CHAPTER 1

MAY 1933

The engine chuffed and the wheels clacked as the train powered its way through Ontario. Over glacier-scraped bedrock it passed, through forests of dark green pine and budding oak trees toward the plains of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, where years of unrelenting sun and suffocating dust had baked the once fertile earth dry and hard.

Inside the third carriage back from the engine, on seats set up like bus benches, men, women and children huddled together. Joseph Gaston, a widower, and his four children occupied two of those seats. They were travelling to—what? He didn't quite know. He stood with six-month-old Clare in his arms. As he gazed out the window into the darkness, his reflection stared back at him.

Joseph was nearly forty. His hair, a dull light brown with the odd wisp of grey above the ears, was combed back from a prominent forehead. His eyes were the blue-green of the ocean on a sunny day. Laughter lines curved around them when he smiled, but this was something he did almost never of late.

Joseph looked at his sons. Nolan, eleven, and Cole, seven, sat together on one bench. After the better part of a day on the train, they were bored. Now and then they gave each other a punch or a kick, usually because of some minor slight such as crossing the imaginary line that separated each half of the seat. Sarah, Joseph's four-year-old daughter, shared the bench behind the boys with the family's three suitcases. She'd been suffering from motion sickness

since their departure and held a tin bowl on her lap. As he reached over to brush her long, blonde curls gently from her half-closed eyes, Joseph wished he could do something for her. Had Helen been alive, she would have known instinctively how to make Sarah feel better; Joseph had always relied on her in such matters.

The train shuddered as if a chill had run down its spine. The movement caused the little girl to drop the bowl just as she retched again; yellow-brown fluid ran down the front of her dress. Joseph, his nose filled with the acrid smell of vomit, wondered if he'd be able to find fresh clothing for Sarah. Handing the baby to Nolan with instructions to rock her, Joseph knelt down in the narrow aisle and opened the suitcase holding their clothes. Of the three bags, one contained the family's clothing. The other two held bedclothes, cutlery, a few basic household items and keepsakes: photos, locks of the children's hair, letters from Helen written while they'd been courting, Nolan's toddler handprints and other reminders of the past. It took him a while to sort through the contents, but eventually he found a pair of Coles' overalls—they would do for now.

He looked up when Nolan suddenly exclaimed, "Dad!"

"What?" Joseph felt drained as he pulled the overalls from the suitcase.

"The baby isn't moving!" Nolan sounded alarmed.

Clare had been crying all day; for the first time she was silent. "She's sleeping," Joseph said, his attention still on Sarah.

Nolan's brown eyes were wide with panic. "But, Dad, she's not breathing!"

The words brought Joseph instantly back to his feet. Bending over the baby, he studied her closely. Nolan was right. Clare showed no sign of life. Quickly Joseph put his face to Clare's nose and mouth, and waited—prayed—for her to exhale. Nothing. Were her lips blue or was he imagining it? He wasn't sure. "Christ!" he muttered, as he grabbed the limp infant from Nolan's arms and shook her gently.

"Did she swallow something?" he barked at his son, startling nearby passengers.

"No," Nolan said tensely, as he watched his father part the baby's lips and investigate her mouth with his fingers.

Joseph balled up Cole's overalls and placed them under Clare's shoulders, arching her head back and opening her windpipe. In an effort to force air into her lungs, he drew her arms up and over her head. When that didn't work he flipped her onto her belly, turned her head to the side, placed her hands beneath her chin, and lifted her elbows to expand her lungs. All this took less than a minute.

Joseph had never been so frightened. He had done everything he'd been taught in the army, but Clare still didn't respond. Oblivious to the silence in the car and the distress of those around him, he began to strike Clare's back. Again and again he struck, each time a little harder. By now the baby's small hands and feet were grey.

"Help! Someone please help!" he screamed, looking around pleadingly. "My baby's not breathing!"

The other passengers were frozen with shock. No one moved.

Guided by instinct, Joseph put his lips to Clare's mouth and sent his own breath into her. All at once, as if by some miracle, the little chest expanded then settled. He breathed into her mouth again. Suddenly Clare coughed. Her eyes opened and she let out a wail like a newborn's cry. In moments, her colour turned from sickly grey to pale pink.

"Thank God!" exclaimed a woman across the aisle, but Joseph barely heard her. With the crisis over, he could only think of the tragedy that might have been. He was trembling violently as he sat down, holding Clare close to him. A ball of emotion rose in his throat and tears formed in his eyes. Lowering his head, he swallowed hard in an effort to control his feelings. It took him a minute to realize that Cole and Sarah were crying. He reached out to them and they scrambled onto his lap, making space for themselves beside the baby. Only Nolan sat alone, his breathing

jerky. Clare, recovered from her trauma, fell asleep in Joseph's arms. Momentarily he thought Clare had stopped breathing again, but before he had to take action her nostrils flared, and he gave a sigh of relief.

A few people now offered their help. Joseph declined politely. *Where were you a few minutes ago?* he wanted to ask them, but didn't. The combination of adrenaline and fatigue made him feel unsteady and nauseous. As he waited for his energy to return he looked at the passengers around him.

The car was crowded. The day was passing and it was growing dark. Before long, conversation ebbed as people began to settle themselves for the night. From their dress, their deportment and their general look of hunger, Joseph sensed the other passengers were also attempting to escape from destitution to something better. Like him, they were all victims of a system that had gone terribly wrong. The catastrophe was said to have started with the stock market crash in 1929. Opinions as to who was to blame were rampant. Unscrupulous moneylenders. Avaricious company presidents. Incompetent political leaders. Whatever the reason, the world's economy had disintegrated, resulting in global devastation. Trade between nations had dwindled. Heavy industry had come to a standstill. Construction had halted. Crop prices had fallen by half, and then half again. Soon, farms had been foreclosed and unemployed men evicted from their homes.

Now, nearly four years later, the situation had grown even worse. The strength that had enabled people to endure hardship in the early years, was wearing out. People could be badly housed, poorly clad and undernourished for only so long. At this point, the Depression was no longer confined to the economy; it affected the morale of all those who could no longer afford the basics of staying alive. The dollars in the pockets of working folk became tattered and greasy as their owners counted and recounted them, praying there would be enough for a family to survive another day. Those who worked were often at the mercy of mean-spirited men who

exploited them for cheap labour. They earned only enough to buy a loaf of bread and cook a thin soup—not enough to keep a man on his feet, let alone feed other mouths.

Despite all these privations, the passengers in Joseph's car were the "lucky" ones; not everyone could afford a train ticket to a new life. Many rode on the roofs of the trains or in the empty boxcars, or even on the truss rods beneath the boxcars. Carrying their worldly possessions in bindles—bundles of clothes tied to the ends of sticks—some two million men and thousands of women illegally rode the trains that crisscrossed the North American continent.

It was dangerous as well as difficult to catch a free ride. For one thing, railroad companies did whatever they could to prevent people from riding without paying. Special police protected railroad property from the hoboes who were blamed for damaging freight inside the boxcars and for ripping up the wooden floorboards for firewood. These railway police—bulls, as they were often called—brutally beat anyone caught trying to ride a train without a ticket. The hoboes learned ways to dodge them. Hiding either behind nearby buildings or further down the tracks, hoboes waited for a train to move and then ran alongside it. Then came the most dangerous part: a person had to either jump into an open boxcar or grab hold of a ladder in order to climb to the roof. If a man missed his footing or failed to achieve a good grip, he could stumble and end up under the train. Each year, thousands lost body parts in unsuccessful attempts to get free rides. Many hundreds more lost their lives.

Yet although the practice was dangerous, some trains had more men riding above the carriages than inside them. For the first time, now that talk inside the carriage had ceased, Joseph became aware of sounds overhead. It was a few moments before he understood that people were riding the roof of the train.

It was time to get the children to bed. When he had changed Sarah into Cole's overalls, he put Sarah and Cole on the two

benches and covered them with thin blankets. He used his ragged jacket to cover Nolan, who lay on the floor below Cole. There was no room for luggage beneath the seats, so he wedged the three suitcases into the space in front of Sarah. Standing in the aisle with Clare in his arms once more, he listened to the steady breathing of his children and wondered whether he would have to endure the rest of the journey on his feet.

