, she also had some help from her father, who was ecstatic and overwhelmed with pride at the idea of his daughter studying in Paris. In fact, Florence would be able to afford a whole thirteen weeks of traveling and studying in Europe. For the last several months, every moment that she wasn’t teaching or rehearsing, Florence had buried herself in maps and travel guides, consumed by the preparations—she was determined to make the most of every moment. John was taking quite the interest in her trip, as well, and Florence could tell he was attracted to the very idea of her as a sophisticated international traveler. Therefore, she took it upon herself to share details of her trip plans in one of her letters:

On Thursday, June 26, we will set sail from Hoboken, New York, aboard the Oscar II of the Scandinavian American Line. Before reaching our destination of Copenhagen, we’ll stop in Oslo. Then, after nearly ten days aboard, we will arrive in Copenhagen on July 7. I’m planning to stay there for three days before setting out to Berlin, where I will visit the Opera House and Crescendo Theater. I don’t know yet who will be performing, but I am sure it will be fantastic. And then off to Oberammergau. I know you must be thinking

to yourself, where in the world is Oberammergau? Well, it is in southern Germany. And they have the most fascinating history—in 1633, more than half of their population died from the Black Plague, so the people vowed that if God spared other lives, the people of the village would perform The Passion Play once a decade. In 1830, they even built a theater just for this play. Can you imagine? The play has more than two thousand actors, musicians, and residents that take part in its production. And I will be there for it! This trip truly will be the dream I couldn't even imagine, John. In just a month it will finally be time to leave for New York.

John's return letter arrived as promptly as ever, and its pages contained precisely the announcement Florence was most hoping for! John would be taking a weekend to steal away from Hastings and his long days in the field—where he expertly smiled and nodded while selling for Northern Power Company—in order to come to Beaver Dam and see her off! On the one hand, she could scarcely believe John was making such a financial sacrifice, especially in these times, just to see her so briefly. But on the other hand, she was thrilled about his decision. She had not seen him since Christmas.

The following Friday, there John finally was, overnight bag in hand. "Give me thirty-minutes to get settled," John said as he pulled Florence into an embrace. "Then how about we meet down by the lake? I can't wait to hear about every single thing you have planned!"

"Yes! Perfect," Florence replied, "I'll run back to my room and bring a blanket."

At the lake shore, the scent of spring heavy in the air. Florence tilted her head to the side and gently rested her cheek against John's shoulder. They were sitting side by side on a blanket spread open on the not-yet-green grass of Tahoe Park. The crisp blue of spring filled the sky and reflected on

Beaver Dam Lake in front of them. Beneath Florence's cheek, the muscles under John's shirt contracted in response to her touch. She was sure she could feel him growing warmer, as well. Desire radiated from him powerfully, and Florence loved the feeling of his wanting her. Suddenly, then, John sat up straighter and turned to face her. "Florence, I can't hold back a minute longer." His low voice quivered a little, just beneath the surface of his usual easy confidence. *Do I really make him this nervous?* Florence wondered. John went on, "I need you to know, now more than ever, that I am mad for you. I've loved you from the minute I laid eyes on you. And over the past year my attraction has only grown stronger."

Florence wasn't in the least bit surprised; she had known for months that John was harboring quite the crush. But she was a bit taken by how pleased it made her to hear him say it directly. She felt a rush of warmth pulse in her temples, and she locked eyes with John.

"I have feelings for you, too, John," she said. "But before we continue, I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I am not in a place to rush into any promises or commitments. You must understand that my primary focus will always be my career. Especially this summer in Paris."

John's eyes were steady and calm, fixed on hers. Under his dark stubble, his skin glowed with the flawless radiance of youth. Florence could tell from the wistful look that came over him every time she mentioned Paris that he found the idea of her—a famous performer important enough to travel the world—intoxicating. With Charles, she had felt slightly less sure of herself. After all, when she and Charles had started seeing each other, she was still only just learning the power she could wield over men. But with John, everything was different. She was awake and aware, able to control her power—choosing what to share, and how to share it to enhance the image he had of her, and to amplify his attraction.

Florence and John spent nearly every minute of the next two days together before her departure. Any time their bodies touched or even

came close, Florence could feel the tension—as if actual electricity coursed between them. The strength of their attraction was undeniable, but she was secretly glad their time together would come to a natural end. She was thoroughly enjoying herself, but she was still resistant to the idea of a full-fledged relationship with John. Still, when he promised to write often, she said she would try to do the same. Then, before they knew it, Florence was on the bus headed for New York City, and John was running alongside her window, waving with a tremendous grin plastered on his handsome face.

CHAPTER 9

The sea breeze was colder than Florence expected, and she pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders as the Oscar II pulled away from shore. A shiver ran up her spine, in part from the cold but also in part from the emotion rising in her chest as she watched New York fade into the light blue sky. She watched intently as the city itself became just another horizon. Florence wasn't used to feeling her emotions so close to the surface of her skin, and she was intrigued by the sensation. She couldn't place exactly what the feeling was—nerves, excitement, sadness—a mix of all that at once? But something was making her palms sweat and leaving her a bit lightheaded.

After dinner, when the sea was just a big stretch of darkness, Florence returned to the open-air ship deck. She sat cross legged on the floor and looked up at the endless sky above. A million pinpricks of light and the moon, three-quarters full and brighter than she'd ever seen it, shone down on her.

"Mind if I join you?" A man had broken off from a crowd of young men smoking near the railings. He had sauntered over to where Florence sat.

"It's still a free country, even at sea, I believe," Florence replied glibly, then paused to take him in. He was tall and fit with a slightly crooked nose and an incredibly charming smile. He was easily handsome and walked in a way that showed just how well he knew it.

"Ivan Van Riper," he said, and threw himself down casually beside her. "Astounding, isn't it?" he said, looking up. And as he spoke, he threw his arm in an arc over their heads.

“Florence Poling, and yes. It really is astounding. So, tell me, what brings you onto the Oscar II, Mr. Riper?” Florence couldn’t mask the amusement in her voice. She was overcome by the romance of the night and the sea and the intoxicating possibilities.

Before they had made it even halfway across the ocean, Florence and Ivan were sharing meals and stealing kisses under the stars. Florence’s thoughts were drawn momentarily back to Charles, who was still holding out hope for a renewed romance. And whose latest cablegram had read:

Good morning [stop] you are going to have one of the biggest treats of your life [stop] you do not have one dull moment and that you will return safely with rich experiences [stop] Miss you very much but will write often [stop] Love, Charlie

Then, Florence’s thoughts flitted to John—how he had run alongside the bus like an eager puppy. She felt a pang of guilt recalling John’s devotion and adoration of her. But this feeling was quickly swept away by the thrill of a new suitor. Ivan was a rich young lawyer in New York City, and he regaled Florence with thrilling stories of life in what he called the greatest city on earth.

“When they say the city never sleeps, they mean the city *never* sleeps,” Ivan said to Florence. His voice was resonant with natural charisma, and his smile and eyes were enough to pull a person into any story he happened to be telling, “Truly!” he went on. “You can find a party to join at any hour of the night. In fact—once...” As Ivan launched into another tale of the city, Florence found herself feeling at once very odd. She knew she was still herself, and this was her life, but there was also something slippery and dreamlike about everything happening around her. The boat and Ivan and the nights dancing under the stars. Ivan cupped her face in his hands

and promised he would come visit her in France as often as he could. Florence couldn't reconcile this life with everything she had known before this moment. She never wanted it to end.

Florence startled suddenly. Everything shrouded in the purple cloak of night. For a moment she had no idea where she was. She had been deep in a dream—and in the dream, she and John had been in a cornfield at the end of summer. The corn stalks were so tall that she and John couldn't see each other, or the road, or anything beyond the sea of swaying green. In the dream, they were playing hide and seek, and Florence was hiding, her body curled close to the soft piles of dirt between the rows of corn. And John was walking row to row singing as he went—his voice strong and sweet and full of life.

“Ma'am,” a stranger's hand was shaking Florence's shoulder again and again, and the stranger was saying words, gently but urgently, directly to her. And although Florence had no idea what the words meant, she soon understood based on the context of the situation that her train had arrived in Paris. It was time to go. She pulled her trunk down from the storage above her seat and walked down the aisle to the platform. The steam from the trains mixed with the black ink of night and the platform lights created a dramatic effect—like she was walking into an ocean of moving clouds. A tall lanky man in black trousers and a loosely tucked white shirt held a handwritten sign that read, *Ms. Poling*.

“Mr. Longueur?” Florence inquired.

“Yes,” the man said. He spoke with a thick French accent. “Welcome! Please, follow me.” He held Florence's suitcase in one hand and a cigarette in the other as he led her through throngs of passengers toward the exit. They walked several blocks until they arrived at the skinny three-story boarding house where Florence had booked a room. She was quite pleased

with the building's tall red doors and thin windows with wooden blinds on either side.

By the time of Florence's arrival at Family House—this was the name of the boarding house—it was already almost one in the morning and the whole house was dark except for the warm light spilling out from a lamp in the lobby and the flashlight Mr. Longueur retrieved from behind the front desk. He led Florence upstairs to her room, which boarded eight girls, although only five of the beds were filled. In the darkness, Florence undressed and slipped onto one of the open bottom bunks. Her body was eager for rest. She felt a fierce knot in her neck, and the side of her big toe throbbled where it had pressed into the front of her heels.

But as much as she longed for rest, Florence's mind was racing. Women in colorful skirts riding bicycles, and mountains covered in snow, and the rise and fall of Ernest Davis's strong low voice, and synchronized movements and electric air of the Passion Play, all swirled around her, making it impossible to sleep. She felt restless and agitated—like everything was moving too quickly and too slowly all at once. Then she thought of her father—his pride, his easy smile anytime he heard her sing—and she remembered why she was in Paris. She resisted the urge to fall further into frustration and instead allowed the memories of travel and thoughts of home to wash over her, so that her face was soft and open when she finally drifted fully into her dreams.

Paris, Florence decided the next day, was alive in the way that Ivan spoke of New York being alive. Cafés were crowded late into the night, operas and theaters were bustling with patrons and performers, everyone seemed to have a purpose, a mission connecting them to each other and the city. Florence had a mission, too—to find a world-class vocal teacher. She'd made no prior arrangements, but she was confident that by living in the city and connecting to Paris's vibrant art life, she would find the

perfect mentor. Therefore, Florence spent her first week going to as many shows and connecting with as many singers as she could.

“How did it go with Céline this afternoon?” This question came from Audrey, a gorgeous Dutch actress and one of Florence’s four roommates at Family House. Audrey sat on her bunk flipping idly through a magazine.

“Well, it turns out there are good teachers and bad teachers, even in Paris,” Florence replied curtly. Céline had been recommended by a teacher at the Paris Conservatory of Arts and was the third teacher Florence had met with that week. “Frankly, I’m a bit disillusioned with the quality of instruction here,” Florence continued. “I’m starting to realize that no matter how talented or famous you may be, that doesn’t necessarily make you a good *teacher*.”

“Oh, don’t even get me started,” Audrey said. She threw her feet over the edge of the bunk and exhaled in dramatized exasperation. “The worst, absolute most atrocious teachers I’ve ever had have always been the renowned theater stars. Say, have you considered going to Fontainebleau?”

Florence paused, not wanting to admit she didn’t know what Fontainebleau was, but also wanting to hear more. Audrey was always happy to fill silence with the sound of her own voice, and so she continued without waiting for a response. “There is a school there, American actually! The American Conservatory of Music. But it’s not just music. They have all sorts of programs. In fact, a boy from my hometown, Henry—incredibly talented, but also totally insufferable, very much the tortured artist type—anyway, Henry was always going on about it. He said they have some of the most renowned fine arts instruction in Europe.”

Within two days of her afternoon conversation with Audrey, Florence had everything worked out. She had purchased train tickets, auditioned, enrolled, and moved thirty-five miles south to the small town of Fontainebleau to attend The American Conservatory of

Music. She was ecstatic to find that her teacher, Madame Roosevelt, was not only a talented singer, but a gifted instructor. She was able to listen and pick out the intricacies of Florence's voice with more attention than anyone Florence had worked with before. She was also an excellent critic with incredibly high standards. As always, Florence was happy to take on a challenge—she felt the most alive when she was being pushed to be the best version of herself.

Florence was staying at the Hotel De Fleur, a place recommended by the kind woman with soft hands and a plump face in the Conservatory admission's office. Florence heaved her own luggage up two flights of narrow stairs (since the bellboy was nowhere to be found) and dragged her bags down a long, carpeted hallway—a hallway that could have done for a vacuum, Florence found herself thinking. She couldn't help but notice that she sounded, in her own head, annoyingly like her sister Ina. Finally, Florence came to the end of the hall and turned the key to open door 305. She was immediately transported out of the dim hallway into another new world. A tall paned glass window flooded the small room with afternoon light. Two narrow beds with white painted metal frames flanked the window. A girl with rounded shoulders, brown hair, and a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks looked up at Florence from her desk.

“Oh! I didn't know anyone would be joining me,” the girl said. Her voice was lower than Florence expected and had an almost hoarse texture to it which Florence found endearing and a bit seductive.

“I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you,” Florence assured the girl. “The front desk clerk sent me up. My name is Florence, I'm starting at The American Conservatory of Arts next week.”

“Anita Hankwitz,” the girl said. She rose from her desk and walked across the room to shake Florence's hand. “Pleased to meet you.” Anita wasn't particularly beautiful, but she moved with ease and confidence that gave her a natural charisma. “I'll give you the grand tour! Here, to this side

of the window is your bed, desk, wardrobe. And up the hall to the right, there is a shared bathroom with a single-stall shower, and on the fourth floor, a seating area. Not the most luxurious accommodations, but, for the price, I've had no complaints."

"Aside from the hallway needing vacuuming, and the lack of a bellboy, I haven't had any either," Florence said. She flashed a smile, and they both burst into laughter.

Florence adored and feared Madame Roosevelt in equal measure, which inspired her to throw herself into her studies with even more fervor than usual. And although Florence was not fluent in French—indeed, barely spoke it—she wanted the full immersion experience, which for her meant learning and memorizing French songs. The truth is, singing opera in French was a mighty challenge. All of Florence's years of experience in professional opera were spent singing in the traditional Italian. Now, she found French spelling to be unpredictable and even mischievous! She sometimes struggled simply to wrap her mouth around the shape of the French words, let alone sing them with enough force to break a heart. But Florence was nothing if not determined, and the challenge of singing in French was not one she was willing to shy away from, no matter the difficulty. After all, what was the point of life if not to scale mountains, plumb depths, expand horizons? Anything less would be a half-life.

CHAPTER 10

Although practice and preparation for her lessons presented never-ending demands, Florence found that with enough discipline and organization, she could manage her time so that her weekends were largely her own. Often, she and Anita would enjoy what they called a “slow day” on Sundays. Slow days were for meeting up with a small gang of American students at the school cafeteria for coffee and breakfast. And oh, that so-called cafeteria food! It was nothing like what Florence was accustomed to from Wayland or Simpson, the standard fare of congealed scrambled eggs, cold toast, and tired cantaloupe. No, here, the breakfast fare included scads of beautiful fresh ripe fruit bursting with flavor, delicious fresh-baked baguettes served with creamy white butter and homemade jams and jellies, plus, of course, delectable pastries of all sorts. And after those leisurely breakfasts, “The Gang,” as the American friends called themselves, would often take bike rides around their small town, or hike in the ancient French forests, or explore other quaint villages nearby. Sometimes, in these slow moments—steering her bike down a cobblestone street or looking into a canopy of endless green arching overhead or noticing how the afternoon sun fell just so down a narrow, cobblestone alleyway—Florence felt most alone and yet most alive.

True to his word, Ivan also made a habit of visiting Florence during her time abroad. He loved touring her around the country on the weekends. Together, the two visited all of the most famous places in France—like the Eiffel Tower and Versailles. And at every site they visited, Ivan would dive into an elaborate explanation of the historical and

cultural significance. Florence didn't particularly mind Ivan's narcissistic quality—she also didn't mind his insistence on buying her elaborate, expensive dinners and taking her out to the finest opera performances. Anita, on the other hand, found Ivan insufferable. She said he was “exactly the type of pompous self-important *you-know-what* I would expect to live in New York City,” and then she made a point of imitating his long-winded soliloquies into historical minutia whenever she got the chance, which was often.

“Flo!” Anita called out early one Friday evening as she burst into the bathroom she shared with Florence. She leaned over Florence's shoulder and caught her gaze in the mirror in which Florence was applying her makeup. “*Sir* Ivan is waiting for you downstairs,” Anita said. She cracked a sly smile and raised her eyebrows playfully.

“Oh, you, now stop that!” Florence laughed. She pushed Anita away in play fight. “There is no need for you to be so, to be so—so—well whatever it is you are being!” With that, their shared laughter echoed and bounced around the small, tiled room.

Ivan and Florence left together for the train station. They were both looking forward to an evening in Paris, where they would see the Opera Thais. It wasn't one of the most popular operas, but Ivan had seen it in New York and felt quite the expert on it. He detailed the whole plot for Florence over dinner.

“The premise, in short,” he began, “follows the story of a Cenobite monk, Athanaël, who is trying to convert Thais to Christianity. But the more he tries to convince her of the truth of his faith, the more he realizes there is a deeper, less pure root to his dedication to this mission, which is his attraction and lust for Thais. Fascinating—really—the exploration of faith and lust, forbidden desire and the mix of complicated emotions that follow.”

“Ah, yes,” said Florence. “Love and faith, two of the most powerful forces in the whole world. She sipped the red wine Ivan had recommended—for in this instance, his chronic “expertise” really was of value. After all, Florence didn’t know the first thing about wine, or any alcohol really, given that she had come of age and spent her entire adult life in a time of American Prohibition. As such, she had only ever tasted alcohol on a few very special occasions. She did very much like the feeling—the warmth radiating under her tongue, the slight blurring of the room, how everything she looked at seemed a little softer, a little less real, while at the same time ever so much more exciting.

At the opera house, the pair settled into deep red velvet chairs. Florence loved the feeling of the cool wood and the plush velvet against her bare forearms. And to her surprise, she was entranced from the very moment the curtains parted. She simply did not expect to be so taken by this particular performance. After all, she had seen five other operas so far in Paris, all of which were more prominent and of higher acclaim than this one. But something about the music moved Florence wildly. Indeed, between the scenes of Act II, the piano began to swell rhythmically before a violin rang out, notes rising the scale, pulling the piano and Florence into a shared crescendo. As the beautiful violin played *Meditation*, long high notes breaking into a staccato and then rising again—more softly than before—Florence felt the weight of her own freedom and isolation. Worlds away from everyone who knew her best, in a dark theater surrounded by strangers, she wondered: if anything were to happen to her how would anyone ever know? Who would tell John? Her father? Ina? It was both terribly sad and deliciously powerful. She wondered, would she ever be so free, so unencumbered again? A sound from deep within her chest spilled into the darkness—low and deep and full of pain and joy. And once it began, there was no way to stop. Florence’s shoulders began to shake as waves of sobs overcame her from a place deep within. To her left, Ivan sat very still,

looking ahead, not saying a word. And for this courtesy of allowing her to dissolve without explanation—she loved him.

So, did it finally happen? Did he profess his undying love for you?” Anita said as she teased Florence the following morning. “He’s clearly crazy about you, it’s only a matter of time.” Oh my, Florence thought, Anita really was in true form—jumping right in with a series of questions to get to the bottom of Florence’s intentions with Ivan. But this time, instead of playing along, Florence was quiet—still reflecting on her experience the night before. She wasn’t ready for Anita’s peanut gallery commentary.

Instead, Florence replied in as neutral of a tone as possible. “He did profess his feelings,” she said, “and then we made passionate love—right there in the middle of the opera.”

“Ha! I knew it!” Anita laughed, going along with Florence’s antics without pushing further. “Poor, poor puppy dog boy back home. He doesn’t stand a chance against rich and charming Ivan. And that reminds me, you got another letter from John.”

Anita pulled an envelope—John’s slanted scrawl across the front—from a stack of mail. She held it out to Florence. As promised, John had written to Florence every single week since she’d left home. She, on the other hand, had struggled to send even two letters in the six weeks so far. She set John’s latest letter carefully on her pillow, promising herself she would wait to open it until she was prepared to write back. Later that afternoon, still feeling contemplative, Florence begged out of the bike tour with The Gang. “Just too many hours of practice ahead of me today,” she told her American friends. In reality, she had other intentions—more important intentions for this day. As soon as she was alone, she gathered up John’s letter and her own letter writing supplies—creamy stationary from a little shop downtown and a truly lovely ink pen—and brought it all to a picnic table under an oak grove on the edge of campus. There, in

the thin sunshine of morning, she read John's careful letter detailing the many goings-on of his life in Hastings: a petty drama with a coworker, a visit he was planning to Eitzen to see his mother, his continued and emphatic statements of love and adoration for Florence. On August 8, she had even received a cablegram at Fontainebleau reading:

DARLING. THANKS FOR THE LETTERS.
 WISH YOU HAPPINESS MY THOUGHTS ARE OF YOU.
 SENT MAIL INDIANOLA. ANXIOUSLY AWAIT
 YOUR RETURN IT COULD BE ONLY YOU, MY LOVE.
 JOHN.

Florence couldn't help but smile as she read. Indeed, sometimes she even laughed out loud. There was something about John's sense of humor, and the ease she felt with him even during times of physical distance, that kept her interested. Filled with her renewed attraction to this magnetic young man, Florence put her pen to paper and wrote:

Dear John,

Thank you for your stories, and for your kind words. You are in my thoughts as well. I must tell you, there is something strange about being so far from home. So much is happening, and yet, since no one is here to witness it—it is almost as if nothing is happening. Last night I was at the Opera Thais, and in the middle of an instrumental I felt such a well of emotion—I began to cry! Right there in my seat, sobbing like a child. It wasn't all sadness, though. There was joy there, too. It felt healing—spiritual even. It reminded me of those moments in church when the whole chorus and congregation

*join in song, and you feel how connected you are to everyone, everywhere,
all at once.*

*With love,
Florence*

August melted into fall in France, much in the same way it did in Iowa and Wisconsin and Minnesota: the slant of the sun turned on its axis, days began to shorten, and leaves started to burn with color then float lazily to the ground. Florence was surprised by the sameness of the natural world when everything else was so markedly distinct. But this year, she barely had any time to feel the usual unsettled claustrophobia of fall. No, there was simply too much to do in her final weeks abroad. She had tests to study for, final performances to prepare, last trips to the opera to plan, and many *many* farewells to bid. Not surprisingly, she had made loads of friends during her time abroad. It was her trademark to do so, and who would be surprised, with her unending charisma? From her favorite waitress, Madame Jeanne, to her favorite teacher, Madame Roosevelt, to Jessica, to Lucas, to Charlotte, and, finally, to Anita and Ivan, who stood apart from all the rest, Florence adored so many dear faces filled that this rich new life in France.

On her last day in Fontainebleau, Florence did what she had done almost every Sunday morning during her time there—that is to say, she enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and bicycle ride in the countryside. “Follow me!” Anita called as she pulled off the dirt road and threw her bicycle to the side before running into a wheat field. It was late afternoon, and the sun was spilling honey dipped light everywhere.

“What in heaven’s name!” Jessica called out. She too had stopped and discarded her bike, but she kept two feet planted firmly on the ground

beneath her. She didn't seem at all inclined to follow Anita into the field. "Anita!" she yelled. "Where are you going?"

"Trust me!" Anita called. She had already disappeared into a field of gold, and soon the rest of the group abandoned their bikes and followed Anita through rows of wheat and up a small hill. "Yes, perfect!" Anita announced, sitting down at the top of the hill. "I just think if we might never see one another again, we should take a moment, here, now, together, to enjoy this—all of this." She flung her arms in both directions.

The four friends huddled together, their arms resting on each other's shoulders. And Florence was there, surrounded by sunlight and new friends in the south of France; and she was caught in laughter as John chased her through rows of summer corn; and she was a young girl standing barefoot in her father's fields. She was every version of herself she had ever been, and she was deeply connected by light and breath to family and loves and friends near and far. She felt totally at ease—and for a moment, content.

CHAPTER 11

Florence was doubled over, one hand pressed against the side of the ferry to keep her balance, and the other clutching the edge of a waist bin as she emptied the contents of her already empty stomach. Again. Acid burned the back of her throat and nose as she coughed, struggling to catch her breath. The boat dropped suddenly, and she lost her footing, crashing shoulder and knees into the stairs behind her. *I am going to die, she thought to herself. I will never make it across this wretched channel, never arrive in Southampton, never make it back across the ocean to America.* But 209 kilometers later, Florence did in fact finally arrive very much alive and mostly well on the shores of Southampton. And on September 20, the Fed Star Line set sail for her return trip to America. On her third day aboard Florence wrote in her journal:

Perhaps it is just my restless and irritable mood this morning, or the size of the ship or maybe it is knowing where I am returning, or the rockiness of the fallseas, or some combination of all of the above, but something about this journey feels twice as long as the journey two months ago. The two pieces of good news are:

- 1. Ivan will be waiting for me in New York, and we'll get to spend some days together before I return home.*
- 2. The shared comradery of The Gang for the next few days abroad making the trip more tolerable.*

The New York docks were imposing—massive piers of dull gray concrete jutting out of the water, throngs of people moving between them, everything shrouded in billows of steam. A bag in either hand, Florence made her way down the narrow stairs. Her friends had already dissipated into the crowd of lovers embracing and mothers with arms full of children and others with open faces—waiting.

“Florence!” Ivan’s voice was so strong and commanding that Florence spotted him right away. He stood behind the first row of onlookers, leaning against a half-wall.

“Ivan Van Ripper—in the flesh,” Florence said. She didn’t want to admit how pleased she was pleased to see him. In part because she did genuinely enjoy his company, but mostly because after months abroad and seven days at sea, it felt good to be claimed, to be of someone else, and belong.

“This way,” Ivan said. He grabbed Florence’s bags and started off at a clip. “We’ll get you through customs, and then I’ll show you to your hotel. I’ve booked you a room right around the corner.”

As they walked down Broadway, Florence was struck by the New Yorkness of New York. It truly had a feeling all its own—a pulsing energy that seemed to move through everyone and everything in its radius. Florence had gone directly to the docks when she departed and hadn’t spent any time in the city. Now, after just a short walk down several city blocks, she started to understand what Ivan was always going on about. Even after her amazing experience touring famous European cities abroad, Florence could tell New York was special.

The hotel Ivan booked was on the corner of 34th and Broadway. A beautiful high rise—soaring glass walls and white stone columns pressed against the sidewalk. The lobby had beautiful red velvet curtains and shiny marble floors. Florence was impressed, and admittedly a bit anxious about being able to afford it. Her savings had dwindled after several extravagant

months abroad. But that worry would simply have to wait. It was late now, and she was eager to take off her shoes and get a proper night's rest.

"Ivan, thank you so much for arranging this," Florence said. She wrapped her arms around Ivan's neck and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "It's lovely."

"Anything for you, my dear." Ivan let his face linger close to Florence's.

Meanwhile, Florence glanced at the enormous clock behind the front desk. "My god!" she said. "It's already nearly midnight." She was genuinely surprised—her rhythm of waking and sleeping and general sense of time was still off balance. "Well, I'd better go get settled and try and get some sleep, otherwise I'll be a total wreck tomorrow. Thank you again, Ivan. Will you meet me for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Yes! And you'd best rest up. Breakfast is just the start—I've taken the day and have a whole tour planned for you. I'm going to show you the best of New York!"

And show her he did. Central Park, the Empire State Building, Ellis Island. The bright lights of Broadway. Luxurious meals at restaurants with fine linen tablecloths. Ivan spared no expense and Florence felt like the star she was. The sky was a purple haze and the streetlights had just flipped on when Ivan grabbed Florence's hand and pulled her down a side alley. "Follow me," he urged her, his voice barely containing his excitement. "I'm going to show you something I bet you've never seen in Beaver Dam."

Florence followed Ivan down a narrow staircase, taking two steps at a time. At the bottom of the stairs was a large metal door. Ivan knocked three times and someone's muffled voice sounded from behind the door. Florence couldn't make out what was said, but after a brief exchange, the door opened wide to reveal a funny little man. He was balding and with round glasses and he wore a black shirt and suitcoat. The man hopped down from his stool and led Ivan and Florence into a dim hallway, at the end of which were two heavy curtains. The little man pulled them open

to reveal a beautifully decorated room—bright and vibrant and filled with people talking and dancing and laughing.

Florence could barely believe her eyes. This must be one of New York's infamous "speakeasies." At the front of the room was a small stage with a piano, where a thin man sat effortlessly riffing some scales up and down the keys. Then the rest of the band appeared—a man with a saxophone strapped across his round belly and a woman with a pile of shiny black hair curled on top of her head. "One, two—" Florence heard the pianist cue. And the music started.

"Oh, of *course*," Florence muttered out loud.

Ivan burst into laughter. "Now listen here, I know you don't like jazz," he preempted, "but that's all they play in clubs like this. And it is very New York."

"I suppose I'll survive," Florence said with a smile.

"Here, take a seat. I'll get us something to drink." With that, Ivan disappeared toward the back of the room, where a slick wooden bar stood in front of a long mirror and rows and rows of bottles. Florence had never seen so much liquor in her life.

