

**all  
manner  
of  
things**

**SUSIE FINKBEINER**



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For my parents

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

—Julian of Norwich

# Prologue

## SUMMER, 1955

We sat at the end of the dock, my father and me. Early morning fog hovered over Chippewa Lake, so thick I couldn't see to the other side. As far as I could tell we were the only two awake out of all the people in Fort Colson. It wouldn't have surprised me to learn that we were the first up in the whole state of Michigan.

My father was having a good day, I'd known from the moment I came out of my bedroom. For one, he smiled as soon as he saw me. For two, he asked if I wanted to sit on the dock with him. Last, he'd poured two cups of coffee, his black and mine mostly milk and sugar.

"Don't tell your mother," he'd whispered, his voice soft and deep, his dark eyes full of mischief. "Promise? She wouldn't approve of a six-year-old drinking coffee. She'll worry that it'll stunt your growth."

"Will it?" I had asked, pushing my cat-eye glasses up the bridge of my nose.

“I guess we’ll see.”

Loose shoulders, easy smile, teasing words, sparkle in the corner of his eyes. He was having a good day, all right.

Good days didn’t come along very often for him, not since Korea.

Melancholy was what my mother called it. When I asked her what that word meant, she told me it was a longer word for sad. When I asked why my father was sad, she told me that war made people that way. When I asked her how war did that, she told me I’d understand when I got older.

It little mattered that morning, though. I was beside my father, sitting Indian style on the dock and listening to the loons call to each other. Their trilling and yodeling filled the air, echoing off the trees that lined the shores of the lake.

“You know what she’s saying?” my father asked.

I shook my head.

“She’s calling out to another loon. Maybe her mate, maybe her chick. Either way, the other has strayed off and she’s searching for him.” He sipped his coffee. “She says, ‘Hey, where are you?’ Then the other one answers, ‘Don’t worry. I’m right over here.’”

“Then they find each other?”

He nodded, looking out into the first-of-the-morning fog.

“Dad?” I whispered.

“Annie.”

“What if the lost one doesn’t call back?”

He hesitated, nodding his head and pushing his lips together the way he did when he was thinking.

“Well, I suppose the first one yodels out louder, ‘You get back here, you loon!’”

I laughed and he smiled and I thought I saw a glimpse of

how I imagined he'd been before the war. I'd been too small then. I couldn't remember.

We sat in the quiet a few minutes longer, the loons still calling back and forth through the fog that thinned as the sun brightened, burning it away. We drank our coffees, the bitterness of mine cutting through the milk and sugar just enough so I'd know it was there.

That night, while the rest of us slept, my father packed a few of his things and drove away in his Chevy pickup truck. I waited for him the rest of that week, sitting alone on the dock with my feet dangling over the edge, toes disturbing the stillness of the water. He hadn't left a note, and I was sure he'd come back any minute. I wanted to be there when he did.

The next Wednesday his letter came with no return address.

*Gloria, I can't be who you need me to be, it read. I have to see if I can walk off the war. Tell the kids I'm sorry. —Frank*

After that I stopped waiting for him. We all did. It was easier that way.

# 1

**JUNE, 1967**

**W**hen God created the world, he only afforded Michigan just so many good-weather days. He caused the book-ends of the year to be winter and the months between to be warm enough for the earth to almost thaw before it was to freeze solid once again.

And somehow, in his infinite wisdom he had chosen to call it good.

In the deepest of winter, I often questioned the soundness of mind that made my ancestors think that Michigan was a good and fine place to settle. But it was in spring, when the whole world came back alive and I forgot the cold, that I swore to never leave my home state. Leaves turned the forests back to green, and flowers speckled bright red and yellow and orange across the lawns and fields. Purple lilacs bloomed on the bush below my bedroom window, smelling like heaven itself. Finches molted tawny feathers to show off their brilliant goldenrod. Robins returned with their trilling

song, and just-hatched chicks peeped from their nests, discarding pretty blue shells on the ground.

Every year it caught me by surprise, the return of life to Fort Colson. But by June I'd fallen into the routine of longer days and leaving my jacket at home, letting the sun warm my bare arms.

I certainly would have liked to enjoy the sunshine. Instead, I stood looking out the big window of Bernie's Diner, dripping washrag in hand, wishing the view was of something other than the five-and-dime across the street. It was the perfect day for sitting on a dock, dipping my toes into the waters of Chippewa Lake.

Old Chip. That was what my brothers and I called it. Where we all learned how to swim and row a canoe and catch fish. Growing up without Frank around hadn't been a walk in the park. But having a mother who was unafraid of getting muddy and hooking a worm on the line made it a little bit easier. Especially for my brothers.