Clare whimpered once and moved to make herself more comfortable. As Joseph looked down at her, a memory came to him: a cold December night just before Christmas, when the thermometer had dipped to 42 below. Clare had been born that night in a one-room rented farmhouse where layers of old newspapers glued to the walls formed the dwelling's only insulation. Although Joseph had spent most of the previous night chopping wood to keep the stove burning, the doctor he'd called to help with the birth had remarked on the frigidity of the room. But Joseph had had more to worry about that night than the doctor's possible chilblains: Clare's birth was premature. The doctor had warned she might not survive even a day. And Helen was bleeding badly. Fortunately, a sensible neighbour who had come to help had lined an old shoebox with cotton batting and she placed Clare inside it, near the open oven door, letting Joseph attend to his dying wife. Upon seeing his tiny baby sister the next morning, Cole had exclaimed, "What do you got there, Dad? A rat?"

All my children are so different, Joseph mused, as he watched them sleep. Nolan was healthy, sturdy and as fair as his father. Olive-skinned Cole, with his mother's dark brown hair, was not quite as robust as his older brother. Sarah was prone to illness. And then there was little Clare, who seemed to have no strength at all. It was as if Helen had given the best of herself to their first-born and less to each successive child, until she had nothing left for herself.

Clare had defied the odds twice: the first time at birth, when she had survived despite the doctor's predictions and the second

time today, when she had stopped breathing and given her father such a horrible fright. What if Clare were to stop breathing again? What if it were to happen while Joseph slept? Though he had been a father for some years, without his wife Joseph felt like a boy playing at being a parent. The responsibility of caring for tiny, helpless Clare in addition to his other children, weighed on him. It was as if his skin had been peeled away, leaving his nerves and flesh raw and exposed. Joseph thought: *a week on this train—I'll never make it.*

Putting Clare down beside Sarah, Joseph opened the window above his sleeping family. A blast of wind gusted in, carrying icy air from nearby Georgian Bay. At the rear end of the carriage a man standing watch over his own family looked up and frowned disapprovingly at Joseph, but Joseph didn't notice him. In a frenzy of unreasoning despair, he seized one of their suitcases and hurled it out of the window. A second case followed. The watching passenger, troubled by Joseph's behavior and fearing what he might do next, hurried toward him. If Joseph intended to throw out the baby, he had to be stopped. But Joseph had no such intention. He closed the window as quickly as he'd opened it. The other man paused in mid-step. When Joseph showed no further signs of madness the man returned to his seat, from where he could keep an eye on his fellow passenger.

After making certain that Clare was secure in her place beside Sarah, Joseph settled himself on the floor and rested his back against the remaining suitcase. Lost in weariness, hunger and loneliness, he allowed himself to close his eyes at last. As the train chugged westward on its way toward a new home and an uncertain future, he was filled with a terrible need for hope.

CHAPTER 2

Addison Philibuster was impressed by the Canadian government's offer to deed 160 acres of the newly opened western lands to any adventurous settler. There were terms, of course; anyone who applied for the land had to pay an administration fee of ten dollars and had to cultivate a minimum of forty acres and build a permanent residence within three years. These terms did not deter the young man. The west was one of the last unpopulated places in North America, and Addison Philibuster considered the proposition the greatest deal on earth.

The idea of providing cheap land in western Canada was a defensive measure implemented by the leadership of a young and growing country. The Canadian government's aims were to protect its sovereignty over the large and sparsely populated territory purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869 and to prevent American settlers from moving into the prairies and potentially annexing the land to the United States.

When 25-year-old Addison arrived at his spread in the late summer of 1872 he was pleasantly surprised at first. The land that was soon to be his comprised a generous portion of prairie grassland interspersed with clusters of spruce and poplar. No need to slash and burn endless undergrowth or pull out stumps in order to cultivate the minimum 40 acres. Furthermore, the swift Elk River—called the Waskasoo Seepee by the local aboriginal population—ran right beside his parcel of land.

Addison Philibuster eventually satisfied the minimum requirements for his 160 acres, but the project had been more difficult than he'd initially anticipated. His first home had been a soddy, a house built from pieces of the thickly rooted prairie sod, cut into rectangles and laid one above another like bricks. Until such time as he could build a wood house, the temporary structure had provided some protection from the scorching heat of summer and the brutal cold of winter. In the meantime, as Addison colourfully

put it, the soddy was "wet as an otter's pocket and dirty as your backside."

Addison had almost starved, that first winter on his land. Instead of asking the other settlers for help—which would have been freely given, for everyone understood the need to work together—he managed by turning to underhanded ways. One stormy winter night he stole his neighbours' only milking cow, correctly guessing that the blowing snow and howling winds would cover his tracks. Knowing the owners would go looking for the valuable animal, and to hide the evidence of his skullduggery, he brought the cow into his small soddy. He combined the cow's turds with stinkweed and burned the mixture for heat while he lived off the animal's milk.

When winter broke and the weather was mild enough to travel, Addison stole four horses, rode them two days to Fort Edmonton, the nearest Hudson's Bay fur-trading post, and sold three of them. He spent much of his profits on a week of debauchery with any woman he could buy and used the rest to purchase necessities such as sugar and flour, as well as a few non-essentials such as alcohol, molasses, red ink and tobacco. On his return, he concocted a brew that he passed off as whisky and sold illegally to the unsuspecting people of the Cree, Blackfoot and Stoney tribes.

Although Addison was able to conceal much of his dishonesty, it became known that he had a wild temper. A neighbour claimed to have witnessed an incident between Addison and a cow. Addison had been trying to brand a newly born calf when its mother had butted him and knocked him to the ground. According to the witness, Addison had picked himself up, walked into the bush, emerged with a branch the size of a train axel, and beat the offending cow to death. The man didn't know that an enraged Addison had then ridden to Fort Edmonton and spent a day with a whore. When he returned to find the calf still mewling over its fallen mother he used the same branch to kill it, then rode back to the whore.

While Addison Philibuster prospered by stealing and selling his vile liquor, most of the early settlers struggled to survive. Land that had at first produced good gardens and crops, as well as being fertile grasslands for grazing cattle, dried up after drought plagued the area for several summers in a row. Although the pioneering families had earned their 160 acres through hard work and strength of character, it was as if the natural elements had conspired to defeat them. Farmers wanting to return east to the familiar homes they'd left a decade earlier, made heartbreaking decisions to pull up stakes and abandon their hard-earned homesteads. Travelling back across the thousand miles of arid prairies was so expensive that desperate farmers resorted to selling their land, livestock and farm implements at a fraction of their value.

At the same time, in an effort to open up the west even further, the Canadian government sponsored construction of a railway that would connect the country from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. The proposed railroad was to run just north of, and parallel to, the border between Canada and the United States, through the newly constructed Fort Calgary. Built to house a detachment of the North West Mounted Police that would safeguard the area and protect it from American whisky traders, the fort was located only 90 miles south of Addison's property.

Addison calculated that the land half way between the two major settlements in the area—Fort Edmonton to the north and now Fort Calgary to the south—would become a strategic location. In addition, the Elk River, which had allowed easy transportation of the aboriginal hunters' fur pelts to the Hudson's Bay Company trading stations, and from there to markets in Europe, had few viable crossing points. By good fortune, Addison had discovered a rare shallow point near his land that would make a convenient crossing place for both people and animals: a settlement might even develop at that spot. He was shrewd enough to understand that if he owned the surrounding land he could sell it to the merchants and farmers who would congregate there. It

was even possible the settlement might be named in honour of its founder. With all this in mind, Addison began to exploit desperate farmers and buy up their land with his ill-gotten liquor money.

Addison's dreaming and scheming came to fruition when the railroad finally reached Fort Calgary in 1883. Indeed, the land he had purchased from desperate families wanting to leave the Canadian west had become a valuable asset due to its situation between the two major outposts. Now Addison was able to stake out lots and sell them for between $75 and $200 each. He used the proceeds of the sales to build himself a mansion on the best piece of land in the newly christened hamlet of Philibuster.

Addison Philibuster did not let making money and creating a village in his name change him. For years he continued to cheat and swindle anyone who could not or would not defend himself. In June of 1897 he sold some riverside property to a man who wanted to start a ferry operation. The buyer had been led to believe that his purchase included the land on both sides of the river. Only when he tried to register his claim with the village office did he learn that Addison had sold him just the property on the south bank of the proposed ferry crossing, and that someone else already owned the land on the north side.

Seeking satisfaction, the furious man tried to confront Addison outside his mansion, but Addison beat him soundly. Then, as was his custom after an altercation, Addison Philibuster headed directly to the local bordello, unaware that the cheated buyer was following him. When Addison, now in fairer mood, exited the premises, the man he had swindled shot and killed him. The man's triumph was short-lived, however; he was convicted of murder and executed.

