

# STRAWBERRY SUMMER

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REFLECTIONS, FRIENDS, AND RENEWED HOPE

Book IV of The O'Shaughnessy Chronicles

by HAROLD WILLIAM THORPE



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## — DEDICATION —

I dedicate this book to all those searching for renewal  
and reinvigoration in their retirement.

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# 1

*Logan Junction, Wisconsin, early Fall 1990*

What form of creature would attack an old woman in her home? Sixty-five-year-old Catherine O'Shaughnessy cast the Madison newspaper aside. She was glad she lived in a small town.

Catherine crossed the room to her front window, looked aloft, and remembered her father's adage: Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning. She frowned. What did he know about sailors? Anyway, she hoped he was wrong. Storms scared her, especially storms and airplanes, but she wasn't going to let anything spoil this day—the day her sister Ruby would return to Wisconsin.

Ruby had always visited in early June, before Wisconsin's wet summer heat drenched her clothes and drained her energy, but they'd agreed that Ruby would come in September this year—waiting until after Catherine's retirement so they could spend more time together.

Catherine had lost a husband, her parents, her sister Sharon, and now had left her job. But she had Ruby, and that was enough. She and Ruby were soul sisters. They talked on the telephone each week, and Ruby returned to Wisconsin every summer. Before Ruby's Robert died, the couple had driven to Wisconsin together and brought their daughter, Marcia, too. But now Ruby flew, and airplanes made Catherine nervous.

Ruby would land in Madison at four o'clock, rent a car, and drive southwest to Logan Junction. They agreed she would call from the airport. And that would leave ample time to prepare the table and get supper on.

Before she dusted and polished her furniture, Catherine shoved a box of fabric swatches and the unfinished patchwork quilt into the downstairs bedroom. She had so wanted to give Ruby this one today, but it would have to wait. All winter she had cut those swatches from

discarded clothing. She'd selected carefully and hoped the pieces were strong and durable. She wanted her quilt to look bright and new on Ruby's bed. She hadn't decided whether to show Ruby the unfinished quilt or wait and surprise her at Christmas. She'd think about that while she prepared the chicken for the oven.

Catherine stuffed the top and bottom cavities with her lightly spiced breadcrumb dressing, and then she rubbed the skin with butter that she'd bought at the High Point Cheese House, the only cheese factory near Logan Junction that still made its own sweet cream spread. But butter was a luxury. Her father would rise from the grave if he knew she used that other stuff. He'd dismiss her excuse that it was cheaper and say it was an insult to Wisconsin's dairy farmers. She pressed the butter into the bird's skin and rubbed until her fingers hurt. She remembered that Ruby had said how golden delicious her roasts looked and she wanted Ruby to know she cared.

But her father's admonition was right. At four o'clock, a thunderstorm swept across southwest Wisconsin. Catherine shuddered as simultaneous bursts of lightning and thunder shook her house and lit her kitchen. Hail pounded her roof, and torrents of rain swept past her window. Catherine hated the thought of Ruby's plane landing in this storm.

When an hour later she'd still not received a call, she dialed her radio to the local news, but no damage was reported. She was about to call the airport when the telephone rang. "Thank God. Ruby's arrived safely."

She rushed to her old telephone that hung on the wall.

"Hello.... Marcia?... Dear God, no.... Last night, in her sleep?"

Catherine slumped into her father's old horsehair chair. Now she was all alone.



Like an aged washed-out portrait, Catherine's family had faded away. Ten years had passed since Ruby's death. Only memories were left, and she went out of her way to preserve them. She hadn't missed a visitation day.

Catherine lifted the lilac dress from the gray ironing board—the dress Ruby had given her, the dress she'd worn on this day ever since Ruby's

death. She smiled as she cradled the gingham material in her left hand while gently smoothing the pleats with her right. She needed to hurry. Bill would be here soon.

