



# CHAPTER 1

Here at the beginning, if it were possible, Will Krouse would point to a photograph. In his mind's eye, he can see it all, the students of Hampton School, 1899. Next to them, Mister Longacher, their schoolmaster, would be standing straight and rigid, a clean-shaven Abe Lincoln minus his top hat, the deep-set eyes below his bushy brows probably angled toward the Kepler sisters. Longacher was the visible reminder of the old century that, even in America, was called by the name of an English Queen, *Victorian*.

Like Longacher, you'd notice Becky Kepler first, with her high cheekbones, long reddish hair, and bright eyes, too lean to be pretty yet. Her sister Callie, four years older,

was on her way to being a great beauty. The two standing next to each other, identical except in height, dressed like twins from matching bonnets to black wool stockings on their long skinny legs.

You'd recognize Will Krouse the boy if you knew Will Krouse the man, his sandy hair tousled, his pale gray eyes playful, his mouth smiling but tight, a fine-featured boy, not tall, his arms already muscular from farm work.

Earl Slayer Jr. would be there, too, his wire-rimmed spectacles pushed back on his narrow, freckled nose. He is the only city kid in the group; his store-bought clothes — the only ones in the schoolhouse — give him away. Earl is the son of the local doctor.

Wendell Gates would make you smile. He is one of those boys who don't clean up well, whose clothes never fit him, his coarse hair is coal black, like an Indian's, though Wendell is the son of an Irish railroader.

Will would have liked to have had that picture to remind himself that they were all close once and so there would be a measure of how far they spun off in their own directions in a couple of decades.

There is no such picture, of course. Times were changing to be sure. Huge economic and political forces were stirring in the old countries that their grandparents had left behind. These forces would sweep through the world scattering everyone and everything. The children of

these children would not grow up in their father's businesses and their grandfather's towns. They would not be friends and enemies for life as were these children in this imaginary photo. Will, Wendell, Earl, the Kepler girls, were part of the last generation that would stay put.

The great grandparents of the Krouses, and the Keplers, and the rest, left Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Contrary to what has been said about them, they did not want a brand new world. They wanted a world much like the one they came from; a familiar world but one with less crowding, fewer restrictions.

The American branch of the Krouse family could trace its roots back to 1819, about the same time Indiana was officially declared a state.

Augusta D. Krouse and his wife, Anna, sailed from the old country, arriving in Virginia. Eventually, with other German immigrants, their covered wagon headed for Indiana territory. They had heard that the land there was perfect for farming and raising cattle.

Augusta and Anna Krouse settled in an area that later became Penn County. Pioneering was a test of survival. Augusta built the family's log cabin by hand, dug out fieldstones of all weights, sizes, and shapes — hundreds of them — so that he could plow in a straight line without breaking a blade.

It was colder on the prairie and windier than anything they'd ever dreamed of. The floods were wetter and the flies, bees, and mosquitoes of summertime were fierce. Nevertheless, the Krouses and a few others stayed.

Life on the prairie wasn't much easier for the later generations of Krouses who followed.

Willard A. "Will" Krouse was the great grandson of Augusta D. He never knew the old man, only of him, from the stories told by his grandfather Augusta W. Krouse, or 'Pop' as everyone called him. His grandmother, Gretchen, they all called 'Mom.'

Pop Krouse, had a gentle manner until something went haywire. Then he flew off the handle, as had every other Krouse when cornered or provoked. Whatever chore there was, it seemed to get done quicker if he was up against it. When moving fieldstones, they seemed to jump right out of the ground themselves once Pop got angry at them.

Pop was in his sixties and still driving hard when Will's father died. He didn't come in from the fields when he was supposed to and, as the shadows lengthened and dinner cooled, a member of the family went out to look and found him sprawled over a huge stone that was half out of the earth. With hard labor by Pop and a couple of mules, the stone became Willard R.'s gravestone.

Will's father had Will working at his side once Will

turned eight years old. After Willard died, Pop took over. Mom used to argue over what was best for the boy since Will's mother died soon after his father did. The family said that heartbreak carried her off. The records showed it was consumption. So Will was orphaned early. Like other boys who've seen a lot of trouble and passion young, Will became a man who looked to himself to get things done.