More than 35 years after Addison Philibuster's death, people in the area still remembered him. Had he been alive they would have crossed the street to avoid him, but the years had blurred their memories. Now they spoke of his gumption for taking the risk of tackling the wilderness of the west, and of his foresight at recognizing how the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the Canadian

government's migration policies would open up this part of the country to Europeans.

In time, Philibuster fulfilled its early promise. It became an area that produced excellent wheat crops, with good grazing for vast cattle ranches. By that point, memories of Addison, the dishonest exploiter, had evolved into a legend about a man of remarkable courage and prescience. In 1901 the town's official population had been 598; by the end of 1928 it was over 15,000. But by 1930 things had come full circle again, with the return of drought on the heels of more general economic chaos.

When Joseph and his children arrived in Philibuster in May of 1933, the town's rapidly deteriorating economy had already decreased its population to less than 10,000. And the situation was growing steadily worse.

"Next stop—Philibuster!" hollered the conductor on entering Joseph's carriage. Joseph touched the letter in his pocket for the umpteenth time. It was still there. Why wouldn't it be? He changed Clare's diaper, combed Sarah's hair and told the boys to tuck in their shirts. It was important that his brother and sister-in-law gain a favourable first impression of his children.

The train began to slow down as it approached the station. It was still moving when Joseph spotted shabby-looking men flinging themselves off the carriage roof and darting away like frightened rabbits. These, he knew, were the fugitives and hoboes who needed to disembark before they got into trouble.

With a shriek of brakes, the train came to a stop. At the same moment, a dozen policemen materialized—apparently out of nowhere—and began to dart between the carriages in chase of the hoboes. Seconds later, twenty railway bulls emerged from behind nearby grain elevators and buildings to block and corral the men trying to escape. The hoboes were terrified. Some managed to elude the net closing in on them. Others ran directly into the bulls and their billy clubs.

A woman sitting behind Joseph gasped with horror. Another shrieked. Alerted to the skirmish, passengers leaned over in their seats and craned their necks to see the mêlée. Frightened by the violence and determined to avoid the fray, parents grabbed children and belongings and scrambled off the other side of the train. After all, this was not their fight. A middle-aged man bent over Nolan and Cole to get a better look. "*Gott im Himmel!*" he exclaimed. Joseph turned and saw the question in his eyes: *I am disgusted—but what are we to do?*

Trapped by the net of cops, and with no means of escape, several hoboes ran back to the train—and more waiting police. Below Joseph's window a young officer swung his truncheon at a hobo's head. The helpless man tried to fend off the blow with his bindle. The cop swung again, knocking the bindle from the hobo's hands. The man cowered in terror, but the swinging truncheon caught and broke the arm that shielded his head. As he writhed on the ground in visible agony, the cop readied his weapon for another blow.

Seeing the wildness in the cop's face, Joseph understood that the viciousness would end only with the man's death. Thrusting the baby into Nolan's arms with a quick "Hold her!" he ran to the nearest exit and leaped to the ground. Managing to deflect the cop's arm as he was about to strike the hobo's head again, Joseph yelled, "Enough! Enough!"

The cop gave a harsh exclamation. Wrenching free of Joseph's grip, he swung around to make certain there was only one attacker. Then he turned on Joseph. Joseph sidestepped and was about to tackle him. At that moment his head was jerked violently backwards and a club was clamped beneath his chin, as if to stop his breath. Instinctively, Joseph grabbed at the club with both hands and struggled to pull free from it, but the person holding it was too strong for him. As the club tightened against Joseph's throat, the young cop punched him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. His legs buckled. Had the cop not held him up by the throat, he would have fallen.

"What the hell are you doing?" a menacing voice growled.

Then came a second punch in the stomach. Unable to breathe with the club still at his throat, Joseph's vision blurred and he felt consciousness slip away from him.

"Daddy!" screamed Cole, appearing suddenly in front of him.

The chokehold eased slightly. Joseph took a few heaving breaths and tried to hold on to a returning awareness.

"Name!" snarled a strident voice.

"Joseph … Joseph Gaston," he managed to whisper.

"What the hell were you doing?"

"He was … going … to kill him," Joseph gasped, nodding in the direction of the young cop and the injured hobo. He tried to move, but the truncheon tightened on his throat again.

"Address?"

With the club restricting his airway, Joseph could only grunt.

"Let my dad go!" Cole screamed, frightened for his father.

The club eased slightly. "Where do you live?"

"Here. We're … moving here."

Joseph was forced to his knees. Lifting his head, he found himself looking into a pair of icy blue eyes. The insignia on the man's uniform indicated his rank: Chief of Police. Thick black eyebrows, an overly large nose, ramrod bearing and the sinews standing out on his neck reminded Joseph of a throwback to an earlier age. The Chief of Police was clearly a dangerous man.

"You're moving to Philibuster?" The question was directed at Cole.

"Yes, sir."

"And the address?"

Cole's mouth turned down and his chin quivered.

"I asked you your address, boy!"

"We're going to live with my Uncle Henri and Aunt Tilda," Cole whispered. Then he ran to his father and buried his head against Joseph's chest.

The police chief's expression changed from fury to annoyance. He took a long look at Joseph, as if committing his face to memory. "Interfere again and I'll throw you in jail!" he threatened, poking Joseph in the chest with the end of his club. "I'll be watching you. Now beat it!"

By the time Joseph got to his feet, the Chief of Police had already turned his attention to the scuffles all around them. Joseph wondered what would happen to the poor man on the ground. He had stopped the young cop from beating the hobo to death, but now there was nothing more he could do for him.

He picked up his son and carried him into the train. Sitting down beside Sarah and holding a shaken Cole on his lap, Joseph rubbed his bruised throat. From where he sat, he saw the Chief of Police order his men to take the hoboes to jail. The cop who had attacked the hobo forced his victim to his feet and hustled him away.

Joseph waited until the police were gone before he moved. After checking that he still had his precious letter of employment on him, he picked up the baby and the remaining suitcase, told Nolan to hold Sarah's hand, and led his children off the train.

Joseph made certain they all kept together as they joined the crowd escaping the unseasonably hot sun for the cover of the train station. The hum of voices in the building was unnaturally subdued as husbands greeted wives, parents hugged children, and friends and acquaintances shook hands. The violence had unsettled the arriving passengers as well as those who had come to welcome them.

Clutching his family to him, Joseph spent a minute or two looking around him, nose wrinkled in distaste at the acrid odor of sweat in the crush of overheated bodies. The place was packed with unfamiliar faces; nowhere did he see his brother and sister-in-law. Realizing it would be impossible to spot them in the crowd, he guided his children toward the exit, past posters exhorting people to "Do Your Duty! Grab the Gopher!"

A mixture of conveyances thronged the parking lot—horse-drawn wagons, taxis and trucks. There were also the ubiquitous Bennett Buggies, vehicles pulled by two-horse teams because their owners could no longer afford gasoline, and named after Richard Bennett, prime minister of Canada since the beginning of the economic malaise. Here, too, were policemen, escorting their ragged, handcuffed victims toward the courthouse and its basement jail. The sight reminded Joseph of the menacing Chief of Police. He had to force his thoughts elsewhere and concentrate on finding his brother.

Where was Henri? In his last letter to his brother, Joseph had mentioned his expected day of arrival in Philibuster: the17th of May—today. Had Henri received the letter? If not, the family was in for a long wait at the station, because Joseph had lost the note with his brother's address on it when he'd hurled their cases out of the train. Now, when it was too late to do anything about it, he wondered why he had yielded to that frantic moment of despair.

Joseph and Henri did not know each other well. Joseph had been eight when his mother had died and his father had abandoned him and his two younger sisters. After deserting them, his father had moved back to his hometown of La Tuque, Quebec, and started a second family. The first of those children was a boy named Henri Philippe. When their father died, Henri, now in his teens, had decided to leave home and explore the country. In the course of his travels he had sought out his much older half-brother. By that time Joseph was married to Helen, and working for a steel company in Hamilton, Ontario. Henri lived with Joseph and Helen for six months, learning English and working as a labourer at the same steel mill where Joseph worked. A year before Nolan's birth, Henri's wanderlust and his growing confidence in his English skills had lured him back onto the road. The brothers had stayed in touch rather sporadically, by way of letters, but Henri had never returned to Hamilton to visit his family. Indeed, they might not

have met again had Henri not sent Joseph the advertisement of a job with the Philibuster Dairy.

Joseph sighed with relief when he suddenly spotted a large man at the edge of the crowd. "I think I see your uncle," he said. He began to make his way through the throng of people and conveyances with Clare in his arms, the other children following him like baby ducks.

Henri, deep in what looked like a whispered conspiratorial conversation, did not see his brother approach. It was the other man who spotted Joseph and pointed him out to Henri.

