

## CHAPTER ONE

SARA March 1990

Did you know, Mom, that singing is an aerobic exercise?" Sara asked. "My voice teacher says so. He says, if you do it correctly, breathing from low in the abdomen, supporting firmly with the diaphragm, you exercise heart and lungs just the way runners do."

"Long-distance runners, yes," Sharlotte said. "Hardly the same for a sprinter." She was driving Sara back to the academy after her midterm break. They had been talking about a book she was reading, and she knew that Sara meant to change the subject. "We weren't doing aerobics when I studied voice," Sharlotte continued. "But we spent a lot of time on breathing." She remembered the feeling during a concert, the euphoria brought on by breathing until she felt the air fill her body to the pelvic cavity, and the exhaustion at the end, which was itself a kind of euphoria.

"You ought to get back into singing, Mom," Sara said, drawing one foot up under her, straining against the seat belt and turning in the seat to face Sharlotte. "It would do you a lot more good than jogging around the water treatment plant. You think your figure's out of shape. What about your voice? I noticed Friday night when you sang how you've lost that abdominal support ..."

"Most of my singing these days doesn't require much of that kind of support," Sharlotte said, switching lanes to pass an 18-wheeler. "I carry songs around like 33 1/3's in my head. You know how it is. Unless I'm near a pipe organ, people always turn to stare if I open my mouth and let everything out. Your grandmother thought I was destined for grand opera."

"Maybe you were. Mom, you've always settled for so little."

For several miles Sharlotte thought in silence about what Sara said. The afternoon sun glared on snow-covered grain fields, where last year's stubble was beginning to show and on snowbanks along the roadside that hunkered down like tired old men. Body and spirit, she was ready for spring and fresh grass to replace the dingy snow and slush. Sara was right. Walking that narrow path kept clear around the water treatment plant hadn't kept her in shape. Sharlotte's spirit rebelled against going in circles, even to exercise housebound heart and lungs. And her voice grew less flexible, less responsive by the month.

But how could she explain that, for her, music supported the soul and that although she once enjoyed standing center stage and watching an audience respond to her voice, now while performing she somehow felt like an infant, newly birthed but still attached by the umbilical cord to its mother's oxygen, as if she didn't really have to breathe yet unless she chose to? She wanted to tell her daughter how she had felt at 20-ready to cut loose with some deep breathing, ready to yell from her own belly. But then, Sara had said she had always been satisfied with so little. Sara wouldn't understand what she had settled for or her ways to achieve fulfillment or how the older she got, the more her life centered in her own mother.

Singing, like love, Sharlotte wanted to tell Sara, is a long-distance exercise that saves something of itself for the last mile. She was always a pole-vaulter throwing herself over the high notes, turning around and running again up the scales, and flying. She had abandoned the discipline that a career in opera would have cost for other disciplines and other commitments.

But Sharlotte knew Sara's voice teacher was right about the aerobics -about exercising the heart and lungs. Even if she had rejected a singing career, she knew she had the lung power and the heart power too. She wanted to insist upon that. But when they started talking again, it was about Sara's job correcting papers for the history teacher.

"It's really neat the way he has everything set up so I can give him a printout of any student's grade anytime he wants it," Sara said in her businesslike mode for the moment. "He started out with standard public domain grade-book software and modified it to do just what he wanted. At first I thought I'd never catch on how to access the features I wanted, but it wasn't as bad as I'd expected."

Sharlotte smiled, remembering the way Sara had fretted over long division and decimals and later compound interest in elementary school. "You always make it," she said, slowing for a Honda Civic cutting in ahead of her.

"What I like about the academy is the way we all feel so close," Sara continued. "Teachers, students, work supervisors." She rambled on for several miles of freeway as she talked about her roommate's boss and the girls across the hall.

Sharlotte was half listening, half remembering her own teen years, the alienation she felt from the girls in the church, the distance that always existed between her and the church school crowd, the rejection she felt whenever she ventured among adult Adventists. Had people in

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the church changed that much, or was there that much difference between Sara at 16 and Sharlotte at 16?

Now Sara began talking about a boy. "He sits in front of me in Bible class. Do you think he might ask me to the banquet?"

Sharlotte laughed, remembering very well that adolescent feeling. "I've never met the boy. How should I know what he's planning to do?"

Sara's voice became dreamy. "I think I'm in like," she said, her face serious until she wrinkled her nose and winked.

Sharlotte glanced at her again. "Your perm turned out prettier than I thought it would," she admitted. "I told you you'd like it," Sara said.

Sara had long legs like Walter's mother and was even more blonde, but she had Grandfather's gray eyes and something too of his persistence. Sharlotte felt a smothering pride over what Sara was becoming. So settled and self-confident. Sharlotte remembered worrying about how her daughter would fit into the academy after being in the church only a year and never having attended church school. I needn't have worried, she thought. Sara always expects delightful surprises. She likes people and expects them to like her.

"Danny's running for SA president," Sara said.

"Oh, he didn't tell me."

"Probably didn't want you to know about it until he had already picked the big plum," Sara said. Then more seriously, "No, that's not fair. Danny isn't that way at all, is he? He probably won't brag even a little when he wins."

"He'll win, of course," Sharlotte laughed.

"Of course!" Sara sighed. "Oh, to be popular! At least I have a popular brother, which counts for quite a bit. Danny has excellent friends and shares his connections. And his pizza. Did I tell you he ordered pizza for me and some of my friends the Saturday night before break? We were so surprised."

"I'm glad he could go on the band tour, but..." Sharlotte smiled at her own mother-henliness.

When they arrived at the academy, the band had not yet returned, so Sharlotte didn't get to see Danny as she had been hoping she might. After helping Sara carry things in, Sharlotte spoke briefly with the girls' dean and with a teacher she met on the sidewalk. Then she started home.

Walter would have the garage in order, with all the unwanted stuff collected during the winter set beside the door for the Goodwill truck

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to pick up in the morning. He would be settled in his recliner with a book, a notebook propped on a pillow on one knee so he could take notes on his reading about ancient reed instruments, his current intellectual passion. I wish I could submerge myself in such a dispassionate passion, she thought ruefully. Wish I could shut off pressures and anxieties the way Walter does.

She pictured the notepad on the kitchen desk, listing the chores her husband had planned to do today along with the hour and minute he intended to complete each chore. Everything would be checked off except the last item - READ. He'd check that off when he heard her drive in. He would ask if she'd seen Danny and if the new drinking fountain he'd ordered had been installed in the girls' dorm lobby. He'd open the refrigerator and get things out and help her make sandwiches for them and sit down with her for a while so she could unwind after driving. He would jump up to get an afghan for her, even though she insisted she was warm enough, and again for a pillow she said she didn't need. Finally he'd pick up the book he'd been reading, push his glasses up, and read her facts he had marked to share with her, looking up now and then to notice whether she found the information interesting.

"Oh, Walter," she whispered into the early spring twilight, "I'm a blessed woman to have you!"