Pop loved his grandson deeply and showed this love, as Krouses did, by pushing Will hard. Mom fed her husband and her grandson the food of the body — berry pies were particular favorites. She also gave them the stories and songs that are the food of the spirit.

Fifteen years later, by 1914, not much had changed. There were new roads, new machinery, and an occasional telephone wire but most of that was yet to come. Will Krouse had remained on the Krouse property and married his childhood sweetheart, Becky Kepler.

Will still plowed with a team, but he did it in a grand old-country way, using a pair of huge Belgian mares, of which he was immensely proud. At 1,500 pounds each, the Belgians were powerful enough to pull a barn to its new location. He'd have them harnessed and in the field by sunrise, taking enormous pleasure in beating the sun to the work of the day.

Today, as he was turning under the sod before winter,

the sun inched over the treetops at the far end of the farm. The soil was still damp with dew. He could smell the earth's vapors as the newly plowed ground released them. A red-tailed hawk was circling high in the air above the team, hoping that the mare's heavy footfall would flush out some straggling field mouse for breakfast.

He watched the hawk swoop down on its prey, then he headed back toward the house. Becky would be cooking up breakfast. There was a little frost in the air, something you smelled more than felt and he wondered if he might not let his boy, Aaron, skip a day of school and work with him and the Belgians. Any day now, it could be too cold to sink the plow blade into the earth. It would be good to give the boy one last chance this season to handle the team.

Will's heart was stirred by the horses and the hawk, and his wife and children. He'd lost a lot and knew the value of what he'd kept. His spread was a large tract, compared to the surrounding properties. His father had been given over a thousand acres from Pop. He'd intended that the land he owned be divided in equal shares between his sons. It didn't turn out that way. Because of a "legal error," and for reasons Will didn't choose to wonder about, Will's older brother, Cecil, kept most of the land for himself. A section of one hundred-fifty acres was set aside for Will. As an adult, Will set out to buy back as much of

the land as he could. He purchased it at a higher than market price from his brother because he set value on the things that Cecil had no thought for. Will owned the stone his father died on top of and under which he was buried. He ended up with the original Krouse log cabin and the worn-out barn that came with it. Cecil considered the land they sat on too poor for farming.

To Will, those decrepit buildings were filled with the tangible presence of what his ancestors were all about — hard work, chances taken, dreams visualized. He vowed never to tear them down and took care to repair them whenever they seemed to need it. Will and Becky built their new homestead a stone's throw from the log cabin.

Who says the departed can't influence our lives today? Because Cecil lacked feeling for the original Krouse place, he misjudged the true value of the land itself. Augusta knew it. He must have, Pop and Will decided. The old man had never told anyone about the hidden spring.

Will found this out by accident as a young boy hunting with his grandfather. They came upon a large pile of fieldstones. As fate would have it, Pop shot at a rabbit, hitting its hind leg. The rabbit ran under the pile for cover. Pop couldn't stomach leaving any animal to suffer, so he and Will began pulling aside the fieldstones that had been placed there over sixty years earlier.

They stopped when Pop yelled, "I'll be damned, if this

don't take the cake."

Underneath the stones was a small bubbling stream of clear running water. Without a word, they carefully put the stones back as they had found them. The find remained a secret between Pop and Will.

The spring was the old Krouse's gift to Will. It made it possible for him to get water to the additional 360 acres he eventually bought from the Pennsylvania Central Railroad — land that was once considered poorer dirt than that which his brother, Cecil, "allowed" him to purchase.

Technically speaking, Earl Slayer Jr. M.D. was a second-generation small-town dweller. His father, however, was such a country doctor, so pleased to be in open farmland in his rig, making house calls, so genuinely delighted at the gifts of eggs and butter given him by his patients that no one ever considered him anything but country.

Doc Slayer Jr. hated everything about the practice that his father had loved. Up early, eat breakfast, get ready to go to work. Same black wool suit; same stuffy office. Then there were the house calls. See them all, one by one ... the coughs, the colds, the sores, the bites, the births, the deaths, the diseases. Day in, day out.