Henri spun around. "Joseph!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms around his brother and nearly suffocating Clare. "And 'deese must be duh little ones." Henri had never lost the strong accent of his mother tongue.

The children looked up in awe at their uncle, who was half a head taller than their father. Brown eyes looked back at them from beneath slicked-back dark hair, receding at the sides. His tiny moustache, as thin as if it had been pencilled in above his lips, was almost inappropriately delicate on a person of such immense stature.

"Please' to meet you," Henri said, treating the children to a curtsy.

Sarah giggled. "Daddy, he curtsied. Girls curtsy."

"You're right," said their uncle's friend, with a chuckle. "Girls curtsy, and boys bow. Unless, of course, the curtsier is The Great Henri, and then the rules don't apply. "

So Henri's nickname had followed him to Philibuster. Joseph smiled for the first time since leaving Ontario.

"Dis cad who calls 'imself my buddy is Raven Mullens," Henri said, introducing his friend.

Raven was of average height, with wavy grey hair, crooked teeth, wide-spaced eyes and white eyebrows. His smile was so sincere that Joseph felt the man was truly happy to see him. Raven endeared himself to Joseph immediately.

"Pleasure to meet you. I won't hold it against you that your brother is The Great Henri. Everyone has a cross to bear," he said, grasping Joseph's hand.

"Pleasure's mine," Joseph said.

"Why are you called The Great Henri?" Cole asked.

Raven laughed. "A joke, son. It's like calling a tall man 'shorty' or a fat man 'skinny.'"

"Pay no attention to dis jealous guy. I am named Duh Great Henri because I can do duh work of ten men," said their uncle, as he hoisted Cole effortlessly onto his broad shoulders.

In spite of Henri's marked accent, Joseph noticed that his brother's English had improved a lot since the time they had spent together a dozen years ago.

"How was your journey?" Raven enquired.

"Dad got into a fight," Nolan said, excitedly.

"Joseph?" Henri looked at his brother alertly.

"With a policeman!" Cole added.

As briefly as he could, Joseph explained what happened, whereupon Raven looked gravely toward the hoboes who were being led away in handcuffs. "I'm sorry you had to see the ugly side of Philibuster so soon. Our exalted mayor ordered the round-up. Claims the communists are trying to stir up something in town and will do their best to incite the vagrants. There've been a few demonstrations lately and he's worried things will get worse."

It was the same everywhere, thought Joseph. Some considered the demonstrators unruly troublemakers; others spoke of them as "the forgotten." These unemployed men, many of them single, wanted only to work for a living wage, so they gathered and protested, but to no avail.

Raven shook his head in disgust. "Westmoreland's a fool."

Westmoreland? It was a man by that name who'd offered Joseph the job at the Philibuster Dairy. His signature was on the letter in Joseph's pocket. Joseph asked Raven if it was the same man.

Raven nodded. "Yes, one and the same. Mayor and majority

owner of the Philibuster Dairy. The Great Henri told me you were going to be working for him. I don't like to put you off, but I think I should warn you—Westmoreland is a mean devil. Deep down mean. Watch out for him."

"There's the man who hurt Daddy." Cole pointed to the Chief of Police.

"Chief Grumpy," Henri said.

"Chief Grumpy?" echoed Joseph.

"Montgomery Quentin," Raven told him. "Another not-very-nice man."

In some dismay, Joseph wondered what kind of place he'd moved to. His future boss was apparently a man to be avoided, and he'd just had a run-in with the head of the police department, sarcastically nicknamed Chief Grumpy.

Raven extended a hand and made to leave. "Sorry if we've alarmed you, Joseph. We didn't mean to. Welcome to Philibuster. And good day to you all." With a quick parting glance at Henri, he said briefly, "We'll talk again."

Joseph was about to ask his brother about Westmoreland when they were joined by a pretty woman with a petite figure, fine features and pale skin. Her attire—immaculate lilac dress, white gloves and a white purse—suggested a person who valued propriety. Henri's wife, he guessed.

"Aha, my Tilly! Meet my bro'der, Joseph Gaston." Henri made the introduction as formally as if Joseph had been a royal personage.

Joseph took Tilda's small hands in his. "It's a great pleasure to meet you at last. Thank you for all you've done." He knew Tilda had been the one who had found a place for him and the kids to live. She had purchased some furniture with the money he had sent and had offered to look after the children when he was working.

"Thanks are not necessary. After all, we're family." Tilda's slight drawl was warm and pleasant. She hugged the children, inquired about their journey and asked if she could hold Clare.

She was visibly shocked when Nolan mentioned the altercation between his father and the Chief of Police, whom Cole already spoke of as Chief Grumpy. An awkward silence followed.

"Well, that's unfortunate," Tilda said then, as she cradled Clare protectively in her arms. "Now, let's get the baby out of the heat."

Henri said, expansively, "If the sun, she is too bright—I shall push 'er away!" Then, with Cole still on his shoulders, he scooped up Sarah with one hand and seized the suitcase with the other.

"Where is duh rest of your luggage, Joseph?" he asked.

"Coming later," Joseph lied, and wondered whether moving to Philibuster had been a mistake.

CHAPTER 3

The Great Henri bounced along merrily, carrying Sarah in his arms and Cole on his shoulders. He was like a playful child, Joseph thought in amazement, talking and laughing happily as he pointed out landmarks he thought important. The most trustworthy mechanics—as if Joseph could afford a car!—"Duh Samson Bro'ders Garage." The best places for "duh pie and duh ice cream." "Duh Farmers Bank." "Duh drug store." "Duh newspaper office."

As they walked through the streets, Joseph noticed pasted to the exterior walls of various businesses more of the gopher posters he had seen at the station. His brother explained that gophers were a threat to the farmers of the western wheat-growing provinces. Ground squirrels, as they were properly called, ate newly planted seeds, chewed on young green stems and devoured mature heads of grain. Along with drought and grasshoppers, gophers were a farmer's nightmare.

Local and provincial governments had created a program to eliminate the gopher population. A gopher tail turned in to an approved government agent was worth a reward of five cents—more, in badly infested areas. At a time when a single dollar was a

lot of money, it was hoped the offer would be incentive enough to cull the gophers and to curtail the damage they inflicted. The previous year, more than 600,000 gopher tails had been turned in by school children and adults, close to one gopher for every person in the province. On hearing this, Nolan declared he'd catch 20 gophers every morning and spend his profits at the cinema every afternoon.

Henri was uncharacteristically silent as they reached the Buffalo Hotel, with its beer parlour that took up half the ground floor. Like similar establishments in Alberta, and indeed in most of Canada, the windows were covered so that the sight of liquor consumption would not offend passersby. The temperance movement had not succeeded in preventing all public drinking, but those who preached abstinence had managed to spread the idea that drinking was immoral. Joseph doubted that his brother had given up drinking—although it was true a woman could make her husband give up just about anything but breathing. It was more likely that Henri had refrained from pointing out the place in deference to Tilda and the children.

"And dis is 'oogaboom's," he said, as they walked by a corner grocery store. The words elicited a disapproving glance from Tilda, as if the very mention of the store were offensive. Joseph wondered what his sister-in-law had against the place, but thought it better not to ask.

It seemed to him, as they walked further, that apart from a newly built theatre and an Eaton's department store, Philibuster looked no better than the dilapidated towns and cities in Ontario. Here and there, seeing the debris of wooden buildings devastated by fire, he could guess what had occurred. Some poor devil, just trying to earn a living with a café or clothing store, had found business increasingly sluggish. Before long, the man was months behind on his bank loan and unable to feed his family. Who could blame him, then, for torching a business no longer worth a hoot in hell? The insurance money would pay off his loan and enable him to start again.

Henri's letters had given the impression that Philibuster's streets were paved with the proverbial gold. No wonder Joseph had expected concrete sidewalks, colourful awnings, bright neon signs, and men and women dressed as gaily as in the twenties, before the onset of the bad years. The reality was depressing: peeling signs, empty buildings and skinny, unkempt, hollow-eyed vagrants walking the streets in search of a meal. Everywhere Joseph looked he saw a film of dirt covering sidewalks, awnings and lampposts, as if some giant caretaker had neglected to take a feather duster to the town. The air was dry and smelled of dirt. Joseph could feel the grit in his mouth.

Leaving the downtown area, they came to a well-treed residential neighbourhood. The people who lived there didn't have much, but they took care of what little they did have. Paint was peeling off some of the houses and some of the sidings had been replaced with odd-shaped boards, but the lawns were trimmed, the trees pruned and the odd flower was blooming.