The sound of clattering pots or pans from the kitchen snapped my attention back to my job. I wrung the extra water from my rag and scrubbed down the tabletops, wiping away the breakfast crumbs to make way for the lunch plates. A couple of girls I knew from high school walked along the sidewalk past the diner window, wearing minidresses and bug-eyed sunglasses that seemed all the rage that year.

Using my knuckle, I pushed up my plastic-framed glasses and hoped they wouldn't notice me. Bernie's dress code only allowed white button-up shirts and slacks—no jeans. On my own I was a certifiable L7 square. The uniform didn't help matters at all.

The girls looked in through the window. Sally Gaines with

the perfectly coiffed auburn bouffant and Caroline Mann with her diamond engagement ring sparkling in the sunshine. Sally's mouth broke into an impossibly perfect smile and she waved, her fingers wiggling next to her face.

I knew that it was not meant for me. As far as girls like Sally and Caroline were concerned, I was less than invisible. I didn't even exist.

Turning, I saw my brother behind the counter, lowering a crate of freshly washed glasses to rest beside the Coca-Cola fountain. The glasses clinked together, but delicately, sounding just a little bit like chimes.

"You have an admirer," I said, stepping away from the window.

"Great," he said, thick sarcasm in his voice. Not looking up at the girls, he took one of the glasses and put it under the fountain, pulling half a glass of pop for himself. "They're good tippers at least."

"For you." I watched him take a few drinks of the Coke before moving on to setting the tables with silverware wrapped in paper napkins. "I don't have the advantage of flirting with them."

"You've got a point," he said. "I am charming."

"And I'm a nerd."

"Nah, you're peachy keen."

"Well, thanks." I looked back to where the girls had stood. They were already gone.

"I have my meeting today," Mike said, finishing off the last of his pop. "The one I told you about."

"When?"

"After lunch. Bernie told me I could leave a little early."

"Did you tell him what it's about?"

“No.” Mike put his empty glass on the counter. He lowered his voice to just above a whisper. “I kind of gave him the impression that it’s a doctor’s appointment.”

“And he bought it?” I asked. “You know you’re the worst liar in the world, don’t you?”

“He didn’t seem to doubt me.” He poured himself another half glass of pop and drank it all at once. “I didn’t want him trying to talk me out of it.”

“Do you really have to do this?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he answered, covering a silent burp with his fist. “Unless you have any other ideas.”

“Canada’s only a few hours away.”

He raised his eyebrows and made a humming sound. “I’m not sure that’s a great option.”

“What did Mom say?”

Shrugging, he walked around the counter, checking the ketchup bottles from the tables to see which needed refilling. He carried the half-full ones back to the counter in the crook of his arm.

“You told her, didn’t you?” I asked. “Please tell me you did.”

“Not exactly.” He lined the bottles up on the counter.

“What do you mean by ‘not exactly?’”

He cringed. “Not at all.”

“Golly, Mike,” I said, hoping it didn’t sound too much like a scold. “You should have asked her about it. She might have had some ideas.”

“I’m almost twenty, Annie. I’m an adult,” he said, making his voice deeper. “It doesn’t matter anyway. They’re sending me whether I like it or not. I might as well just volunteer and at least have some say over things.”

“I guess.”

“She’s going to be furious, though. I know she will be.” He moved behind the counter again and wiped the bottles down with a wet rag. “I don’t know how I’ll tell Joel.”

In the thirteen years since our baby brother was born, Joel loved no one as much as he did Mike. If he ever tired of such undying admiration, Mike rarely let on. He took to the role of big brother near perfectly.

“Why haven’t you told him?” I asked.

“Gee, I don’t know,” Mike answered, uncapping the ketchup bottles. “I tried. I just didn’t have the heart.”

“You aren’t abandoning him, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

“Still, you have to tell them sometime.”

“I will,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“The sooner the better,” I said.

“I’ll know more about what’s going to happen after my meeting with the recruiter.” He sighed. “It’s a pickle, that’s for sure.”

“Maybe they won’t want you.”

“Come on, buddy, you’re going to hurt my feelings.”

“Oh, get out of here.”

“Soon enough, sis.” He turned toward the kitchen. “Soon enough I’ll get out of here all the way to Vietnam.”



If there was any consolation to be had for missing out on summer, it was that Bernie let me read during the lulls of the day, provided I had all my silverware wrapped and tables clean. I’d just settled onto the stool behind the cash register

with book in hand when the bell over the door jingled with the arrival of someone. Regretfully, I shut the book and put it back on the counter. Scout Finch would just have to wait a little bit longer.

My mother stood just inside the door, purse hanging from her bent arm, and looking every bit the lady in her red blouse and tweed skirt. She'd worn her hair down that day with the ends in upturned curls.

She'd never been one to lie about her age. In fact, I'd heard her more than once brag about being over forty. "Just over," she'd say. The conversation inevitably turned to how she looked so young.