Doc Jr. yearned for bigger things. He leaned against the high back of his father's brown leather chair, wondering how long he could stand to live in this jerkwater

crossroads.

He was not his father, and all the townsfolk who had worshipped his father could attest to that fact. They already did attest to it, in fact. “Doc Senior’s shoes are hard ones to fill,” they would tell him, with an infuriating pity.

He did not want to fill Doc Senior’s shoes. He’d hoped to advertise the fact by discarding all his father’s old furniture, except this brown leather chair. He wanted to be some place where patients paid in cash, not pigs and chickens and baked goods tendered in pride.

His father had not liked hearing that Earl Jr. wanted to leave Penn County after medical school. He wasn’t pleased that his son wanted to travel and see Europe, like so many of the people he had gone to school with back east. His father insisted he return to this lifeless farm town filled with people who thought Europe was a place you came from, not a place anyone went to for experience.

There was another reason, the only reason really, that brought him back to Hampton. It was something he didn’t talk to his friends about. There was a girl — a girl he wanted — one that made his body burn with passion almost every night, unlike the sophisticated girls who gave themselves to him back east. She lived here in Penn County.

But when he returned to Hampton to claim her, someone had gotten to her first.

By the time the sun topped the trees, Will had the harnesses off and was knocking feed into the horses' trough. He pulled his watch out of his pocket, six thirty.

"How lucky can a man be?" Will said to no one in particular. "Out here among God's creations, working this Krouse land." They were the first words that had gone through his mind that day.

He opened the back door. "Will Krouse, don't you come in here with muddy boots," Becky said.

"I won't." Will stepped back out of the enclosed porch that led to the kitchen, untied his boots and kicked them off on the outside stairs.

Becky laughed her musical laugh at him until she nearly started coughing. "Caught ya," she said.

Her auburn hair looked almost red in the morning sun light shining through the kitchen window. A lock of it had fallen over her eyes, as if she were just half-awake. It was early; she was a little rumped and wrinkled. At the sight of her husband — ten years and four kids later — she still brushed her hair in place with the back of her hand, wanting him to look at her. He did.

She smiled, picked up a fork, turned the sausage in the pan, and shot Aaron a fiery glance. The boy was at the

bottom of the stairs dressed in patched overalls and his farm boots. “Will, talk to that boy of yours. He thinks that there’s no school for him today.”

He frowned as he stared at his mother. The boy had taken pains not to comb his hair.

There was going to be a struggle, Will could see. He took a deep breath and was distracted for a moment by the smells of the kitchen — sage spiced sausage, buttermilk biscuits, and even a hint of an apple pie that bubbled over in the oven.

“Will ...” she said.

Aaron stood in the hallway, “Pa, remember, you said I could work the team.”

Will walked over and wrapped his arms around his wife, who stood in front of the cooking stove. He didn’t ask how a farmwoman, mother of four, could look so beautiful. He just knew that she was.

“Will, don’t you come huggin’ on me. Tell that spittin’ image of yours he has to go to school.”

Will gave her a pat on her backside and walked over to the sink. “Too hungry to talk, Becky.” He pumped water over his hands. “You goin’ to see your Mom today?” he asked.

“I’m going to see Callie,” she said in a small voice. Callie was gone. Like Will’s mother, she had been taken by consumption.

“You sure?” he asked. The trips to the graveyard always left Becky exhausted.

“Got to,” said Becky in a voice so small and so absolute that there was no arguing. “I miss her so.”

Many young men would have married Becky for her looks or even for her cooking, something she learned from her mother. Will married her because she was Rebecca Kepler, a determined woman with a big heart.

The boys and he sat down and skidded their chairs to the table. Will surveyed them with the same pleasure and more he took in the Belgians, the red-tailed hawk, and the sunrise.

Becky stood behind them and cleared her throat.

Will bowed his head. “Lord, thank you for all our blessings and grant us spiritual wisdom. Amen.”

Wendell Gates was a big man. He had a two inch scar etched across his eyebrow to prove it. A root cellar door “ran into” him while he was horsing around with a couple of pals back in high school. They were looking for some “shine” Wendell had stashed away.

This morning, as he stood in front of the long mirror behind the bedroom door, Wendell couldn’t help noticing that his skin was blotchy, his eyes bleary — signs of another late night at Honey Boy’s.