Ivan returned with two thick crystal glasses. "Whiskey on the rocks—just wait till you taste this. Some of the best whiskey in the city." Ivan pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

Florence took a sip—and to be frank, she wasn't sure she liked whiskey. But she definitely liked the glamor of it all. And the attention of a handsome man. And the warm loose feeling making its way down her spine. And the person she imagined she would be if she led a life like this—in a big city with clubs and lights and nights out.

They stayed through one set, then made their way back up the narrow stairs into the brisk fall night. The sky was dark and clear, and stars shone surprisingly bright overhead. Ivan placed his hand on the small

of Florence's back and pulled her into him. He stepped, one-two-three, leading her in a waltz down the sidewalk.

"Remember the stars at sea?" he said. Ivan's voice was soft and low in Florence's ear.

"I'll never forget."

"Let's pretend we're back on the Oscar II. Let's stay up. Let's spend the night together."

Florence wasn't surprised by Ivan's suggestion. She smiled to herself, imagining Anita's sarcastic drawl—*how shocking!* But it wasn't shocking in the least, of course. Florence had noticed Ivan's lingering looks, his passionate kisses—all entirely demonstrative of wanting more.

"Let's!" she said. She was feeling spontaneous and free, and she didn't want the night to come to an end. And, just maybe, she wanted more, too.

It was already past midnight when Florence and Ivan got back to her hotel room and the night sky was jet black between the towering buildings. As soon as the door closed behind them, Ivan pulled Florence into him, professed his love for her, and kissed her long and hard. Florence let Ivan lean her back against the wall. She wrapped one of her legs behind his back, pressing herself against him, and felt the pulse of her own desire.

When Ivan hurriedly tore open his shirt buttons, Florence was surprised by the firmness of his bare chest and arms. And when he pulled Florence toward him, then lowered her onto the bed, she melted at the heat of his breath against her cheek. "Florence," he said, "you don't know how many times I've pictured this, you, us."

Florence clutched the back of Ivan's neck and kissed him hard. His stubble grated against her cheek and his mouth tasted like the cigarette he'd smoked on their walk back to the hotel. She pulled him closer and thrilled at the feeling of his body against hers. She didn't know if it was Ivan, or the drink, or the adventure of the night, but she felt everything

more than she ever had before. Ivan's coarse hands pulling off her clothes sent shivers down her spine. His fingers running down her back and up the insides of her thighs caused her to tilt her head back and let go completely. The rush of sensation carried her. She clasped her hands around Ivan's shoulders and back until their bodies moved together in an ancient rhythm. Florence lost her breath as she arched upward, letting the pulsing waves of heat sweep over her. Her cheeks flushed and Ivan's hair was damp with sweat when the two of them finally collapsed in stillness, arms and legs still entangled as they drifted to sleep.

The sky was not yet light—but nor was it any longer black with night—when Florence stirred at the sound of the alarm clock. It was quarter to five. She wondered if she'd even slept a full two hours, considering the after-midnight delights of the previous evening. Ivan had been, she had to admit, an exciting lover. But now, it was time to return home. And although the early hour was made blurrier by exhaustion, she was buzzing with excitement at the thought of Beaver Dam. Inch by inch, she extracted her arm from underneath Ivan's neck—gently, slowly, ever so careful not to wake him. What she wanted more than anything was to take a quick shower—in private, alone with her thoughts—before her long train ride. What was the harm in allowing Ivan to rest as long as possible? She took in the sight of him, stretched out on his back beneath the sheet, the heavy quilt in a tumble at the foot of the bed, Ivan's long, lean form undeniably appealing even under its drape of white cotton.

As Florence stepped into the steaming water pulsing from the shower head, she pondered whether she would even wake Ivan at all before she slipped out the door of the hotel room, or simply leave a quick note and a kiss blown over her shoulder. However, she needn't have wondered, because when she stepped out of the warm bathroom dressed in the wool travel dress and tall lace-up boots she'd set out for herself the night

before—Florence was nothing if not disciplined in all of her endeavors, including travel—Ivan was already standing by the door with her bags in hand, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. “After you,” he said, pulling the door open.

In the hotel lobby, Ivan walked briskly to the doorman to request a taxi, while Florence checked out at the front desk. “Poling, room 507,” she said to the clerk.

“Key,” said the man behind the desk.

“Excuse me?” Florence said, partially because it had taken a moment for her to understand what he just said, and partially because she simply wanted him to speak to her in complete sentences.

“Key, please. You’re checking out I presume?”

“Oh yes, here you are,” Florence said. Though she held her tongue, she was lamenting to herself about how some people really are just rude for no good reason at all. “And my bill please,” she said.

“Already paid. Here’s a copy of your receipt.”

Florence spun around to look at Ivan—his handsome silhouette striking against the lamplight from the hotel walkway. She was absolutely stunned. Such a wildly generous gesture from Ivan—one she hadn’t in the least expected. In fact, she generally felt more than a little squeamish when any man—but especially one who carried complicated but clearly romantic feelings for her—spent too much money on her behalf. But she *was* awfully low on savings. She wouldn’t trade her summer abroad for anything, but without her Chautauqua income, her travel and living expenses in France had drained her accounts with breathtaking swiftness. So, in this moment, all she felt about Ivan’s generosity was gratitude, plain and simple. She thanked the cranky desk clerk and tucked the receipt neatly into her purse before rushing out the wide double doors of the lobby to meet Ivan, who was already standing beside her taxi.

At Grand Central, the two had just enough time for a cup of coffee and a croissant—*nothing* compared to the pastries of Paris, they both agreed—before saying their final goodbyes on the platform as Florence waited to board her train. Everything around her felt just a bit wavy—like how heat makes the air ripple ever so slightly when it rises off hot concrete in the summer. She found herself back in the dream that had started all those weeks ago on a ship in the middle of the ocean. Ivan had a way of making everything feel slippery and unreal. She wrapped her arms around his neck and breathed him in. This, she suspected, would be their last goodbye—but she didn't say that part out loud. As intoxicating as a dream of life in the city was, this was not her real life. Her real life—John, Beaver Dam, the halls of Wayland Academy, which were already full of high school students jumping and joking and jostling against one another—awaited her return.

Once the dull gray of the city began fading into the dull brown of the country, Florence reached into her purse. She wanted to write a letter to John updating him about her return trip and anticipated plans for the final leg of her journey. When she pulled out her paper and pen, the receipt from the hotel fell out. Florence scanned the itemized charges:

Sept. 28: room \$4.50

Sept. 29: room \$3.00

Sept. 29: phone \$0.10

Sept. 30: room \$3.00

Sept. 30: phone \$0.10

Oct. 1: phone \$0.40

Oct. 1: total: \$11.10

Heavens! Even more than she had expected—more than a third of her weekly pay at Wayland! She was grateful to have met such a generous friend. Thinking back on all the adventures she and Ivan had shared together over

her long European summer, Florence decided—even though she rarely looked backward long enough to keep contact with fleeting friends—that the first letter she wanted to write was to Ivan.

As Florence's train approached the Chicago station, a bitter wind swept over the platform. She pressed her forehead to the window and stared absently into the crowd. What fun it was to watch people. They were so fascinating with their public displays of affection and acrimony, their oddities and quirks. As much as Florence didn't love writing on paper, she did love spinning stories in her mind about the people she encountered. Like that young man leaning against the nearest concrete pillar, the one hunching his shoulders and pushing his hands further into the pockets of his too-thin-for-the-weather jacket. Certainly not a sensible choice for this temperature—but wait, was that—it couldn't be, but Florence might have sworn she was looking straight at John Deters. The man was looking down, away from the wind's sharp bite, but, even still, Florence was now certain. That was John, all right. A shiver of excitement ran down her spine. My goodness, how did he know when she'd arrive? And how long had he been waiting? He certainly looked cold. That's when Florence remembered the delay—hadn't the conductor said something about waiting on a cargo shipment? John stomped his feet a couple times, maybe trying to get the blood flowing into his toes again.

When Florence's train finally stopped, impatient passengers flooded the platform and John jumped up onto a bench, cupping his hands over his eyes to try and spy his dear Florence in the crowd. "Florence!" he yelled, but his voice was swallowed by the rumble and whistle of the train. "Miss Poling! Over here again!"

Although she didn't hear a thing he was saying, Florence was already heading straight toward John, soon wrapping her arms around his back

and letting him lift her feet off the ground as he spun her around. “John Deters,” she said. “How in the world did you know when I’d arrive?”

“Simple,” John said. “I just cross-referenced the tentative itinerary you sent in your last letter with the train schedules and figured this had to be it! I borrowed Bill Stover’s car and got myself down here—I couldn’t wait a minute longer to see you.” John’s grin was wide and open and felt like home. Florence could not have been more pleased to see him.

The two talked nonstop the entire drive back to Beaver Dam, without a single lull in conversation. Florence told John about The Gang, and Anita, and Paris, and her music lessons, and the bicycle rides in the countryside. She told him about the operas she had seen, and about what had happened during the Opera Thais. She tried to explain what it felt like to be so free, so untethered from the known world, how everything becomes more dreamlike, more liquefied, more laden with possibility. John listened and nodded and always wanted to know more. “What else?” he asked again and again. When he finally turned left down Main Street in Beaver Dam, the sky was just beginning to brighten with the first glimpse of sunrise. They had driven straight through the night.

John parked at the curb outside of Florence’s place and lugged her bags up onto the porch for her, making it look effortless, Florence couldn’t help but note. “I’m sorry I can’t stay, Florence,” John said when he’d finished hauling luggage. “I promised Bill I’d have the car back by tomorrow, and I’ve already missed two days of work. You know this economy never gets any better. I’ve been working six-day weeks and really can’t afford any time off at all. But this was worth it—more than worth it. I couldn’t miss the chance to see you.”

“I was so surprised to spot you on the platform,” Florence said. “Thank you, John. It was such a treat to have this time with you—and a whole lot better than the bus too, that’s for sure!” Florence was only teasing but she could tell John took her comment about the bus to heart. She could, she

realized, read his face like a book. Such earnestness! John was young, yes. But he had a gravity, as well. So, she added quickly, “When will I get to see you again, John?”

“Not for a few months, I’m afraid. But the shops all close around the holidays, so I should be able to get away for a few days at Christmas. If your dad will have me, I’d love to come see you in Indianola over the break.”

Florence pressed her hands into either side of John’s cheeks and pulled him into a long kiss. She’d missed these kisses with John, the way his lips moved beneath hers, the way his tongue felt as it pressed against hers. She didn’t want it to end. But he had to go. The clear blue of early November was growing lighter by the minute, and John was already running late.

CHAPTER 12

The Great Depression was still taking its relentless toll on everything—including Wayland. A year had passed after the catastrophic stock market crash, the crash that sent brokers jumping from buildings and the economy into a tailspin, and nothing had been the same since. Enrollment was down to the lowest it had been in decades. Not only did such dismal enrollment place a heavy burden of stress on the staff and administration, but students were also facing stress at home with their parents struggling to afford tuition.

“Things just don’t seem the same,” Florence found herself complaining, once again, to Marj over dinner. “Especially in contrast to my travels in Europe. It really was a reprieve to dine out, have adventures, all so carefree. Everything was bright and happy, Marj. It really was. But here and now, Wayland and all of Beaver Dam feel more subdued—and, to be frank, more dour—than I remembered.”

“That’s because it is,” Marj said. “Nothing is the way it used to be, and it’s even worse than before you left for the summer. Just the other day, the paper reported that 15 million Americans are out of work. That’s twenty percent of Americans, Florence! Nothing like this has ever happened before. It *is* dour.”

Florence could hear Marj’s voice rising at the end, the way it did when she was frustrated or stressed. Time to change the subject. “This dismal weather isn’t helping,” Florence said. Both women stared at the wall of gray sleet coming down diagonally outside the mess hall windows and, after several moments of heavy silence, they burst into laughter. What else could they do?

Florence booked a bus ticket home to Indianola for December 21—the last day of the term and the day of her student’s winter showcase. She brought her bags with her to the showcase so that she could leave straight from the concert hall for Indianola. The feeling of being in a rush made her feel alive, and she was anxious to see her father.

Florence’s father met her in Des Moines, as he always did, and the moment Florence spied him through the bus window—waiting alone in his car—she was flooded with the truth of how much she had truly missed him these past months. It was bitter cold, near zero with wind chill, and she could see her father’s breath creating puffs of fog on the windows with each exhale. As she waited to disembark the bus, Florence was also flooded with relief and pleasure to realize that Sarah hadn’t come along for the ride. Seeing her father alone in his car filled her with a strange and tender sensation, one of seeing, even if briefly, a familiar loved one transform. He was the same person, of course. Of course! But he was also undeniably different—his body was smaller in its seat, his hands bonier, his shoulders thinner.

Once Florence climbed into the car, however, everything snapped back to normal, the way it had always been. She told her father everything about her time in Fontainebleau and Paris. About her friends and about Ivan (about whom, it turned out, Mr. Poling was *very* curious). Florence didn’t mind how many questions her father had for her. To the contrary, she was grateful for this time alone with him. She loved the way their conversations could ebb and flow naturally. And she loved having her father’s undivided attention. They talked the whole way back to Indianola and then for several more hours in the yellow light of the kitchen, until finally a series of yawns passed back and forth across the table sent them ambling up to bed.

It took Florence a moment to realize where she was when she woke the next morning. She hadn't had a single dream the whole night, but rather the deepest kind of sleep that swallows you whole until you barely remember who you are. After three seconds of pure bewilderment, her body recognized the familiarity of her childhood bedroom where she lay warm under a quilt with stitched roses. Her father's voice drifted up the back stairs from the kitchen, but Florence pulled the quilt up under her chin and took another deep inhale, letting herself sink back into the pillows in order to stretch the moment just a bit longer to enjoy the warmth of her body.

Downstairs, Sarah had put out quite the spread—fresh bread, fruit, and eggs—so that even Florence couldn't help but feel welcomed by such a beautifully prepared homecoming meal.

“You have to tell Sarah about that play—the one in that town in Germany,” Florence's father said. Then he called out, “Sarah! Come sit. Listen to this.” His eyes sparkled with delight with every story he asked Florence to retell. He had never imagined one of his children would travel so far or have so many amazing experiences, ones he himself would never know. And he loved every minute of reliving the moments through Florence's retellings.

There was plenty of time for stories, too, given the absolute ferocity of the weather. With temperatures continuing to plunge far below zero, Indianola found itself braced against the kind of cold that makes your face hurt just from opening the door to grab the paper. No one wanted to go out for any reason at all, let alone to brave the ice rinks or sledding hills. So, for two full days, the Polings barely left the house. Instead, they read and chatted and perused the paper and played cribbage until it was time to begin decorating the house and otherwise preparing for the busy holiday festivities to come. Florence was secretly glad for how slowly time was

moving. She felt at peace. The presence of her father had a calming effect. Sometimes it takes leaving a place to realize how much you appreciate it.

When John arrived the next day—along with Florence’s sisters, Ina and Bertha, their husbands and children in tow—the holiday spirit arrived in earnest, with all its laughter and savory delights, its evergreen-scented evenings by the hearth and early morning coffees in the kitchen. Before Florence knew it, five days of energetic festivities whooshed by in a happy blur. And while the family exchanged no gifts wrapped in shiny paper, no boxes tied up in silk ribbons, they shared plenty of chopping and stirring and kneading and washing and drying and animated conversation and constant singing—oh, the singing! What a joy it was, Florence and John’s voices melting together like warm wax as they sang “Silent Night” at candlelight service on Christmas Eve; Florence standing in front of the congregation singing “His Eye is on The Sparrow” (her father’s favorite) at Sunday service; John teaching Bertha’s youngest the round “White Coral Bells”—and how heartily Florence’s father laughed at that! Their time together was the only gift they needed. It seemed every waking hour was filled with connection and mirth, and it felt exactly right.

By Sunday evening, however, Florence’s mind began to wander back to Wayland, with images of her desk just as she had left it, cluttered with unfinished paperwork. She would need to head back to Indianola first thing Monday morning to resume her duties on campus. Everyone else needed to get back to work, too, and Florence’s goodbye with Ina and Bertha and the kids was an extended, noisy jumble of waving arms and sing-song “bye-byes” as children shoved small hands into narrow coat sleeves. Florence’s goodbye with her father, on the other hand, was short—a quick hug at the bus station, her father’s eyes glistening with tears, as they always did whenever Florence left him again. As for John, well, her farewell moments with him were spent in a passionate kiss before they boarded their separate buses. Florence found herself awash in longing for more—and overcome

with regret that she hadn't gotten a single scrap of alone time with John throughout the holiday break. She couldn't wait for the chance to see him again, and this time, *without* her entire family as chaperones.

New Year's Eve was a quiet, calm, and pleasant affair—a simple meal of baked chicken and creamed spinach with Marj. The two women spoke of their hope for the year ahead—*an end to this interminable Depression*, they emphatically agreed, and *better days ahead*.

But if better days were to come, they did not arrive immediately for Florence. To the contrary, January was not only cold and snowless but also shadowed by personal and professional disappointment on the highest order. How tormented Florence felt when she received news of a scholarship to study at Fontainebleau, while recognizing instantly and without a shadow of a doubt that she could never, ever afford to accept such an opportunity to travel abroad now. Indeed, the life she had been living only six short months prior seemed like an elusive dream that had happened to someone else entirely. Meanwhile, February dragged on in the same dismal fashion as January, and Florence grew increasingly desperate for something, anything, to interrupt the bleak monotony.

When the knock pierced Florence's concentration—it was Sunday afternoon and she was struggling through grading a seemingly endless stack of student papers for her music theory class—she nearly tipped her chair over in surprise. “Ms. Poling—you're needed in the main office immediately,” said the young office aide when Florence regained her composure and unlatched her door. The weak light of early March slanted through Florence's window and staved off a rush of dread. What could be so urgent on a Sunday? On top of the rest of the world's problems, was she going to lose her job? Certainly, she'd been a little down these past couple of months, and perhaps she wasn't bringing the same passion and

devotion to her teaching as she had in the past, but wasn't everyone a little down these days? Could she possibly be performing poorly enough to have caught the attention of the administration?

Mr. Jackson's office was on the southwest corner of the second floor of the administration building. With its large paned windows overlooking Wayland's small courtyard, the office exuded authority and importance. Even Mr. Jackson's desk felt weighty—it was the old wooden type that seemed so enormously heavy it was hard to imagine how anyone had ever gotten the thing up the narrow stairs and through the door of Mr. Jackson's office.

"Miss Poling, do have a seat," Mr. Jackson said quietly—almost sadly, Florence thought—and she did what he asked immediately, resting her hands gently on the smooth mahogany edge of his desk. She wanted to ask him why he'd called for her, but the words got tangled up in her throat.

"Miss Poling," Mr. Jackson said again. Then, "I'm terribly sorry to tell you this. So sorry, but your father has passed away."

Florence heard Mr. Jackson's words, but the meaning felt distant, like the notes of a song she recognized but could not place. "Passed?" she said blankly. "My father?"

"I'm terribly sorry," Mr. Jackson repeated. "I'm sure it's an awful shock. But please don't worry about your duties at Wayland as you make your plans to go home. We will arrange to cover your classes for next week, of course. I'm sure you'll want to leave for Indianola as soon as possible."

How, Florence wondered, could Mr. Jackson still be talking? As if those four impossible words he had uttered—*your father passed away*—were not total nonsense. "I'm sorry for your trouble, Mr. Jackson," Florence said. "But I am sure you're mistaken. I was just home over the holidays, and my father was in *perfect* health. He even wrote last week—he was in good spirits. Chipper, in fact."

Suddenly Mr. Jackson wasn't behind his desk anymore. He'd silently slipped around it to stand right next to Florence, his warm hand heavy on her shoulder. And his mouth—that terrible mouth!—was making sounds again, it seemed. “Florence,” he was saying. “I am so sorry. But there wasn't any mistake, I promise you. Your father passed away late last night—I received a call from his wife—Sarah, I believe?—just moments ago.”

At the mention of her stepmother's name, something inside Florence pulled hard and then snapped. She wanted to crumble, she wanted to weep uncontrollably—but nothing came. Instead, she floated peacefully to the edges of herself. The rest of what Mr. Jackson said about packing and someone helping her get to the bus station sounded odd and muffled, as if she were hearing it all from deep, deep under the ocean. But somehow, despite the thick and leaden muffling, she did manage to pack, and someone did manage to drive her to the station, ultimately leaving her to wait in that night-hushed and somber place for the ten o'clock bus to Indianola.

Florence wouldn't arrive in Indianola until morning, but the thought of sleep was not just foreign, but outrageous, almost laughable. Instead of even trying to force her eyes closed, Florence stared blankly into the black of the bus window and let her thoughts roam back to her father's recent letter. She went over and over it in her mind. When the letter no longer held her wild thoughts in check, she imagined her father's face, mentally tracing over the curve of his eyes, nose, and mouth again and again and again.

When the bus lurched to a stop in Dubuque, pausing just long enough to let passengers disembark to use restrooms while the driver refilled the gas tank, Florence stood outside in the cold. As she looked into the open March sky in the middle of that terrible night, she realized there was only one person left in the whole world whom she desperately wanted in that

moment. She rushed to send a Western Union telegram containing words she never imagined herself uttering:

My father has passed away. John, if possible, please come.

I need you.

Love, Florence.

Of course, Florence knew that when her bus arrived at the Indianola station a few hours later, there would be no John waiting for her. It was impossible for him to get there so soon. In fact, when she climbed down the bus stairs and made her way into the station through the wide revolving door, there was no one at all waiting for Florence.

And when she arrived at the house that used to be her father's—Florence could no longer think of this house as home and was certain she would never think of it that way again—Sarah sat silently on the couch with a faraway look on her face that Florence recognized from her own reflection in the black bus windows. “It was too late,” Sarah said finally. “It was just too late.” Sarah told her that James had been feeling unwell all day but had refused to go to the doctor. “After dinner he complained that maybe the milk had gone bad—his stomach was upset. I headed to the kitchen to check the milk and that’s when it happened—I heard a thud and hurried back and he had fallen right out of his big chair. Just like that. Massive heart attack, they said. It was just too late.”

The two women sat in silence, each alone with her thoughts. They went on this way for what felt to Florence like eternity, though surely it was less than an hour before they were deep in the work of handing arrangements: making calls, repeating details, answering questions, accepting condolences. *No, no one could have known. The service will be Thursday afternoon. Yes, at First United Methodist. Thank you. God bless you, too.*

On Wednesday, John finally arrived with wide open arms. Florence collapsed into him on the front porch. Suddenly, the full, crushing weight of the past three days hit her with a violent force she had not expected. Her shoulders collapsed against John's sturdy chest, and she began to sob silently against him. That night, Ina and the girls arrived, too, and Florence was relieved to finally have her sister's company in what she could now think of only as Sarah's house. Florence and Ina stayed up washing the girls' hair and plaiting it back—all the while trading stories about their childhood in the warm, humid air of the bathroom.

The service the next day was beautiful and, Florence thought, worthy of her wonderful father. Friends and family packed the church. It made Florence proud to observe the degree to which her father had been a loved and respected member of the community. Clearly, he had touched the lives of many. And although it was a sad occasion, Florence was comforted to be surrounded by her siblings. She wasn't close to them—except Ina—but they were, after all, family. At times like this, that had to mean something. She was comforted too—far more than she had expected to be—by John, whose steady presence over the past year and a half had come, in its own way, to feel deep and true, as well.

CHAPTER 13

In the next weeks and months and, indeed, for much of that first year after her father's death, Florence struggled with limbs that felt heavy and a heart untethered. She found her students distracted and increasingly difficult to motivate. Thankfully, Chautauqua was still performing, but crowds were dwindling and, predictably, her pay was cut as the never-ending economic depression pressed on. John, too, was making less money than ever at Northern States Power. It seemed like the economy had a death grip on everything. The whole country was treading water, just barely surviving. The only bright spots for Florence were her weekly letter exchange with John and the two days they spent hidden away together over Thanksgiving break.

Before Florence knew it, Christmas was coming again. How dreadful. "I've never been less excited for a break," Florence complained to Marj in the teacher's lounge between periods as a sharp snow pelted against the wide windows. "I almost wish we could teach straight through the holidays," she continued. "At least then there would be petty problems to distract me from the abysmal lack of cheer."

"Oh, sweetie," Marj said. "I'm so sorry. I know it must be hard, your first holiday without your dad."

"Oh, it's got *nothing* to do with my father," Florence said. "I'm talking about the utterly dismal state of the economy. Why even bother with Christmas when everyone's broke and exhausted?" Florence didn't care one bit for sympathy. In fact, she couldn't stand it. But truth be told, she *did* miss her father terribly. And she was heartbroken at the thought of going home when he wasn't there. Where even was home now? Surely not

Wayland Academy. And yet, it wasn't Indianola or Sarah's house, either. She felt the most at home with John, but he was hundreds of miles away.

"No matter," Florence said as she pulled her thoughts back from the darkness of her lack of a real home, her loss of her father, and how alone she felt. She busied herself then with the stack of papers she'd collected from her mailbox, which, to her relief and joy, included a letter from John:

Florence my love,

I put in my request to my supervisor this morning—I will come to Beaver Dam for the holiday. I can't stand the thought of you being alone, and I miss you more than I can bear. I'll see you in just a few short weeks.

Truly, John

P.S. I have a big surprise for you!

Florence held John's letter close to her chest for a moment and breathed deep. She would be home—if there was such a thing—for the holidays, after all.

Snow fell lazily the way it sometimes does in early winter—not the forceful fluffy snowflakes of a proper storm, just quiet little wisps of white floating down. Florence would have preferred an all-out, no-holds-barred, stop-the-world blizzard. But, alas, it was not to be. Meanwhile, she sat alone in her silent classroom, enveloped by the distinct hush of a nearly empty campus. With Christmas only two days away, almost every student and teacher had already left. But Florence was waiting for John, who had frustratingly refused to give her his bus arrival information. He couldn't tell her, he said, on account of something or other to do with his "big

surprise.” At this point, Florence didn’t give two cents about a surprise, big, little, or otherwise. She was bored of waiting and wanted, at the very minimum, to know how long the waiting would continue.

Outside, the chapel bell rang clear through the thin, cold air, and Florence counted the chimes even though she already knew it was eleven o’clock. The morning was ticking by at the pace of an ancient turtle with at least one missing leg. When the chimes stopped, a car approached with a low rumble. Two quick, sharp honks followed. Florence peered out her window to see who might be getting picked up now. Whoever it was, she was envious, because down on the street sat an elegant sedan with shiny black paint. *Flashy*, Florence thought. Then the driver’s door swung open, and out stepped, of all people, John Deters—his face plastered with that sideways smile. *John!* Florence could hardly believe her eyes. That old broken-turtle of the morning tore into a breathless sprint as Florence took the stairs two and even three at a time. It felt like mere seconds before she was out the front door and wrapped in John’s arms.

“Florence, my love, I can’t believe I am finally seeing you!” he said. “You are more beautiful than ever.” He spoke low and close to Florence’s ear as they embraced.

“Thank you for coming, John. I can’t even begin to tell you how happy I am to be with you.” Florence pressed her face into John’s chest to hide the tears that had, to her shock, welled up in her eyes. She pushed back from him to regain herself. “Give me just a moment,” she said. “I just need to grab my bag!”

“Yes, but hurry, Flo,” John said. “We have people to see and places to go! Not a moment to spare.” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and a playful push.

Florence spun around suddenly and faced him again. “But where are we going?” John couldn’t stay at Wayland, because men weren’t allowed

in the women's dormitories, even on a break. But they hadn't made any other arrangements.

"I have no idea!" John said. Then he threw his head back in a loud laugh that erupted straight from the center of himself. "Let's just hit the road, anyway. It doesn't matter where we go, so long as we're together."

The Buick is a beauty, John," Florence purred from her perch on the buttery leather of the passenger seat. "I still can't believe this car is yours!" She rested her face casually on her palm as she looked across at John. She admired the skillful, confident way he navigated the snowy roads. Finally, she asked the question she'd been burning to ask since the moment she looked out the window at Wayland and saw this sedan. "How on earth," she said, "did you afford such a classy car?"

"Well," John said, and Florence could tell immediately based on his enthusiastic inhale that he'd been waiting for her to ask exactly this. "I have been saving for over a year now. Putting away any extra I could manage. Because I knew as soon as I started to fall in love with you that I would need a car. How else would I be able to come see you whenever I wanted?" John reached his hand behind Florence's head and pulled her toward him to kiss her forehead. "But of course, I couldn't buy just any car, I mean—I needed something that fit with my image, you know. I thought it might take forever to find something decent. But then, a few weeks back, my buddy told me about this guy who was in a real hard way. Lost a lot of money in the bank crash, right after he'd laid out a small fortune for this sleek new Buick Series 40. Thing is, he was hard up, like I said, so willing to sell it for nearly nothing since he needed cash so bad. I thought to myself, *that's my car!* And now, it is."

As Florence listened to John's careful recounting, she was lulled by his familiar, charming speech patterns and the gentle rocking of the car on the

road. The snow was getting heavier outside, but Florence was warm and safe and, for the first time in what felt like forever, very, very happy.

It was already midafternoon by the time Florence and John made it to Milwaukee, the destination they'd both agreed made sense. They had to stop at three different hotels before finding somewhere affordable with a vacancy. After all, they would be staying through New Year's, a whole eight nights all to themselves!

"Name, please," said the middle-aged woman behind the counter as she reached for the glasses that hung on a beaded chain around her neck. She flipped open a ledger and prepared to write down their information.