Her tan, silk blouse would balance the lilac in the dress, a bit more subdued, more appropriate for the day. She rushed toward her bedroom, toward the closet where the blouse hung, but stopped abruptly when she noticed a stack of letters on the stand by the front door. She couldn't let Bill see those—just more ammunition for his insistence she leave her home. Catherine grabbed the envelopes, walked back through the room, and stuffed them into her secretary. She stood for a moment and admired the freshly ironed dress. Ruby's generosity had been never-ending.

"It's beautiful, Mom," Bill said.

The voice startled her. She hadn't seen her son park out front, nor heard his footsteps or the squeak of hinges. She must be getting old.

"Do you think so, Bill? Dad liked me to dress up. Most of the time, I ran around the farm in flannels and coveralls."

"He'd be proud of you," Bill said.

Catherine walked to the ironing board and laid the dress down. Bill reminded her of his father: tall and muscular; straight, dark hair combed back; a prominent nose and deep blue eyes; and a quick but restrained smile. He looked all Torberg, not short and chunky like the O'Shaughnessy men. Thankfully, neither she nor Ruby had inherited her father's build. She might be short, but she'd never been chubby. Her sister Sharon hadn't been so lucky. Still, Bill was more responsible than his father had been—too responsible, maybe. It seemed to Catherine that he had little time to enjoy life. He'd told her that small town accountants were expected to be punctual, precise, and practical—a bit too practical for Catherine's liking. She supposed it was her fault. She'd tried hard to make him unlike his father, but she'd neglected to foster in him the O'Shaughnessy's love of more delicate things.

"Did you bring the flowers?" she said.

"They're the best we've ever had."

Catherine was skeptical. Bill didn't know a rose from a petunia. She shook her head. "If they're beautiful, Jennifer must have selected them."

"You wound me, Mom. How could you doubt me after all these years?"

She snatched her dress off the ironing board. “You’re a Torberg, aren’t you? Your father never liked flowers. He said they were too much work for something you couldn’t eat.”

“You mean to say,” Bill laughed, “he didn’t like your dandelion salad and rose hip soup?”

Catherine stiffened. “Maybe if they were dressed with a shot of whiskey.”

Bill followed her through the living room. “Mom, get over it.”

At her bedroom door, she pivoted to face Bill. “You don’t remember Lars Torberg like I do. He dragged us all over the country. We never stayed long enough to pick dandelions or grow roses.”

Catherine pulled her tan blouse from her bedroom closet. Bill had been too young to understand the loneliness she felt in her marriage. She should have hung the blouse out earlier. Catherine brushed away the wrinkles. Dragged all over the country. She pulled the dress over her hips. It didn’t seem so tight last year. Throughout her marriage to Lars, she had to deal with so many things on her own. It wasn’t a partnership like her mother had with her father.

There was that middle-of-the-night phone call when they lived in the New Mexico wilderness. Technically their trailer was on the edge of town, but it seemed like a wilderness to her. Lars was at work—who knows where—so she was alone as usual. The shrill rings of the telephone jarred her awake, and she immediately felt her heart pound against her chest. She thought that Lars had been in an accident, but the phone call wasn’t about Lars. She wouldn’t repeat the words that man used. And later that night, still alone, she woke up for no reason and found a tarantula in the crib a few inches from Bill’s head. She’d grabbed the spider with her bare hand and tossed it across the room—then she almost fainted. There were dozens of other incidents that left Catherine feeling like a single mother long before she actually became one, but no matter what criticism she leveled against Lars, Bill always defended him.

Five minutes later, Catherine re-entered the living room. “Will I need a coat and scarf?”

“I don’t think so,” Bill said.

She opened the front door. Even though another May had disappeared into Catherine’s vast collection of yesterdays and summer was on the horizon, a cool north breeze convinced her that a coat and scarf were



needed. She reached into her closet and selected a worn, beige cloth coat and a gold silk scarf. Catherine was ready to face the most important day of her year—the day she'd visit her family. For Catherine, this Memorial Day drive wasn't just another outing; it was a sacred mission.