“Piss on the shave,” he mumbled as he rubbed

his unshaven face. There hadn't been a major political figure in the country who shaved since before Lincoln. Not till now, when the sitting President was an east coast Princeton man with a smooth face.

Wendell didn't look like many of the political figures who danced in his head. His dark complexion and solid build gave him the look of a Potawatomi Indian. He watched his muscles flex as he rubbed some Wild Rose tonic on his scalp. Parting his hair down the middle, he noticed the sides were long. He needed a haircut.

He turned sideways and gazed at himself. Except for a couple of small love handles, he was, as he usually said, in fightin' or fuckin' shape. His eyes still foggy, he struggled with the last two buttons of his shirt.

"You up, Wendell?" Mildred called from the kitchen.

He held onto the door jamb as he pulled on his overalls, then looked over at the still-made bed. His pillow was on the floor, apparently where he had slept.

"Wendell?" Mildred whined. He liked her so much better with her mouth shut.

"Just coffee," Wendell said.

Mildred grimaced as she put the pot on the stove. He'd been "campaigning" again at Honey Boy's. How late? Who knew? She remembered the old grandfather clock striking twelve before she finally fell asleep. Too drunk to think about waking me up. Lucky me.

Mildred stood at the bottom of the stairs as Wendell came down.

“You might as well have breakfast,” she said. “There’s no hurry.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” he asked. “I’m goin’ to work.”

“You’re late for work. The railroad sent a puddle jumper over to get you,” she said. “Why don’t they just call them errand boys?”

“What did you tell him?”

“That you were still in bed.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Will they fire you?”

“Who gives a shit,” he said. Once he was sheriff, he’d be entirely out of their league.

“Where’s my coat?” he asked, but she was gone. “Mildred,” he shouted.

“It’s too warm for a coat.”

He followed her into the kitchen. The coat was hanging on a peg. He carefully removed the badge and pinned it on the strap of his overalls, then took the chipped tin cup she offered. Wendell could drink coffee hot enough to boil eggs. He knocked it down like a shot of medicine, which in a way it was, turned, and slammed out the door.

Will walked to the barn where he had left the horses. He

took the Belgians' harnesses and handed them to Aaron.

Aaron was amazed, every time he looked at them up close, at how big and powerful they were. The horses were heavily muscled, with deep chests and wide barrels. The harnesses draped across his arms, mostly touching the ground. "Pa, these are the greatest plow horses there are."

Will nodded. "Aaron, you're going to have to climb up on their stall to get that rig on them."

Aaron had watched his father hitch the team so often over the last year that he didn't have to worry about getting it wrong. Every once in a while, he patted the animals. Their coats were softer than that of the bull he was raising. He knew how to scratch the horses; they turned their heads in approval.

Will glanced over at his son. "Now remember, it's not the Belgians you have to be concerned about when plowing. It's the surrey seat that you'll be sitting on."

"I know, Pa."

"Good, then you'll understand why you'll be sitting on my lap at first."

"But, Pa ..."

"Come on." Will turned hard away from the barn and set the boy on his lap. He could tell that his son wasn't pleased at the arrangement. Will had never forgotten the boyhood incident when a neighbor's team of mules hit

a half buried fieldstone, tipping over the surrey, throwing the neighbor off. The man lost his life and his family that day. His daughter was forced into marriage and his four sons were split up. The two oldest ended up somewhere out West; the other two nobody seemed to know. That winter, his wife sat out on the fieldstone that took her husband's life until she froze to death. The story told around the countryside was that the tears on her cheeks were still frozen when she was found days later.

Will swallowed hard. He knew what it was like without his ma and pa, but Becky and the kids? The boy in his lap, Will worked the team, his arms around his son, as the earth turned beneath them.

“Pa, do you have to hold me so tight?”

Hattie Wallace started out cleaning tables and serving drinks downstairs, but once Honey Boy convinced her how easy the work upstairs was, she changed her arrangement with him. No, “flat-backin’” wasn’t honest work, but compared with her life in Beaver Hollow, Honey Boy’s was heaven.