"Our castle," Henri said, as they reached a small, single-storey white house surrounded by a high fence from which the paint was also peeling.

Joseph was just opening the gate for Tilda, when what looked like a giant wolf came running around the corner of the house. "Christ!" he exclaimed and shut the gate quickly.

The wolf barked as it thrust its front paws onto the gate. Sarah screamed in fright. The baby awoke and began to cry. Nolan and Cole stepped behind Joseph, as if for protection.

"For heaven's sake, Henri, control the dog!" Tilda said crossly.

"Jasper. *Couche*!" Henri ordered, whereupon the wolf lay down instantly.

"Look what that monster has done. I thought you'd tied it up," Tilda scolded, as she rocked the baby and tried to comfort her.

"Jasper. *Attends*," Henri said and opened the gate. The huge dog remained obediently prone. A rope led from its collar to a wooden stake that must have been yanked from the ground.

Squatting beside the dog and petting him, Henri looked at the children. "It is okay, my lovelies. Jasper will not 'arm one 'air of your 'ead."

Although at first glance the animal indeed resembled a wolf, it was a Siberian husky—crossed with a horse, Henri joked. Jasper was the biggest dog Joseph and his children had ever seen. The boys, fascinated by the dog's unusual eyes—one azure, the other light brown—laughed when the sickle-shaped tail thumped the ground with happiness. No longer frightened, they began to stroke Jasper. After a few minutes Sarah stroked him too, giggling as she buried her face in the dog's deep fur.

While Henri and the children played with Jasper, Tilda, who was still carrying Clare, led Joseph into the house. Joseph felt a pang of envy as he looked around the clean, bright home, much of it painted in a cheerful yellow. If only he could provide such a home for his family. At least, he thought, it would be pleasant for the children here, cared for by Tilda when he was away working.

Sitting down with his sister-in-law in a pretty nook next to the kitchen, Joseph was conscious of an uncomfortable silence. For some reason, he felt out of place as he waited for her to say something. He was sure Tilda would offer her condolences. "I'm so sorry about Helen," she would say, as so many others had done back home. He dreaded the words and the memories they evoked.

Invariably, certain questions would follow. "How are you doing?" And then, "How are the children?" Joseph always said he was fine, even though he was not. He was terribly lonely, and he found raising the children on his own to be overwhelming.

He also understood that people expected him to give up the kids—the girls, at least—to one of his sisters or some other female relative. They felt he was not doing right by the children in keeping them all with him. But despite the disapproval, Joseph was adamant that his family would not be separated. Helen would not have wanted it.

He knew his children better than anyone else did, and he'd seen how losing their mother had changed them. Nolan had become more daring than ever, climbing the highest trees and jumping off roofs. Until Helen's death, Cole had seemed perfectly content playing on his own: now he would not be parted from his brother. Sarah, his darling little girl, had become sad and clingy. Only Clare, who had never known her mother's love, was unchanged.

Tilda broke the silence with an unusual question. "What are you feeding Clare?"

Joseph hid his surprise. "Condensed milk."

Tilda nodded, her eyes never leaving the baby in her arms.

"Would you like me to take her?" Joseph asked.

Tilda smiled and held the baby closer. "No, thanks. I can manage."

Joseph was marvelling at how comfortable Clare seemed in Tilda's arms when his brother bounded into the house. "So, Joseph, when do you start work?"

Joseph pulled Westmoreland's letter from his pocket. "I'm to report tomorrow." He turned to Tilda: "If that's okay with you, of course?"

"Oh, yes, I'm all ready for the darlings," she answered sweetly.

"In that case, I should make you look presentable," said Henri.

As Tilda began to prepare dinner, Henri took Joseph to the back yard and set him up on a kitchen stool. The children played with Jasper as their uncle cut their father's hair.

"I do dis on duh side for extra money," Henri explained, as he started to trim Joseph's sideburns. "But I won't do shaves. People complain I don't do a good job. Dey t'ink I don't sharpen my razor enough. *Me*!" He gave an incredulous laugh. Then he told Joseph that he took pride in knowing his way around metal. He worked primarily as a saw filer; a man highly skilled in metal work, whose main job it was to set and sharpen teeth at the lumber mill. "It's duh grit in de air dat makes trouble for duh razor," he explained. "It gets into duh skin and dulls my blade before I finish duh first

stroke. Even when I sharpen after every customer, it is no good. So I geeve it up."

As he shaped Joseph's hair, Henri spoke enthusiastically of all they would do together now that Joseph was in Philibuster: Sunday picnics and trips to the lake in the summer, tobogganing and skating in the winter. Joseph was glad his brother was so thrilled with the family's arrival, but he could not share his enthusiasm. Since Helen's death, he had been unable to rid himself of the belief—irrational though it was—that an ominous force meant him harm and wanted to see him broken and destroyed. Joseph had never considered himself superstitious, but recently, almost as a way of averting evil, he had decided to ignore the pleasant things in life. He would keep his head down and focus on what mattered: work and feeding his children.

When he could get in a few words of his own, Joseph asked his brother about Winfield Westmoreland. After what Raven had said at the train station, he was a bit nervous about his new employer. Henri told Joseph as much as he knew, most of which he'd gathered from newspapers.

Westmoreland had spent part of his childhood in Philibuster, leaving the town as a teenager to seek his fortune in Toronto. There he had worked as a labourer for a construction company, learning all he could about erecting buildings before starting his own company. When the Great War had started five years later, Westmoreland had already created a name for himself. After spending the war as an ambulance driver in France, he'd returned to Toronto where his construction firm continued to flourish. In 1926 he moved back to Philibuster to look after his ailing mother. Once there, he had become involved with the business elite and was elected to the city council on his first attempt. In the next election he had run for mayor and won.

Henri had never met Westmoreland, but had heard he was a little aloof and sometimes unfriendly. Yet who could blame him? Westmoreland had his businesses to manage and the city to run,

not to mention the sacrifices he made for his mother. Instead of cavorting with the princes of industry in Toronto, Montreal or even New York, he continued to live in Philibuster.

Philibuster's residents did not seem to mind Westmoreland's standoffishness; they were grateful to have such a successful man running their town. He performed his mayoral duties efficiently, if not always with geniality. He had, in fact, recently been re-elected to a second mayoral term, handily beating the other candidate, William "Raven" Mullens. Hearing this, Joseph figured that Raven was probably sore at losing to his rival. Moreover, Raven had been fired from his job as the city's chief engineer when Westmoreland was a councilman. Since Raven had personal reasons for disliking Westmoreland, Henri advised Joseph to keep an open mind about his new employer. And indeed, having heard the facts, Joseph was already feeling more confident.

Before long Tilda called everyone to dinner. The meal was the best Joseph and the children had eaten in many months: cold chicken, potato salad, coleslaw, pickles and preserved blueberries for dessert. Only little Clare declined to take anything, pushing away her bottle of milk, though both Joseph and Tilda tried to feed her.

The hot afternoon had merged into a warm evening by the time Joseph stood up to go. Tilda gave him a few provisions: a jar of sugar-and-milk for Clare, and some of the meal's leftovers for the rest of the family. "There's no ice in your cold closet, but the milk will keep until you have a chance to buy some," she told Joseph. "Henri will show you the way. We'll see you all tomorrow."

Joseph tried to conceal his anxiety as they walked a block and a half to a three-storey rooming house. They had stayed in places like this before. Rooming houses were often owned by out-of-work people trying desperately not to lose their homes. In order to make the mortgage payments, an owner would move his family into the biggest room of a house and rent out the rest. Some people

turned their homes into boarding houses, where a renter could get a meal or two. Others did not want to bother with providing meals and simply rented out rooms. But what seemed like a good idea to homeowners needing extra money sometimes led to their undoing. An inexperienced landlord might not realize that the increased cost of heat and light for a house full of people could exceed the rent collected. Transients often caused damage. And getting rent money out of people who were unable to pay even for food could prove extremely difficult.

As Joseph followed his brother up the grimy stairs to the second floor of the building he wrinkled his nose at the familiar smell of cooked cabbage. In rooming houses across North America, families ate what was cheapest. If the man of the house had a job, his wife could feed her family stew or macaroni and cheese. If money was exceptionally tight, a family might have to survive on mashed potatoes or boiled cabbage.

Even in good situations, boarding house accommodation entailed risk. Rooms were poorly lit, paint peeled off walls, mould grew in corners and dead mice rotted in poorly covered water barrels. Sometimes there was no privacy: a curtain on a wire might be all that separated neighbours from one another. Moreover, in a house full of strangers, a prospective renter knew nothing about the other occupants; they could be deranged women or sinister men who were overly fond of children. All these thoughts passed through Joseph's mind as he reluctantly put the key in the lock and opened the door.