"Mr. and Mrs. Deters," John replied, then spelled out, one slow letter at a time, "D-e-t-e-r-s." Florence was relieved when the woman simply handed them their estimated bill and keys, without asking for a marriage license. But then again, why should she have asked? They looked exactly like a married couple—an exceptionally stylish one, that is. The charade, however, amused Florence. While she felt totally natural and at ease being with John in this way, whether or not they were married, no respectable hotel would have booked them a room together if they didn't pretend.

Florence followed John to the stairs on the edge of the lobby, then up to their room. He turned the key and held the door open. "Mrs. Deters," he said, gesturing her through the door with a wicked smile.

"Oh, hush," Florence scolded him playfully—just as soon as they were safely behind closed doors, that is. John wrapped both arms around Florence's waist and lifted her feet straight up off the floor. Florence shrieked in genuine surprise as John spun her in several circles, building momentum before launching them both onto the bed in a fit of shared laughter—the kind where your ribs hurt and you can barely catch your breath. Their bodies were a tangle of warmth and excitement, and Florence felt elated.

“Florence Poling,” John said, pressing her back gently into the bed and climbing on top of her so that he could pin her arms to her sides the way boys do with each other on the playground. He brought his face close to hers, his lips just barely brushing against hers as he said, “Just you wait—someday, I’ll really make you mine.” With that, John kissed Florence like he’d never kissed her before. Florence let herself melt—the heat of his skin, the greediness of his hands against her breasts and hips and between her thighs. Florence trusted John completely, but she was glad to see he had come prepared with protection. While she didn’t believe for a minute that sex before marriage was a sin, the notion of becoming pregnant—and of having a child out of wedlock—was completely out of the question. Thanks to John’s foresight, she didn’t have to stop and worry about that.

And making love with John was different than it had been with either Charles or Ivan. With John, sex was exciting and new but also a comfort—as if their bodies were made to fit together. Something more came over Florence, too, something deep beneath the sublime physical pleasure of John’s skin on hers, the fire of his heat inside her. It was something tender and real that pulsed between them in the space of their shared touch.

Florence and John spent their days walking the shores of Lake Michigan—huddled together against the bitter wind off the water—or sharing buttered popcorn in the dark warmth of a hushed movie theater, or simply entangled in their shared bed exploring each other’s bodies. Then one morning, when John slipped into the shower after making love, Florence pulled her passport out of her purse and opened it to the cover page, where her date of birth was recorded: September 12, 1901. She carried the passport to the desk in the corner of the room where John had folded his clean clothes over the back of a chair. There, in the middle of that expanse of empty desk, Florence set the small red booklet, beckoning. *There*, she thought. *Let him find out my age once and for all.* She knew

John must be curious about their age difference, even though he'd never asked her directly.

Sure enough, in the corner of the mirror as she brushed her teeth five minutes later, Florence watched as John, white towel wrapped around his waist, lifted the passport and flipped it open. As he examined the booklet, he raised his eyebrows and lifted his shoulders slightly, as if thinking, *"Hmm, seven years older, not that bad."*

Before either of them felt ready, New Year's Eve was upon them. Florence had been in poor spirits all day. She wasn't looking forward to returning to Wayland, and she felt especially foul after John explained that realistically he wouldn't be able to visit her again until March. Given all this, she wasn't feeling in the least bit festive, but John insisted on one last celebratory night out for a grand farewell dinner.

John had scrambled to find the perfect restaurant for the occasion, too—the place was dazzling, with a beautiful bay of windows overlooking the oceanic waters of Lake Michigan and flickering votive candles in crystal holders gracing every table. If Florence had ever worried about the trace of faint lines on her forehead or around the corners of her eyes—lines she'd seen for herself in the harsh light of day in her compact mirror—she was certain those lines were softened if not erased entirely by the sparkling light of this romantic setting. In fact, John could barely take his eyes off her long enough to guide forkfuls of pork chop into his mouth. He looked mesmerized, Florence thought happily. It lifted her spirits to see him so completely under her spell. Yet, when John grabbed her hands across the table and squeezed them before taking a deep breath, Florence braced herself instinctively. "Florence," John said on an exhale, his voice urgent. "I love you, and I can't stand not knowing whether I'll live the rest of my life with you or not. Please, won't you consider marrying me? If you do, I promise to you the most beautiful future."

Of all the times men had begged her to be with them forever, Florence felt the most moved by this petition of John's. She truly did love him more than she had loved anyone before. But still ... it just wasn't right. She held John's hands tightly in her own and looked steadily into his eyes. "John," she said. "You know I love you. I truly do. But with all that is going on in this world, I can't begin to imagine next year, much less some distant, mystical future together. Please, let's just enjoy the night we have before us."

CHAPTER 14

Things are even worse than they were before break,” Marj said to Florence. The two women sat shoulder to shoulder in Florence’s room after dinner. “I can barely get students to answer simple questions in class,” Marj continued. “It’s like their bodies are here at Wayland, but their minds are somewhere else entirely.”

“Can you blame them?” Florence asked, her tone harsher than intended. “I just mean—I am having a hard time myself. I can’t imagine being young in a moment like this. They have no control over anything that is happening, but they are suffering these dire consequences all the same.”

“I know, I can’t imagine either,” Marj agreed. “But here’s the thing. This is hard on us too, as teachers. How are we supposed to inspire a generation that’s so completely disconnected from hope? So hopelessly distracted and numb?”

This gave Florence an idea. The students needed something to connect with, something to bring them closer to hope. Suddenly, all Florence could think of was *Meditation* from the Thais opera she’d seen in France, and the enormous relief she had felt while weeping between its crescendos. She got busy right away—she would plan a show! *The Wayland Follies*, she called it. It would be a musical program with not only the choir, but *all* the students and teachers. Something to bring the whole community together. Something to inspire them all and provide a shared purpose. Why had she not thought of this sooner?

In no time, Florence became wholly consumed by the *Follies* project. And the more she planned and prepared, the more elaborate the program

became. There would be several singing groups with solos, duets, and trios. There would be whole chorus numbers. There would be “Ziegfeld Girls” in fancy costumes dancing elegantly across the stage in the background. Florence even agreed to let a student do a five-minute comedy sketch! Why not? This performance would be epic, and the whole point was to give the students something to focus on, to work toward, and to be excited about. Within a few short weeks, it became unequivocally clear that Florence’s plan was working. Students were coming early and staying late after rehearsals. Staff and students were collaborating on making set decorations, costumes, and brightly colored posters to hang all over town. The overall mood on campus was transforming one rehearsal at a time, and Florence felt a jolt of energy every time she passed one of the flyers:

The Wayland Follies!

A free variety show hosted by Wayland Academy

7:00 P.M., Wednesday, Thursday and Friday

March 9, 10, and 11

Come one come all!

And come they did! The auditorium was packed—standing room only for all three shows. The crowd and the room were electric with joy and energy and love. Florence had been hesitant to perform herself—she wanted it to be about the students and the community—but everyone had insisted that she sing, so finally she agreed, mostly because she had found the perfect song to provide the emotional catalyst she was hoping for. As the last act of the night, Florence took the stage. Before she sang, though, she spoke to the students and the whole crowd, surprised at the emotion in her voice as she began: “Everyone here is facing some sort of pain, fear, or loss,” she said. “This has been an incredibly challenging time—for me as well.” Heat rose in cheeks as she thought of her father, realizing this was

the first time she would be performing without him occupying his usual seat in the center of the third row. She swallowed hard. “But,” she said, “through it all, we’ve had each other. We *have* each other. We are a community here. And the dedication and passion and strength that each of you have shown in preparing this show, well, all I can say is I am honored to perform alongside you. Tonight, I will be singing ‘I Love Life’ by Cassel and Mana-Zucca. Thank you.” Florence inhaled and began, and her voice clear and strong as ever as it vibrated against the walls and filled the entire performance hall with its beauty: *I love life and I want to live and drink of life’s fullness. Take all it can give. I love life, every moment must count. To glory in its sunshine and revel in its fount. I love life, I want to live.* Florence felt the energy in the room building with every line. *I love life, it holds me in its sway, my heart bears its music, a melody gladsome and gay. I love life. I’ll have none of worldly strife. Oh, but to live, for to love. I love life. I want to live. I love life.*

As she held the last note of the song, Florence’s eyes welled again with tears and her voice trembled under her own emotion. But she held the note strong in spite of it all, and when she finally finished, the room fell into an awe-filled silence. Then, the audience burst out of their seats and began clapping and shouting in uproarious applause. Many openly cried, wrapping their arms around one another. Florence held her arms out to either side, beckoning the students to join her on stage to take a bow. The audience continued to cheer for at least five minutes, the whole room filled with the sound of voices joined in joyous celebration.

In that moment, standing on stage in front of a community audience at a free show of high school students, Florence felt prouder than she ever had before. She had *made* this. She had made a place where music could touch people’s lives, could change them even if just for one night, could offer them solace and relief. She was giddy with excitement as the students finally filed offstage to join their families and friends in the audience. And

she was giddy because she had invited John, and she could see him there, waiting for her in the shadows. Soon they'd be in his beautiful black Buick, speeding down the highway, a whole weekend alone stretching out before them. Florence could hardly wait.

Luckily, she didn't have to wait long, because the moment the auditorium began to empty, she rushed to grab the getaway bag she had already stowed in the dressing room, then hurried to meet John at his car. Oh, how she loved that stylish car! And as they pulled out of Beaver Dam, something about the warmth of the car and the cold night and John's confident assurance behind the wheel reminded Florence of her father. She was grateful to have the memory of her father with her in this moment. She felt loved and safe, and before she even realized what was happening, the exhaustion of the last several weeks of rehearsal and the epic performance overcame her as her chin fell toward her chest and her breathing settled into the steady rhythm of a deep, healing sleep.

She woke to John's hand gently shaking her shoulder. They were already in Milwaukee. Florence had slept through the entire drive. She simply had not realized how bone tired she'd been. John took care of their bags and checked them into the hotel. Once John had gotten their room key, Florence followed him up the stairs and was thoroughly delighted to discover that he'd reserved the very same room they'd stayed in over New Year's—how wonderful!

As soon as the door clicked shut behind them, Florence felt her body swell with energy even though it was nearly midnight. True, she'd had that delicious sleep in the car. But another truth was this: Florence hadn't fully realized just how terribly much she'd missed John. And now that they were finally alone again, she couldn't resist his magnetic pull a moment longer. Florence wrapped her arms around John's shoulders, feeling his muscles taut and alive under her embrace. She kissed his neck, pressed her hips against him, reveled in his body, so full of desire that it was electric. In one

smooth motion John tugged his shirt over his head and pulled Florence onto the bed. She ran her hands over his chest, feeling—and loving—the way he shivered under her touch. Florence pressed her lips into the space between John’s shoulder and neck, buried herself in the smell of him. He pulled her into him, a low moan escaping his lips as the heat and friction built. They were entirely lost in each other—it didn’t matter that the night was wearing on outside their window or that neither of them had eaten in hours—all that mattered was their bodies merging into one.

They spent most of the following day in much the same manner, never straying too far from their room. Oh, certainly they enjoyed a leisurely room-service breakfast and even took a short stroll on the grounds in the afternoon sun, but otherwise they were perfectly content in their warm bed, tangled in white linens and wrapped hungrily in each other’s arms. Sunday, which arrived too soon, came as a rude awakening—Florence didn’t want their time together to end. It surprised her, really, the way each time they were together, she felt her connection to John deepening. When they made love, everything was heightened and more real than the so-called real world. But that lesser real world was beckoning, and it would not wait, as they both needed to get back to work.

“I don’t know when I’ll see you next, my dearest Florence,” John said glumly. They were parked outside the teacher’s dorm at Wayland, and John took Florence’s hands in his own as he spoke. “But I promise you that I’ll come as soon as I can afford to. In the meantime, remember that I love you more every day.”

Florence swallowed hard. Sometimes, like now, John felt like the one good thing in her life. The only respite she had from the terribleness of the world around her. She didn’t want to let him go.

CHAPTER 15

My goodness, Marj, how can you possibly stand the smell of that?" Florence brought her hand over her mouth. "It's repugnant."

"It's just toast! With a bit of creamed codfish. Florence, you're always so dramatic. You've eaten the same thing yourself a hundred times." Marj was at her desk, busy preparing the day's lessons as she ate.

"I can't imagine—" Florence gagged, then doubled over a trash can. Now she had her friend's full attention as Marj leapt up from her desk to help Florence steady herself. "Oh, oh, oh!" Marj said. "Florence, you need to breathe—deep breath through your nose, Florence, like this." Marj inhaled deeply through her own nostrils, as if by doing so she could steady her miserable friend, who was still folded over, her body heaving. "Florence," Marj said with real concern. "Are you okay? Heavens!"

When Florence was finally able to stand, she was overcome by dizziness from having bent over for so long. She grasped the edge of her desk to steady herself. "I don't believe I am okay, Marj," Florence said. The color had drained completely from her face, leaving her skin paper white and nearly translucent. "Excuse me, now—I need to clean myself up." Once she had steadied herself sufficiently, Florence made her way to the teacher's lounge bathroom where she carefully rinsed her mouth and washed her face. She was distracted by how dreadful she felt, but she nonetheless got herself freshened up enough to resume the day's tasks. Indeed, she busied herself with her classes and felt, by the time she turned in that evening, that perhaps it had all been a passing fluke. But on Saturday morning, it happened again. By Sunday, she couldn't block out the terrible, nagging thought any longer: *could she possibly be pregnant?*

Surely John had used protection—hadn't he? He always did. But she couldn't shake this distracting worry over that first night in Milwaukee. No matter how hard she tried to retrace that frantic evening in her mind's eye, she just couldn't picture John taking out a condom or putting one on. Then again, it had all happened so quickly—she could easily have forgotten. After all, John was graceful, skillful, at ease as a lover. Never clumsy. It's possible he'd done it all so smoothly there'd been nothing, really, for Florence to notice in the moment. But then there was the undeniable fact that her period was late—something that simply never happened. And here she was feeling exhausted, nauseated, and dizzy—the very things women always talked about during the first weeks of pregnancy.

Florence decided to write to John immediately. When he received her letter—four days after she dropped it at the post office—John drove down to Beaver Dam the very next day. So, there they sat on a Saturday morning, just six short weeks after their leisurely breakfast and day in bed—sharing another breakfast. Only this time Florence could barely stomach a slice of bread. John sat across the booth from her, worry creasing his brow. In a hushed voice he begged, “Florence, I love you. I know you don't think you're ready, but under the circumstances, will you marry me? I've wanted to marry you for years. I've asked you before! If this is possibly true, we should do it now.”

Florence paused. Her whole world was shifting beneath her feet, swallowing her dreams and the future she'd always envisioned for herself. At the same time, she knew what John was saying made sense, was the only thing that made sense. “I wish this had not happened,” she said slowly, “but maybe it was meant to be. Maybe I needed this to commit to a lifetime with you. I trust this happened for a reason. And I love you and trust you. I will marry you.”

The next days and weeks brought a dizzying blur of activity: a wedding on Sunday afternoon at St. Paul Methodist with Reverend Johansen and a

single couple (strangers to both John and Florence) as witnesses. Reading the words *my precious wife* in John's messy scrawl for (which made her feel both pleased and constricted). A heartbreaking letter from Chautauqua saying they would be canceling all operations in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa for the summer of 1932. A plan made with John to move to Hastings over the summer. The discovery that she could pack her entire room—everything she owned in the whole world—into just a few trunks and boxes.

Florence was married to John, and she was growing a baby inside of her—yet she felt perhaps more alone than she had ever felt before. In part, this was because she had decided not to tell anyone about the marriage or the baby. Well, except her stepmother Sarah, that is, whom she did reluctantly write with news of the wedding. Out of obligation, she added that she was expecting a baby in mid-December. On the one hand, Florence didn't want Sarah to be surprised or to end up hearing this important news later, from a stranger. But Florence also made sure to tell Sarah that at Wayland, she would remain Florence Poling, not Florence Deters, in case Sarah wished to return her letter. She certainly didn't want to deal with people's questions, and why should she? After all, she would only be at the school a few more weeks before summer break, at which time she would join John in Hastings. She had no intention of resigning just yet, either—that could come in due time. Florence didn't like discussing her personal life even under the best of circumstances, and this was certainly *not* the best of circumstances.

On May 21, Florence received a reply from Sarah, addressed, as she had instructed, to “Ms. Poling.” From inside the envelope, Florence extracted thick, creamy sheet of piece of paper engraved with the following announcement:

Mrs. James L. Poling
Announces the marriage of her daughter
Florence Poling
to
Mr. John L. Deters
On Sunday, March the twenty-seventh
Nineteen hundred and thirty-two
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Florence could barely believe her eyes. Her pulse thrummed in her ears as her hands began shaking with anger. Not only had Sarah taken it upon herself to announce Florence's marriage—how dare she, without so much as asking Florence first!—but she had the unbelievable nerve to have changed the date of marriage to March 27 instead of May 15. Florence knew that Sarah had done this to avoid any suspicions around when her child would be born in relation to when she had married John. Sarah wanted a clear and unequivocal nine months of pure propriety. But Florence found this lie insulting and hurtful, and it only made her feel that much more alone. She couldn't wait for the semester to end so she could go to John in Hastings and get on with her new life, for better or worse.

The first weekend in June, Florence sat alone in her dorm room, which was already entirely packed despite the fact that she still had two more weeks on campus before the apartment she and John had rented in Hastings would be ready. The smell of lilacs and honeysuckle from the bushes in the courtyard wafted through the open window. Florence was finally starting to feel a bit better—less nauseated, less dizzy, more able to keep food down—and she was practicing a new recital piece, one she loved, when a knock came on her door. She was wanted in the main office—an urgent call, the aide said. Florence couldn't help but be thrown back to the

last time she'd been summoned to the office with such urgency—the dark news of her father's passing. It can't be anything like that again, Florence told herself. Not every urgent call is a tragedy! But when she pressed the phone to her ear, John's tear-choked voice told her what it was before he even formed the words. His father—only fifty-seven years old—had unexpectedly passed the night before. "The funeral is in Eitzen," John said. "Won't you please come, Florence? I don't know how to face this without you." John's voice cracked even more deeply than before.

Florence agreed instantly. "All my things are packed," she told him. "And they will fit easily in the Buick. We can go straight from Eitzen to Hastings after we have spent time with your family."

The air in John's car was heavy—and Florence knew all too well the pain and shock he must be feeling. Although she didn't know his father, Florence felt John's hurt as her own. But she couldn't help also feeling relieved and excited to be pulling away from Wayland Academy for the very last time. She was officially starting her next chapter. And she would be meeting John's family for the first time.

"But you mustn't take it to heart if they are cool toward you," John said. He was using the 185-mile drive to prepare Florence for the reception she might soon encounter. "You know, they weren't full of congratulations when I announced our wedding. But you see, this is just the way they are. It's not personal. It's about expectations—if you don't do everything the way they expect you to, they get upset. But I know once they get to know you, they will be just as happy as I am."

Despite John's concerns, his mother Anna threw the door open with arms wide to welcome them when they arrived at her house at nine that evening. She embraced John in a warm hug, then turned to Florence and hugged her, too. Anna's house was overflowing with John's siblings and relatives—and even more relatives were traveling from across the state.

The funeral service wouldn't be until Thursday afternoon to allow time for these travelers to arrive. And although the occasion was solemn and sad, Florence felt, over the next few days, moments of deep connection and joy as she bonded with John's family and heard the many colorful and endearing stories about John's father, William—a beautiful name, Florence thought.

On Thursday afternoon, St. Luke's United Church of Christ was packed wall to wall in celebration of William's life. It was a beautiful service, and just as she had at her own father's funeral, Florence found herself profoundly moved by the love and respect of an entire community for a life well lived. As the service concluded, Florence wept for John and for his mother Anna and for her own father and for herself. And she wept for the life she felt streaming toward her, and the old life that she felt slipping ever more quickly through her fingers.

CHAPTER 16

The apartment John had rented for them in Hastings was small, but much bigger than either of the rooms they had been living in as single adults. It had a hallway kitchen, with two wooden chairs and a yellow linoleum table with metal edges and a crease down the middle. Plus, a small area, not unlike a living room, that fit a two-person couch and an end table. On the day they moved in, John pushed the couch and table from the center of the wall into the corner. “There,” he announced. “That ought to be enough room for a bassinet.” The apartment also had a full private bathroom—such luxury!—and the price was right at only thirty-five dollars a month.

During her first week in Hastings, Florence took up walking. She had always loved June in southern Minnesota—she’d been to many towns nearby on tour with Chautauqua. She loved the blueness of the sky and bright green canopies overhead. She loved the feeling of her body moving through space and time, her strong legs carrying her forward—sometimes for hours at a time—because it reminded her of who she was. When Florence walked, she wasn’t just the pregnant wife strolling aimlessly on the streets of a small town. She was also the girl who became an opera star with one of the most successful American arts movements of the entire century. She was the girl on a bicycle in the French countryside. She was the girl dancing in the alleyways of New York City. And she undeniably enjoyed walking because she had never in all her life had this much free time. In fact, by mid-afternoon, she sometimes felt that if she didn’t get up and *do* something, she would simply have to scream. And so, she walked.

It was during one of her long walks that Florence stumbled upon a local grade school—a charming two-story brick building with big white windows. She stood across the street and watched the children running out onto the playground. She placed her hand on her stomach—a gesture that was becoming more habitual than she liked. The truth was, Florence missed her students at Wayland. She missed teaching. And she missed having enough money to buy groceries reliably. Unemployment didn't suit her one bit. While Florence didn't particularly mind the tiny, cramped apartment with its chipped paint or scuffed wood floors—she had never been fussy like that—she did mind being bored and broke. And perhaps that is why, before the thought had even fully crystallized in her mind—she found herself marching across the street, through the school's wide double doors, and down the polished hallway to the central office. “I'd like to speak with the music director,” Florence told the secretary.

When the music director appeared in the office several minutes later, he looked fresh out of high school, with his curly red hair and acne-splattered forehead and chin. Florence was shocked at his seeming youth, but maintained her composure easily, something years of performing had taught her to do almost without fail. “I need a room and a piano,” Florence explained after introducing herself, her background, and her current predicament. What she wanted was to teach private lessons using the school as her studio. And why not? It would not only meet Florence's need for a space to teach—it would also be a valuable service to the students.

“I see, yes,” the director said. He nodded so vigorously that Florence almost laughed out loud. “Let me talk to our principal and see what we can do,” he said. “Why don't you come back tomorrow afternoon?”

When the school presented its offer—to rent Florence a room six afternoons a week for six dollars a month, she agreed on the spot. She was sure she could find enough students to cover the cost of rent—after all, not a single music teacher in a 100-mile radius had teaching credentials like hers.

That night over dinner, Florence explained her plan to John. “I’ll charge a dollar for an hour-long lesson,” she said. “That means if my schedule fills, well, the math isn’t complicated. It’s a lot of money, John.”

John thought for a moment and took a few more bites of his baked potato before speaking. When he did respond, he grinned in a way Florence couldn’t fully interpret. “That sounds awfully good on paper,” John said, “but a dollar is a whole lot for most people in this town, Flo.”

“I know, I know—but listen, if I am going to do this, I have to charge enough to make a profit. Even at a dollar an hour I’ll need at least ten students to cover rent and other costs, while still leaving income for us. Enough to make it worthwhile, that is. I’ve got these posters made up—” and with that, Florence slid a poster across the table:

MUSIC LESSONS STARTING JULY 1

Teacher: Florence Deters, graduate of Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. Seven years’ experience teaching music at Wayland Academy in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. Master’s degree from Chicago Musical College in music execution. Extensive opera training in Europe.

Price: Half hour lesson - \$0.50 - One-hour lesson \$1.00

Time: 3:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. Mondays - Friday

10:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. Saturdays

Location: Hastings Elementary school - room 101

“I’ll start handing these out tomorrow,” Florence said, her excitement gathering even more steam. “I have two weeks to recruit.” Florence’s cheeks were flushed, both due to the summer heat in their small apartment and her delight over finally having something meaningful to pursue.

“I know there’s no stopping you when you put your mind to something,” John said. He pushed his empty plate toward the centerline of the yellow table. “And I wouldn’t ever fool myself to even try. But please

promise me you'll be careful out in this heat. Make sure to drink water and rest. Remember, Flo, it's not just yourself you have to worry about now."

As if Florence could ever forget! She was still slightly nauseated and a bit dizzy most mornings. But these inconveniences didn't slow her down. She spent the next two weeks putting posters in every store, library, and restaurant within walking distance of the apartment and Hastings Elementary. She stapled posters to phone poles. She handed them to strangers on the street. She knew if she could just get enough students started, word of mouth would take care of the rest. And sure enough, one student at a time, Florence's vision unfolded exactly as she had planned. In fact, by the middle of July, she not only had ten regular students, but she was also fielding inquiries from others every day. In this way, she soon filled almost all her available hours.

One afternoon, one of the mothers brought a friend with her to pick up her daughter from her lesson with Florence. "If you have a moment," the woman said to Florence, "my dear friend Abigail would love to talk with you about her daughter Janet."

"Of course, of course," Florence said, and gestured Abigail into her small practice room. "My daughter, Janet," Abigail began, and her voice was soft and round, just like her with her plump arms and round cheeks. She wore her hair in two long, thick braids. "Janet's been singin' ever since she was just a lil' thing. Such a beautiful voice. But we couldn't ever afford to get her professional training, still can't for that matter." With this, Abigail paused and drew in a sharp, long breath. "Which is what I was hopin' to ask you about. We're chicken farmers and, in this economy, extra cash isn't something we got laying around. But eggs, well, those we got plenty of. If you'd accept it, I could spare a half dozen eggs for a half-hour lesson."

Florence felt the sting of tears in her eyes—remembering her own first lessons when her family had moved to Indianola. How proud her father had been to be able to afford to get her training. “Of course,” Florence said, her voice matter of fact and devoid of emotion or judgment. “Janet can start in a one-hour lesson slot next Saturday morning at 10:30.”

“Oh, my heavens, you don’t know what this will mean to Janet,” Abigail said. “You don’t know what it means to me, to all of us. We only want what’s best for her—and it’s so hard in these times to feel like you’re doin’ right by them.” Abigail reminded Florence of everything a mother should be. She wondered for a moment if something about pregnancy or childbirth or breastfeeding could naturally bring about this kind of motherliness. Was there some part of the whole process that broke women down until they were, finally, fully prepared to put their own needs last? But, then again, Florence had been mothered by Elizabeth, so she knew full well that this was not true.

Not even close.

One Friday in late August when the sun was sinking ever lower in the sky, Florence received a letter from Wayland Academy addressed to Ms. Poling. In a curt and formal tone, it explained that due to low enrollment the Academy would be closing, and not just for the school year ahead, but indefinitely. All staff and teachers would be let go. They could not afford to stay open. Florence held the letter in her hands for a moment at her tiny kitchen table. Although she herself had no plans to return to Wayland, she felt a knot rise in her throat as she read and re-read the letter. The place that had been a second home to her for nearly a decade was gone in the blink of an eye.

When one door closes, she thought to herself.

That night she and John shared a simple meal of corned beef hash and apple salad. After the dishes were washed, dried, and stacked neatly in

the cupboard, they lay in bed together reading, as they often did in the evenings. John placed his hand on Florence's stomach, which had begun to grow swollen and taut.

"You know," John said, "I won't care either way, but just imagine if it is a little girl. Just imagine if she got your hair and eyes. My god, Florence, imagine if she got your beauty! But she could do with a bit of my charisma," he added with a full-faced grin, which Florence playfully ignored. John went on to imagine every possible combination of features and personalities for their future child. Florence kept on reading as John continued his game. Occasionally she reached over to run a hand through his hair. From time to time, she murmured an "mmm-hmm" to please him. They were both working harder than they ever had before. John was up and out before sunrise every morning and Florence had filled all of her available teaching hours. She was now earning \$12 a week in profit—a sum that was at times even more than John made with his sales commissions! Plus, there were the eggs from Janet's mom. Certainly, they were both exhausted, but they were making ends meet and then some. And they were happy to have each other. Soon enough, Florence thought, they would meet their new baby and be a true family. More than she could have imagined on that distant morning at Wayland, crouched over the wastebasket in agony, Florence felt *almost* ready.

CHAPTER 17

Full was a steady stream of teaching and selling and teaching and selling and teaching and selling. The days, meanwhile, grew shorter and colder and shorter and colder until one Monday afternoon halfway through December Florence grasped the edge of the sink where she had been standing washing dishes after supper. “John,” she called across the apartment, “I think this baby is going to come very soon.” She gripped the sink more firmly. “I am feeling this funny feeling, like tightening all over. I think that must be what they call contractions.”

“Are you sure?!” John ran the ten feet from the living room to the kitchen. “I can’t believe this might really be it,” he said. “What do we do?”

“Nothing yet,” Florence said. She projected a collected confidence, although inwardly she felt a rush of nerves. “We should wait until they are closer together, the contractions.”

That night, neither of them slept. Not John. Not Florence. Not their soon-to-be-born baby. As they lay awake in the still-dark morning, Florence finally announced calmly, “Okay, John, let’s go. The contractions are happening about five to six minutes apart. And they hurt.”