"My secret?" she'd say with a conspiratorial wink. "A hairdresser who can keep my secrets and a strong girdle."

My mother, Gloria Jacobson, ever the charmer who turned heads anywhere she went. And me, her beanpole of a daughter who hardly took the time to twist a braid into her hair most mornings. It was a wonder she never tried to give me beauty tips, as much as I sorely needed them. Then again, I'd never asked. Never much cared to, either.

"I can't stay long," Mom said, making her way to the counter. "I have a few other errands to run before going back to work."

"Late lunch?" I asked, checking my watch.

She rolled her eyes. "Mrs. Channing was in for a checkup today, and you know how she can go on."

She lifted her hand, making a puppet out of her fingers, opening and closing them like a mouth.

"Did she ask again about you and the doctor?"

Mom sighed. "Of course she did."

After Frank left us, Mom found herself in need of a job for

the first time in her life. She'd put on her most professional-looking dress and walked over to Dr. Bill DeVries's office to ask him to hire her. She'd said he owed her. For what, I'd never had the courage to ask. The doctor, though, just happened to have a position open at his office. She'd worked as his receptionist ever since.

If rumor could be believed, the good doctor had held a torch for my mother since they were young. He'd even invited her to prom, but a day late. She'd already accepted Frank's invitation.

Most of the women in town waited for a romance to bud between Mom and Dr. DeVries. They'd waited more than twelve years with no sign of giving up hope. I wasn't sure if theirs was an act of sheer determination or utter stubbornness.

Either way, Mom could outlast anyone, even the old biddies of Fort Colson.

"I told her that I'm still married and, as far as I know, that won't change any time soon," Mom said, instinctively touching the gold wedding band on her left ring finger.

When I'd asked her years before why she still wore it, she told me it was to "discourage any interested parties." I wondered if it was also to keep certain chatterbox busybodies from speculation.

A small town like Fort Colson was fertile soil for gossip to take seed.

"Is Bernie here?" Mom asked.

"He's in the office," I answered. "It's bookkeeping day."

She reached into her purse, searching for something. "I'm sure it's putting him in a foul mood."

"Well, no more than usual," I whispered.

“He’s not being grumpy to you, is he?” She arched one of her eyebrows. “You don’t have to put up with his moods, you know.”

“He’s my boss.”

“And he’s my cousin.”

“Second cousin, Mom.” I rolled my eyes. “Everyone around here is your second cousin.”

“Still.” She went back to digging through her purse. “You don’t have to take it from him. You’d get treated better working in an office somewhere.”

“You know I’d hate that.” I leaned my elbows on the counter. “I’m horrible at typing.”

“You’d learn. Besides, there’s more money in it.” She tilted her head. “Or you could go to college.”

“I don’t mind his moods,” I said. “Besides, I can’t afford college.”

“We could work something out.” Her hands stilled and she looked up into my eyes. “I could work more hours. Maybe get a second job.”

“You don’t have to do that.” I slid my book off the counter. “I wouldn’t want to go anyway.”

She gave me a sharp look—eyes narrowed and mouth puckered—that told me she didn’t believe a word of it. The look didn’t last long, just enough so that I’d see it. Then she turned her attention back to her purse.

“If you say so. Ah,” she said, pulling an envelope from the depths of her handbag. “This came today.”

Red and blue stripes colored the edge of the wrinkled envelope and a darker blue rectangle with white letters that read “BY AIR MAIL PAR AVION.” It was addressed to me, the sender was Walter Vanderlaan, Private First Class.

“Any idea why he’d be writing you?” she asked, tapping his name with her long, red fingernail.

“No.” I shrugged one shoulder. “I haven’t a clue.”

“You’re sure?” She turned her head, giving me the side-eye.

I picked up the envelope, tapping a corner of it against the counter. Walt and his parents had been our neighbors when I was small. Our folks would play cards some Friday evenings, letting us kids stay up late to swim in the shallows of Old Chip or watch *Ozzie and Harriet* on television.

Walt had been my friend even though he was Mike’s age. When he knocked on the door to ask for a playmate, he sought me. When we picked teams for a game of tag, he’d call my name first. More than once I’d overheard our mothers talk about writing up papers for an arranged marriage.

He was my very first friend and I was his.

But after Frank left and we moved, we didn’t talk much anymore. And the older we got, the more Walt hated me. At least that was how I interpreted his name-calling and dirty looks.

I tried my hardest not to grimace, looking at my name on the envelope written in Walt’s handwriting. “He’s hardly spoken two words to me since we were little.”

“Well, apparently he wants to talk to you now.”

“I can’t imagine why.” I pushed up my glasses. “I’d think he has plenty of other people he could write.”