"Remember, we drive to Willow first. I'd feel terrible if I missed any of the graves, but I swore an oath to honor Uncle Jesse's."

"Who holds you to that?"

"Myself. And that's the most important oath of all."

"That old flag in the living room was his, wasn't it?"

"The honor guard presented it to me at his funeral. It was June 1946. I vowed to display it every Veteran's Day for the rest of my life."

"You did better. You framed it and mounted it on the wall."

"To remember Uncle Jesse. His face was so badly maimed in the Great War that he shied away from folks. People made fun of him, but we became friends. He was a kind man. He saved me twice. I still get tears when I remember that day at the funeral."

Bill had heard the story before, but out of respect for his mother—and for Uncle Jesse—he let her continue.

"The sun illuminated the flag-draped casket. I thought that the flag's stars shined more brightly than those in the night sky. It seemed to me that the boughs of the ancient Norway spruce, which stood as a sentry overhead, drooped in sadness at his passing. All eyes were on the casket. I knew that Jesse would be happy to know that no one turned away during this, his last moment above the earth.

"Eight soldiers in their crisp, khaki uniforms placed the casket on its standard. Sixteen riflemen stood at attention at the sergeant's command, and when he signaled, the riflemen fired in unison a ten-shot salute. The sound rang across the valley and reverberated off the hills. After the minister concluded the service, saying, 'Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust,' two soldiers stepped smartly to the casket, lifted the flag, and quickly folded it into a compact, triangle shape.

"I remembered that Dad said Jesse's last word before he went under the water for the last time had been, 'Catherine.' The thought brought tears, made me want to scream my anguish, but I wouldn't do that. I couldn't detract from the dignity of Uncle Jesse's service.

"One of the soldiers lifted the flag high and walked straight toward me. To my surprise, he handed it to me, and in a trance, I reached to take it. I felt hot tears roll down my cheeks, but I didn't utter a sound.

To hide my pain, I lifted the flag to my face and brushed my lips across it. As I did so, I remembered the day when I kissed my uncle's disfigured brow and the surprised look of gratitude that flooded his face. I held the flag against my cheek, the fabric soaking up my tears, and I resolved to treasure it forever, to display it every Veteran's Day for the rest of my life, to honor my Uncle Jesse."

"This is a story I never mind hearing," Bill said. "From all I've read, that was a terrible war. So many gassed and so many disfigured. I'm glad you befriended him."

Catherine knew that, having been in the service, Bill was sympathetic to veterans. Thank God he was never in a war.

Before she closed the door, Catherine stared at the flag on the wall, absorbed by the memory.

Bill took her elbow. "I promised Jennifer I'd be home by five," he said, "so we better get moving."

They took the usual route—through Dodgeville, then down highways 23, 130, and 133 to Willow. But before she directed Bill to the cemetery, Catherine insisted they drive to the river, to the spot where Jesse was last seen alive. "It was here that he uttered his final words. It was here that he called my name." She threw flower petals onto the water.

They returned from the river to military ridge, turned west at Dodgeville toward Edmund and Highway 39, then south into Hinton where her Tregonning ancestors rested. For a little off-the-beaten-path village, Hinton boasted a proud cemetery, lawns mowed and weeds trimmed. Rows of American flags honored Catherine's great-uncle Charles and other Hinton youth killed in the Civil War and all wars since. They entered at the southeast roadway and stopped at the cemetery's most conspicuous landmark, a six-foot high, rough-cut rock covered with sculpted grape vines. The name Tregonning leapt from the marker as prominently as the word Hollywood is declared from the Hollywood Hills.

Catherine's Uncle Nicholas, who had made his fortune in Western gold mines, had purchased this stone. Assembled around this large edifice, three small gravestones marked the burial sites of Nicholas and his parents, Edward and Mary, Catherine's grandparents.

Bill stopped the car while Catherine searched for a flower to place on her grandmother's grave. "What do you think? Should I give her the red geraniums or these white daisies?"

“Mom, these yellow roses are beautiful. They’d be—”

“Not those. They’re for Ruby. She loved yellow.”