They grabbed the bag Florence had prepared for the hospital and rushed straight to St. John’s in St. Paul, where Florence was whisked away to room 305 and told to change into a hospital robe for labor. John was sent to the hospital cafeteria to wait. Florence had packed him a sandwich, but when he was finally allowed into her room, he told her he hadn’t been able to take a single bite. He sat by Florence’s bedside and held her hand, and every time a contraction came over her, Florence pressed her hand down hard into John’s. “I pray for you and our child to get through this

ordeal unharmed,” he whispered. “And I pray for it to be over soon.” When the nurse said it was time for Florence to be wheeled to the delivery room, John looked unbelievably relieved. At 5:16 that night, a nurse came into the waiting room to find John and said, “Mr. Deters, you are now the proud father of a healthy baby boy.”

Florence and John named their son Robert Louis Deters. Robert, because they both loved this name, and he could go by Bobbie for short. Louis, in memory of Florence’s beloved father, for Louis was his middle name. In the hospital bed that night Florence held Bobbie—tiny and pink and perfect—and John held Florence, his arm draped over her and his head resting on her shoulder. They both spoke to Bobbie in soft whispers. They told him how happy they were to finally meet him. They told him how perfect he was. They told him how many people were waiting to meet him and to love him.

Neither Florence nor John could afford to take any time off work, so Florence rescheduled three days’ worth of lessons while she was in the hospital and by Friday afternoon was back with students in the practice room at Hastings Elementary. Bobbie was there, too—wrapped in a blanket and set in a basket next to Florence’s piano. He slept peacefully through her lessons, only occasionally squawking to get picked up or cooing happily to the sound of the piano. Florence’s students didn’t mind one bit about having a darling new baby at their lessons—to the contrary, they were thrilled.

As for John, he couldn’t have been a prouder father. He spent the entire week leading up to the holidays telling each and every one of his clients about his new boy. “He’s perfect, ten fingers and toes just like he should have,” he’d say. Or, “He’s got a grip on him already—gonna have to get him in little league once he’s big enough!” More than anything, John couldn’t wait to take Bobbie home to meet his family at Christmas.

“My mother will be so overjoyed,” he told Florence. “Her first grandson! And she’s been grieving so hard since Dad died. This is going to be her Christmas miracle.” Early Saturday morning they packed the car and hit the road toward what became the most joyous Christmas any of them had celebrated in years. Bobbie was passed from lap to lap. He was cradled and rocked and kissed by his grandma Anna, who could barely let him go to give Great Aunt Ruth a turn, let alone Uncle Martin. Bobbie was doted on and adored, his every squirm and smile the cause for laughter and applause.

Of course, no one bought gifts that year, but there were several knit mittens and hats and blankets for little Bobbie. And everyone made sure to send Florence and John home to Hastings with plenty of homemade goodies. Florence was truly overwhelmed by how special they made Bobbie feel—and how special she felt as well. She was becoming a loved member of the Deters family, and that was simply glorious. It really was.

Many years later, Florence would look back with great fondness on this holiday spent with John’s family, recalling its tenderness and the way Bobbie’s presence cast a golden glow over everything. On those occasions of remembering, her whole heart would fill with the light and joy and love that had enveloped her and her perfect little family during that first Christmas with Bobbie and John.

As much as she was in love with Bobbie, Florence found that her son changed faster than she could believe. The world was spinning at a new pace—one that increased by the day. It was a disorienting contrast, Florence found, to see her son transform by the minute in the midst of the endless, unceasing Great Depression that appeared to have no end in sight, with every week another struggle to make ends meet.

An outgoing and cheerful little boy, Bobbie loved to smile and wave “hi” and “bye.” He loved to hide his bright blue eyes behind his chubby

hands, making himself disappear and reappear over and over and over again—each time erupting in fits of laughter. In her son’s joy, Florence found a depth of meaning that surpassed all that had come before, even the thrill of performing for a rapt audience. Bobbie, she came to believe—like music—was magic.

One evening not long after his first birthday, Bobbie splashed in the shallow warm water of the clawfoot tub as Florence washed his soft tufts of hair. Both Bobbie and Florence heard the familiar commotion as John came through the front door—the thud of boots and jangle of keys. “Dada!” Bobbie announced with a smile. He was enormously pleased with himself whenever he got the chance to show off his continually expanding vocabulary.

“Florence!” John called from the front hall. “You won’t believe it!” He came clamoring into the bathroom, still in his coat and scarf and boots.

“Gracious, John! You’re tracking snow all over the house!” Florence’s scolding held no sharpness in it at all. “Out with it,” she continued. “What’s all this fuss about?”

“I’ve just been offered a job, Florence! An amazing opportunity. You remember, Bill, Bill Stover?” As he spoke, John’s jacket and scarf leaked remnants of the evening’s snowstorm onto the white tile. “Well,” John went on, “Bill is an insurance salesman, as you know. And he’s been telling me to get into the mortgage game for years. Now, he’s connected me with this new company through a buddy of his—”

“Slow down, slow down, John,” Florence begged. She stood and plucked Bobbie from the bath, wrapping him in a soft towel. “Start with the basics,” she said. “What job? What company?”

“Right,” John said. “Of course. It’s a mortgage broker position, with Mortgage Associates. They’re in Mankato, so not too far.” John was speaking in a notably calmer voice. “Bill recommended me, and I just got

the offer! This is *big* Flo. I could make a lot more money, and I won't have to be driving around all day in the field anymore."

"In Mankato," Florence said. She was keeping her voice even as she worked to put all the pieces together. "So, we'd need to move there, I take it? And when would you start?"

"Now," John laughed. "They want me right away! As early as the first of January. I can't believe our good luck. This is my chance to do better by you and Bobbie."

But Florence wasn't thrilled by this new prospect. Not at all, in fact. Moving would mean starting over for her, after working so hard to build her music studio, which was thriving. She would miss her students, and she did not relish the thought of beginning again from scratch. But she knew they needed the money. And she did enjoy the Stovers. She'd met them several times over the years and had felt an immediate connection with Bill's wife, Lou, a slight woman with a commanding presence and irresistible smile. She wouldn't mind having them close by. And John was convinced, thanks to Bill, that Mankato was an up-and-coming urban center. He'd spoken of it this way many times, even before this offer—he saw it as a place that could offer a much better life for their growing family.

On a snowy New Year's Day in 1933, Florence and John loaded the contents of their cozy one-bedroom apartment into the Buick and set out on a grand new adventure. By the time they arrived in Mankato, it was already late afternoon, and darkness soon pressed against the windows of their new apartment, which was littered with boxes. They had so much work yet to do, but they were also both exhausted and ravenous and a bit lightheaded. The lunch they'd packed for the car was already long gone and there hadn't been time to stop for dinner along the way. Bobbie was the only one who'd eaten much at all, thanks to the snacks Florence had stowed for him back in Hastings. Still, they were giddy with excitement

over the newness of it all as they sprawled out a blanket on the living room floor and sat down. Bobbie slept happily between them. Florence rested her head on John's shoulder.

"This feels like the beginning of something good," Florence said quietly as they watched snow fall silently outside the dark glass of their new picture window.

Before John could answer, there came a knock at the door. "Welcome to Mankato!" Florence recognized Lou Stover's voice even though she couldn't see her in the entryway. John welcomed the couple into the house. "You'll have to excuse the mess," he said as he set their jackets on a pile of unpacked boxes. Florence was surprised and pleased to see familiar faces at the end of a long day. Bill, Lou's husband, was tall in a way where you didn't really notice it—until you did. He was calm and quiet and always doing the next thing that needed doing, in this case, unpacking the home-cooked dinner that Lou had made and serving up two plates of meatloaf and mashed potatoes for John and Florence.

That night, Florence felt, more than she had since her father's passing, as if she had a real home again.

The very next day—their first full day in Mankato—Florence set out to accomplish an important mission: she would acquire a piano of her own, finally. Their new home in Mankato was the spacious lower level of a duplex with two bedrooms, a large living room, and a formal dining room complete with a built-in wooden buffet. The duplex offered enough space for Florence to teach right from home—no need to rent a studio space from a school or church—if only she had her own piano. So, she combed over the paper, searching the personal ads for anyone selling a piano at a price she could hope to afford. When this search proved unsuccessful, Florence took a deep breath and set the paper down. She wasn't ready to give up, she simply needed a new strategy. In the meantime, she

busied herself putting away their kitchen supplies and making a list of groceries they'd need for the rest of the week. Then she bundled Bobbie in multiple warm layers—jacket, coat, hat, and mittens—and walked to the nearest grocery.

As Florence made her way through the produce section, a thin voice cooed at Bobbie from behind a large display of red apples. Florence looked up to see a tiny old woman. She must have been nearly ninety, Florence thought. “Oh, what a gorgeous baby!” the woman said. “And a gorgeous mother, too! I’m Betty Maloney, by the way.”

“Oh, thank you, Betty,” Florence replied. “We adore him.”

“You really ought to get some of these apples,” Betty said. “They’re perfect for baking or canning.” Florence continued down the aisle, unsure if this comment was directed at her or not.

“And babies love apples,” Betty said. “Just boil and mash them with some cereal, and there you have a wonderful breakfast for the little one.”

Apparently, the comment *had* been meant for her, Florence thought, turning her cart back toward the apples. “Thank you,” Florence said. “We do have some apples at home for now, but I will keep these in mind for next time.” She paused, then added, “We just moved to Mankato this week.”

“Just moved!” Betty exclaimed. “How wonderful. Do tell me, where did you move from? And what brought you?”

Florence gave up on the thought of making her way out of the produce section quickly. Instead, she told Betty all about John’s new job with the mortgage company, and her own work as a voice teacher. She described her bustling studio back in Hastings, and her plan to find her own piano in Mankato, now that she had, at last, enough space for one.

“Oh, you’re a musical family!” Betty said. “How wonderful. Well, you and your husband simply must come to service on Sunday at Centenary Methodist, which is just down the block.” Betty’s long winter coat hung

heavy on her tiny frame as she waved her arms enthusiastically. “Centenary has the most wonderful church choir in town.”

“We’ll be sure to come by,” Florence said politely. But as she spoke, she couldn’t help but wonder how many more ideas Betty might have about what she *ought* and *must*.

“Oh, and about that piano of yours,” Betty said. “You really ought to check the community announcement board over by the deli counter. People post all sorts of things on there!”

This suggestion turned out to be unexpectedly useful. Right there on the board was a posting for exactly what Florence had been searching for—a second-hand upright piano at a fair price. She copied down the address on the posting and, after stopping off at home to leave the groceries, headed straight over. Maybe the woman selling the piano was sympathetic to Florence’s circumstances, trudging through the snow with a one-year-old on her hip, or maybe she was just desperate to sell. Maybe, most likely, even, it was a bit of both. Either way, after a short conversation, she agreed to sell the piano to Florence with only one fourth of the price down and a promise to pay the rest over a six-month period.

With her piano secured, Florence was ready to start recruiting students, just as she had in Hastings. She made a new poster, this time listing her own address under *location*. What a wonderful feeling that was! Soon enough the inquiries rolled in, and why wouldn’t they? Florence knew that even in Mankato, a bigger city than Hastings, she was still the most highly qualified teacher. She even got an inquiry from Bethany Lutheran College. It turned out they were looking to hire a choir director. Apparently, one of Florence’s voice students had given them her name!

Before long, between her private lessons and teaching at the college, Florence was making a decent monthly salary. And her income combined with what John was making as a mortgage broker, they had more financial security than they’d ever enjoyed as a married couple. They were finally

able to comfortably pay their expenses instead of scraping by one month at a time.

And they were both thrilled with their new city, soon making loads of new friends and becoming active members of Betty's church down the block. John was even invited to sing a solo with the church choir—"My Redeemer and My Lord," by Dudley Buck. Everyone in the sanctuary was overwhelmed by John's beautiful baritone voice and his larger-than-life presence. Florence and John agreed wholeheartedly: Mankato was the place for their family.

When just a few short months had passed, John and Florence found themselves comfortable enough to afford a whole week off to visit John's family in Eitzen. What a luxury, Florence thought. After all, their usual holiday visits were so rushed they barely had time for any real conversations. Florence could hardly wait to spend quality time together as a family. Even packing the car felt like a treat. Florence beamed as she organized the backseat of the Buick, grateful for all that she and John had accomplished already. "John," she called happily as she tucked a basket of Bobbie's toys under the seat, "Can you grab Bobbie's favorite blanket? I think it is his bassinet. He likes to tug the corner while he sleeps."

The drive to Eitzen was more lovely than Florence expected, because. All of their past trips had been in the ice and snow. Now, June's blue sky accentuated the beauty of the river valley and rolling hills. Anna waited for them on the front porch, and as soon as they pulled into the driveway, she leapt up to help hold Bobbie as John and Florence unloaded the car. By that evening, Anna had already taught Bobbie to say "Nana," which made her grin from ear to ear. "Would you just look at her?" John said to Florence. "I've never seen my mother smile so much in one day."

The next morning after church, Anna invited the whole family over for dinner. Anna's sisters helped prepare a huge chicken dinner with all

the trimmings. And John's sisters Ruth and Martha made apple pies with lattice tops—the most delicious apple pies Florence had ever tasted. She wished she could bring some back to Betty in Mankato.

Across the table from Florence, Anna bounced Bobbie on her knee, stopping occasionally to feed him bites of pie. “Children make all the difference in a family,” Anna said. “I hope we have more babies in Eitzen soon.” She shot looks at Martha and Ruth across the table. “And I hope John and Florence bring Bobbie to visit more often, too.” As if on cue, Bobbie lunged toward the bite of pie Anna had scooped for him, and everyone erupted in laughter.

CHAPTER 18

Summer in Mankato was stunning. Lush bluffs overlooking the Minnesota river, deep blue skies, parks with grassy lawns for children to play and run and for families to gather for picnics. Indeed, while Florence had liked Mankato from the start, summer was when she began truly falling in love with it. “It’s an unusually lovely place,” she liked to say. On most days, she and Bobbie enjoyed long walks along the river. He loved to collect pebbles and throw sticks into the water, only to stand and watch them float away. He also loved when Florence chased him in the grass. As soon as she caught him, he’d burst into laughter, screaming *again, again!* Then, they’d start the game all over.

At least, that’s how it usually went.

One afternoon in mid-July Florence and Bobbie were at their favorite park, the one just north of the river, Florence noticed Bobbie getting tired after only a short burst of running. Curious, she thought. Later that night, when Bobbie barely ate at dinner, she felt sure he must be coming down with something. “Maybe just a summer cold,” she told John after Bobbie was asleep that night. “Unless you think he might have allergies? In any case, he just doesn’t seem himself. And he isn’t due for a doctor visit until December.” Florence couldn’t quite keep the worry from creasing her forehead as she considered what to do. “John, I think that Dr. Nielson should see Bobbie tomorrow, just in case this isn’t going to clear up on its own.”

Dr. Nielson said it was good that Florence had arranged the visit, but that he couldn’t be sure of anything without running a few tests. So, his nurse took some samples, including some vials of blood. Shocking,

Florence thought, how much blood they could take from such a small person! She and John waited anxiously for the results—but it was a full week before they were summoned back to see Dr. Nielson.

As soon as they stepped through the door into Dr. Nielson's office, Florence knew something was wrong. It was in the tight-lipped smile on the doctor's face. It was in the seriousness of his eyes. Florence felt her stomach drop and heart rate quicken before Dr. Nielson even began to speak. When he did, Florence could barely breathe. "Florence, John," he said. "I'm so sorry to bring you sad news." Dr. Nielson's voice was steady and low. He looked straight ahead, but not quite into Florence's eyes, or John's. "Bobbie's blood test results are very troubling," the doctor said. And before Florence knew what she was doing, she was springing to her feet—which she could no longer feel—and demanding to know what Dr. Nielson meant by troubling, begging him to just tell them what they needed to know. She watched and heard herself from a distance, as if she were hovering just outside of her own skin.

"I'm so very sorry," Dr. Nielson said again. "But the blood test indicates that Bobbie has leukemia." At this, John placed his hand on Florence's shoulder and tried to guide her back to her seat on the couch. "Doctor," John said. "What does that mean? What do we have to do to make it better?"

Dr. Nielson took a breath. "Leukemia is a blood disorder," he said, "where leukemia cells multiply and take away from healthy blood cells. We will need to do further tests to confirm the diagnosis. We will also need to monitor his condition carefully and track any new symptoms."

Florence remained frozen on the couch. She hadn't heard a single word after *leukemia*. She had read a story once about a child with leukemia. She couldn't remember almost any of the details—except that the child in the story had died. She didn't hear Dr. Nielson's gentle voice explaining the next series of tests. And she didn't hear John's well-meaning but utterly

pointless questions. She didn't hear anything at all until they were back in the Buick pulling out of the hospital parking lot, when Bobbie's high clear voice called out, "bye bye" as he flapped his small hand back and forth.

Florence's cheeks were wet, and she realized she had been crying the whole time. "This is a nightmare," she said to John. He, too, had tears in his eyes. He glanced across the front seat and whispered, "I know, Florence, I know. But we cannot panic. We have to pray and love our boy as best we can."

"No," Florence said. "I can't believe this is true. I just can't believe it's really happening." She set her gaze straight through the windshield to the street beyond, without seeming to see a thing.

Florence kept on in this state—barely eating or hearing or seeing anything for the next week. Then, in what felt like either a lifetime or the blink of an eye, they were back in Dr. Nielson's beige office, staring at another tight-lipped smile.

"Unfortunately, there is now no doubt," Dr. Nielson said softly. "All of our tests have confirmed that Bobbie has childhood leukemia." With these words, Dr. Nielson cemented the nightmare Florence had spent the last week desperately hoping and praying away.

"What do we have to do? We'll do anything to save our son," John said. Florence, however, was nowhere and everywhere. She was simultaneously slipping outside of the edges of herself and falling deeper and deeper into the pit of her stomach.

"My dear Mr. and Mrs. Deters," Dr. Nielson said. "We have doctors all over the country working on a cure for this horrible illness, and maybe there will be a breakthrough in time to help your Bobbie. But I am a man of science, and I must tell you the facts: there is at this time no cure for childhood leukemia. No cure. But we will do everything we can to keep your boy from pain, to keep him as comfortable as possible." Here, he

stopped and sighed deeply. “And I am so very sorry to give you this news,” he said again. “My staff and I will be here to support you in every possible way.”

John thanked Dr. Nielson and took Florence by the elbow—as he had taken to doing over the past week anytime she became a living statue of herself—and led her to the car.

In silence, they drove home.

That silence spread like darkness in the months to come. Florence’s mouth held still while her hands twisted around each other in fear. John’s ragged, bitten nails announced his worry, as did his attentive eyes—trained as they were on Florence. Meanwhile, Bobbie’s voice grew softer and his utterances shorter with each passing week, despite his Tuesday visits to Dr. Nielson which included all variety of treatment plans to help him be more comfortable. Florence could feel her son starting to slip into another world. By November, their whole house, previously filled with the sound of Bobbie’s pattering feet and joyous laughs, fell into a cold hush. It seemed as if the snow falling outside their window was deadening all the sounds. It seemed as if the house was collapsing into itself under the weight of so much sadness.

The frailer Bobbie became, the more severely his illness presented itself. With increasing frequency, he would break out in a high fever, seemingly out of nowhere. All through the night, his forehead and cheeks would blaze. When morning came, he would wake clammy and drenched in sweat. All through those feverish nights, Florence would lie awake, listening to Bobbie’s breathing, heavy and rasping against the dark. She would often take him into her bed, holding his small frame close to hers and placing her hand over his heart. When sleep evaded her, which was often, Florence prayed. She asked God—begged God—to save her son. She bargained with God to bring back Bobbie’s health, his rosy cheeks, his

babbles, his laughter. She would give anything, she promised. Anything. And so it was that in those still hours after midnight, while the rest of the world slept, Florence whispered into the purple bruise of night, pressing her eyes closed against the hot tears soaking her soft hair and pillow. *Anything*, she begged. Please. *Please*.

That December, Bobbie turned two years old. John insisted they throw a proper party—and Florence agreed even though she could hardly stand the sight of the balloons. On December 13, the very day that Bobbie had arrived as a perfect newborn just twenty-four months earlier, the Deters house was filled with the chatter of nervous grown-ups pretending to celebrate while desperately trying to think of the right things to say. Trying to think of anything at all to say. What was there to say? Betty and Lou took turns placing hands on Florence's shoulders. Their friends from the congregation and some of Florence's students came with boxes and ribbons. Bobbie was a shadow of himself, but he did smile at the cake and at the candles. He clapped his small hands together at the end of *Happy Birthday*. But those small hands barely made a sound. Florence's heart broke again and again to see Bobbie's labored joy. That night in bed, as her son slept, she filled her heart with light and whispered in his ear: *you are loved, my sweet boy. So very loved.*

Christmas came and went, and Bobbie continued to slip away from Florence and John, whose hearts were coming ever more undone. Bobbie's tiny fingertips and lips became brushed in blue and purple. His breathing became uneven, his small chest heaving with the effort of each inhale. Before the new year, Dr. Nielson recommended that Bobbie be admitted to the hospital. "That way," the doctor said, careful to keep his voice even, "we can monitor him around the clock." Once Bobbie was admitted to the children's ward, Florence and John took turns staying there. He was still strong enough to wrap his small hand around their

fingers. “He will never be alone,” Florence whispered to John one gray afternoon as they sat together at Bobbie’s bedside. “Never, ever.”

Time moved strangely in the hospital. Florence felt as if an eternity and a moment were one and the same. She also felt that almost nothing mattered. No treatment, or prayers, or faith mattered anymore. The only thing, in fact, that did matter? Bobbie. And Bobbie was being pulled further and further from her arms every moment.

Florence’s baby was leaving her.

No matter how much you know a thing, it can still knock you down just as if you never saw it coming. That’s how it was for Florence that dark Tuesday afternoon when she held Bobbie against her chest and felt a new depth of quiet in him, a quiet that persisted even in his few moments of wakefulness. “Mrs. Deters,” said the nurse. “I’ll have the switchboard contact Mr. Deters.” Florence didn’t ask what that meant. She only knew that in less than half an hour’s time, John was there—his strong chest against her back, holding her as she held Bobbie. They planted kisses on his forehead and cheeks. They whispered that he needn’t be afraid. They held him close as his chest rose and fell a final time.

And they kept holding their perfect boy as his body went still.

After Bobbie passed, Florence didn’t move or speak for what felt like a very long time. She thought maybe if she could just stay still herself, she might wake up to find it wasn’t actually January after all, but still June. The sky would still be endless and blue, and Bobbie would still have pudgy cheeks and a taut belly and a strong body full of laughter.

But in truth, even as Florence held still, the world moved around her. When they arrived home from the hospital, John helped Florence up the stairs to their bed, where she lay listening to the sounds of John moving through the house, vaguely amazed by the fact that his limbs were still

functioning while hers were filled with lead or sand or something else impossibly heavy. She knew what John must be doing: the things that needed doing in situations like this. There were arrangements to be made. Family and friends to be notified.

In the other room, John was calling his still-alive mother, Anna. That was one of the things that needed doing. Anna's phone was connected to a party-line with at least eight others, including Aunt Bertha and Reverend Radloff and all other neighbors and friends. All of whom knew about Bobbie's condition. All of whom had been praying for his recovery.

At quarter after six that evening, Anna answered her line after two short rings.

"Mother," Florence heard John say, "our little boy has gone to heaven." Florence felt something lodged deep in her chest rise to the surface as sobs broke the shroud of silence wrapped around her. Then she felt the shape of John next to her. Neither of them spoke.

There was nothing left to say.

CHAPTER 19

Florence's silence settled into anger. Anger at Dr. Nielson for failing, at medicine and medical experts for failing, at God for failing. At herself for failing. She had no interest in food or bathing or living. She simply fell asleep and refused to wake until late morning the next day, when she found herself numb and unable to think. Nonetheless, she got out of bed, took a long warm bath, and went downstairs to the kitchen. When she passed the living room where John was reading, he rose to tenderly kiss her forehead, wishing her a good morning. She could not locate her voice in her throat, and silently continued to the kitchen, where Lou Stover was already waiting for her, chopping away at something with quick and busy hands. Lou paused, knife hovering over the cutting board, and looked up when she saw Florence. "We loved him," Lou spoke slowly, each word dripped in care. "Bill and I did. We loved him like he was our own. And I know you are angry—with God, with yourself. There isn't any sense in times like this. I don't blame you." Lou pulled out a chair and gently guided Florence to take a seat. "No one blames you, Florence."

Florence watched as Lou continued chopping. She seemed to be preparing vegetables for a stew. That made sense. People made food for people in grief. And stew was a thing people ate in winter. As Lou chopped, she talked. She told Florence about what was happening around town. The gossip from Florence's church—even though she herself didn't attend and didn't care. She told her about the snowstorm expected that weekend. And, finally, Lou told Florence about another dear friend who had been wrecked by grief and loss. "I didn't think she would ever come through the darkness, but she did. She found light again. She found God again."

She converted actually—she’s a Christian Scientist now—and she said that Christian Science is what finally helped her to understand healing, to see the truth. You know I’m not of the faith myself, Florence, but I saw the effect it had on her. It might help to talk to someone who understands. I can arrange for you to meet her if you’d like.”

Florence took comfort in the feeling of Lou’s busy work in her kitchen and in the sound of her voice. But eventually Lou finished, leaving the stew to simmer on the stove. She gave Florence a tight hug and quick kiss on the forehead and left to collect her husband. Florence stayed at the kitchen table. She heard Lou go get Bill from the living room where he’d been sitting with John. She heard Lou say to John, *If there is anything we can do, really*. Then she heard the opening and closing of the door, followed by silence.

Again.

But the next day, Florence found her voice. She telephoned Lou and said she’d like to meet that friend, the one she’d mentioned, the Christian Scientist. She needed to believe in something. Why not this?

Snow fell and melted. Florence started attending Christian Science services and, in her typical way, she applied herself to the endeavor with vigor and determination. What was the point in doing a thing if not to do it well and wholeheartedly, after all? So, Florence immersed herself in the literature of Christian Science, and, as she did, her rage burned into something more like devotion. She came to believe with all her heart—with every fiber of her being—that the divine power of love could have been used to heal Bobbie. She believed it could be used to heal herself, too.

She spent hours poring over the *Science and Health with Key to the Scripture*, written by Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science. Always the quick study, Florence soon knew everything there was to know about the nearly seventy-year-old religion. John didn’t convert,

but he was thrilled to see some of the old Florence coming back. The driven, powerful woman he had fallen for in the first place, all those years ago.

In spring, almost a full year after Bobbie's diagnosis, Florence and John took a week away from work to visit John's mother in Eitzen. It would be good to be with Anna, who shared the pain of Bobbie's passing. Indeed, his absence still surged beneath the surface for all of them. But at least they could come together as a family.

Florence's renewed sense of faith spurred her into motion. By summer, she was back at it with an overflowing schedule of teaching and performing. If she was busy enough, she had less time to remember how Bobbie had loved to splash in the bathroom tub or run down the hall from the living room to the kitchen or crawl into bed with her and John on hushed mornings and curl up between their warm bodies. Eventually, though, Florence discovered she was on a fool's errand, after all—for no matter how busy she forced herself to become, memories of Bobbie remained alive in the house that she and John had shared with him.

It was time for change.

Not long after the new year, Florence and John moved to an apartment on Liberty Street and slowly began rebuilding some of the fullness of the life they had lost. Their shared love of music brought them back to themselves and to their community. John continued as a soloist at the Methodist church, and Florence at the Christian Science church. They began hosting music socials on the weekends, inviting friends and congregation members to join them in song. Most Saturday nights their house was filled with piano and laughter and voices joined in harmony.

When spring arrived that year, it did so suddenly and dramatically. Mankato was as gorgeous as ever. Green flooded the treetops along the river valley as new life pressed up from the depths of the earth all around

them. It had been years since Florence had seen a spring like this. And one afternoon that May—it was early May still, for the lilacs were still just budding—Florence wrapped her arms around John in the kitchen. She pressed her cheek against his chest and turned her face toward his. “John,” she said, holding his gaze. “God has made our wishes come true—I am pregnant again!”

John pulled Florence to him and spun her in the air. “Are you sure?” he asked, his smile wide and open. His excitement was bigger than both of them.

“I’m sure!” Florence said. “I was late in April, and now again in May. And I feel just the way I did before. We are going to have another baby.”

Florence’s belly grew bigger and rounder through the long summer months. Her second pregnancy was easier than the first, in part because she already knew what to expect. She still missed Bobbie and felt the pain of his loss in the memories she had of carrying him inside her for nine months. But she was learning how to live again, and she couldn’t wait to meet the new baby that was growing in her now.

Florence and John were both busy working as much as possible before the baby came and didn’t have time to visit Anna. She understood, she said. But she also said that if they didn’t take time off once the baby was born and let her meet her new grandchild, she’d have to box some ears. “Oh, now, don’t you worry,” John assured her. “We will not disappoint you, Mother.”

On January 9, 1937, at forty-four minutes after nine in the evening, almost two years after they had lost their first son, Florence and John welcomed another baby boy into their family. They named him William James after his two grandfathers, William Deters and James Poling. They’d call him Billy for short.

Billy turned out to be everything his parents most needed. He was an easy baby, content to be held and rocked. He especially loved when Florence sang to him, and he cooed during Florence's lessons and smiled at strangers at the market. Anna was delighted to meet him and relieved to see John and Florence so happy with their boy. Billy ate well and grew quickly. Before long he had a big belly and rolls of fat on his arms and legs. Everyone agreed he was a beautiful and healthy baby.