To his astonishment, the room was quite decent. Tilda, it seemed, had made something of a silk purse out of what had been, essentially, a sow's ear. On one side of the room stood a pram for the baby and a double bed, already made up with clean bed linens, for the three older kids. Joseph would sleep on the floor. On the other side was a converted kitchen with a table and four mismatched chairs, a hotplate for cooking and a sink with a hand pump. There was also a cold closet—an icebox incorporated into

the kitchen shelving. A Quebec Heater to keep the room warm stood by the window. The old stove was missing both the foot-rail and the finial top—removed, no doubt, for their nickel plating, which had probably fetched a few dollars for some starving family.

Joseph wondered what all these furnishings had cost. After selling everything he owned back home, he had wired the proceeds to Tilda with a request to do the best she could. Either Tilda was a world-class haggler—Joseph's money could not have bought all he saw in the room—or she had spent some of her own funds. Hell, she'd even made a curtain for the window. He would have to talk to her about it. For now, he was simply relieved that the place was livable.

The children were excited. "Daddy," Cole shouted, "are we going to live here?"

"Yes," answered his father, wishing he could match his children's enthusiasm for new things.

"Dare is a shared privy at duh end of duh 'all," Henri told them, whereupon Nolan and Cole ran down the hall to inspect it, their feet banging loudly on the bare floor.

The door next to theirs opened and two children with almond-shaped eyes and coal-black hair peeked out into the hallway. From behind the door, someone said a few words in an unfamiliar language. Immediately, the children drew back and the door closed.

Before leaving them, Henri gave Joseph directions to the Philibuster Dairy. Then he enfolded his brother in a great hug and said, "I'm so glad you and duh children 'ave arrived!" Joseph gratefully reciprocated the gesture.

As the kids exuberantly investigated their new home, Joseph unpacked their only suitcase. He was happy to find, tucked in amongst the clothes, an old dictionary, its brown leather cover deeply scarred and slightly water damaged.

Having been forced to leave school in grade six, Joseph had often dreamed of completing his schooling and even attending

university. Unfortunately, circumstances had made this impossible. Certain he would be laughed at by people who would not consider him smart enough for such lofty ambitions, he had never told anyone of his aspirations. He had even kept his dreams hidden from Helen. But his wife, who had known him better than he'd realized, had surprised him soon after their marriage by giving him a dictionary for his birthday. "Because I know you want to better yourself," she'd said. When he understood that she believed in him, he had come close to tears.

Joseph had made a habit of studying his dictionary for a while every night. No matter how tired he was after working twelve-hour—or longer—shifts in the stifling heat of the steel mill's blast furnaces, he would learn a new word. Sometimes he spent hours researching the definition of a particular word, while Helen sat beside him reading or knitting, always silent and supportive. Even after the children were born, Joseph and Helen had tried their best to continue their nightly ritual. For Joseph, the ritual meant much more than a way of staying connected with the woman he loved; he kept hoping that his constant efforts to improve himself would eventually lead to a better life for his family. But he had not opened the dictionary since Helen's death.

Sighing as he put down the book, Joseph told the children it was "time to hit the kip." Sarah fell asleep immediately. The two boys were still too excited to sleep. They had to be reminded to keep it down and stop talking a number of times before they finally closed their eyes.

Tired though Joseph was, he could not yet relax. It was time to feed Clare the mixture of sugar-and-milk Tilda had prepared. Certain the baby would be hungry, he was concerned when she refused to open her mouth. Clare had taken in so little during the journey, and Joseph had hoped the return to stable surroundings would bring back her appetite.

"Do you want to sleep?" he whispered, and put her down in the pram. But far from sleeping, the baby grew restless and began

to cry. Within minutes she was sobbing so urgently that Joseph picked her up, put her over his shoulder and patted her back gently. Every twenty minutes or so he tried to feed her, but she rejected him every time. Back in her pram, she cried until Joseph picked her up again and paced the room; four strides one way, four the other, until well after midnight.

Eventually, the cause of Clare's distress became apparent: painful gas filled her little belly, making it hard as a rock. Now, at least, Joseph knew what to do. Putting Clare on his lap facing away from him, he worked her little legs in a cycling movement. A series of loud burps finally gave both baby and father relief.

It was after two in the morning before Joseph was finally able to put a sleeping Clare in her pram. He was exhausted by the time he turned off the light and stretched out on the hard wood floor with his coat pillowed beneath his head. He wondered whether he would get any sleep at all before it was time for him to start his first day at work.

CHAPTER 4

Fearing he would sleep through the alarm, Joseph placed the clock in a tin pie plate where its ring would be extra loud. When it went off at 5:00 AM, he jumped up and slapped his hand over the bell, as startled as if he'd been stabbed with a hot fork. Before doing anything else, he checked his pocket for his letter of employment. Reassured to find it, he got the children up and dressed, and fed them Tilda's leftovers.

Henri had already left for work by the time a bleary-eyed Joseph reached the house. Joseph left instructions with Tilda: he would arrange for the boys to start school as soon as possible, but until then they were free to explore the neighbourhood as long as they stayed together; Sarah would not eat porridge, but enjoyed toast; Clare usually napped at 9:00 in the morning and then again

at 2:00 in the afternoon, and Tilda would know Clare wanted to sleep when the baby pulled on her ears.

Tilda acknowledged the instructions good-naturedly and told Joseph not to worry—she knew all about little girls, she had been one herself. She could handle boys, too. After all, she joked, she had married The Great Henri.

Sarah began to wail when she realized Joseph was leaving. Her father gave her a hug. "Your aunty will look after you today, honey."

"I don't want her! I want you!"

Joseph held the child tightly. "It's okay, it's okay," he whispered repeatedly into her ear. When her crying ceased after a few minutes he tried to leave again, but again Sarah sobbed. This time Tilda was able to distract the child with a pretty spoon, and after a "Try not to kill each other," to the boys, Joseph snuck out the back door.

As he hurried to the Philibuster Dairy, he found himself looking forward to an occupation that came with a salary. His recent experiences had taught him that physical work, no matter how hard, did not compare with looking after young children. Caring for oneself was one thing; having other human beings depend on you entirely for their survival was quite another. A day fully occupied with feedings, changing and washing diapers, and tending to sick children was far more tiring than heaving a shovel or pounding nails.

The front doors of the Philibuster Dairy were still locked when Joseph arrived. From his pocket he drew out his precious letter and a strip of newspaper. He had read them both so often that he knew the words by heart, but he read them again anyway. "Help Wanted, Male." The Great Henri had cut the ad from employment section of *The Philibuster Post* and mailed it to Joseph some time back. The body of the ad read: "Experienced man of good character wanted to run dairy farm and milk route. Regular job for decent man. Must be good horseman. State wages in first letter." The ad ended with an address to which applicants could write.

Next, Joseph glanced at the letter, its envelope stamped in an Alberta post office. "We are pleased to offer you the position of Route Operator for the Philibuster Dairy. Report for work on May 18." He remembered how the weight of the world seemed to have lifted from his shoulders as he read those words. It had been so long—sometimes it felt like forever—since he'd had steady work. All the years of sweat and toil he had endured in the steel mill, four years before the war and another ten afterward, seemed like a nightmare now, with nothing to show for it.

Joseph had worked with blast furnaces, immense barrel-shaped structures in which raw ore and limestone were subjected to heat fiery enough to melt rock and turn iron ore into molten pig iron and slag. Seven days a week, twelve hours a day, Joseph had worn cotton gloves and leather shin guards, surrounded by rows of blast furnaces cooking the raw ore at over 1000 degrees Fahrenheit. When sweat dripped from his sweltering body, it sizzled on the floor like drops of water in a hot, oiled frying pan. So intense was the heat from the rows of blast furnaces that he drank two pails of water daily without quenching his thirst.

Not only had working at the blast furnaces been backbreaking, it had also been extremely dangerous. The molten iron and slag, handled properly, would pour down open channels. If mishandled, however, the liquid iron caused horrendous accidents, singeing clothing and cooking skin. Joseph had once seen a man beside him at the blast furnace burn to death when he failed to lower a stopper in time. As a result, liquid iron poured out of the blast furnace, struck the edge of the channel and erupted in the man's face. The desperate man had died screaming in anguish. It was commonly joked by the other workers that a person seeking employment at a steel mill should wait outside the mill until a man was carried out—because that was the right moment to apply.