When she reached the top of the narrow staircase, Hattie heard two familiar voices coming from one of the rooms on the left. She peeked in. “Am I disturbing anything?”

“No, dearie,” Ruby said. “Come on in.”

Ruby and Prudy Garner sat facing each other, legs crossed, on opposite ends of the small sofa beneath the window. Their matching red bathrobes clashed with both their thick strawberry blonde hair and with the somewhat tattered wine-colored curtains hanging down behind them, but the overall look was colorful ... as were the Garner twins.

Hattie always marveled at their humor, their kindness ... and how difficult it was to tell them apart. Time — and their constant partnership — made the process even harder by endowing them with identical mannerisms and matching laugh lines.

“Can I sit on your work bench, Ruby?” Hattie asked, patting the thin mattress on the old iron barred bed.

“Put your ass wherever you like, honey,” Ruby said. “What’s on your pretty mind?”

Hattie was pretty. Very pretty. Her straight hair was coal black like her younger sister, Stella’s. The Wallace daughter’s eyes were brown and large, setting off their narrow noses. Everyone said their good looks came from their ma, but the family’s craziness definitely came from their pa, Homer Wallace.

“Oh, I was getting a little lonesome and thought if you two didn’t mind, I could use a little company before my beau shows.”

“Beau. I *like* that word, Hattie,” Ruby exclaimed.

“What do you think, Prudy?”

“Beau,” Prudy repeated, clasping her hands together. “I’ll use that. Sure beats real people’s names.” She looked at her sister and rolled her eyes. “Like ‘Daniel Norton,’ for example.”

“Ohhh ...” Hattie groaned, making a face. “I had Dan Norton last night. Where does that man hang out that makes him smell so bad?”

“More like where hasn’t he hung out?” Ruby said. “A smell that bad takes years to build up.”

“Look on the bright side,” Prudy interjected, “You always know with Dan Norton you won’t have to smell it long.”

“He is a quickie,” Hattie said.

“He comes and goes,” Ruby squealed, bursting into giggles.

The other two laughed with her.

“He tried to kiss me last night,” Hattie said.

“Dan Norton?” Prudy looked at Ruby. “What did you say to him?”

“Didn’t say anything.” Hattie leaned back against the head of the bed, examining her long fingernails. “Squeeze their seeds hard enough and they forget about kissing.”

“I’m never going to kiss them,” Ruby said.

“But how about if they get rough?” Prudy asked.

Hattie blew on her freshly polished nails. “Honey Boy

will take care of the roughhousers.”

The twins agreed.

“Where’s your baby sister been, Hattie?” Ruby asked.

“Stella? She’s still got that job working out at Long Pointe.”

“With all the crazies?”

“Hell, we work with crazies, too,” Hattie said. “At least hers are locked up.” She shot her friends a look.

“But don’t you still see her?” Ruby asked. “She’s got to come home at night to sleep.”

“It’d take a day to drive out there,” Prudy said. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“I guess you’re right,” said Ruby.

“You guess ...,” they both giggled.

“She don’t come home that often,” Hattie shrugged. “Not even on days off. They have rooms for the help to stay in out there.”

Prudy made a face. “She lives right there?”

“It’s a better place for Stella than Pa’s.” Hattie clenched her jaw and stared into space with such a pained expression it took Prudy’s breath away.

Doctor Earl Slayer Jr. lived in the frame house that his folks left to him. It was where he was born and, the way things were going, it was where he would die. Though it

was not where he planned to spend this evening. When he'd stopped by to change his shirt, Pansy was there. She was a legitimate cause for detour.

Earl squinted, watching Pansy undress in the flickering light coming from the kerosene lamp on the table next to him.

"Are you just going to lay there and watch me, again?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. He loosened one of his lace-ups with the other and shook his feet until both shoes fell with a thump onto the hardwood floor. "Come over to this side of the bed where I can see you better."

"In front of the window?"

"So what, we're upstairs."

"That don't mean someone from the street can't see in."

"Who cares?"

"I do."

"Why? You have nothing to be ashamed of."

She smiled as she untied the ribbon holding her petticoat and slipped it off, then carefully laid it on the high back chair along with her dress. She giggled.