When it came time for Billy's baptism, Florence and John decided the ceremony would take place in the Methodist church. Florence and John's families had both been Methodists, and it felt right to have Billy join that tradition, even with Florence's fervent new devotion to Christian Science. On the morning of July 25, Billy's baptismal day, Florence and John bathed their son in the kitchen sink and dressed him in a white cotton gown. He was a perfect cherub.

John and Florence had a real community surrounding them in Mankato, a community in which they had established themselves as active social leaders, especially through their music parties. The church was wall-to-wall packed. As they walked down the aisle to take their seats, Florence felt a hand grab her skirt—it was Ina! She hadn't seen her older sister in nearly a decade—since her last Christmas with her father. Florence gasped her sister's name out loud and wrapped her arms around her, then held her shoulders as she assessed her—the same kind eyes, but her face was creased and her black hair was filled with gray. "I can barely believe my eyes, Ina," Florence said. As tears welled up and spilled down her face onto her dress, Florence realized she hadn't fully recognized how much she had missed her sister until this moment, when she found herself suddenly standing right in front of her. "Thank you for coming, Ina," Florence said through her tears.

Ina stayed with Florence and John through the weekend. Billy was the star of the show, already active and alert at six months. He liked to play

peek-a-boo and would erupt in fits of laughter—shaking his arms and legs in joy—every time Ina miraculously reappeared in front of him. Ina also seemed to delight in revealing bits of Florence’s life to John. Florence had always been fiercely private and independent, and she saw that Ina was taking a bit too much pleasure in sharing Florence’s life before marriage. That is why several years would pass before Ina would admit to Florence exactly what happened that Saturday morning when the door clicked shut behind Florence as she set off to her morning lessons. What happened was this: Ina waited until she was sure Florence was gone, then said, “So, John, tell me. Do you really know how old Florence is?”

“Well, of course I know she was born in 1901,” he said. “That would make her 36 years old—seven years older than me.”

“Ha!” said Ina triumphantly. “Just as I suspected.” Ina was reveling in her little game. “You’re mistaken, John. Florence was *actually* born in 1896. I know because I was already twelve by the time she was born, and I practically raised her until I left the house to marry Robert. I know her age as surely as I know my own. And that age is 41 years old!”

John was flabbergasted. How on earth had Florence gotten her passport to read 1901? And why? He felt a bit lightheaded and excused himself to get a glass of water. But by the time Florence returned on her lunch break he had regained his composure and resolved never to ask her about her age. He had never cared how much older she was—seven years or twelve, what was the difference? He hadn’t cared then, and he certainly didn’t care now.

The morning of Ina’s departure—she stayed for three more nights—she kissed Billy on the forehead, then kissed Florence and John on their cheeks. She promised wouldn’t let so much time pass before visiting again.

Later that morning, John sat on the porch of their duplex and watched as Billy explored the green of their yard. It was the height of summer, and

Florence kicked off her shoes to feel the soft grass under her feet, then situated herself on a quilt made by Anna for Billy. Billy lay on his back looking up at the canopy of leaves and bright white clouds overhead, reaching his small fists into the air as if he could capture those clouds if he could just reach a little bit higher. All at once John was there too, leaning over Florence and lifting Billy above his head before bringing him in close to his chest and planting a raspberry kiss on his belly. Billy kicked his feet and waved his arms in delight. Florence let the sound of their laughter wash over her as she closed her eyes and breathed in the sweet grass and fresh summer air.

As tensions over the brewing war in Europe grew, the seasons flowed one into the next, and calendar years spilled one into another. Billy went from toddling to walking to running, and Florence and John found it was time to move again, this time only two blocks away to a larger duplex on 103 State Street. Billy was almost five and needed some “big kid” things, like his own room and piano lessons. Fortunately, Florence and John were earning enough to make such things possible for their son.

Florence was sure Billy would be musically talented, just as she and John both were. And she was proud to be able to provide early music education for her son, something she and John had never been afforded themselves. Since she had already been teaching in Mankato for years, Florence knew the perfect teacher for Billy: Mrs. Silber, an older woman with a cloud of gray hair and thick knuckles. She was by far one of the most talented piano teachers in Mankato, and one of the only ones experienced enough to instruct children as young as Billy.

But from Billy’s very first lesson, Florence was disappointed. Instead of sitting properly on the piano stool next to Mrs. Sibling, Billy crawled beneath the bench to press the pedals with his hands. Things quickly devolved from there. Over the next year, Billy resisted practicing to the

point where Florence had to drag him across the living room and stand over him with a timer if she hoped to eke any practice out of him at all.

“Maybe piano just isn’t for him,” John offered unhelpfully from his chair across the room during one of Florence’s battles with Billy. Florence shot John a look and he said no more. But later, when the house was quiet, Florence found John at the kitchen table. “Maybe piano isn’t for him,” she said, “but we were never given the opportunities Billy has. He has barely even been in lessons for a year. He doesn’t *know* if it is for him or not. We both know that starting with formal training early is a huge advantage if he wants to be a professional musician later in life. I don’t want to rob him of that option over a few pouted lips or stomped feet.”

John nodded and let the topic of Billy and his piano lessons come to a natural close. “Hey,” he said brightly, in a skillful change of topic, “I’ve got an idea—been thinking about Christmas, and Billy’s birthday. He’ll be six this year, and I want to do something extra special for him. I’ve got a client out in the country—just had a litter of puppies. What do you say?” He flashed his most dashing smile at his lovely wife. And Florence agreed to the puppy idea as a peace offering of sorts. Plus, she had always had a soft spot for dogs, and she liked seeing John so boyishly giddy.

Later that night, while Billy and John were both sleeping soundly, Florence awoke suddenly in the night. She went to get a glass of water when she noticed it was snowing again. She stopped to watch the flakes silently float to the earth. She was thinking about the tree that still needed decorating and the holiday menu that needed planning and the surprise puppy John was going to get for Billy. Billy—whose chubby baby arms and toddler belly were already disappearing in place of lanky long muscles and a boyish little waist. Billy, who just a few months earlier, in the heat of August, had spent two full weeks visiting his Grandma Anna and Aunt Bertha’s all by himself. Two weeks hadn’t seemed especially long at the time. But somehow, when she went to fetch him, Florence had felt that

Billy had crossed some invisible threshold during his time away. Under the heat of the August sun, she watched Billy's muscles pull across his shoulders and up and down his legs, so strong and sure as he scrambled up the tree on Anna's boulevard. All at once it was harder to see the baby he had once been and easier to see the form of the man he would one day become.

Sometimes change was like that—slow and then very, very fast.

Finally, the big night arrived—Christmas Eve. Florence and John had planned a quiet holiday. The Stovers were out of town so it would be just the two of them and Billy. They sat around the table and poured gravy on their roast beef as Billy talked on and on about so-and-so and this-and-that. John could barely contain his excitement, catching Florence's eye any chance he could, flashing one big grin after the next in her direction. Later, as Florence stood at the sink washing dishes, she called Billy to come help dry so that John could slip away. As she handed Billy plates, Florence listened for the sound of the side door clicking shut and John's boots shuffling. Only when she was certain it was the right time did she release Billy from his post and let him run eagerly into the living room for presents and carols.

There, in the middle of the braided rug, sat a big box wrapped in shiny paper, its edges wilted slightly from the damp and the cold. Billy rushed to the box and squealed in a way that reminded Florence of his babyhood. He reached his small hands into the box and pulled out a tiny, wriggling black and white puppy. "I can't believe it!" he said. "A puppy! I just can't believe it!" He hugged the furry pup close and kissed the top of her head, and she squirmed so frantically that Billy had to, with great reluctance, let her out of his arms.

Florence watched it all unfold from her perch on the edge of the piano bench, John's arm around her waist.

As the year turned, Billy and his new puppy, Lady, became fast friends, rolling on the floor and chasing each other up and down the halls. John, meanwhile, made sale after sale and Florence was busily teaching while also adding the Women's Glee Club of Mankato to her roster of responsibilities. Billy still disliked practicing piano—even on the used grand piano Florence had purchased from Bethany College after their old piano started losing its tune faster than she liked. Meanwhile, John still came home most days to find Florence waiting for him with a kiss and a smart smile. On one such day, her smile was just a little smarter than usual. "What's this all about?" John waved his hand in casual reference to Florence's expression, chuckling.

"Well—you know how we've always dreamed of having a girl," Florence began, pausing to assess John's face, which was still gentle and amused. "Lou and I were talking, and she told me about an agency through her church, one that works to find homes for orphans. I reached out to them and John—look." Florence handed him a half-sheet of paper. There was a picture of a little girl with ringlet curls and blue eyes. At the top of the page the name "Rebecca" was printed in capital letters along with some basic biographical information. Florence tried to hold back her enthusiasm, but her decision was already made. "I called the agency and they said we can go down to their office and fill out the paperwork later this week to start the process," Florence said. She moved closer to John, wrapping an arm around his back. "If we choose, she could be ours."

John didn't take much convincing. By the end of the following week, the papers were in order. Of course, they still needed to talk to Bill about getting a new sister. They sat him down on the couch, where he sat like a tiny adult, feet together and hands placed neatly on his knees, waiting for whatever news his parents were about to deliver.

Florence pulled out the photo from the agency and began telling Billy about the idea about a new sister named Rebecca. As Florence spoke, she

watched her only son's face turn dark and stormy. His brows furrowed and his mouth pulled tighter and tighter until he finally erupted into screams and tears. His adult-like manner completely dissolved, leaving in its wake something more like a petulant toddler.

"No, no, no," Bill insisted urgently, tears rushing down his red cheeks. "I hate anybody with the name Rebecca! I won't do it. I won't. I won't. I will *not* have a sister called Rebecca."

John and Florence were stunned. Any attempts to reason seemed to enrage Billy further. Eventually, they gave up and sat in silence for several minutes as Bill carried on. Finally, as he began to tire himself out, John placed a hand on his son's shoulder and assured him everything would be okay.

But John and Florence were both so disturbed by the outburst that they called off the adoption, and never spoke of it again.

If Florence's mood was notably low for a few days following the adoption debacle, she responded in typical fashion by soon finding a new passion project to pursue. Within a few weeks, she greeted John at the door with yet another mischievous grin. "John, I must tell you. I was on a walk today, and I saw a house for sale. And... I, well, I took a quick look—and it must have been built just for us. I swear."

"Hold on just a minute," John said as he opened a beer. "I wasn't aware we needed to move again."

"No, no, no. We don't *need* to move. But don't you think it would be nice to own your own home? This house has a nice big garage in the back and a large yard with well-kept grass and a thriving garden. I've been working on the cost. I think we can afford it, John." Florence waited casually in the kitchen doorway—not wanting to let on how determined she was.

“Well, okay. I can take a look.” John gave Florence a quick kiss before heading to the living room. “I’m free tomorrow before noon.” Florence stepped forward into the kitchen and pressed her eyes closed hard, then held her hands to her chest. For a moment she let herself imagine their future in that house—its huge living room had plenty of space for their new grand piano. Its staircase coming elegantly down from the second floor would be perfect for music parties. Its spacious master bedroom, so comfortable, a place for them to sleep. She would make that house theirs—she would.

The next morning after meeting with the real estate agent, John agreed the house was perfect for them, and Florence showed him the numbers. She had worked it all out. John was impressed with her accurate accounting—and she was right. Their mortgage payment would be about the same as what they were paying for rent. So, together, they decided to make an offer.

In August 1943, they became the official owners of 321 State Street.

Billy didn’t know a thing about the move or the new house. Instead, he spent two weeks immersed in Anna and Bertha’s quiet and predictable routines in Eitzen. Later, he would tell Florence and John how much he loved how the days unfolded at Grandma Anna’s, one task to the next, with Grandma seizing any opportunity she could do include him or dote on him. He would tell them about church on Sunday, and the stained-glass windows filled with morning light and the shiny wooden pews and the minister who would give the first sermon in German and then the second sermon in English. It didn’t matter which language Rev. Radcliff was speaking, Billy didn’t much listen to either, but he found the rise and fall of Rev. Radcliff’s voice comforting. Meanwhile, Grandma Anna and Aunt Bertha praised Billy for how quiet and still he was—how well he paid attention. And when Florence and John arrived in Eitzen, Billy dawdled,

wanting to show them one last thing he had made, or to ask Aunt Bertha for one last cookie before leaving.

“You two sure are keeping us on our toes!” John joked with his mother. “Next time he visits he might never want to go home.” Indeed for the entire drive back to Mankato, all Billy could talk about was what an amazing time he had had and how he couldn’t wait to go back to Eitzen. Florence leaned her head back, feeling the soreness of her muscles after a few weeks of packing and hauling and unpacking. She tilted her head to catch John’s eye, smiling in anticipation of Billy’s reaction to their surprise. When they pulled up in front of 321 State Street, Billy perked up from where he had been lying across the backseat. “This isn’t our block!” he said. “I thought we were going straight home.”

“Billy—we *are* home.” John swung the car door open, then leapt out and swung Billy’s door open, as well. “Welcome to our new home, son!”

Billy looked tentatively excited, first poking his head out of the car slowly then jumping onto the curb. “We’re home?” he said, looking quizzically to Florence. “We have a new house?” With that, he ran up the front steps. He was immediately greeted by Lady with her tail-wagging and excited wiggles. Together, boy and dog ran from room to room, up the curved stairway and down again, and finally into the backyard.

Florence and John stood to the side, with Florence resting her back against John’s chest.

CHAPTER 20

I can't believe it," Florence whispered. She and John sat across from one another at the kitchen table. A letter lay between them. "I know it's necessary," Florence said curtly. "But to think they're just pulling people—pulling fathers of young children—right out of their families like this."

By this time, the fall of 1943—and the Deters' first autumn in their new home—the United States had been involved in World War II for nearly two years. Across the world, families were being torn apart and chunks of earth were exploding into the air. But safe in Mankato, in their perfect new house, Florence experienced the war as abstract and far away. Until that thin envelope addressed to John Deters brought reality crashing into their home.

"The whole world is at war, Flo," John said. Florence studied his face, which was rearranging itself in the way it always did when he was hiding his true feelings. Feelings, Florence was sure, that had been running like a current of excitement up and down his spine since opening the envelope. John had never thought to enlist in the army, but Florence was well aware of how John tended to react—in fact, always reacted—to the notion of being needed. And she could see exactly how he was reacting now to the notion of defending his country and his people. To the notion of being a hero. By the time John spoke again, his words came as no surprise: "It is my duty," he said. "You know I will miss you and our boy dearly. But in these times, we have no choice but to rise to the occasion."

John was required to report directly following the Christmas holiday, in January 1944. Florence insisted that they not tell Billy until after his birthday. "I don't want to upset him before the celebration," Florence

said. “There’s no reason for us to spoil his Christmas.” However, when she and John sat Billy down to explain the turn of events, it was clear that Florence’s fretting about his reaction had been in vain—seven-year-old Billy was *thrilled* at the idea of John fighting in the war. He didn’t understand enough about war to be scared about what might happen to his father. Instead, his thoughts were flooded with the idea of good against evil, villains vanquished by heroes. One of those heroes could be his dad!

A week after Billy’s birthday, he stood next to Florence as they bid farewell to John at the train station. John lifted Billy onto his shoulders to let him look out over the crowds. “See those great big engines?” John said. “What power they have? That’s because you live in the greatest country on earth. You’ll see, son. I’m going to make you proud.” Then, he cupped Florence’s face and gave her a long kiss, promising to stay safe and write often. Finally, he turned and boarded the train.

Billy waved until the train disappeared with his father, now headed for basic training in California at Fort Roberts. “Come along,” Florence said, taking a reluctant Billy by the hand. “We have plenty of chores waiting for us.” Florence was quiet during the bus ride home and remained so the rest of the day. Everything, she knew, would be different without John. She would need to work longer hours and take on more students—and, even still, money would be tight. Their new house suddenly felt a little too big. Nonetheless, she knew she was fully capable of facing this challenge. When had she ever shied away from hard work? When had she ever turned away from what needed doing? The answer was never. And she never would. Certainly not now, when John was away defending her right to live in freedom, possibly risking his life, too.

But when John completed basic training that spring, he wasn’t deployed overseas. Instead, he remained in California, stationed at Fort Ord, one of the most attractive U.S. Army posts of all, thanks to its proximity to the Pacific Ocean beaches and the wonderful weather and stunning vistas of

Monterey Bay. When, in his letters home, John described the beautiful scenery, Florence tried to keep her resentful feelings in check. But it was not easy. Here she was, working double time at home, caring for Billy completely on her own, scrambling to make ends meet, while John was off on his own, enjoying what was turning out to be a cushy assignment if she'd ever heard of one. One way Florence kept herself from negative thoughts was by turning her attention to her genuine gratitude for her Christian Science church and the community it provided for her. She leaned on this community heavily throughout John's time in the military. And she was able to rely on the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy and others in the Christian Science community to properly direct her energy and stay committed to what needed to be done.

A part from one brief visit in the fall of 1944, Florence and Billy didn't see John for nearly two years. Only when he was finally discharged in September of 1945, with the war over and the country returning to normal, did Florence's family resume its familiar shape. At least, some things were familiar, anyway. Billy entered third grade that fall. Trees turned orange, yellow, and red. Autumn winds took on a chill. November came in gray and snow fell and the holidays arrived, once again. On Christmas Eve, Florence and John took Billy to the candlelight service at the Methodist church and sang all the old carols. They opened presents together in the living room, just like old times. On Christmas day, they attended Florence's church, where she sang a beautiful solo, "Oh, Holy Night." So, yes, in a sense, life had resumed its comfortable patterns. The Deters were doing all the same things they had always done. But something was different. It had to do with John, Florence thought. Something about the way his voice sounded, maybe? Or something in his face, the expressions he wore? Or maybe it was how he moved his body. Or all these things. Or other things altogether. Whatever it was or was not, Florence

said nothing. She wasn't sure how John would react, and she didn't want to argue, especially during the holidays. Instead, she simply held her tongue and prayed things would return to the way they had been before. Meanwhile, John and Florence celebrated the new year with a marvelous party, their house filled with food and drink and candlelight, and friends and guests singing and dancing into the night.

Over the next few months, their family routines settled further and further into pre-war normalcy, except that under the veneer of day-to-day activities, nothing felt "normal" to Florence. John was working longer and longer hours that were less predictable than ever. He even went into work on the weekends. It was true that Florence was working hard, as well—they had to, if they wanted to make their budget. But it was more than work—it was something else that Florence couldn't quite put her finger on. Even when John was at home, he seemed distant. Still, Florence was reluctant to say anything. When John drifted into his spells of distraction or wandering thoughts, Florence would simply ask, "What's wrong?" or "What are you thinking about?" or "Will you tell me what's been on your mind?" John's answer was always the same: "Oh, nothing."

If Florence could have put her feelings into words, she might have said there was a wall around John that had never been there before. It was odd—the feeling of missing someone who was right in front of you. But instead of dwelling on this idea, she pushed her unhappy thoughts out of her mind, turning her attention, as usual, to her work. The war had been hard on their family financially and she was determined to help get them living in comfort again, and soon.

Things continued this way into the spring, and Florence stayed silent about John's changed demeanor. She found great comfort in her daily devotions. Every morning she would read "The Lesson" from the Bible and then its interpretation from *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* written by Mary Baker Eddy. This helped her cope. Then, one

afternoon as she stood at the counter drying dishes, Florence heard John take a call in the living room. Afterward, he whistled on his way into the kitchen, chipper and light. “Flo,” he said. “That was a friend of mine from California.” The friend would be visiting Mankato, John said, but hadn’t made any arrangements for lodging yet. “I’d love to offer our home. Would that be okay with you?”

Florence wasn’t thrilled—something about the way John was speaking, the way his mouth was turning up at the corners—but she didn’t let on. Instead, she simply replied, “Of course, John, this is your home too.”

Very good Mary Beth,” Florence said to her student. A few weeks had passed since the call from John’s friend, and Florence had the house to herself for a Saturday morning of lessons. Billy was down the street at a friend’s house, and John was spending yet another weekend at the office. Given how things had been recently, Florence was perfectly happy to be alone with her work. She always felt most herself while teaching—confident and in-charge. “Now, let’s take it again from the decrescendo.” Just then, Lady erupted into barking at the window. “Stop that, Lady!” Florence said. But then she noticed the shiny black town car driving slowly down her street. It must have been the slowness that set Lady off, so Florence picked Lady up and deposited her in the kitchen to keep her from disrupting the rest of the lesson with Mary Beth.

“Sorry about that,” Florence said when she returned to the piano. “Now, as I was saying, let’s take it again from right here after the decrescendo.” Florence settled herself back onto the bench next to her young student. But halfway through Mary’s second time through the piece, the doorbell rang. Lady voiced her protest loudly from the kitchen. In the midst of the din, Florence opened the door to find a beautiful woman, suitcase in hand. Behind the woman, the shiny town car was parked ostentatiously in front of Florence’s house.

“Excuse me, is this where John Deters lives?” the woman asked, shifting her gaze slightly to take in all that lay just past Florence.

“Yes,” said Florence, “but John isn’t home now. He’s been at the office all morning.” Florence gave the woman John’s office address and excused herself to finish her lesson with Mary Beth.

To Florence’s surprise, the woman reappeared later that evening, and this time she was in the front seat of John’s car. Florence saw them through the front window—John opening the passenger door for the woman and the two of them walking up Florence’s front steps together. When the front door opened, Florence was greeted by John’s full wide grin—that old grin she’d seen so little of since his return from California. “Marlene,” John said. “Allow me to introduce my lovely wife Florence, whom you’ve heard so much about. And Flo, this is Marlene.” John waved his hand to the side where Marlene stood. “She’s a very good friend of mine from California.”

“Yes, we actually met earlier today—I gave Marlene directions to your office, dear.” Florence placed her hand on John’s shoulder and turned her head slightly up at him as she said this. Then she turned to face Marlene directly, holding her hand out. “It’s a pleasure to officially meet you, Marlene. Any friend of John’s is more than welcome in our home.”

While John went to collect Marlene’s bags from the Buick trunk, Florence showed Marlene upstairs to the guest bedroom. Florence was smiling, yes, but she hoped the tightness of her lips signaled her annoyance to John. She was annoyed for a number of reasons, and why shouldn’t she be? First, John hadn’t bothered to tell her of Marlene’s expected arrival and she felt unprepared. Second, John had failed to mention his friend from California was a woman, and a very beautiful one at that. Finally, John had chosen to drive the two of them home right in time for dinner. Florence hadn’t planned to make a meal suited for guests and didn’t have time to get ingredients. Now they would have to eat out.

Once seated at the restaurant, Florence's mood turned around slightly. For his part, John was positively spritely. He lit up telling Florence about Marlene's position as a commissioned officer at Fort Ord, describing how she belonged to the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. And of course, telling Marlene about Florence's opera singing, how she had studied in Europe. How talented she was. Billy entertained them all with his well-timed interjections—such a clever and social child he was. Florence couldn't help but be proud. Even Marlene seemed impressed with how well-behaved Billy was, which gave Florence some additional gratification.

The next day, Florence went to her Christian Science service while John took Marlene to the Methodist service. After church, John and Billy showed Marlene around town for the afternoon. Florence, alone at home, tried to distract herself. What was it that was under her skin? She wasn't sure exactly what was going on, but she had her ideas, and those ideas were getting harder to ignore. Something was plainly off about this visit.

At dinner that night—out at a restaurant again—Florence spoke less than she had the previous night. She had set herself to paying attention instead. And pay attention, she did. She watched Marlene watching John. She saw how her eyes were glued to him, drinking in everything he did. She saw how John leaned too close to Marlene when he opened the door for her. She saw what she saw, and what she saw was more than enough. If she were being honest with herself, she had known from the very start, as soon as John came to the kitchen, happy as a clam, after that surprise phone call weeks ago.

One day of this visit was more than enough.

That night in the privacy of their bedroom, Florence turned to John—whose mood was better than it had been for months. “John,” Florence said in a neutral tone. “How long does Marlene plan to stay with us?”

“Well, I'm not sure,” John answered, “I think at least until next Saturday.”

“No.” Now Florence’s tone was decidedly curt. “She most absolutely will not.” This got John’s full attention.

“What do you mean?” John said. His voice had risen several pitches unintentionally. “Why would you say that?”

“John,” Florence replied slowly and firmly. “I know there is something between you two. I’d like you to ask her to leave. It isn’t right for me or your son to be around this.”

“We are good friends, but that’s all! I can’t ask her to leave!” John’s tone reminded Florence of Billy’s when he wasn’t getting his way.

“You will ask her to leave ... or I will,” Florence said. She was simply not going to acknowledge John’s false protests around being “just friends” with Marlene.

“Okay, okay,” John said. He seemed to realize there would be no getting out of this. “I will talk to her in the morning and make other arrangements.”

“Those ‘other arrangements’ had better be that Marlene is on her way to wherever she is going,” Florence said. With this retort, Florence turned off her bedside lamp, believing that she was officially closing the book on the Marlene conversation. And sure enough, the next morning Marlene was indeed gone. But so was something else: the trust between John and Florence. Florence knew her husband—he had always enjoyed flirting and female attention. That had been true since he was just a boy at Wayland Academy, flirting with his pretty teacher. But he had never been so blatant, so bold, so disrespectful of her and their marriage before. To invite this woman to stay with them in Florence’s own home! She could barely believe he would do such a thing—except he had. It hurt her more than she would have admitted to him, or anyone else. Even herself.

Without hesitation, Florence arranged to see a practitioner of Christian Science in Kansas City. She would go there by herself and spend the night. In Christian Science, a practitioner is someone who heals

through Christian love and scientific understanding. Florence thought of her practitioner as a person who helped her know the truth. And that is what she needed now, more than anything: the truth. She was able to share her concerns and troubles with the practitioner in a way that she would simply never feel comfortable sharing with anyone else in any other context. That's because with the practitioner, sharing was for learning the faith—it was to further her study of Christian Science. And the practitioner's answers were never personal. Instead, they were always rooted in the doctrine. Always action oriented. Where wallowing in self-pity or negative emotion felt useless, discussing her life with a practitioner felt purposeful, practical, and useful.

CHAPTER 21

Student recitals. Solo recitals. Voice lessons. Holidays. The Glee Club spring concert. Duets with John. Church services. Billy's summer visits to Eitzen. Florence's visits to Minneapolis and Kansas City to see practitioners. Weekend music parties. On the surface, their family marched through the next few years mostly as it always had. Yet, their foundation was shifting ever so slowly and surely.

For one thing, John and Florence argued more than they ever had. They fought about big things, like John deciding to take a position at Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance without telling Florence. How could he up and leave the Mortgage Associates Company after working there for over a decade? Without so much as a conversation about it? Florence was offended, to say the least. And they fought about small things too—like the way John always lingered after concerts, flashing his smile at the posse of women that had started following him from show to show. And sometimes they fought about nothing at all. The easy trust and connection they'd long shared had been replaced by distance and pointed remarks.

Perhaps all this strife was part of the reason why, in the spring of 1951, Florence began planning another recital—and not for her students or the Glee Club. No, this time, she would be presenting a special performance—featuring just John and Florence. Singing alone, together. Their two voices joined as one. Joined as only their voices could be.

As always, Florence was meticulous in her preparations. She created a beautiful program which she had printed along with posters and flyers. She efficiently promoted the concert to her students and friends. She even

got them to run an announcement in the *Mankato Free Press*—it was a large black and white photo with blocky text beside it:

Husband, Wife to Give Concert Monday Evening.

Florence arrived early to the concert hall, as she always did before performances, to make sure the piano was tuned and the programs and chairs in order. Florence loved the infiniteness of empty auditoriums, the calmness of deserted hallways, and the dark night against the windows. The feeling of an auditorium ready for music always set her at ease.

After deeming the auditorium ready, Florence left to finish her makeup in the teacher's bathroom down the hall. She cut through the side entrance behind the stage and escaped into a hallway, where she was surprised to hear a thud, then a clatter from the music closet. Who else could possibly be on site so early? Florence knew the music closet well, with its narrow shelves that stretched eight feet on either side all the way to the back wall. Time and again she herself had organized the shelves—filled with song books and sheet music along with small percussion instruments, tuners, and long forgotten instrument cases—time and again. She knew that door and all that lay behind it so well she didn't think twice before turning the knob and letting the door glide silently open.

There it was, then, that familiar shape in the dim light—that tall slender frame, knee slightly bent, elbow crooked to rest on a shelf, other arm wrapped around someone, someone John was kissing and pulling into him. Florence closed the door, confident that John hadn't noticed a thing. Hadn't felt the air flow behind him, or the pulse of her gaze on the nape of his neatly trimmed neck. She retreated into the yellow light of the bathroom, pressed her palms hard against her eyes. She hated what she had seen—she wanted to believe her eyes were wrong. Yet the afterimage of John would not dissolve. So, she resolutely turned her attention to God.

Dear God, you have given me strength before, and I need your love now. I know that there is no evil, there is only love. Please guide me. In an instant she knew there was only one way—and that way was forward.

She splashed cold water on her face, cooling the redness on her splotchy cheeks, reapplied her powder and lipstick, and took a deep breath. She met her own eyes in the mirror and thought of the auditorium, surely already filled with students and colleagues, neighbors and friends, families and children.

People, Florence's people, all waiting.

After the concert the Buick crackled with electric silence. Billy pressed his knees against the front seats. He seemed confused, Florence thought. Probably unsure why everything seemed so tense when the concert had been such a success—full house, encores, standing ovation—all the things that usually got his parents, especially his mother, in high spirits following a recital.

