

F ebruary, 1936

Will O'Shaughnessy knew his mother was worked up when he saw his father's sleigh lurch up the driveway. Gertrude O'Shaughnessy's finger marched in rhythm to her mouth as she dressed her husband down. Thomas didn't argue. He tipped his flask and looked straight ahead.

Gertrude hopped off the sleigh. Mary tried to intercept her, but Gertrude raced past her daughter-in-law and grabbed Will before he stepped off the porch. "You're really going through with it?" She grasped her son's arm and twisted him toward her. "You know what your grandfather thought about your business judgment."

"Didn't I prove him wrong?"

"You sold some cars. I'll give you that. Why'd you leave?" "I always wanted to—"

"Father said it's those new fangled ideas you learned at the university — don't make sense in the real world."

"I worked hard selling and repairing cars, I—"

"He always said that schooling would come to no good."

"But—"

"He never forgave your leaving him in the lurch, going south to see that uppity black man when he needed you at home."

"George Washington Carver uppity? Dr. Carver knows more about crops than anyone I know."

"What could a black man possibly know? Father said you're not tough-minded enough for farmin'. It's not an eight-to-five job, you know, and you don't have weekends to laze around either. Farmin's seven days a week, sunup-to-sunset work."

"I grew up a farmer."

“You grew up a hired hand. You won’t have your grandfather and father to direct you and your brothers to help. I hope you don’t expect your girls to pitch hay and milk cows.”

And that worried Will, too.

Thomas sat calmly and fondled his flagon while Gertrude huffed back to the sleigh. Then she turned back to her son. “I almost forgot what I came for. Mary’s mother called. Said Heinzelman’s circus will be in Cedar Rapids next month.”

Thomas lowered his flask and spoke for the first time. “Do you think Jesse might be with them?”

“I don’t know, dad.” Will saw the pain in his eyes. “There’s no time for it now. I’ve got a farm to build.”

Will watched his father’s horses turn and slowly move down the drive. “Sounds as if her nose’s bent out of shape,” Mary said.

“She was bound to find out. She’s upset because we didn’t tell her first.”

Will O’Shaughnessy knew Wisconsin history, and for a while at the university, he thought he would be a teacher. But he grew up a farmer.

All he ever wanted was his own farm. And now he’d get the chance, but the words, “you’re not tough enough,” echoed through his mind. And now that he’d have to build his own farm, his grandpa’s words stung all the more. If, as custom dictated, that grizzly old bastard had given Will his farm, he’d be well established by now.

But was he tough enough? When he lay awake at night, Will worried. Had he quit his automobile business too soon? Did he run away because it had become too hard? The thought that Grandpa might have been right haunted his waking hours and fueled his nightmares.



They began moving day in the rolling hills of Southwest Wisconsin, crossed the military ridge, and then slowly descended crests and valleys toward their new home on the Wisconsin River. Their route paralleled that of Chief Black Hawk’s trail a hundred years before when he had desperately guided his small band of refugees away from a United States militia that always lingered close behind. The chief had led his families along a circuitous route to the Wisconsin River where, in an effort to save his people, he fought a valiant delaying action. Although seventy

warriors were killed that day, most of the women and children crossed the river.

Will knew that Black Hawk had fought for the lives of his families. He felt a similar desperation, and he hoped to protect his family's welfare with the same fervor shown by that ill-fated chief. The farther they traveled the more anxious he became. The land they traversed that morning seemed better suited to the Native American warrior than to a would-be farmer. Trees, brush, and undergrowth clogged their way. Even if the growth could be cleared, could a horse hold a plow on these steep slopes? Sharp valleys that guided meandering streams to their river destination seemed ill-suited for tilling. And Will knew how a valley stream could flood and wash away a newly planted crop.

After traveling all day through these ridges and valleys, Will, his wife, Mary, and his daughters—fourteen-year-old Sharon, twelve-year-old Ruby, and ten-year-old Catherine—arrived at the Wisconsin River bottom, where they were greeted by a fog so thick that Will had to leave his sleigh and lead his team by their halters.

At dusk a breeze swept down from the bluffs and cleared the fog away, and then he saw it: a plain, double story house with double-hung windows. They rode another ten minutes and turned onto a long, snow covered drive. A black and white English sheepdog caught his daughters' attention when he barked his greeting.

"That must be Teddy," Will said. "Old Mr. Barnes said he'd be waiting. He wouldn't leave his home when Barnes lost it, so he stays here to greet visitors." Will held his horses. "Whoa, Ted, Ned." He tossed the reins down. "He said we could have him. Said he'd not feel right making him leave the only home he's ever known."

"He's ours?" Catherine said. "We can keep him?"

Catherine's cat, Emily, arched her back and hissed so loudly that Teddy backed away, but not without a subdued protest.

"He's a fine host," Sharon said. "He hardly objects to ill mannered Emily."

"Emily, behave yourself," Catherine said. "This is Teddy's home, and you're a guest here. Remember that, young lady."

The girls jumped from the sled and approached Teddy, who sat back on his haunches and offered a paw. "See, he wants us to know we're welcome," Catherine said. "A real gentleman."

"Mr. Barnes says that we'll always be safe from rattlesnakes with Teddy around," Will said. "He says he's the best rattlesnake scout on the river."

“Ugh, I hate snakes,” Catherine said. “We didn’t have poisonous ones at Ashley Springs.”

“There are poisonous snakes here,” Will said, “so you’d better learn to recognize them and keep your distance, too. It’s never a good idea to tangle with something that’s quicker and meaner than you.”

“I’ll never leave the yard without Teddy,” Catherine said. “Never, never, never.”

“That’s good advice for all of you,” Mary said. “Too bad there’s only one Teddy.”

Four sleds full of furniture and household goods slid down the slush-covered drive. “We’ve got work to do,” Will said. “I’ll help the men unload.” He turned to his wife. “You and the girls go inside and tell them where to put things.”

It was as basic as most Wisconsin farm houses, but maybe a bit bigger, with five rooms downstairs and four up. The house had a covered wrap-around porch and a front and back stairs. The front door, on the north side of the house, opened into the living room. Will supposed they’d mostly use the side entryway into the kitchen as it provided a vestibule to keep hats, coats, and boots. The south-facing kitchen opened up into a dining room to the north, which was next to the large living room beyond. Off the living room, a parlor opened into a small bedroom with a southern exposure. The bedroom had a locked door that accessed the back stairs and an enclosed porch.

Mary immediately claimed the downstairs bedroom, saying the girls’ legs were young enough to tromp up the stairs each day. And she also claimed two of the smaller upstairs bedrooms to store her excess Ashley Springs furniture and other keepsakes that she couldn’t bear to discard. Fortunately for the girls, the two larger bedrooms faced the south where they would get winter sunlight, and because they’d have to room together, Ruby and Catherine claimed the largest room in the upstairs.

Moving in was the easy part, Will knew. The hard days were ahead. His automobile business had floundered during these terrible depression years. And all across the country people were in despair, trying to eke out a living. Could he make it as a farmer?