“I should have known that you’d save the best for Aunt Ruby,” Bill said.

“Do we have enough?” Catherine counted the flowers to be certain there was a flower for each—not just any flower, but one that fit the person. “I think daisies are for the children. Daisies look so youthful.” She set the daisies down and picked up a more colorful flower, brought it to her nose, but quickly pulled it away. “They don’t smell the best, but Mother loved red geraniums; these should go to her. Don’t you agree?”

“Whatever you think, Mom.”

Catherine sorted through the flowers until she found a lone white rose. She looked toward her grandmother’s gravestone, and a smile flickered across her face. “This rose fits Grandma Tregonning. It’s pure, small, and delicate. She worked like a servant woman but acted like a lady. I can’t help but think she had royalty in her blood.”

“How about Great-Grandpa’s grave?” Bill said. “We have enough.”

Catherine shook her head. “Grandpa doesn’t deserve flowers.” She’d not put flowers on the grave of a man who deserted his wife.

The first leg of the journey complete, they drove eastward through Hinton along Highway 39 toward Ashley Springs and its larger, tree-covered cemetery. Catherine’s mother and father were buried there. Ruby and Robert, too. Catherine raised a lilac, a pansy, and a rose from the seat next to her, but after careful inspection, she set each back down. “Let’s see. The geraniums are for Mother, the daisies for the babies. What should I put on Dad’s grave?”

Bill braked the car near his grandparents’ markers, picked up the flowers, and handed them to her. “Honeysuckle, roses, lilacs, or pansies. What’ll it be?”

Catherine took the flowers, stepped from the car, and spread them across the hood. She glanced toward Bill, who slammed the door, paced the car’s length, and counted the flagstones. Catherine took her time. She’d not be rushed, not when vital decisions were to be made. At last, she selected the honeysuckle. “Dad loved honeysuckle. Ruby and I would sing ‘Honeysuckle Rose,’ and he’d say, ‘Once more, girls. When I close my eyes, I can see the honeysuckle that grew outside my bedroom window when I was a boy.’ Honeysuckle is perfect for him.”

Bill snatched the remaining plants. “We need to get moving. I’ve got a long drive home.”

She’d waited all year for this day, and she wouldn’t be hurried now. “Be patient, Bill. It’s just once a year.”

Catherine sorted through the flowers. “The lilacs for Sharon?” She held the flowers up. “Yes, the lilacs. She planted lilac bushes all around my yard when she lived there. I still have every color—purple, pink, indigo, and white.” Catherine put the lilacs aside. “And the yellow roses for Ruby. I miss my sisters. I feel so alone now.”

“Mom, you need more than memories. You need people.”

“People could never replace Ruby.”

“Mom, Ruby’s dead.”

Catherine hated that word. She’d not let Ruby’s memory die—not so long as she was alive.

As they carried the geraniums, honeysuckle, and daisies to the graves, Catherine’s thoughts turned to another matter.

“Do you think there’s a space for me? Where will I be buried?”

“Mom, I’ve told you: The manager said there’s an open gravesite next to Grandma and Grandpa. And Ruby and Robert are right next door.” Bill pointed. “See there.”

“You’re sure now? I’d feel better knowing that I’ll be near Ruby.”

Bill took Catherine’s arm and walked her around the markers to Mary O’Shaughnessy’s grave. “Right here next to Grandma. See this space?”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Rest assured, Mom, this is where you’ll be.”

They placed the geraniums and honeysuckle next to her parents’ markers and the yellow roses next to Ruby. Bill hurried to the car while Catherine walked slowly among the graves. She paused at a small stone about twenty yards beyond her parent’s markers. They weren’t family, but this stop was still part of the annual ritual, one she couldn’t do without. Hard as it was.

Bill had already opened the passenger door when Catherine saw him turn and walk back toward her. She stared at the grave marker as he approached. “Mom, what’s wrong?”

“I’m okay.”