Then, when the house door closed behind them, Florence saw Billy's face contort from confusion to fear as she herself began to scream and scream. Florence knew very well that Billy had never heard her scream like this before. Not even when he accidentally broke plates from placing them carelessly in the sink. Not even when he missed curfew coming home. Never. And she knew that he could not understand the words she was screaming—no one could. Her face was streaked in hot tears and her whole body was shaking.

John sent Billy to his room and took Florence by the shoulders. "Florence, come on," he said. "Get control of yourself!" He demonstrated taking an exaggerated inhale and exhale. "Like this," he said. "Now, breathe."

Florence shook John off her shoulders, but she did take a deep breath, composing herself enough to get out an intelligible sentence. “I saw you,” said. “I *saw* you, before the show.”

John seemed stunned, like he truly had no idea what Florence was talking about. But his face shifted ever so slightly before he looked at Florence blankly—as if thinking, *Well, it’s true. Is there anything I can say? I don’t think there is anything I can say...* He remained silent as Florence resumed screaming and shaking, which she continued to do as the two of them remained in their living room for the better part of an hour. Finally, when Florence had slumped onto the couch, her face in her hands, John began to speak calmly. He said, “I am sorry you are so hurt. I didn’t mean to cause you any pain.” In a different time, he would have gone to her, put his arm over her shoulders to comfort her. But now, Florence noticed he was smart enough to give her space. He retreated to their bedroom.

Florence sat for a while on the couch. She knew John. She had always known he had an eye for women—but it was different now. It wasn’t what he felt for the other women. It was what he no longer felt for her. And while she didn’t feel bitter or scorned, she did feel disrespected. Wholly disrespected. After everything she had done for John, and for their family. To have him behave this way—practically right in front of her. It was unfathomable.

The house was quiet the next morning with Billy off at school and John gone early for work. Florence sat by herself at the kitchen table and picked up the *Mankato Free Press*. She sipped her black coffee and missed her father more terribly than she had in many years. A few pages in, she saw an article detailing the concert. It read:

Mr. and Mrs. Deters Featured in Unique Recital

The audience called for two encores and applauded the success of the concert. Encore performances included:

Encore No.1 by John: 'No Other Love, by Chopin'

Encore No. 2 by Florence: 'You Will Remember Me, by Romberg'

Mankato can rejoice in the presentation of this kind of concert.

May there be more in the future!

Florence couldn't help but wonder. Would there be more in the future? For the first time in many years, Florence felt totally unsure. Something that had been bending inside of her since John's return from the military had finally snapped. There was no going back—only forward. She knew she would heal, but she also knew things would never be the same.

And she was right.

John and Florence marched forward to a tune of silent resentments on both sides. They both retreated into longer and longer hours of work and community service, spending very little time together. Florence felt that she was underappreciated and disrespected. John claimed he was not accepted, loved, or trusted as he should be. Their spoken arguments continued, although they did their best to hide their bitterness from others, especially Billy. But as hard as they tried, it was impossible to mask the tension that permeated their every exchange.

Once Bill's school let out for the year, he kept himself busy away from home. As a sophomore with a car of his own and a new surge of independence, he spent long days out with friends. He didn't even go to visit John's family in Eitzen that summer.

It was clear to Florence that none of them much wanted to keep going the way things were—but it was John who finally made a change. Florence watched through the picture window one afternoon as John parked the Buick on the street outside. They remained in the front seat of the car,

John resting one arm casually on Bill's headrest. While she couldn't, of course, hear what was being said, Florence knew sure enough. And she was right, as she later learned from Bill. "I'm moving to Pittsburgh," John had told him. "It's time for a change—I'll go out and get settled, and when I have a good setup, you'll follow."

Not only was Bill not crushed by this news, he was lit up by the prospect of a grand adventure led by his father's changing plans. Oh, Bill, Florence thought, knowing her boy—almost a young man now, truly—must be truly excited at the idea of moving to a big city. He must think that John meant all of them would follow him to Pittsburgh. That they would still be a family. But Florence knew better. She knew some wounds had to be left alone to heal. And she knew her marriage was already ending—even if it wasn't officially over yet. She knew these things but had no intention of forcing this knowledge on Bill or anyone else. She would keep it to herself, as she had done with so many things in the past. She would do her daily devotion and affirm that the Divine Truth would manifest itself.

After John left for Pittsburgh, Bill and Florence went about their lives and commitments as they always had, with little fuss. Bill, like Florence, was skilled and fiercely independent. He had his license and his own car, and he was respectful and happy to drive his mother where she needed to go, whenever he was available.

Not long after John left, Florence sat down with herself at the kitchen table to set a couple things straight. "Okay," she said aloud to herself, just as a practitioner might say to her if they were across the table from one another. She continued, "Florence, you are alone, you are responsible for yourself and Bill. No more John. That is a fact, and you must adjust your life accordingly. Your life is perfect. You have always been able to take care of yourself. When you were young. When your mother died. When your father died. When Bobbie died. When John was gone in the army. You've

always handled everything just fine and this will be the same. You love God and you love your life. Now. What do you need to do?”

Then she put her pencil to paper and wrote the following list:

1. *Learn to drive a car.*
2. *Buy your own car.*
3. *Organize time better.*
4. *Make sure what you are doing is meaningful and enjoyable.*
5. *Make sure what you are doing is profitable, you need to pay the bills.*
6. *Be cheerful, don't feel sorry for yourself.*
7. *Love God, your church, and all people.*

Yes, she thought, I must do this, and life will take care of itself. And that is exactly what she did. The first item on Florence's list to get checked off was the car: she bought a 1952 Packard Clipper. She took Bill with her when she went to purchase it so that he could drive it home. But the very next day, Florence started practicing—with Bill perched in the passenger seat to help— every chance she got. After just four lessons and some practice on her own, Florence was ready for the test. She was thrilled at the idea of being able to drive herself around—after all, it was crucial that she be able to take the driver's seat in her own life. Finally.

Florence passed the written test with flying colors—always the quick study—but the road test was a different story. She was so nervous her hands were shaking on the wheel as she turned hand over hand, looking over her shoulder. Halfway through the test she was sure she was going to fail. Her head was flooded with the thought—*What if I don't pass? What if I will never be able to drive myself?* She was excessively careful. And slow. Not at all smooth behind the wheel in the way John and Bill were.

The police officer asked her to pull over. *This is it*, she thought. *I'm done for*. The officer said, “Mrs. Deters, listen, I know you are serious

about becoming a good driver. And I think you are a safe driver, but you really need to practice. With experience I think you will do just fine. So, I am going to give you a passing grade. Congratulations! You can now drive your own car!” Florence was so thrilled she could have kissed the officer on the head, but of course she restrained herself.

As she drove herself and Bill home from the police department, Florence could feel Bill nervously holding the side of his seat, double checking her moves, seeming to signal he wasn’t so sure about his mother being ready to drive. But her son was smart enough not to say anything out loud. And Florence was too pleased with herself to scold him.

With John gone, 321 State Street had to find a new balancing point. Billy had always gotten along fine with Florence, but John was the one who had always been able to cajole their son out of a bad mood or inspire him or throw him into a fit of laughter. Florence didn’t know how to be like John—and she didn’t want to. Why should she? After all, how could she be expected to be anyone other than herself: efficient, restrained, and on task. She and Billy would have to navigate their new reality by coexisting peacefully, while mostly attending to their own busy lives independently.

Independent co-existence wasn’t difficult, given that Florence was working more than she ever had—and loving it. She was taking on ever more students and coming to find teaching more fulfilling than ever. Her work with the Women’s Glee Club was also busier by the day. Their next performance would be the opera *Martha* on January 26 – 27, 1953. It was a challenging performance and required more male singers than Florence could get together in time—but as always, she had a solution.

“Bill, dear,” she announced over a quiet dinner one night. “I’m going to need you to be available on the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh for the Glee Club performance.”

“You know I always make a point to come to your shows, Mom,” Bill replied between bites of his hamburger. “I’ll be there.”

“No, no,” Florence corrected. “I need you to *perform*. We don’t have enough males, and you have a lovely voice. Now, don’t worry about coming to all the rehearsals. I know you are busy with school. I can work with you at home. But those two nights, you’ll need to be free.”

Bill looked at his mother dubiously—clearly mortified at the idea of performing in one of her shows. He had never taken to music the way Florence had hoped, but she knew he would do this for her. “Come now, it’s just the chorus,” Florence continued. “Nothing to fuss about.”

The following fall, Bill finally got confirmation of what Florence had already known for more than a year—this marital separation was permanent. There would be no following John to Pittsburgh. This news came in a letter addressed to Bill, which he tore open in his car outside. Florence watched through the living room window as her son sat in stillness. She stiffened as he hit his head against the steering wheel and tore the letter to shreds. She didn’t need to read the letter to understand what had been inside. Bill stormed in from his car and ran straight up the stairs to his room, Lady plodding along behind him. She was old now, and her back legs had started to give. Still, she insisted on following Bill around the house—especially when she could tell he was upset.

The holidays that year were glum. Bill was still upset about the news from his father, and Florence was preoccupied with her backbreaking teaching schedule. She had also taken on an altogether new challenge. One of her students, Evelyn Nelson—who drove eighty miles from Albert Lee every week for lessons—had made Florence an offer. If Florence would agree to drive down to Albert Lee once a week, Mrs. Nelson would help her fill a day of lessons. So, every Monday Florence drove to Albert Lee to teach from nine in the morning through four in the afternoon, straight

through without a break. Then she drove back to Mankato, usually making it home before eight o'clock.

When spring winds blew in, they brought sadness to the Deters home as Lady lost interest in food along with the strength walk outside. Florence, having spent her early years on a farm, understood when an animal was close to the end and told Bill it would not be long. Bill, for his part, hated seeing Lady in pain, so when she finally let go on a cold spring day before Easter, he felt some fragile relief that her suffering was over.

Later that year, Bill graduated from high school, he quickly enlisted with the navy. It was as if the image of his father in uniform—the idea of his father as a noble hero—had never left him. Just like that, then, Bill was gone from Florence and Mankato. Indeed, he was ready and eager to begin his own independent life, to chart his own course, just as his mother had once been.

PART II

To stop the flow of music
would be like the stopping of time itself,
incredible and inconceivable.

Aaron Copland

CHAPTER 22

In the wake of her son's departure, Florence felt none of the emptiness and listlessness so often described by other mothers. To the contrary, she felt the tempo of life speeding up faster and faster with each passing year. She was busy, just as she had always been. With a quiet house and no one to cook and clean for besides herself, Florence realized she could accomplish more professionally. Soon, she accepted a position as assistant personnel director and music director at the Mankato Commercial College. Every Monday she drove to Albert Lee for a full day of lessons. Every Tuesday she led the Glee Club. In Florence's view, idle hands were the devil's workshop, and she had no intention of being idle—not ever. Thus, her days overflowed with commitments and demands and new challenges, all of which pleased her.

Also pleasing to Florence was the news from Bill, after he successfully completed the Naval Academy prep school, of being assigned to the University of Minnesota NROTC in Minneapolis. Florence was proud of her boy—now, truly a young man—and happy to have him close by. Bill often made the drive to Mankato to see Florence on weekends or long breaks. Mother and son would then slip easily into their old comfortable habits, sharing simple meals and talking over coffee in the morning about the news or family and friends.

Or, on occasion, news of John, who had recently remarried.

“Did I tell you Dad moved again?” Bill asked one morning. He sat at the kitchen table across from Florence, the paper half open in front of him. “I know I told you he got married. But now he's living down in Phoenix. I think I might visit next summer.”

“How lovely for him,” Florence said. And she was surprised, she truly was, at how effortless it felt to be happy for John, and for Bill. “It would be wonderful for you to see Phoenix. Warm down there in the summer, though.”

“True,” Bill said, “but that area is full of great trails and scenery—I’ve never been to the desert before. I might see if I can bring Grace—you know, the girl I’ve been going steady with—down to meet him. I know it’d mean a lot for both of them.”

“A wonderful idea,” Florence replied, “It certainly would be quite the trip.” Florence had met Grace several times and liked her very much. She knew John would like Grace, too. And most of all, she was deeply pleased that, even after the hard years they weathered together as a family, Bill was still so very close with his father. Bill had always idolized John—and it meant the world to Florence that the two of them could have a beautiful relationship now. Even she, with the help of her faith, had completely forgiven John, as she felt she must.

That summer—it was 1958 already—Bill did just as he had hoped to do and brought Grace to visit John and his wife Bea in Phoenix. For her part, Florence had finally transitioned from the role of wife and mother into some sort of *after*—her life now made sense and was filled with purpose. She was busier than she’d ever been. Perhaps that’s why she didn’t think too much of it the first time it happened, one afternoon in the heat of summer, just as she had finished her lessons for the day. It started normally enough, with the phone ringing in the kitchen hallway. “Hello?” Florence said into the receiver. But her greeting was met with an extended silence. Then, a voice on the other end of the line said, “Is this Florence?” That voice, it sounded just like John! Florence was sure of it. But why would John ask, “Is this Florence?” He would know. “Yes,”

Florence said. But before she could say another word, the person on the other end of the line hung up.

How strange. But Florence didn't think of it again until, two weeks later, another unusual call came. This time when she answered, she was greeted with only silence—the caller didn't say a word. Just silence, then the dial tone. The third call came as summer was winding down and the first tinges of fall were showing with red on the sumac and crab apples littering the sidewalks. This time, when Florence picked up the phone, it was Bill who spoke. “Mom,” he said, his voice strained, “I don't know how to tell you this, but Dad passed away this morning. He had a massive heart attack and didn't make it to the hospital.”

All at once, Florence was standing in her kitchen hall but flashing back to her father's house with Sarah over thirty years ago, huddled on the sofa, dialing and dialing, doing all the things you must when someone passes.

“Oh, Bill,” she said when she found her voice a half a second later. “I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Not right now, Mom,” Bill said, his voice soft. “The funeral will be in Eitzen, and Grace and I are going there right away. I will call you just as soon as I know more. I love you, Mom.” The line went silent, and Florence stood with the phone to her ear for several seconds before sinking onto the kitchen stool.

How could this be happening? John was still so young, only 49. What had made him ill? Was there a spiritual answer? Had he been unhappy after all? Had it been the stress of his new marriage? Of moving? “Stop,” she said to herself aloud. “Stop this right now. You can't know why John passed; all you can do now is pray. And ask God to be with your son.”

For the next few days Florence busied herself with work and tried to resist the urge to reach out to Bill. He had said he would call with more news when he had it. “The funeral will be tomorrow, at the Eitzen St. Luke's Evangelical and Reformed Church,” Bill told Florence when,

finally, he called. “I have seen the whole family, and many of them asked about you and send their greetings. It’s been hard, everyone keeps insisting that I look at him. But Mom, I don’t want to see him this way! I want to remember him full of life and happy the way he was when Grace and I visited him just two months ago.”

“I know it must be very difficult,” Florence said. She was being ever so careful with her words. “Bill, you must do what you think is right and best for you. I love you so very much. Thank you for calling.”

“I know this is not easy for you either,” Bill said. “And we are thinking of you. Love you, Mom.” Then he was gone again. He would be starting school the following week, and Florence worried about how this profound and sudden loss would affect him. Losing a parent—a beloved father—so young can change a person. Florence understood this because it had happened to her.

And she knew all too well that this loss would open a void in her son that neither she, nor any human power, could fill.

At the first break in the semester, Bill drove to Mankato to see Florence for the first time since his father’s passing. He told her all about the funeral, and, together, they remembered the many happy times with John, reminiscing about the father and the husband they had so dearly loved. Eventually, Florence told Bill about the phone calls she had gotten prior to John’s death, and how she thought they might have been from him. How she thought maybe he had known something might happen.

“Mom!” Bill said, “I think you must be right! Maybe Dad had some symptoms. Or maybe he had some kind of premonition. Maybe he just didn’t know what to say about it or how to talk about it. But I think you are right that he knew something.” Here, Bill paused. When he spoke again, he said, “There’s something else. Two weeks before his heart attack, Dad

bought a life insurance policy with me as beneficiary. Fifteen thousand dollars. I just received the check last week!”

“Bill,” Florence said quietly. “I think a lot more people know these things than we think. The spirit has a way of knowing.” She observed her son across from her and smiled softly. With his broad shoulders and wide smile, he was just as handsome as John had always been—and he looked more and more like him with each passing year.

“Mom,” Bill said, and now he was smiling, too. “I have one more thing to tell you. Grace and I are getting married. And we decided to move up our timeline. We’ve set the date for December 28. The Sunday right after Christmas—a winter wedding.”

“A winter wedding!” Florence echoed. She was thrilled. Yes, she knew this decision was fueled in part by grief and loss, just as her bond with John had been fueled in part by her own loss of her father. But she also knew that we all need to build connections through love to survive. She was happy for her son.

Bill and Grace’s wedding was held on the University of Minnesota campus at the Bethany Presbyterian Church, officiated by Rev. Alvin O. Carlson. Grace wore a smart royal blue suit with a white hat, and Bill was the image of his late father in his Navy Uniform. The church was full, with nearly forty guests in attendance. All the immediate family members from Eitzen were present, as was Grace’s family from her mother’s side—although her parents lived in Germany and could not attend. Florence looked lovely, as usual. And she was her friendly magnetic self, especially towards all the members of John’s family. It was a beautiful ceremony and Florence was filled with joy and pride, even if right beneath those happy feelings, she felt a swell of sadness that John was not there to share this special moment in their son’s life.

The time has come,” Florence said to herself one morning not long after Bill’s wedding. “I need to rent out one of the rooms in this old house. It’s too big for a little old lady to live in all alone.” Florence wanted the income, yes, but also the company of a renter. Bill and Grace visited often, but Florence understood that they were building a life of their own. She needed to take care of herself.

One evening after a voice lesson with one of her particularly talented students—Don, a young man who was studying at Mankato Teacher’s College—Florence mentioned she was thinking of renting a room in her house.

“How much will you be asking?” Don asked.

“Twenty dollars a month,” Florence said.

“I’ll take it!” Don said. He was clearly delighted. “When can I move in?”

“Don’t you want to look at it first?” Florence asked. She had to admit, Don’s immediate enthusiasm had taken her aback. They agreed Don would come by the following evening to look at the room and make his final decision. Unsurprisingly, he signed for the room the very next day. Soon Florence could see the divine plan in action once again, as Don seemed like a second son who arrived at just the right moment in Florence’s life. They shared a love of music and singing, and Florence was thrilled to introduce Don to opera. The first performance she brought him to was *Madame Butterfly*. Soon after, he shifted his voice studies to have an emphasis on opera.

With all her students, Florence was more than a teacher—she encouraged them to go beyond and to stretch themselves farther and farther, to perform at recitals and civic events, at their churches and in their communities. She encouraged them to reach higher, work harder, enter voice contests, and practice to win. Don was no exception, and under Florence’s tutelage he became eager to take on more opportunities to perform. Soon

he was a frequent soloist with the Mankato Women's Glee Club. He also allowed Florence to enter him in the Aquatennial Opera Contest—in which he won first place for the Dramatic Tenor Division with his rendition of “La donna e Mobile, from *Rigoletto*” by Verdi. The prize was an all-expense paid trip to the Palmer House in Chicago, for him and a guest. Of course, he took Florence.

Before their departure for the Palmer House, Florence threw herself into planning a special surprise for Don. She had to be sure everything was perfect before she told him. Finally, over dinner that Friday night in Chicago, she drew in a sharp breath and said, “Don, I have some news. You’re going to be singing your winning contest song on TV with the *Ed Sullivan Show!*” Don could barely believe it. He had no idea how Florence had made it happen—but, sure enough, when they went to the Palmer House auditorium, there was Ed Sullivan. After a few minutes, Sullivan announced Don’s prize and his song, and Don sang as elegantly as ever. Florence stood toward the back of the auditorium, letting the beauty of the music wash over her. She could not have been prouder of her student.

The next night, Florence had another surprise. She took Don to a South Chicago restaurant called Pucci. The maître d’ led them to a table near a stage on which stood a gorgeous nine-foot Steinway piano. Soon, an older gentleman in a tuxedo sat down at the piano and began to play. Florence tapped Don’s hand across the table. “Don,” she said, “that man’s name is Charlie. He is blind, but don’t kid yourself, he is a master. You are going to sing your song tonight. Just tell Charlie the key and you will be amazed.”

Florence had known about Pucci’s and Charlie the pianist for years. Pucci’s was near the University of Chicago and close to the Chicago Opera house, so opera stars would often come after their shows just to sing with Charlie. Before the food arrived at Florence and Don’s table, someone announced that an opera tenor was going to give a special presentation.

“Mr. Don Bulfer, winner of an Opera Tenor contest in Minnesota, is here with us tonight, give him a warm welcome!” they announced.

Don walked on stage and told Charlie that he would be singing “La donna e Mobile” in the key of A major. That was all. And so, Charlie began to play, and Don began to sing, and the two of them were equally impressive—they put on a truly stunning performance. At the end, the applause went on and on.

After Don had returned to his seat, the owner of the restaurant approached the table. “Thank you,” he said, placing a hand on Don’s shoulder. “Thank you both so much for that amazing performance. People like you are exactly why we do what we do. Your meal and drinks are on the house—enjoy!” Florence and Don could scarcely believe it. They stayed until closing, enjoying all the singing accompanied by Charlie’s gorgeous piano.

CHAPTER 23

As if Florence didn't have enough responsibilities already, she decided, in 1961, to take on a new project. The idea for it struck her one Saturday evening when she and Don were driving back from Minneapolis following a beautiful performance by The New York Metropolitan Opera Company at Northrup Hall. They were both reminiscing on how wonderful it was to experience live shows like this one, and how lucky they were to live within two hours of a city that hosted such talented groups.

"It's a shame not many people know about it," Don was saying from the passenger seat. "Besides us and the few people you bring along, I don't think a lot of folks from Mankato get exposed to performances like that."

All at once, Florence knew what she would do: start an opera tour, The Mankato Opera Tour. She started by telling her students and friends that she was planning to go to the opera on a certain date and that she would help them make arrangements if they wanted to join. Once she had enough people, she would charter a bus for transportation and book a dinner reservation in Minneapolis for after the show. Florence scheduled her first tour in 1961. The excursion would take place on Saturday, May 17, and by the time that date arrived, Florence had filled an entire bus with eager opera goers. The second year, she filled two buses, and from then on she filled three busloads per year, except for the year, when she filled four buses, then decided that was simply too many people to manage.

Florence loved managing the Mankato Opera Tour because she loved sharing the transformative power of music with her community. But it was a lot of work! As she told the *Mankato Free Press* when they interviewed her about the endeavor, "You would fall over dead if you knew

how much time I put into it!” The article went on to say, “... but she has the time and interest to do it and she loves it.” The Mankato Opera Tour also provided a small amount of added income for Florence, which she didn’t mind either.

Not long after Florence’s second successful Mankato Opera Tour—it was a bright spring afternoon—Florence’s telephone rang. When she answered, the caller said, “Hello, is this Florence Poling Deters?”

“Speaking,” Florence replied tentatively. Who would use her maiden name to address her, after all these years?

“Florence, this is a voice from your past. It’s Jeff! Jeffery Stoddard, your old friend from Simpson College.”

“Jeff! My goodness.” Florence was stunned. “It’s been ages. How are you?”

“I’m fine Florence! I’m well.” Jeffrey’s voice was eager as ever, even over the phone. He continued, “Listen, I need to see you. Can I come and spend an hour? Just to catch up and let you know what has gone on with me? I am in Minneapolis now. I can come any time.”

“Well, let me see,” Florence said. She pulled out her lesson calendar. “Next Saturday afternoon at four o’clock would work, since my last lesson is at three.”

“Very well!” Jeff said. “I’ll see you then!”

The following Saturday afternoon, Jeff arrived promptly, walking up Florence’s front steps at exactly one minute before four. He was tall and long-armed as ever, but now in an older man form. He had lost most of his hair but wore a stylish hat and suit. Finally, his age seemed to fit him. Florence opened the door and threw her arms around her old friend—surprised at how comforting it was to see a face from so many years ago. “Come in, come in,” she said as she motioned him into the house. “Can I get you anything? Tea? Water?”

“Water’s fine,” Jeff said. He seemed a bit nervous, fidgeting as he pulled his hands in and out of his pockets. Then, “Listen, Florence,” he started in after a quick sip of the water she’d brought him. “Can I just tell you why I came?”

“Go on, then,” Florence said, chuckling a bit to see her old friend acting so very much himself.

“Florence, my love,” he began. “And yes, my love, I still love you, but now in a caring way. As you know, I was married to a wonderful woman, Irene. She died about two years ago. We didn’t have any children, but we had a wonderful and rich full life together. After she died, her best friend Marietta also lost her husband, and last month we were married. I am happily married! Again!” He paused for another gulp of water. “Then, a week ago, Jonas came into my bank—I am owner and President of my dad’s bank in Minneapolis now—and I don’t know if you remember Jonas, but he was a classmate of mine at Simpson. Anyway, your name came up and he told me his sister lives in Mankato and his niece, Jean Olson, takes voice lessons from you! He was at Jean’s last recital.”

“Yes, Jean has a lovely voice,” Florence said, seizing the chance to get a word in edgewise with Jeff’s fast banter. “I know Jean and her family very well,” Florence continued.

Jeffery didn’t even seem to notice Florence’s comment—instead he seemed determined to get the rest of his story out in one long breath. “Jonas also told me your husband died about three years ago, and that you have a son—Jonas thought maybe he was in the navy?—and I can’t remember what else. Then, when I got home, I told Marietta about my love for you when I was a student at Simpson, and later when you were performing for Chautauqua. Well, she said she had already heard all about it from Irene before she died. So, I told Marietta that I had to see you, and she understood completely. That’s when I called you. I just had to come. I needed to find out how you are doing. And now, here I am.” He

stopped, shifting his eyes off his glass of water to briefly meet Florence's before looking down again.

"Jeff, I'm overwhelmed that you still remember me," Florence began softly, greatly endeared by his careful recounting of how he had come to be in her living room that afternoon. "It is quite lovely to see you and to hear that you are happy. I have had some bumps along the road, but now I am doing well. My son, Bill, graduated from the University of Minnesota and is now an officer in the navy. He's married to a wonderful woman, Grace. I am so proud of him."

Florence's conversation with Jeffrey went on for over an hour. They recounted their trials and their triumphs. Shared stories from their past. Enjoyed reminiscing in the company of an old friend. Before he left that day, Jeffrey said, "Florence, I would like to see you again, and I also want you to meet my wife."

"The only day I am free is Saturdays, in the late afternoon, just like today. Maybe you could come around five-thirty and we could go out to dinner? I never did learn to cook and really don't have time to fuss. But I would love to meet Marietta."

Jeffrey and Marietta planned their visit for the first weekend in May. They arrived in two separate cars, each pulling up to Florence's house. She opened the front door before Jeff and his wife were even halfway up the front walk. "Welcome," Florence called out. Together, the three walked to the restaurant on Front Street where Florence had made reservations.

The evening was warm and clear, perfect for showing off the spring scenery of Florence's beautiful small town. And the conversation at dinner was lively, since Florence and Marietta hit it off splendidly. Both Jeffrey and his wife loved opera and Florence told them about her bus tours to Northrup Hall in Minneapolis. Then, in the middle of the conversation—just as Florence was diving into a story about her upcoming opera

tour—Jeffrey cut in. “Florence, I can’t wait any longer,” he said. Now he was leaning so far forward that he looked as if he might fall right out of his chair. “I must tell you!” he went on. “After I saw you the last time, Marietta and I got to thinking of how we could help you have an even richer life. After all, you brought so much pleasure to my life. So, this is what we came up with. You know that money is absolutely no object to us, and we like to share. Therefore, we have paid off your house mortgage. You see, I called your banker and asked what was due, and now it is at zero! Then, I noticed your old Clipper. Of course, I know you must drive a lot with your work. Well, that car Marietta was driving? It is yours now! I hope you will accept these gifts. They are from our hearts.”

Florence had tears in her eyes when she said, “I really don’t believe what I am hearing. Why me?”

It was Marietta who answered, not Jeff. “Florence, my dear,” she said. “Jeffrey has been star struck over you for all these years. Irene and I both heard your name over and over and over.” Marietta chuckled at this and patted Jeffery’s hand. “Every time Jeff listens to an accomplished singer, he compares her to you. He was so happy to reconnect with you. And I know Irene would approve of him making this happen for you. Just as I do. Believe me when I say that Jeffrey will be much happier as a result of doing this.”

Florence simply had no words to express her amazement or the depth of her gratitude. Finally, she said, “All I can say is thank you. Both of you. I accept your gifts, although I still think it is far too much. But I understand, and truly, *thank you.*”

On the walk home, Marietta gave Florence the keys to her new car. Then, on her kitchen table, Jeffrey laid out the title to the car, asked her to sign, and that was it. Night had long fallen, and it was past time for Jeffrey and Marietta to head back to Minneapolis. They made Florence promise

to let them know when she would be in Minneapolis so that they could see her again. She agreed, of course. And just like that, they were gone.