Joseph had dreamed of buying a dairy farm even before he'd married Helen. To that end, in an effort to save money he had spent 14 years toiling in unbearable noise and heat. By the year

1928, Joseph and Helen understood they could not wait any longer. Though they didn't have as much money as they'd have liked to have for their down payment, especially with interest rates so high at the time, they realized that Joseph had been fortunate to escape working in the steel mill without major injury, thus far; best not to continue pushing their luck. They used every penny of their savings to purchase a farm near Strabane, Ontario, about 20 miles southwest of Toronto.

The farm had been a dream come true for Joseph and Helen. They had started with 12 Jersey cows, a few pigs and chickens, enough fertile land to grow whatever they needed and a healthy place to raise their growing family. Unfortunately, they had purchased the farm when optimism in the world economy was at its strongest and prices for land and buildings were at their height. By 1931 milk prices, along with the prices for every other commodity, were the lowest they'd been in 30 years. The Gastons could no longer earn enough to pay their mortgage and the bank had foreclosed on their farm.

Joseph, Helen and their three children—Clare was not yet born—had moved back to Hamilton, where Joseph found work on a tractor assembly line. The job lasted six months then Joseph was laid off. His next job, building office furniture, lasted only three months before his employers went bankrupt. By 1932 times were even tougher and Joseph had to go further afield in search of work. Companies everywhere were cutting employees or shutting their doors for lack of business. Joseph took a position as a travelling salesman, though he knew the position would be short-lived—which it was. Things became so desperate that he eventually took a badly paid job as a log driver on the French River, a few hundred miles north of his home in Hamilton. Apart from the poor pay, working conditions were abominable. Swarms of black flies were so thick in the area that there were times when Joseph could barely see, and with every breath he choked on the flies he inhaled. But work was work and he stuck it out as long as he could. When even

that job ended in his employer's bankruptcy, there was nothing more to be had.

Joseph was pulled from his thoughts when a distinguished-looking man approached the front doors of the dairy. Of Joseph's height, about five-foot-eleven, he trod a fine line between being well fed and pudgy. He was clean-shaven, pale-skinned and had narrow lips and small eyes. His clothing was expensive: a perfectly pressed, three-piece navy suit, a matching blue fedora, a blue tie with white polka-dots, and a white handkerchief in his upper welt pocket.

Joseph stood up immediately and walked toward him. "Morning," he said with a friendly smile.

The man gave Joseph only a careless glance. Then, without a word of acknowledgment, he unlocked the door of the dairy and went inside.

Joseph was dismayed. *Do I look that desperate*? he wondered, as he looked down at his own clothing. His shirt, jacket and pants were clean, although the cuffs were frayed and the shirt was not quite white any longer. Did the other man assume he was looking for a handout?

Minutes later a middle-aged woman emerged from the building. She, at least, returned Joseph's greeting. "Are you here to see someone?" she asked.

"Why, yes, ma'am, Mr. Westmoreland. My name is Joseph Gaston."

"I see," she said non-committally. "Well, you may as well come in and sit down."

As Joseph followed her into a tastefully appointed reception area, he tried to remain calm. On the walls, a series of photos showed the dairy's development from the ground breaking ceremony to the laying of the foundations to the putting up of the walls. The last photos showed the ribbon-cutting ceremony which had occurred just 18 months earlier. Below that picture were listed the names of the attendees, one being the Canadian prime min-

ister, R. B. Bennett. Next to him stood the president of the dairy, Mr. Winfield Westmoreland—the man who had snubbed Joseph a few minutes earlier. A bad feeling came over Joseph.

By now the staff had begun walking through the door in ones and twos. Wanting to make a good impression, Joseph smiled at them all. He waited for almost an hour before the secretary appeared again and informed him that Mr. Westmoreland was ready to see him.

Joseph was ushered down a hallway and into a lavish office with a terrazzo floor, panelled ceiling and polished oak furniture. Behind a large desk sat Winfield Westmoreland. He made no attempt to extend his hand in greeting when Joseph was introduced. Nor did he invite him to sit.

"What do you want?" Westmoreland asked gruffly. If he recognized Joseph from their brief contact an hour earlier, he did not show it.

Joseph stepped forward and held out the letter of employment. "I'm here for the job you offered me."

Westmoreland took the letter and skimmed it briefly. "Humph," he said.

Joseph smiled and waited nervously.

"You were supposed to start work today," the man said.

"Yes," Joseph agreed.

"But you didn't. I had to get someone else to fill the position."

Joseph's heart raced. *This could not be happening!* "But, sir, I'm reporting for work now. Today. As you requested."

Westmoreland frowned at him. "I needed you to start milking this morning. To do so, you should have reported to me yesterday."

"But the letter … that's not what it said. It said to report today."

"Obviously, you misunderstood our correspondence. Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do about it."

Then, before Joseph's disbelieving eyes, Westmoreland deliberately tore the letter in two.

Joseph was close to tears as he stared at the man behind the desk. For weeks the letter had kept him going. The prospect of a job had represented clothes for the children, shelter from the elements and food—above all else, food. All of it now gone.

"But you offered me the job!" Joseph blurted out, staring at the ripped letter in Westmoreland's hands.

"By not showing up in time for work, you've forfeited it."

"But … we moved across the country to get here …"

"Not my problem," Westmoreland said coldly. He called to his secretary. "Mrs. Brown, please show Mister … Mister … the gentleman out."

Moments later, Joseph found himself once more on the front steps of the dairy. Stunned, he staggered aimlessly down the dirt road and back toward town.

CHAPTER 5

Joseph stared at the ground as he walked, puffs of dirt rising with each footfall. His mind was a blur of misery and confusion. What had just happened? It was impossible that he could have misunderstood the letter. Its meaning could not have been clearer. He had been asked to start work today! Nowhere had it been suggested that he should report a day earlier. There had to be a mistake, and Joseph wanted to know what it was.

Angrily, he turned around and walked back to the dairy. He requested the secretary to get an appointment for him with Westmoreland. When she was reluctant to do as he asked, he told her there had been a mistake, and that only Westmoreland could help him get to the bottom of it. The secretary left her desk; she was not gone long. Frostily, with no pretence at her former politeness, she made it clear that Westmoreland would not see Joseph; he was not to disturb the great man again. When Joseph left the dairy a second time he was outraged.

So much had been riding on this job. The train tickets alone had used up most of his fast-dwindling savings. He had nothing of value left to sell. His belongings at the rooming house were worth four or five bucks, at most. How was he going to feed the kids? And why did these terrible things keep happening to him?

As he strode back to town, he tried to shrug off his feelings of anger and self-pity. He didn't have the money to get his family back to Ontario—not that there was work for him there either—but he had to do *something*. Rummaging through a few garbage cans in search of newspapers with Help Wanted ads, he found what looked like a complete copy of the *Philibuster Post.* Glancing at the front page before leafing through the paper for the section he wanted, a picture leaped up at him: Winfield Westmoreland.

The accompanying story related Mr. Westmoreland's promise to take a salary cut if he were re-elected mayor. Now, in his second term, he had, in fact, already taken a voluntary ten percent roll-back. "The city is in deficit," he was quoted as saying, "and everyone, including me, must tighten their fiscal belts." The article went on to mention that, without fanfare of any sort, Winfield Westmoreland and a number of other city council members had personally arranged for a 60-ton train car to be filled with flour, cereal and potatoes to be shipped to Weyburn, Saskatchewan.

"It is well known that the district of Weyburn may be the hardest hit of any area in Canada these last four years. When the Post *learned of this generous gift, we spoke to one of the donors, prominent businessman and our mayor, Winfield Westmoreland. He said, 'I believe we all owe it to our fellow men to serve them as best we can. I also believe we should treat each and every person with whom we come into contact with dignity and kindness, especially when they are in their greatest need.' This newspaper would like to thank the very humble Mr. Westmoreland for his generous and brotherly project, which will reflect greatly on our fair city."*

Joseph felt like spitting on Westmoreland's picture and throwing the paper in the trash, but he restrained himself and turned to

the Help Wanted section. The only job he saw advertised was for an experienced machinist, for which he was unqualified. Frustrated at the lack of opportunity—here, just as back home—he refolded the paper, put it beside the refuse container for the next person, and started walking the streets in search of a job.

When Joseph got to Tilda's late that afternoon, he expected the house to be in a shambles with the boys out of control, Clare screaming with gas pains and Sarah in tears. Instead, he found the boys building a castle out of playing cards at the kitchen table, Clare napping soundly in a bassinet in the guest bedroom—"She ate well today," Tilda told him—and Sarah playing house in the living room. "Can I go play outside now, Daddy?" she asked, when Joseph hugged her and put her on his lap.