Bill looked down. “Hays. Charles and Dorothy. You’ve stopped here before, haven’t you? Who are they again?”

“It was long ago. You never met.” She started toward the car but stopped at another marker. “Amundsen, Walter Amundsen. I think he was Professor Amundsen’s husband.” Catherine chuckled softly. “They don’t make women like her anymore. I haven’t seen her for years.”

The half-hour drive back to Logan Junction was quiet. After she had placed the last flowers on Sharon’s grave, Catherine was exhausted and ready to rest. The trip hadn’t tired her so much as the weighty decisions about which flowers best fit her loved ones. When her sisters were alive, they’d help make these decisions, but now the responsibility was all hers. For such a simple task, the duty weighed heavily.

Bill walked his mother to the door. When Catherine entered, she tripped over the threshold and would have fallen if she hadn’t grabbed his arm.

“Mom, I know you’re tired, and it’s not the time to talk about it, but you’ve got to consider leaving this house before it falls down around you. The floors tilt, the boards are uneven, and the thresholds are loose. You’re going to fall and break something. I don’t want you here alone.”

She thought about her cold and drafty farmhouse back at Willow. That wasn’t always in good repair either, but she’d loved it just the same.

“Mom,” Bill said, “are you listening?”

She couldn’t hear this again. “Not now, Bill. I’m going to lie down for a while.”

Bill picked a letter off the floor. “Peterson Land Developers? What’s this?”

Catherine looked back. She’d missed that one. Well, no help for it now. “They want to buy my back lots. They telephoned, too. They pester, pester, pester.”

“Great, Mom. A chance to sell your house. It’s time you moved.”

“They didn’t mention the house, just the back lots.”

“Your acres are valuable. They’d buy your house to get that land. Did you ask about the house?”

Catherine took the letter from Bill’s hand. “I’m not interested.”

“Mom, don’t dismiss it. You shouldn’t stay here alone. There’ll never be a better time to sell. Madison’s moving this way.”

“I need a nap.” Catherine turned toward her bedroom. “Call me when you get home, will you? I worry about you driving all that way alone. And please, thank Jennifer for those lovely flowers.”

## — ABOUT THE AUTHOR —



**H**arold William Thorpe grew up in Southwest Wisconsin. He spent many happy hours visiting his relatives' farms. During his teen years he de-tasseled corn, worked two summers as a live-in farm laborer, one summer as a Surge milking machine sales and service man, and part of another summer as a U. S. Department of Agriculture field man.

He graduated from the University Wisconsin-Platteville with a bachelor of science degree in education. He worked for 11 years in Janesville, Wisconsin, first as a fifth-grade and special education teacher, then the last four years as a school psychologist. He earned a master's degree in educational psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a doctorate in education from Utah State University.

After earning his doctorate, he took a position at UW-Oshkosh. There, he initiated a program to prepare students to teach children with learning disabilities. For the next 25 years he taught behavior management, instructional strategies, and research classes. He supervised student teachers and graduate students, and served in administrative positions as a graduate program coordinator, a department chairperson, and a college associate dean.

But his first love was conducting the research that produced more than 25 publications in education and psychology journals, including *Remedial and Special Education*, *Computers in the Schools*, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *Journal of Special Education Technology*, *Psychology in the Schools*, *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *Corrective and Social Psychology*, *Education and Training of the Mentally Retarded*, and others.

Near the end of his university career he headed a research project that resulted in the return of \$52 million from the U.S. Department of Education to Wisconsin schools.

Upon retirement, he decided to learn fiction writing—subsequently publishing three *O’Shaughnessy Chronicle* books: *Giddyap Tin Lizzie*, *Bittersweet Harvest*, and *Puppet on a String*. *Strawberry Summer* is the last book in the O’Shaughnessy series.

He also wrote books for each of his four grandchildren. These publications include three chapter books: *Wyatt’s Woods*, *Aubrey’s Attic*, and *Grayson’s Garage*, and one picture book: *Bellamy’s Ball*.

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