In the soft light of evening, pen in hand, smooth ivory stationary glaring back at her from the polished surface of her writing desk, Florence felt entirely stymied. How could she possibly explain to Bill this recent turn of events—the unbelievable generosity of Jeffrey and Marietta? Outside, high-pitched squeals of the neighbor children rang out as they chased one another through the neighborhood’s wide front lawns under the warm glow of the streetlamps. It was almost as if the force of their joyful shrieking was lifting and billowing the lace curtain to Florence’s left, instead of the cool breeze of evening. And then, as if in rhythm to the children’s fading chorus, the lace fell back to the sill. “That’s it,” Florence said as she rose briskly from her chair and clapped her hands together. “It’s simply not possible.” She plucked the unwritten letter from the desk and folded it into thirds before stowing it in the middle drawer of her desk. No point in wasting perfectly good stationary—she’d simply write a different letter to Bill about something else later. For now, she would set this topic aside, because she could not imagine any acceptable way to express in writing all that had just happened. No, it would have to be in person, the next time Bill and Grace visited Mankato. Then, she’d tell them the whole marvelous, incredible story.

Jeffery was an old friend,” Florence said the following weekend. She paused to sip her coffee, but it was too hot. She set the cup back down and began again. “We knew each other from my college years at Simpson,” she said. “He always fancied me, a bit, you could say.”

“So, an old lover?” Bill said, his voice matter of fact, but his eyes curious. “From before you met dad?” He was leaning forward now, elbows on the

oak table, chin resting on his knuckles. Florence could tell that her son was trying to understand exactly where this story was heading.

“Well, we never dated formally,” Florence continued, “but it seems he’s held a candle all these years. You see, he and his second wife, Marietta—his first wife, Irene, passed several years ago—but he and Marietta came to visit me a few weeks ago. And it turns out that Jeffrey has done very well for himself. In fact, he’s now the president of a bank in Minneapolis. And he came here to tell me that he wanted to reconnect in a sense. To be part of my life somehow.”

Florence watched as Bill and Grace exchanged a quick glance. Clearly, they were intrigued and curious about this long-lost character from Florence’s past.

“Didn’t you say he’s married?” Bill said. “It seems...”

“No, no, not reconnect in *that* way,” Florence said. “Long story short, he and Marietta went ahead and paid off my mortgage—and gave me a new car, too. It’s parked out front!” Now, Bill and Grace both shot from intrigued to stunned. Florence reveled at the sight of their mouths hanging slightly ajar.

“They just—” Bill began to repeat what Florence had just said. “This guy just found you, after all these years—all these *decades*—and offered to pay off your house?”

“Yes.” Florence said. Now it was her turn to be matter of fact.

Bill shook his head in baffled amazement. His mother had always had an inexplicable magnetism, but this! This wasn’t something that just happened. Not ever, to anyone. People didn’t just pay off other people’s mortgages. It was the strangest thing he’d ever heard.

All the same, he was terribly grateful. It was a relief to know his mother wouldn’t have to work as much or as hard as she had all his life. Plus, he loved the light blue, 1962 Oldsmobile Cutlass sparkling in the sunlight. A perfect car for Florence.

CHAPTER 24

Thanks to her new freedom from mortgage payments, Florence did have more elbow room in her schedule, it was true—even as she continued performing and planning recitals and opera tours. But she didn't use her newfound spare time for relaxing. Instead, when Grace and Bill mentioned that their little Pomeranian, Jackie, was being neglected because of their heavy work schedules, Florence said, "I'll take her," which she most happily did. Florence was wholly thrilled to have a dog to love and share her house with again.

And Jackie did help to occupy some of Florence's time, but not quite enough, in Florence's opinion. Which is in part why she took up ... golf. Which began as an interest. Then, a hobby. And shortly thereafter, a passion and obsession, as was Florence's usual trajectory with any endeavor. What was the point, she sometimes wondered, of a "casual" pursuit? Anything worth doing was worth doing well. Extraordinarily well, if possible. As Florence's game improved and her love of golf deepened, she tried to get Bill on board, as well, inviting him out to the course anytime he came to visit, giving him detailed accounts of her successes. But Bill's enthusiasm failed to match his mother's. "I don't really get the point," he said on the few times they traversed the fairway together. Undeterred, Florence joined the golf club women's team and had no trouble at all finding partners and friends to join her whenever she wanted to play a round.

Perhaps the greatest surprise of Florence's so-called golden years arrived unexpectedly and in a form she never anticipated. It all happened about a year after Don had left for school in Iowa. Although Florence no longer needed extra money, thanks to the generosity of Jeffrey and Marietta, she

had decided to find another renter for her spare room. The truth of the matter was, she missed the company. And her days felt far too predictable, as well. She'd barely mentioned the rental room to more than a handful of students before it was spoken for—and this time, by an older woman, Hope Cummings.

Hope worked for Mankato Furr Company's main office just a few blocks over from Florence's home at 321 State Street. Florence liked that Hope had excellent references. She also liked that Hope had a delightful sense of humor. Perhaps most of all, at least at the outset, Florence liked that Hope was a truly excellent cook. Indeed, Florence didn't mind Hope's culinary talent even one little bit, since she herself never had put any time into learning to cook anything other than the basics and her mother's apple pie.

No one could have known it that soggy day when Hope first moved into the house on State Street, but something beautiful was born that spring: Hope would live happily with Florence for the next twenty-five years.

When the phone rang on May 7, 1964, Florence nearly knocked over the floor lamp in her haste to answer it. She'd been waiting all day for a call from Bill. In all honesty, she'd been waiting many months, almost nine to be exact, ever since Bill and Grace had announced Grace's pregnancy back in the fall. "It's a girl mom!" Bill said now, his voice brimming with joy and pride. "Angela Danielle Deters."

A girl. Florence could scarcely believe it—finally, a girl. Such a joyful surprise, especially after the sadness of turning away from adopting Rebecca all those years ago. With the phone pressed hard to her ear, Florence pulled herself out of her memories. "A girl!" she echoed. "How wonderful! And please, you must come visit as soon as you can."

Just one week later, Florence held her arms open for baby Angie as Bill and Grace bustled into the house on State Street. As Florence took the baby from Grace—who looked beautiful in the glow of new motherhood, Florence couldn't help but notice—she handed her daughter-in-law a thin envelope. Grace tore it open immediately. A card addressed to her and Bill and baby Angie. Grace read it silently before examining the \$25.00 United States Savings Bond made out to Angela Danielle Deters. From Jeffrey Stoddard! Grace handed the card to Bill with raised eyebrows as if to say, “Looks like he really does want to be a part of your mother's life.”

Florence said nothing, giving her full attention to baby Angie sleeping soundly in her arms, swaddled in a thin blanket. “Oh, you like that, don't you,” Florence said to the baby as she walked around the room, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet, bouncing and humming. She seemed to be in her own world, alone with the baby. When she spoke, she spoke directly to Angie. “Aren't you a dear,” she said, taking Angie's tiny hand in hers. “Listen now, you may call me whatever you wish—Grandma, Nana, Grandmother—but don't you ever call me Granny.”

Grace shot Bill a quizzical look but didn't say a word. Hope, on the other hand, had heard Florence's whole speech from the kitchen, and burst out laughing as she entered the living room, a plate of fresh-baked morning muffins in hand. “Now let me get a look at that baby,” she said to Florence. Then, to Grace and Bill, she said, “You two, just call me Auntie Hope.” And they did, for the rest of their lives.

Over her long career as a teacher, Florence had always found herself especially drawn to certain students over others. The names of these students would come up again and again on phone calls with Bill or during visits. In a sense, Florence's favorite students became “regulars” in the family discourse, even though Florence was generally the only one

who ever met them. The summer after Angie was born, it was Florence's "farmer student" who took center stage.

"He's just such an unusual case," Florence was telling Bill on one of their calls. "He is a farmer, and he lives about eight miles north of here, near St. Peter. His dream is to sing in the church choir. But the choir director will not accept him. And with good reason!" Florence's excitement radiated over the phone line. "He can't sing in tune, Bill! He starts off fine, but after a few notes, he falls completely flat. I simply cannot wait to begin lessons. I am so excited to teach him."

"I'm sure you can help, Mom," Bill said. Florence agreed.

All through that summer, Bill and Grace visited Mankato often. Florence wanted as much time with baby Angie as possible, and her parents wanted the same for their daughter. Every visit was punctuated with progress reports on Florence's farmer student. Even months later, the reports kept coming, until finally, during a visit that fall, as the tips of the leaves began to burn with shades of orange and red, Florence launched in again. "You remember my student, the farmer who couldn't carry a tune?"

"How could we forget?" Bill said with a laugh.

"Well, last Sunday Hope and I went to his church, by invitation, and not only is he singing in the choir, but he had a short solo we had been working on, and he sounded great!" Florence paused, then added, "Hope and I were asked to his house for dinner, and we met his family. I tell you, there is no one prouder on this earth than he was. That is why I love what I do."

Grace, who had baby Angie on her lap, asked, "And how long did it take? With his lessons?"

"Less than a year!" Florence said proudly. "Now, that's dedication."

Dedication was something Florence had always valued greatly. After all, as soon as she herself put her mind to something, she nearly always made it happen. Like her idea about an opera tour in New England—why

not? She was eager to see the fall colors and Niagara Falls. By the time she told Bill and Grace about it, Florence had already spoken to a travel agent, promoted the tour, and had a bus full of participants signed up. Bill was impressed, but not surprised. Somehow, Florence always found time and energy for these projects.

As the next years passed, Bill and Grace became rich in daughters—Elizabeth Kolenda and Martha Lousie arrived in 1967 and 1968—and the young family came often to visit Grandma Deters and Auntie Hope. And while the visits were filled with laughter and the usual spoiling, Florence herself wasn't what anyone would call a "doting" grandmother. She loved the girls, but the fact of the matter was, she was busy. She had tasks to complete, and plenty of them. And she didn't care to slow herself down to a child's pace. While visiting Florence, the girls spent most of their time beside their Auntie Hope, helping her bake cookies or listening to her intricate stories or playing dress up with her too-big shoes and dresses.

Perhaps above all, Florence prided herself on her private nature. She would never understand people who "let it all hang out," so to speak. No one had any business in her personal affairs. Talking about others was far more entertaining, if you asked Florence, than talking about oneself. And talk about others she did. Not in the form of gossip—more like stories born of interest, curiosity, and care. And if you listened closely enough to Florence's stories about so-and-so and such-and-such, you could piece together what was important to her. That's how Bill and Grace first started to pay attention to "the judge."

The judge lived in a nearby county and enjoyed opera. He'd been attending for a few years, and one day Florence mentioned to Grace and Bill how flattered she was when she first met the judge, because he remembered

her from her Chautauqua days. The days of her stardom. And since they both loved opera, Florence and the judge got to talking on the bus rides to and from Minneapolis—the very same bus rides that Florence herself organized as part of her now very successful opera tours. After those long hours on the bus with the judge, Florence always had interesting tidbits to share. Over time, the two became very close friends. But as was her way, Florence never did introduce the judge to Bill and Grace.

Even private people, however, have their breaking points. Florence's breaking point finally revealed itself one Saturday afternoon as she sat across the kitchen table from Bill. She'd driven up the day before and spent the night—and she'd be heading back to Mankato before sunset. She didn't care much for night driving. Now, she felt fidgety and agitated, and her restlessness shot through her fingertips as she tapped them against her coffee cup. "I have something I've been praying about," she finally blurted out. "And I value your opinion, Bill. I'd like to see what you think."

"Okay," Bill said, but cautiously. His mother was notoriously strong willed and rarely apprised him of her plans until they were nearly finished, let alone asked him his opinion about something *before* doing it. "What is it?"

"Well," Florence said, then drew a breath. "Do you remember the judge, from my opera tours?" Florence always referred to people in her life this way, by their category and relation to her, rather than simply by their own name.

"Sure, I remember," Bill said. "What's going on with the judge?"

"Well," Florence sighed as she set a diamond ring on the table between them. "He's asked me to marry him, and I'd like to know what you think."

Bill said nothing, so Florence went to the stove and got the coffee pot to refill their cups. She took her seat again. Still, Bill said nothing. The ring sat untouched on the table in front of him. The silence was so loud that the kitchen clock seemed more like a gong. When Bill did finally speak, he

did so slowly and deliberately. “Mom,” he said. “I don’t think it is my place to offer opinions on something like this. We’re talking about *your* life, *your* future. You have to make your own decision.” He paused for a moment. “Anyway, I had no idea it was that serious between you two.”

“To tell you the truth,” Florence said, “neither did I.” She was plenty relieved to be moving on with this conversation rather than sitting in that thunderous silence. “I was a little surprised myself,” she went on. “I knew he was very lonely. His wife passed about five years ago, and his children are all married, with families of their own and no time for him. Still, a proposal? For heaven’s sake. But we do get along very well, and I always enjoy his company.”

“Well,” said Bill slowly. “I am sure you will make the right decision—and it is up to you alone.”

With that, they finished their coffees and Florence left to drive herself back to Mankato.

CHAPTER 25

When the first snow of the season finally fell in December of 1969, the Deters girls were ecstatic, because soon it would be time for their Christmas trip to see Grandma Deters and Auntie Hope! And they were delighted when, upon opening Florence's door, the house seemed to almost spill out onto the porch, filled as it was with decorations. Auntie Hope had gone above and beyond, with a huge and beautifully decorated tree plus garlands of artificial poinsettias and pine wrapped around the stair banister. She had also placed bright red live poinsettias flanking the entryway and in the living room. "Look! Mommy! Look!" Angie exclaimed, spinning around in her joy at the beauty of it all. Then she pulled on her mother's hand and pointed at the shiny packages under the tree.

On Christmas Eve, Grandma Deters gathered the family around the piano and led everyone in a round of classic carols. The house was rang with music, much as it had all those years before when John and Florence hosted their music parties. After the singing, Bill took Angie and Beth outside to see if they could see Santa or his sleigh in the sky.

"Grandma, we did see it!" Angie reported proudly on their return. "Santa's sleigh! Daddy spotted it way up in the sky."

"Of course, you did!" Auntie Hope replied, matching the excitement in Angie's voice. "And look what he brought for you!"

Santa—whose timing was impeccable, as always—had managed to leave his gifts inside while the girls were outside with their parents. And it was perfect.

Christmas dinner was prepared mostly by Auntie Hope, except, of course, dessert. This could only be Florence's apple pie, her mother's recipe, which she served with vanilla ice cream. After dinner, the girls played happily with their new toys while the grown-ups chatted in the living room.

"Well," Florence began, in that way she did when she wanted everyone to know she had something to say. "I'm sure you have been wondering what I decided about getting married." It had been over a year since she'd asked Bill's advice about the proposal. And she hadn't said a word to them about it since. Surely, they had to be wondering!

"After asking for God's guidance," Florence went on, "I have decided not to marry the judge. I am getting older, and he is three years older than I am. At this age, one does not know about the future. I have my hands full taking care of myself. And what if something happens to him? What if he loses his health or mobility? I don't want to be tied down." She paused, gazing at the lights on the Christmas tree, which twinkled against the tinsel. "He was disappointed," she said finally. "But he wanted me to keep the ring. He truly cares for me—I guess it was selfish of me, but I know it was the best decision. We will still be friends and I will see him as often as possible. That will be important for both of us."

"This all makes sense to me," Bill began, but before he could say anything more, Florence continued over him. "Besides, I have a family!" she said. "I have you and Grace and the girls, and Hope. I have my sweet dog, Jackie. I am not lonely at all! And I have lots to keep busy with. So, yes, I made the right decision for me and that is the only decision I could make."

The following spring, Florence's sister Ina came to visit Mankato. The plan was to celebrate Ina's eighty-sixth birthday, and Florence was thrilled about it since it had been several decades since she'd seen Ina. And

Bill and Grace arranged to come to Mankato for the occasion. Bill had never met Ina while he was growing up. But he'd heard many stories about his mother's favorite sister. He was thrilled to think he'd finally be meeting someone from his mom's side of the family.

Florence was relieved to find, on Ina's arrival, that she was still very much herself full of energy and sharp as ever. Less than one hour into the visit, she was up to her usual antics, waiting till she thought Florence was out of earshot to query Grace. "Do you know how old Florence is?" Ina asked with a wry smile.

"Yes," Grace said. "She's sixty-nine years old."

"Ha! No. I am twelve years older than Florence, and I was 12 when she was born.

Now, I am 86. So," Ina said knowingly, "In September Florence will be 74."

Ina's visit was filled with joy and reminiscing. On her last morning she gave Florence a long hug and kissed both her cheeks before Bill helped her down the stairs. "Just you wait, Florence, you'll be as old and decrepit as me one day soon. Your body knows your true age, even if no one else does!" With that, Ina erupted into a fit of laughter. Little did Florence know that would be the last time she'd hear her sister's mirthful laugh.

Ina's visit was not the end of excitement for Florence that spring, for this was also when she discovered that little Angie loved to sing—and she had a beautiful voice! Every time Angie came to visit, Florence would take special time to teach her a song and give her a lesson. Angie was musical in a way that Bill had never been. Indeed, Angie seemed to enjoy all the extra attention from her Grandma Deters. Florence was thrilled! That spring she wrote to a letter to Grace and Bill saying:

So pleased Aunt Ina got to see you all. It really pleased her. She is a dear—I hope I can do as well at her age. Also, I would like to include

Angela in this spring recital. The weekend of May 8 is fine for her to come down and practice. Each day we will rehearse her song in short intervals, going through it several times carefully. I want her to feel sure and poised, in her sweet childlike manner. Also, I feel she should be here for a Saturday morning rehearsal.

10 a.m. at the small theater, May 16. We'll use the foot lights, which are blinding. One cannot see the audience at all when performing. She must get that all in mind, we wouldn't want any surprises for her. Enclosing a few programs.

Love, Mother

The recital was held on Sunday, May 17 at Mankato High School. It started at eight in the evening. The Deters family filled the whole front row. Florence dressed Angie in a pink ruffled dress and shiny black buckle shoes. Angie sang three songs: "Waiting to Grow," "Indian Lullaby," and "The Robin and Chicken." Her performance was perfect, and Florence was overjoyed and proud. She began planning for the following year immediately.

Managing Angie's rehearsals and recital performances became one of Florence's many obligations, along with: running the yearly New England opera tours, giving voice lessons, directing the Baptist Church Choir and Commercial College Choir, and serving as director of music at Bethany Lutheran College as well as the Mankato Glee Club. And, of course, soloing for the Christian Science Church every Sunday.

CHAPTER 26

The commotion, when it erupted, came from the back of the bus. “Stop! Stop right now!” a passenger yelled. It was fall, 1971, and Florence and her New England opera tour group were on their way back to Mankato after another successful year on the road.

The driver pulled off at the nearest exit and everyone was looking around to try and figure out what was happening. Mrs. Jones, who had been on several of Florence’s tours, was sobbing uncontrollably. “My husband is not breathing,” she stammered. “I think he is gone.”

The driver and Florence made their way down the middle row only to find that, sure enough, Mr. Jones was not breathing. The driver could not find a pulse. Mr. Jones had passed away.

Florence couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “What should we do?” she asked out loud, to no one in particular.

Mrs. Jones was white as a ghost, shaking, and in such a panic that the words, when they came, tumbled out of her mouth: “Let’s just get home, I have no money to pay a doctor, I need my family, it will take us forever to get away if we talk to anyone or call the police. Please, go. Please, let’s just go.”

The driver looked at Florence. “We are only about four hours out of Mankato,” he said. “And she’s right, we could be detained for hours or even a day if we go anywhere now. I think we should talk to all the passengers and see what they want to do.”

Florence agreed and stood on a seat at the front of the bus. “Hello,” she called out. I need your attention. I understand this is upsetting for everyone, but I need to know how many of you would be willing to

continue for four more hours to get to Mankato. If you are okay to press on, raise your hand.” Every single passenger on the bus raised their hand and agreed to stay the course toward Mankato.

As the driver started the bus, a hush fell over its interior. Not one person said a single word for the rest of the ride. Florence sat near Mrs. Jones, trying to exude comfort as best she could. As they pulled into Mankato, the driver insisted they stop at the hospital immediately. The rest of the passengers disembarked at the wide-double doors to the emergency department—and from there they walked away in silence, one by one. Florence remained with Mrs. Jones and the driver to try and help handle everything as best she could.

“And this is why,” Florence explained during Bill and Grace’s next visit, “I have decided to discontinue the New England opera tours. I have been at it since 1965. It is time to stop.”

However, it wasn’t long before Florence was back in the tour business. The following fall, she announced her intentions to launch The Mankato Theatre Club Tour. “It will be an Eastern Mediterranean cruise,” she told Bill over lunch on an unseasonably warm October day. “Which includes stops in: Athens, Dubrovnik, Rome, Madrid, and Lisbon. As well as a Cruise of the Greek Isles—twenty-two days in total. We will leave on April 20, 1972.”

“But mother,” Bill said. He looked confused by her announcement. “I just don’t understand. Didn’t you just discontinue the New England tours last year? Because of the stress?”

“Yes,” she said. “But that was last year, and this is this year. And Bill, listen, you know I love to travel. And I miss going overseas! Many of my friends talk about the wonderful cruises they have taken. I get jealous. I’ve never been on a cruise. And I have a great partner in the R. H. Lutes Agency. They are doing all the scheduling, I need only to bring at least sixteen people for me to get a free trip. A free trip, Bill! That’s more than

worth it. I mean, naturally I will be in charge, but if questions arise, the agency can answer for me.”

“That sounds all well and good,” Bill said, “but don’t you already have enough to handle?” He looked, Florence couldn’t help but notice, genuinely concerned for her.

“I will be postponing the spring vocal recital until summer, and I will be back in time for the May opera tours,” Florence said cheerfully. “Not a problem. What’s more, the package includes air, all meals on the airplane and cruise, breakfast every morning, hotels, sightseeing, and even tips. All for only \$1,085.50. Can you believe that price?”

Bill gave up trying to discuss it—he knew his mother was determined and he knew she would get it done and be on her way in April. Sure enough, by Thanksgiving, when Florence visited Minneapolis, she already had seven deposits, just by word of mouth. She had also brought along a copy of an ad the travel agency had helped her prepare. It would be in the *Mankato Free Press* just after the holiday.

“Looks great Mom,” Bill replied, “I like the picture you chose.”

At Christmas, Florence’s first words to Bill and Grace, after she had shepherded the girls, with their snowy boots and coats, into the house, were, “Not just sixteen, *eighteen* fully paid deposits!”

Bill knew better than to say anything other than congratulations. He still suspected the cruise wouldn’t be as relaxing as Florence was convinced it would be. And he was right. By the time Florence returned mid-May, she was completely exhausted, emotionally and physically. The work of caring for eighteen people abroad was far more than she had expected. Nonetheless, she still had the opera bus tour and recital to plan. And when in 1973 she decided to pause her bus tours, it was only because had something else in the works. “The Scandinavian Experience” would be a twenty-day tour of London, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. She had no trouble filling the tour, which went off without a hitch. But, on her

return home—after detailing the events of the trip—she announced, “Bill, I think this will be my last tour. For real, this time. And I thought you would like to know. Worried as you always are about my so-called pace. I am genuinely worn out after this one. So much so that I’m not sure it was worth it.”

“I’m sorry it was hard, Mom,” Bill said.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” Florence said. “I had a good time and so did everyone else.”

Bill smiled and held his tongue. Florence could tell he was happy that she was finally letting go of touring. What she didn’t know was just how happy he was, especially since he knew—thanks to Ina—that Florence was almost 77 years old.

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CHAPTER 27

Since that very first performance with Angela, Florence had continued the yearly tradition of training her and including her in the spring recital. She often gave voice lessons to the younger girls, Beth and Marti, but they never performed. This time, leading up to the 1975 recital—it would be Angie’s sixth performance—Florence selected four lovely songs. The first three songs Angela knew well and liked very much. For the fourth song, however, “The Little Horses” by Aaron Copeland, was a different story. Florence had chosen it because she knew that Angela adored horses and dreamed of having her own someday. She was sure Angela would love the song. But she did not love it. Not one bit.

“It’s a lullaby, Grandma Deters!” Angie protested. “Just like I sang when I was five! I’m eleven now, and much too old for songs like ‘The Little Horses.’”

Florence insisted over Angie’s complaints. She was, after all, in charge. “The Little Horses” would be performed by Angela Deters. Florence would not have it any other way. And when Angie took the stage at the recital, she was her usual charismatic self, confident and smiling. She completed the first three songs beautifully. But when she got to the fourth song, her demeanor changed drastically. Grace and Bill—seated in the front row as always—looked worried. Their little girl had lost her smile, and seemed to be focusing much harder than usual, but nonetheless she sang:

*Hush-a bye, don't you cry
Go to sleep little baby*

*When you wake, you will have cake and
All the pretty little horses
Blacks and bays, dapples and grays
A coach and six white horses
Hush-a bye, don't you cry
Go to sleep you little baby
A brown and gray and a black and bay and a
Coach and six—*

Then, it happened. Florence saw it immediately, the flash of panic across Angie's face. It was obvious what was happening. Angie had forgotten the words. She improvised and managed to finish out the verse she was in the middle of singing, but the moment she hit the last note of that verse, she took a bow and ran off the stage. She was crying uncontrollably.

Grandma Deters complimented Angie on how well she had improvised. "It happens to everyone," she said. "Even the very best performers. I am sure no one had the slightest idea that you forgot the words, or that you didn't sing that song perfectly."

Angie shook her head, refusing to meet Florence's eyes. When Bill and Grace came backstage they, too, told Angie how much they had enjoyed her performance and how wonderful she was.

"You are lying," Angie cried. "I was awful and forgot my words."

Bill put his hands on his daughter's shoulders. "Angie," he said. "What are you talking about? Your songs sounded perfect to me!"

"You are lying!" Angie said again. "You are all lying! I know it was awful, and I won't ever sing in a recital again." And she didn't. Not even later, in high school, when her music teacher, Mrs. Larson called Grace one day to say, "Mrs. Deters, I don't know if you are aware of this, but your daughter Angela has a beautiful singing voice. I have known very few students with such a voice. She is number one in 3,000. But I cannot get

her to join any small singing groups. Nothing but the high school choir. And I would like her to sing a solo part with the choir, but even that, she refuses. Can you help me?”

When Grace sighed and told Mrs. Larson about that long-ago recital with Florence, Mrs. Larson said she understood. “But it’s terribly sad,” she said. “You know, Angie could have had a career in music. If only she would still sing.”

The headline read, *A Woman’s Place ... In Making Joy*. It was the May 31, 1975 edition of the *Mankato Free Press*, and Florence had spread the paper out on Bill’s dining table during a visit. A reporter had done a long profile about Florence, detailing her career and service to the community. It included a large photo of Florence with the caption: *for five decades, the sound of music has been Florence Deters’ forte.*

Florence pointed out her favorite quotes, reading them aloud to Bill and Grace. She laughed at how the reporter wrote, “*One thing you’ll never find in Florence Demers’s record collection is an album by Led Zeppelin. That disruption would represent a total departure from her love of music—specifically opera. The voice teacher spares little love for any kind of rock and roll, much less hard rock.*”

“What I told them,” Florence said to Bill and Grace, laughing to herself, “is that those rock singers just yell and scream their heads off. And they do!”

The article went on to describe Florence’s accomplishments and her great service to the Mankato community: *She continues to give lessons to a small group of voice students who range in age from her 10-year-old granddaughter to a farmer in his 50s. “I’m giving them a service,” she says simply. “I’m equipping people to sing, to enjoy their lives. It’s a more lasting accomplishment than my years as a performer.”*

Florence certainly didn't want to appear as if she was making a fuss over the article, but she did think it would mean something to Bill to know the *Press* had thought his mother's work was important enough to write about this way. It meant all her time all these years meant something, that it was appreciated.

"But with good always comes bad," Florence announced as she folded the article back into her purse. "I have news to share with you. Last week, my dear sweet Jackie passed away. She was the best dog that Hope and I could have asked for. She had a long happy life. And we miss her very much."

Grace and Bill looked sad to hear this news of Jackie, just as Florence knew they would. After all, she'd been a part of the family for many years, and they knew how she kept Auntie Hope and Grandma Deters company. Florence had expected her son and daughter-in-law to take this news hard. What she didn't expect—not in the slightest—was their decision to surprise her at the holidays with a three-month old Pomeranian puppy in tow.

"Oh my!" Hope exclaimed when she opened the door, "who is this perfect little creature?"

"We knew she would be perfect for you and Hope," Bill and Grace said together, their words tumbling out all at once. "We knew you would love her!" And they were right.

"She's a treasure and a gift," Florence said. She and Hope decided to name the little pup Sissie, and she was a wonderful addition to their little family.

When Bill slipped a wad of cash into Auntie Hope's hand on departure, he didn't realize Florence was just a few steps away in the hall already. "Just make sure Sissie gets to the vet for her shots," he was saying.

Florence, of course, avoided medical doctors herself—a part of her religious practice—and she certainly would not be bringing a dog to see a vet. But nor would she attempt to stop Hope from doing so, especially if it was so important to Bill.

CHAPTER 28

For Florence, the next year was a time for focusing on her students and performances and for training Sissie. And that one other minor matter, the one she'd been keeping to herself, keeping under wraps, until she felt the urge to share. Which, as it happened, came during the middle of dinner with her family.

"You know how I have always dreamed of returning to Fontainebleau?" she said, pushing a spoonful of mashed potatoes around on her plate. "Where I studied in France? Well, next year, I am going back!"

"Another tour?" Grace asked while she helped Marti get a slice of turkey.

"No, no tour," Florence said. Here, she flashed a smile at Bill. "This time, a vacation. A real vacation."

Bill and Grace looked thrilled at this. They looked even more thrilled when

Florence told them she wanted to bring Hope to Fontainebleau with her. "How wonderful," Grace said. "I couldn't think of a better companion for you on a big trip like this one."