“People change. Being at war can make a boy get ideas.” Her eyes widened, she nodded once. “It makes them take notice of things they might otherwise overlook.”

“Mom, no. He wouldn’t—”

“Annie, you aren’t getting any younger. You’re eighteen,

after all. And I know you are probably in a hurry to get married.” She leaned over the counter toward me. “I’m sure you think he’s a nice boy, but . . .”

“He’s not nice,” I interrupted. “I already know that. I’ve always known that. Besides, I’m not in a hurry to get married.”

“Honey, he’s at war. I’m sure he’s lonely.” She sighed. “I guess I just want you to be careful.”

“Careful of what?”

“I don’t want you getting your heart broken.”

“Mom, I harbor no secret affections for Walt Vanderlaan. I promise. Besides, he’s been engaged to Caroline Mann for ages.” I stuffed the letter in between the pages of my book. “Don’t worry. I won’t write him back, if that’s what you want.”

“You can if you would like.” She let out a breath and leaned her elbows on the counter. “Just don’t keep any secrets from me. Can you promise me that?”

I nodded, squinting at her, trying to figure out what she was up to. She never sighed that way unless she had something up her sleeve. Then, her blue eyes sharpened, as if she was trying to see through me. I’d never in all my life held up under her X-ray gaze.

“Is there anything that you’d like to tell me?” she asked. “Any secrets about Michael?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know he’s keeping something from me.”

“Gosh, Mom, why would you think that?” I widened my eyes, hoping to look puzzled instead of guilty.

“What’s this appointment of his?”

“How do you know about that?”

“Mothers always find out,” she answered. “What’s this appointment?”

The door to the diner opened, letting in a handful of girls who wandered to the window booth, whispering to each other about this or that. I let them know that I'd be right with them, and they nodded as if they were in no hurry.

"You know, don't you?" Mom asked. "Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"Mom."

"It's not about a girl, is it?" She touched my hand. "Please tell me it isn't."

"Mother."

"I understand, times are different than when I was his age." She stood upright, smoothing her blouse. "With the music and the movies now, I know that it can all be so confusing . . ."

"Mom, I swear to you it has nothing to do with a girl," I said, trying to stop her from saying something that would make me blush.

"All right," she said, putting her hands up in surrender. "I'm just worried is all."

"It would be better if he told you."

"Okay." She snapped her purse shut. "I should get back to work anyway."

I nodded.

She touched my cheek with her fingertips. "You're getting so grown up."

"If only I looked it." I pushed up my glasses. "I'm tired of people thinking I'm twelve."

"Someday you'll be glad you look younger." She winked at me.

"Maybe."

"Trust me, you will." She turned her attention to the pastry

case, where we kept the desserts from the Dutch bakery down the road. “See if Bernie will let you bring home some leftover *banket* for dessert. Tell him I’ll pay him back next week, all right?”

“Sure.”

“And your *oma* is coming for supper. She might like it if you walked with her.”

She picked up her purse, putting it back over her arm, and walked out of the diner, hips swaying with each step.

Mike reminded her of Frank. She never said it in so many words; still I knew. The way his brown eyes were unable to hide his mood, how his dark hair curled when he let it get long, his deep voice, his dimple-cheeked smile. All of Mike was all of Frank.

The girls at the booth ordered a glass of Coke each and a plate of french fries to share. The whole time they stayed, they watched everyone walk past on the other side of the window, giggling and gossiping.

While they ate, I sat behind the counter, my book unopened with the envelope peeking out, begging me to find out what was inside. I told myself I’d toss it in the mailbox at the end of the street with a big “RETURN TO SENDER” scrawled across it.

But stuffing the book into my purse, I knew I’d do no such thing.



Dear Annie,

*I'll bet I was the last one you expected to get a letter from. I hope it was a good surprise, seeing my name on the envelope. No doubt the only reason you opened it was to find out why in the world I would be writing you.*

*Anyway, I found this feather on the ground over here in Vietnam and thought I'd send it to you. I hope you still like birds. Don't worry, I cleaned it really well. Isn't it pretty?*

*Wish you could see the birds here. They're like nothing at home. I tried taking a picture of one of them for you, but the darn thing flew away just as I snapped the shot.*

*Do you remember when we were kids and we'd watch the hummingbirds flit around the feeder in my front yard? You said they were magic and I wouldn't believe you. You cried, remember, when we found the one that died after it flew into the window. I think about that sometimes, you know. I felt bad that you cried that day. It was so small—impossibly small—and weighed almost nothing at all.*

*I never told you, but I buried it under my mother's hydrangea tree and marked the grave with a fieldstone. It's still there. When I get home, I can show you if you want.*

*Your friend,  
Walt Vanderlaan*

*PS: You can write back to me if you'd like. I hope you will.*