"What's so damn funny?"

"You should see yourself laying there in nothing but your socks."

"Step out where I can see you better."

“Would you please dim that lamp?”

Doc leaned over and turned the brass knob on the base, lowering the wick.

Pansy stepped to the side of the spindled bed.

“Hmm, much better, Rebecca,” he said.

She turned her back to him and bit down on her lip as the name “Rebecca” rang through her head. She tasted the small droplet of blood as it formed on her lower lip. She stepped out of her pantaloons and removed her stockings, then finally her camisole.

“Now what are you going to do, just stand there?” he asked.

She laid the rest of her undergarments on the chair and turned to face him.

“Part your legs,” Doc said.

She parted her lips, wetting them with her tongue, soothing the tiny pierce. She spread her long legs. Doc’s eyes fixed on her silhouette. Then she pulled the ribbon from her long black hair, letting it fall over her breasts.

“Push your hair back, Rebecca.”

She knew everything she would have to do for him before she could join him in bed. Doc watched her every move. He reached over and turned the lamp back up.

“Get me my black bag.”

“You going to hurt me?” Pansy asked.

“Just do what I say.”

She picked up his bag and set it on the bed, then climbed on top of him. He felt around inside for the tiny vial before placing his hand between her breasts, savoring for a moment her skin against his. Pulling down hard on her hair, he let a small amount of opiate drain into her mouth. Her back arched as he thrust himself inside her.

“Oh, Doc, I can be her,” Pansy said.

Supper finished, Will took Samuel and Jacob into the parlor to read them a story from his old *Grimm's Fairy Tale* book. Aaron followed. The book was written in German in the black ornate fonts of the old country. The children were only interested in the pictures. Becky put Adeline to bed and went into the parlor. Aaron lay on the floor half-asleep.

“Will Krouse, you've worn your son out. He's barely got enough strength to do his sums.”

“Aw, Ma,” Aaron said, getting to his feet.

Becky paused in the kitchen doorway. “Didn't I get you a Grimm's that's written in English?”

Will looked at her over the top of the book. “I told you that my father read to me out of this book, just like his father did him.”

Little was he to know that in less than three years, his children's generation and future Krouses of Penn County would be forbidden from speaking their native tongue any

longer.

“Well, I would like our children to read out of the new book.”

“Okay, I am reading it in English,” Will said, before hiding his face behind the book.

“That’s funny, I thought I heard some German when I came downstairs a minute ago.”

“No you didn’t,” he said. Most of the time he read aloud in English, only slipping occasionally. Will didn’t have his grandfather’s accent.

He turned the pages and thought about the old country. Then he tried to remember the names of some of the families that he’d see leave Penn County. Was it the hard winters? Or the hard life, in general? With the rails and the roads, would more of them scatter?

Once in the kitchen, Becky took out the small chalkboard and started Aaron through his multiplication tables. Not more than ten minutes passed before Aaron asked, “Ma, would you like me to get us a slice of that good apple pie you baked?”

“That’s not going to work, Aaron.” Becky leaned across the table, lightly tapping her son’s nose.

“Do I have to be the smartest boy in school?”

“No, but you needn’t be the dumbest either.”

Aaron had already picked up many of Will’s mannerisms, one of which Becky observed right at that moment.

Aaron sat tapping his fingers on the table — thumb to pinky — sounding like a galloping horse.

“Stop that, Aaron.”

“Stop what?”

“Don’t you what me, son.”

“Sorry, Ma.”

Whenever Will got tired, bored, or thoughtful, he would tap his fingers. Most of the time it went unnoticed. Becky knew Aaron was trying with all he had to stay awake.

“Would you like to have a glass of cider and play twenty questions with me?” she asked.

“I’m really having fun doing my sums, Ma.”

Becky gave him a kiss on the head and playfully tugged on his ear. “Nobody likes a fresh boy, Aaron.”

She walked back into the parlor to see if the rest of her family wanted some. Will, Jacob, and Samuel were sound asleep and Mr. Grimm was lying face down where he landed after falling out of Will’s hands. Becky smiled as she went back to the kitchen. Her smile turned into a laugh when she saw Aaron, head down on the table. She was among the living dead.