Florence explained that she'd been putting money aside and had five hundred dollars to contribute to Hope's travel expenses. "I am wondering if you and Bill might consider contributing the same, as a gift. And the rest I am sure she could cover herself."

"Of course," Grace replied immediately. "I know we would both be happy to make this happen for Hope." They all agreed to keep it a secret until Christmas, so they could present it as a surprise. Then, when the time came, they placed under the tree a small box with a tag that said:

To: Hope

With love, from your family

Inside was a copy of the entire itinerary of their eighteen-day trip to France. Hope looked overwhelmed with emotion, especially when she got to the end of the card, signed, *with love, from your family*. “How could you do something so wonderful, so generous?” Hope said. She had never traveled internationally and would never have been able to go on such an extravagant trip without their support.

In the still black morning of June 18, Florence and Hope were both wide awake—neither of them had slept a wink. They were too eager and excited about their trip. They had arrived at Bill and Grace’s house in Minneapolis the night before and would soon board a plane to New York, and from there a cruise to London. The whole Deters house woke up to see them off, although the three girls went quickly back to sleep after kissing Grandma and Auntie goodbye.

For Florence, arriving in New York and setting forth on the cruise felt almost like stepping back in time. She found herself flooded with memories from her past. Ivan, dancing under the stars, her adventures in the speakeasy. Many things had changed—indeed, so very much had changed. But the feeling of watching the shore fade away into the distance still filled her with that mix of excitement and nervousness, just as it had that very first time. But now she had a dear friend at her side, a person with whom she could share her joy, a person who would stand by her as they faced the vastness of the ocean and everything it represented between this shore and the next.

Florence and Hope returned nearly a month later to Minnesota. The July air that greeted them was so thick with humidity that even long

after the sun had set, the stickiness persisted. Florence didn't mind. Her heart was so full to the brim from the excitement of her trip that when she threw her arms around Bill—there in the shallow light of Terminal 1 at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport—she could barely contain herself, despite a lifetime of practice. Bill had been waiting, patiently, book in hand, for Florence and Hope's flight to land. After embracing both of them, he stacked their luggage on a pushcart and led the way back toward his car. Long before they got halfway to the parking garage, Florence and Hope were immersed in the telling of tales from their travels. And in the car—windows down and humid air washing over them—their stories and laughter spilled out into the night.

Florence and Hope remained in Minneapolis with Bill and Grace for the next few days, and the girls offered the perfect audience for the colorful accounts of Auntie Hope and Grandma Deters' travel adventures. Marti, the youngest, was especially entranced. She would sit and listen for hours, begging the two women to tell more about the cruise and London and Paris and Grandma Deters' old school in Fontainebleau. At eight, Marti could scarcely believe that her grandmother and Auntie Hope had slept on a boat or that there was a queen, a real one, in London, or that Grandam Deters used to live anywhere so far away.

"Grandma," she pleaded over breakfast on their last morning, "tell the one about the channel. I mean, the first time! When you went across by boat."

"Well," Florence began, "that had to be one of the most terrifying boat rides of my life." And then she began.

After three good days of rest, Florence threw herself back into teaching and preparing for the Mankato Opera Tour. August in Mankato was beautiful as always, with the last abundance of summer spilling over

in every shade of green. Although Florence had loved every part of her trip to France, she was glad to be home and grateful to be surrounded by her students and friends and community. Her days were full, but slower than before. Florence and Hope were both mostly retired, sharing the comfort of their home and each other's company, and enjoying themselves in an increasingly comfortable silence.

That silence was broken one morning as Hope stood at the kitchen sink washing fresh garden tomatoes, so red and full of life, only to startle at the sound of a crash from the entry. She dropped the tomatoes into the sink to find Florence crumpled at the base of the stairs, a high whine cutting through the air on every exhale.

"Oh my!" Hope yelled. "Oh no, no, no. Florence, what happened? Did you fall?"

Florence was completely still, gone into her pain. But she nodded slightly. "I caught my foot on the last step," she said. "I just need a bit of help to stand up, so that I can make my way to the sofa and rest."

"Florence," Hope said. "We need to call a doctor—you need to be seen right away." Florence could hear the panic in Hope's voice, despite her obvious efforts to hide it.

"You know how I feel about medicine," Florence snapped. "Just help me to the sofa."

So, Hope helped lift Florence from the floor, then guided her in fits and starts—Florence's whole-body weight pressed against her—onto the sofa. Hope ran straight to the phone in the kitchen and called Bill.

"Florence has fallen," Hope said into the phone receiver. "She can't walk, and is in a lot of pain, and she will not let me call a doctor, what should I do?"

Although Florence couldn't hear what Bill said, she could easily imagine her son's response: *I am on my way!* She was right, of course, and therefore not surprised when Bill arrived two hours later. Even if she had

been surprised, she could barely have registered it, let alone protested. She was too delirious from the pain and stress on her body. She barely uttered a single word between when the ambulance arrived and her quick journey into emergency hip-replacement surgery. Her silence persisted after the surgery and during her first days of recovery. “Bill knows my feelings about doctors,” Florence thought, “and there is really nothing more to say on the matter.” Despite her misgivings over breaking from her faith to undergo surgery, Florence went onto recover well and quickly. So quickly that Bill raised misgivings of his own. “You’re back to teaching, already?” he said during one of their weekly calls. “Mom, it’s only been two months since your fall.”

“Yes, well, my faith has helped me heal,” Florence said matter-of-factly. “And you know I can’t stand sitting around.” Then she launched into an account of her various students and their progress or lack thereof. She didn’t like to talk about what had happened, especially as it concerned the medical intervention. Better to keep moving forward than to spend too much time looking back. And better to talk fast than to let Bill get too far down the road of his so-called “concerns.” Eventually, Florence did pause—in the midst of an intricate story about a particularly talented student—and the moment she did, Bill jumped in. What he said was certainly not what Florence was expecting.

“That’s wonderful about your student, Mom,” Bill began, then quickly changed topics without missing a beat. “And also, Grace and I have been talking lately about whether it might make sense for you and Hope to move to the cities.” And now it was Bill who spoke quickly to make sure he’d finish his thought before Florence took over again. “Mankato is far,” he said, “and if anything were to happen—well. I just think you and Hope should think about it, moving to Minneapolis, or one of the suburbs closer to us.”

After a short silence, Florence spoke. “I will pray about it,” she said.

CHAPTER 29

Less than a year later, the decision was made. In winter, Florence put her beloved home on the market. The home she believed had been built just for her family the second she spotted it all those years ago. The home for which she had done the math in order to convince John that they could buy it. The home she presented to her son as the grandest surprise. The home where she had thrived these past forty years. And the home to which she said a strained good-bye to in the spring of 1979, when she and Hope left Mankato for good.

Move day was cars and trucks and boxes and boxes and boxes. Of course, they had hired a team of movers, and Bill and Grace had cleared their schedules to help. But “fitting four decades worth of house”—as Hope called it—into a two-bedroom apartment took plenty of hard maneuvering.

The new apartment that Florence and Hope would share was situated in a small building on a quiet street in Edina, a first-ring suburb of Minneapolis, not too far from Bill and Grace and the girls. Hope and Florence greatly appreciated that proximity, as well as the building’s lovely courtyard where they could walk Sissie, which they each did several times each day.

On one such walk—the air was especially brisk that evening, with the sun low over the tree-line—Florence took to reminiscing, as she found herself doing more recently, even in spite of her resistance to looking back. “You know that article, Hope?” Florence said. “The one from last week, in the *Mankato Free Press*, with a quote from one of my students?”

“Mhmm, yes,” Hope said absentmindedly. “The one about Shirlee.”

“Yes, that,” Florence replied, “that one. It got me thinking. The student said it was her dad who insisted she take voice lessons, and that it was her dad who dragged her to study with me, kicking and screaming all the way, and that it was I who then changed her life forever. She said that lessons with me set her up to be a soloist in San Diego and member of the San Diego Opera Chorus, all that.”

“Yes,” Hope said. “She was lucky her father saw her talent, wasn’t she?”

“Of course,” Florence said. “But my real point here is that I barely even remember the girl. I mean, I remember her well enough, but she wasn’t even one of my favorites!”

Hope let out a half-snort half-laugh at this.

“Well, it’s true!” Florence objected, “but anyway—what I am trying to say is, just think how many lives I might have changed without even realizing it.”

“Yes,” Hope said. “You truly are a force for good my dear.” She turned to Sissie then and said, “As are you, my love. As are you.”

The days in Edina were slow like honey. Hope read and walked. Florence read and walked. The two of them visited Bill and Grace and the girls on the weekends. The days were slow, but the years were fast. Mankato was already three years behind them when Hope called out one morning from her room: “Flo! Flo, come help me out of bed.”

By the time Florence was at her friend’s side, Hope was shaking from the effort of trying to lift herself. Florence knew that Hope had been losing strength over the past few months—struggling more to climb up and down stairs, feeling faint and weak. Indeed, Florence worried about her dear friend and prayed for her health every day. But she was reassured knowing that Hope had finally converted to Christian Science. At least now, she had a connection with a power greater than herself. Still, Florence

could see that Hope was somehow still losing ground. In response, Florence prayed harder.

Despite Florence's prayers, Hope simply wasn't her usual self that weekend at Grace and Bill's. She didn't even have the energy to make cookies for the girls. Instead, almost as soon as they arrived, she settled into a chair in the corner of the living room where she remained for most of the visit. Grace brought a glass of water to Hope and sat down beside her. "Hope," Grace said quietly. "How long have you been having trouble walking?"

"Only a couple weeks," Hope said. "These old feet just don't work the way they used to."

The girls, meanwhile, doted on their beloved Auntie, bringing her little treats from the kitchen and drawing pictures to lift her spirits. They could tell she was in pain and wanted to do anything they could to help make it better. As Florence sat with the girls, she overheard Bill and Grace talking in hushed tones.

"I know, *I* know," Bill was saying, "but I can't make her listen. I can't make her believe in the things we do."

"But her speech Bill," Grace said. "You can hear it plain as day. She's slurring. She has all the signs of minor strokes. We see this all the time in the hospital with our older patients."

"I trust you," Bill said. "You're the nurse here. You know better than any of us what to look for. But ever since she converted—and anyway, you know what Mom thinks about doctors. I just don't think there is anything we can do."

Hope's condition deteriorated rapidly over the next months, and as she lost more and more strength, she eventually struggled to walk at all without assistance. Still, she refused to see a doctor. Eventually, when Florence could no longer give Hope the help she truly needed for daily living, she helped her friend arrange a move to a Christian Science

convalescent home. Every single day, Florence visited Hope in her new home. And every day, Hope's light grew just a bit dimmer. When the time was near, Florence called Bill. "It's time to come," she said. "Please bring Grace and the girls to say their goodbyes.

It was a crisp fall day and the leaves already lined the boulevard as the Deters walked somberly up the stairs of the four-story brick building to bid farewell to one of the kindest, gentlest spirits they had known.

Up in her room on the third floor, Hope mostly slept. Her breathing was loud and raspy, but her body was still and her face peaceful. The Deters filled her room with bright bouquets and colorful hand-drawn cards from the girls—heartfelt signs of their love. They made a circle around her bed and took turns giving her hugs and kisses on her forehead and cheeks. They were her family and they made sure she knew it. They also made sure she felt deeply how profound a blessing she had been and would always be in each of their lives.

Later that night, after only two short weeks in the convalescent home, Hope passed.

CHAPTER 30

And just like that, Florence was living alone again for the first time in decades. Her days and weeks and months grew quieter and slower than they had ever been. In the morning she drank one cup of coffee—followed only by tea—at her small kitchen table. There, she read the Christian Science daily lesson. Sometimes, in the afternoon she ran errands. Or practiced piano. Or took Sissie for walks. She didn't have much interest in cooking or eating, but on Saturdays she would drive to Lunds & Byerlys on France Avenue and stroll up and down the wide, well-stocked aisles to taste the various samples offered by the store. A pleasant lunch.

Sundays were her favorite days. In the morning, she went to service at the Edina Christian Science Church. Afterward, she would drive to Minnetonka to have lunch with Bill and his family, always arriving no later than noon. That's why she knew Bill and Grace must be sick with worry on the Sunday when the clock ticked well past three and she had yet to appear. It's not that she wasn't trying to get there, trying to arrive at their house as always, but somehow the roads weren't making the same sense they usually did. Somehow, their house wasn't in the spot where it belonged. When Florence finally stopped at a storefront in St. Paul to call Bill, he picked up the phone almost before it rang.

"Bill," she said, "I must have taken a wrong turn. I am not sure where, but I don't know how to get back to—"

"Mom," Bill interrupted. "Mom, where are you?"

"In St. Paul, I am at a gas station on the corner of Selby Ave. and Lexington Parkway."

“Okay, you stay there. I am on my way.”

Florence wasn't sure how she had ended up fifteen miles from Bill and Grace's house, but she was grateful to her son for leading her all the way back across the metro. After that afternoon, she noticed other things started to change—it became harder for her to remember simple things like names or places. Sometimes, she would be somewhere and wasn't sure why she had gone there in the first place. She hated feeling like she was losing control, like she couldn't take care of herself. But she was sure if she prayed and knew the truth, her memory would restore itself. Then came the day when Bill cornered her. “Mom,” he said over sandwiches one Sunday afternoon. “We have to talk about your memory. I know you've noticed it too—how sometimes you forget places or can't remember someone's name.”

“I remember things just fine,” Florence snapped. “Most of the time, anyway. And everyone has little spells now and again.”

“These aren't spells Mom,” Bill pressed. “It could be serious. Grace and I think you should go in to have an exam—and I know, I know how you feel. But it is just an exam, just to see what is going on.”

Florence had no intention of submitting herself to an exam—just an exam her foot! But Bill simply refused to back down. After an entire afternoon of his pleading, she finally agreed to see Dr. Beecher.

“Pernicious Anemia,” he said after running several tests. “That's what's causing minor memory loss. Hard to say how long it's been affecting her,” he explained to Bill and Grace, “since she hasn't been examined in so many years. But a weekly shot of B12 ought to take care of it. And if she stays regular with those shots, there shouldn't be any further damage to her memory.”

“I do not consent,” Florence said flatly from her seat across the room. “I will be having no such shots. It is against my faith.”

“Thank you so much, doctor,” Bill interjected, “for everything. We will need some time to discuss as a family.” Florence knew exactly what Bill meant by the word “discuss,” and she was absolutely right: it meant hours and hours and hours trapped in Bill and Grace’s living room, hearing every reason under the sun why she simply had to have these shots, why there simply was no choice to be made. If for no other reason than to escape further convincing, Florence finally relented and let Grace administer the weekly B-12 shots.

Mom,” Bill started right in, “I’ve got an idea!” He had called one morning just as Florence had begun sipping her morning coffee, her Science and Health daily lesson on the table, soft morning light spilling across its pages. “I know you’d like a challenge,” Bill went on, “something to fill your time. So, I’ve signed us up for a course!”

“What sort of course?” Florence was immediately skeptical.

“A music appreciation class at MacPhail,” Bill said. His excitement was crackling through the phone receiver. “Look, Mom, I know you’ve always wanted me to take more of an interest in music, and I think this could be a good start.”

“Well,” Florence said cautiously, “that does sound like something I’d enjoy.”

“I thought you might!” Bill said. “It starts this Wednesday evening and will run through the spring. Be ready, I’ll pick you up at six.”

Florence was ready and waiting downstairs when Bill arrived for their first class. He drove the two of them into downtown Minneapolis and together they took their seats in a small classroom at the McPhail Institute of Music. The chairs were arranged in a circle in which the teacher—a young man with curly brown hair and glasses, khaki pants and worn-out leather shoes—also sat. “Welcome,” the teacher said with a wide grin. “I’m so glad you’re all here.” He went on to describe his own background—he

had studied music history and theory at the University of Minnesota and was infectiously passionate about Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods of music.

Under this enthusiastic young man's dutiful weekly instruction, Florence and Bill studied the life and stories of Bach and Wagner, of Beethoven, Mozart, and Chopin. One evening in late May as they walked back to his car Bill blurted out, "Mom, I have to tell you something, I get it. I get your love of music. And I love it too—I can see it now. Hear it now—the magical power of music."

"I always hoped that someday you would," Florence said.

When music appreciation class ended, Florence and Bill formed a sort of study group of two, with official meetings every Friday afternoon at the Perkins near Florence's apartment. Florence enjoyed everything about these meetings. She enjoyed driving herself the short distance to the restaurant, just as she had always enjoyed the pleasure of driving. She enjoyed the ritual of ordering—they would each get two eggs and toast followed by a slice of their favorite pie. And she greatly enjoyed the discussions she and Bill shared on those Friday afternoons. Sometimes they would discuss the happenings around town. Or what they thought about a particular piece of music. Or how the grandkids were doing. Always, they would leave grateful to have spent time with one another.

Then, one afternoon as Florence turned off 50th after her weekly lunch with Bill, she noticed flashing red and blue lights in her rearview mirror. She checked either side, but she was the only car on the road. She knew she hadn't done anything wrong, so she simply kept driving. She drove and drove and drove, all the way back to her apartment, in fact, the cop on her tail the whole way. Nonetheless she simply opened her garage door, parked her car, opened the door, and climbed out. And there in front of her was the officer.

“Ma’am, why didn’t you pull over?” he said.

“Because I did nothing wrong,” Florence said.

“Well, ma’am,” the police officer explained, “back on 50th when you were turning on France Avenue, you actually made a dangerous left-hand turn.”

“I did no such thing. I turned on my left turn signal lights, as I always do, before completing that turn.”

“Well, yes, ma’am, you did do that,” the officer continued patiently, “but then you just turned left! Right into oncoming traffic! Everyone coming from the other direction had to put on their brakes and stop just to avoid hitting you.”

“I simply do not think that was the case.”

“Well, whether you think it or not, it is what happened. The fact of the matter is that I am going to have to take your license. You’ll be notified via mail of a court date with further information. I am sorry ma’am, but it is a matter of public safety.”

First thing when she got inside, Florence called Bill. “You wouldn’t believe the tone he took with me,” she vented. “A matter of public safety, my foot. I am an incredibly safe driver! You should know! You taught me.”

“We’ll get it sorted out,” Bill reassured her. “You let me know as soon as you get your court date. I will come with you, and we’ll make sure this is handled properly.”

Less than two weeks later, Florence appeared in court, pleaded her case, and convinced a judge to let her take a road test in order to re-validate her license. “Not to worry,” Florence thought. “I passed that road test years ago when I had barely learned. How could I fail it now?” Florence was sure she would be back behind the wheel in no time.

When the day of her scheduled test arrived, Bill drove her to the driver’s school to pick up the instructor, who rode in front with Florence. Bill climbed into the back.

“Alright,” the instructor guided from the passenger seat, “now go ahead and merge onto 494.”

Florence proceeded onto the right-lane entrance ramp. The lights were flashing yellow and there were no oncoming cars, so she pulled right onto the highway and slid into the right lane, without using her turn signal.

“Why didn’t you use your turn signals to merge?”

“Look behind you,” Florence replied, “there isn’t anyone in that lane.”

After failing her road test, Florence lost her license for good, and with it, much of her freedom. Her life became unbearably small. She felt trapped, unable to go where she wanted when she wanted. She was fully dependent in a way she had never been—and it wore on her spirits. She didn’t even feel like playing piano or singing. She couldn’t make it to family lunches. Even getting to church services was a chore. Now, she had to rely on Bill to go anywhere she needed. How could she not resent this terrible loss of freedom? She didn’t think it fair that old age came with so much humiliation. Sissie was her one joy.

“Oh, you are a spoiled little thing, aren’t you, Sissie?” Florence said one evening as she let Sissie eat the scraps from her plate. “You don’t deserve it, but you’re lucky you’re the only one in the house now. Jackie never would have gotten away with half the antics you do.”

Sissie busily licked away, wagged her tail in time to Florence’s voice, pausing only after finishing off the last of the leftovers. Then she gazed at Florence longingly.

Florence was nearly ninety by now, and she felt Bill’s impatience for her to move into a “retirement home” radiating through every call and visit. He could barely get through a conversation without prodding at this home or that home. But she wouldn’t have it. Not for a minute. None of the homes he was so fond of allowed pets, and that—that simply would not do.

“Mom,” Bill reasoned one afternoon after lunch. “You know, the homes don’t allow pets to *live* in the facility—but they do allow visits.”

“I won’t have it,” Florence said sternly. She was sitting in her favorite chair, Sissie curled in her lap. “I don’t see the appeal and I don’t much care for this conversation.”

“It isn’t safe,” Bill continued. “With you living alone like this. What if something happened? No one would know. How would we get to you? How would we help? You’d be stuck here, helpless, and that just won’t do.”

Florence was still and silent save for her hands, which worked their way under Sissie’s chin, over her ears, and back.

“We can find Sissie a good home where she’ll be adored and doted on. Grace knows a family, a young couple. They said they’d be happy to bring her to visit you. And frankly, Mom, it’s about time you start taking your age more seriously.”

Florence didn’t have anything left to say. She had said everything she could, but she knew it didn’t matter. She knew the decision was being made—just not by her.

After the move, Florence spent less and less time socializing and more and more time longing for the past. For the freedom of her youth—for ships taking her to faraway shores, for dancing under the stars. She missed the thrill of performing, the hordes of boys following her after shows with Chautauqua. She wished that one last time she could feel the expanse of an open field, or a road leading to an unknown adventure. She wished one last time she could feel the adulation from a crowd, a standing ovation for her transcendent performance.

And after only nine months in the retirement home, Florence had to be moved again. This time to a memory care facility. The degradation was abhorrent to her. What was the point of being on God’s earth if she could

no longer fulfill God's purpose for her? She continued to pull further and further from the reality of her present-day conditions. As the weeks passed, she fell deeper and deeper into herself. Sounds floated by her. Residents drifted up and down the hallways. And who cared? Florence tuned it all out. Her world now was largely irrelevant: strangers she didn't know and didn't want to know. Why should she? And the more she tuned out, the more confused and disoriented she became. More than that, she became depressed and angry and full of fear. What was the point of anything anymore? She didn't recognize herself or her life.

Usually, when Bill or Grace came to visit, Florence stayed in bed. Why should she acknowledge them? Who were they to her, anyway? Once, Bill brought Florence a large, framed photo of her father, James. He placed it on the wall, right next to her bed. Oh, how she had loved her father. She still did. Seeing his face beside her bed brought a spark of joy. Maybe enough joy that a flicker of a smile passed her lips. Maybe. But if there was a smile, it was only for her. There was nothing else now, as she retreated fully into her own silent world.

All she needed now was God. Christian Science would be her final beacon in this life. And this life was eternal, for there was no such thing as death. Florence had long understood this, and she understood it more than ever now.

Then, one evening when Bill and Grace came to visit, Florence could sense their fear for her. She was silent and distant, but even beneath her closed eyelids she could envision Bill's face pulled taut. She could feel the way he edged away from her. Of course, it would be hard for him to see her like this. She didn't care. It was harder for her. Every moment she felt herself slipping away and with each slip away she felt a pulse of rage and terror.

Somewhere far away Bill and Grace were making eye contact, and Grace was resting her hand on Bill's shoulder as he said, "Mom, I love you."

Then both Grace and Bill were kissing her cheeks before turning to leave. And then she was alone again with her terror and her fury. The room, already dark, grew darker and with the deepening blackness, Florence felt swallowed by her own despair.

In the early hours of the following morning, a nurse shuffled into Florence's room and heard her labored breathing, ragged and uneven, raising and lowering her whole chest, frail as bird bones. The nurse sat beside Florence and held her hands in his. Florence felt the nurse's presence, the warmth of his hands. And she heard the sound of her own breath, loud as the ocean, swelling and subsiding like the waves of the Atlantic, like the sea itself, like the never-ending expansion of the universe. Florence reached for the nurse's hand and held on with all her might as she took her last breath.

It was Thursday, February 4, 1988.

EPILOGUE

Music can change the world,
because it can change people.

Bono

A hush falls over the recital hall at Coast Music as a young student takes the stage. Her long dark hair is braided down her back, and she stands before a shiny black grand piano. Her teacher gives her a smile and inhales to cue the start of her performance. The young student presses her shoulders back and begins to sing.

The whole room fills with her voice. A little unsteady at first, she gains confidence as she glances back at her teacher. The audience gathered is grateful for the gift of her voice. Her parents and other students' parents and families and siblings and friends. Love, and pride and support radiate around the room.

To the left there is a huge frame, hanging in the middle of the wall, 22 inches high and 27 inches wide, which holds a large diploma. The diploma reads:



Fontainebleau Conservatory of Music
Florence Poling – 1930

Coast Music is a family business in Manhattan Beach, California, run by Florence's three granddaughters. Their motto—*music can change the world because it can change people*—guided Florence through her life and now lives on through their work. Coast Music carries out their mission of changing lives through music by offering private music lessons, music classes, online music courses, and summer music programs. The school serves students ranging from age five to sixty-five years old.

Coast Music was founded in 2004 by Florence's second-granddaughter, Beth, and her husband, Matt. Both Beth and Matt graduated from Berklee College of Music. Matt is a Los Angeles-based keyboardist, musical director, arranger, and composer. He has played for President Biden at the Annual Kennedy Center Honors Program and has toured and recorded for numerous famous artists including Jane's Addiction, Christina Aguilera, Alanis Morissette, Jennifer Lopez, and Prince. Matt is also an associate director of Fox's *American Idol*, he has been doing this since the inception of that program. He is also an arranger for *The Voice* on NBC.

Like Florence, Beth is a performer and educator. Since childhood, she was driven and determined to forge her own path. She has a bachelor's degree in vocal performance and music production from Berklee College of Music and was awarded the *Ella Fitzgerald Scholarship* for her master's degree in jazz studies from USC. She is the current music director for College Audition Los Angeles (CALA). Beth has a gift for developing talent and helping her students reach their goals. She has coached and performed on shows such as the *Christmas Caroler Challenge*, *Fix My Choir*, and *American Idol*. Beth has a deep love of teaching and is an incredibly talented instructor. Her extraordinary care for all Coast students fosters a loving, nurturing, and supportive environment.

Marti, Florence's youngest granddaughter and Coast Music's band director, has a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Michigan and a graduate certificate in jazz studies from USC. She

is the conductor and lead vocalist for the award-winning music and entertainment company *Bonnie Bold Foster Productions*. Leading Coast bands—a program with over 20 bands and students ranging from five to sixty-five years old—is Marti's passion. She loves to inspire students of all ages to produce exceptional performances and see how the band program transforms their lives.

Angie, Florence's oldest granddaughter, is a perfect combination of her grandmother and grandfather. She is focused, determined, and driven like Florence. And she is charismatic and magnetic, like John. Coast would not be what it is today without Angie. As Coast's general manager, Angie works her magic behind the scenes to grow opportunities for outreach and community connection.

Florence's son Bill is one of the five owners of Coast Music. Without his leadership and moral and financial support, Coast could not have grown into the amazing musical force it is.

As for Florence, she is still very much alive. Her legacy is shaping the lives and careers of her granddaughters. Her passion guides the mission of Coast Music and the more than 300 students, 24 bands, and 33 teachers in their community. Her vision is changing the world with every new student who is graced with the opportunity to be transformed by the power of music.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I had no idea what an unexpected adventure it would be to write about Florence. She is the person who made this book possible by saving every single program for every show she had ever seen, performed in, or directed, including operas and the recitals given at Fontainebleau. She also saved every newspaper article mentioning her or any of her students. She saved letters, cablegrams, notes, and pictures of every period of her life, during the good times and the not so good times.

I also owe a very special thank you to Don Bulfer. We spoke on the telephone, and he told me about his experience as a student of Florence. Then he emailed a very detailed account of his trip to Chicago with Florence as the winner of the Minnesota State Fair contest. I could not have written about this without his help. Thank you, Don.

I am grateful for my husband, Bill, Florence's son. He read every word of this manuscript. Sometimes he agreed with what I wrote, but many other times he disagreed, and I had to change my interpretations to match what he was sure really happened. In many instances, he was there and saw what took place. He was also honest in saying that because of this book, he has completely changed his feelings toward

his mother. He has always loved her, but now he understands her better and loves her in a very special and significant way.

It is difficult to correctly express what a wonderful experience it has been working with Jeannine Ouellette and Billie Ouellette-Howitz. I have marveled at their understanding and expertise in interpreting my story. They also gave me the support and encouragement I needed during this whole process. I thank them both so very much.

Finally, I must mention how surprised I was at the reaction from others when I mentioned I was in the process of writing a book. The usual question would be, "What is it about?" And when I would answer, "My mother-in-law," that would end the conversation right there. People seemed uninterested and unable to even ask why I might want to write such a book. Maybe it's because of all the mother-in-law jokes. However, I have always said that I was blessed with the world's greatest mother-in-law in Florence.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graceann Kolenda Deters was born in Michigan in 1934 and lived in Brazil as a missionary kid from 1939 to 1952. She graduated from Cox College of Nursing and Health Services in Springfield, Missouri, then received her bachelor's degree in nursing education from the University of Minnesota and a master's degree in human development from St. Mary's University. Graceann has taught nursing, counseled men in prison, run businesses with her husband, traded securities, and raised three lovely daughters. She has also written two books, *Divine Betrayal* and *Three Loves*. She lives with her husband, Bill, in Fort Myers, Florida, where they recently celebrated their 64th wedding anniversary.