In some perverse way, Joseph would have been happier to find the house less serene. Not that he wanted things to go badly for Tilda, who was doing so much to help him, but after losing the dairy job and having spent a fruitless day spent searching for work, he badly wanted to feel needed.

His brother came through the back door with Jasper moments later. "'Allo, Joseph," he said as he kicked off his shoes and kissed Tilda's cheek. "'ow was your first day?"

"Not good," Joseph said with a wince, and explained.

"Well," Henri's tone was offhand, "I am certain in time you will find somet'ing."

Expecting his brother to be outraged at Westmoreland's treatment of him, Joseph was surprised by Henri's cavalier attitude. But had he been able to read his brother's mind, he would have understood.

Although they had spent no time together as children, Henri had never lost a younger sibling's awe of his much older brother. The six months they'd spent together when he was sixteen and Joseph twenty-eight had left an indelible impression on Henri. By this time he had already acquired his moniker, The Great Henri,

because even as a young boy he'd been able to cut down trees faster than a grown man. So when he came to live with Helen and Joseph, Joseph hadn't had any problems finding the strong youngster a job at the steel factory. He worked in the stockyard, filling skips with rocks of iron ore. Sometimes he would have the satisfaction of bringing the ore to the blast furnace where Joseph worked, marvelling at his brother's skill with the molten pig iron.

In the evenings, when they sat around the fire, Joseph and Helen helped the lad with his English. They took turns pointing to different objects, which Henri had to name in English. As his vocabulary improved, they encouraged him to combine words in sentences. Every day the youngster became more confident in his ability to speak English, and every day he grew fonder of his brother and sister-in-law.

Until his arrival in Ontario, Henri had known only the mountains and forests surrounding his hometown in Quebec. Though he was happy with his brother and Helen, the time he spent with them had opened his mind to a larger world and he wanted to see more of it. When the moment came to part, Joseph and Helen presented the young man with a French-English dictionary, and all three shed some tears.

And so Henri resumed his journey across the continent. With the money he'd earned at the steel mill, he made his way to Lake Winnipeg where he looked for work as a fisherman. He had no fishing experience, but his great size, amiability and faith in himself made up for that lack. He was soon working on a barge, catching pickerel, perch, pike and lake sturgeon.

Bored after a season of fishing, he left the Lake and meandered south into Minnesota, where he talked himself into a position as a hunting guide, only to be fired when he proved himself a poor guide—good with a rifle but lacking knowledge of the area. The penniless boy spent two cold winter months living off little more than carrots stolen from farmers. He wrote to his brother and told him of his situation. He did not ask for money or help, he simply

wanted to share the tale of his journeys. In time, he received a letter from Joseph, together with enough money to feed himself for a month.

Henri also managed to get himself into other bad situations. He would arrive in a town, take a liking to a street, a building, or, more likely, a girl, and inquire about work. Each time he laid claim to experience he did not have. He built coffins in Minot, North Dakota. He was a cashier in a grocery store in Sidney, Montana. He broke horses at a ranch south of Regina, Saskatchewan and cut hair in Brooks, Alberta. Finally, he ended up in a logging camp in northern British Columbia, where he remained for a while before making his way to Philibuster and making a home there. Whenever Joseph sensed his younger brother was in trouble, he would send him a few dollars. Henri never forgot Joseph's kindness.

When Henri learned of Helen's death and Joseph's intention to raise his four children alone, his belief that his brother was a saint was strengthened. A man who could take sole responsibility for a young family was capable of doing anything. So when Joseph told him he'd lost the dairy job, Henri knew, just knew, that his brother's bad luck could only be temporary. Such a good man would not be denied his due. In time, Joseph would find work and prosper.

"Dinner will be ready soon," Tilda announced.

"In that case we'll be off," Joseph said.

Tilda looked surprised. "You're not eating with us?"

"Thanks, but we can't impose—you've done so much for us already today."

"That's silly," Tilda said from the stove, where she was stirring the gravy. "Everything is ready and there's plenty for everyone. You might as well sit."

Joseph reluctantly accepted the invitation. The children washed their hands and everyone sat around the table. During dinner, Tilda gave Joseph a few recommendations, such as a good place for second-hand household goods, the names of stores car-

rying inexpensive children's clothes and the best times to buy low-priced groceries.

The children spoke about their day. Sarah had helped her aunt cook, clean and feed the baby. The boys had explored the neighbourhood. They had met the iceman who had given them each a piece of his wares.

And, Cole said, they had found some bottles in a back alley. "Traded them in at Hoogaboom's and got licorice. And, Daddy!" Cole's eyes widened with excitement. "You should see the lady there. She wears pants!"

Tilda's eyebrows came together in a frown. "You children shouldn't be going to Hoogaboom's."

Remembering Tilda's reaction to Hoogaboom's the previous day, Joseph wondered again what was wrong with the store. Just then Tilda screamed and Jasper barked, startling them all. Through the window, Joseph saw a skinny man peering in at them.

"Goodness!" Tilda exclaimed, Hoogaboom's forgotten as she put a hand to her chest. "Scared the daylights out of me, that did. Henri, quieten that beast. What's he doing inside anyway?"

The man at the window smiled and waved. Jasper went on barking.

"Henri!" Tilda demanded.

Her husband silenced the dog before going to the door. He returned to the kitchen accompanied by the stranger, introduced him as Ethan, and invited him to sit at the table.

Tilda was silent as Henri told the young man to fill his plate. Ethan needed no urging. The look in his eyes as he regarded the food told a tale of desperate hunger.

When he had swallowed a few bites he smiled at the others. "Right decent of you folks to ask me in. Right decent. Haven't had a proper meal since Hector was a pup." He speared a piece of chicken with his fork, then looked up again. "Right good food you got here. Mighty good. Came in today. Headed for the rally in Vancouver. Hopped off before the bulls could get me."

Ethan was very young, eighteen at most. His hair stood up on one side of his head, like a child's after an afternoon nap. His clothes were in reasonable repair; somewhat dishevelled, yet without patches or obvious holes. He was, Joseph figured, an inexperienced young kid on the road, an "Angellina." A farm boy, perhaps, who had left home because his family could no longer afford to support him and he didn't want to burden them.

If Ethan's clothing was one indication of his innocence, his constant banter was another. He talked too much. He used hobo terms too freely. He spoke of "bone polishers"—mean dogs—who chased him as he "padded the hoof"—travelled on foot—across the prairies, looking for a place where a "bo"—a hobo—could get a meal. In contrast, men who'd been on the road for a long time said little and bragged less about where they had been. They were tired, hungry and generally ashamed of what had become of them. Joseph, like so many others who had come of age earlier in the century, believed that every man should be able to make something of himself. This belief originated partly with the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches stories they had read as children. Growing up with such expectations had made the Depression even more difficult for the unemployed. In their minds, people who were unsuccessful were either lazy or stupid, and they did not want to think of themselves in those terms.

"Looked all over the main drag. Couldn't find a soupy anywhere," Ethan said. "Yep. Don't nobody want a bo hanging around."

"Dis is true, dare is no soup kitchen in Philibuster," Henri said, "but you might try duh Sunshine Society on 56 Street." His friend Raven Mullens was, among other things, the president of an organization that helped feed the destitute.

Joseph knew Ethan was right. A man without a job was not welcome anywhere, nor did anyone make it easy for a person to get on his feet. Sure, some of the larger cities might give you a $1.25 room ticket so you had somewhere to sleep for a few nights. There

might even be a soup kitchen where you could eat twice a day for a couple of days before you were forced to move on. But that was it. Without a job, you were a liability anywhere.

Although political parties at the federal level had made promises to help the unemployed, the responsibility for housing, feeding and clothing the jobless fell mainly on the shoulders of civic committees and private charities such as the Salvation Army or local emergency relief associations. When federal government funds were available—although there wasn't much being doled out by the Bennett government—individual municipalities administered the money. Each town made its own decisions about how to maintain a subsistence level of existence for the impoverished men, women and children who lived there.

Typically, members of the tax-paying public constituted the civic relief committees. These committees determined who received relief and how much assistance they could obtain. Those who qualified did not receive cash. Concerned that public funds would be misused by men spending their relief money on alcohol or gambling, municipalities used a system by which privately owned businesses would accept relief vouchers for rent, food and heating fuel. No money was available for "luxuries" such as toothpaste, needles, thread, wool, light bulbs or toilet paper. As for the things that made life more bearable and were a way of keeping up one's spirits—a movie or an ice cream cone—these were not even considered.

Men who qualified for relief—almost always family men—were put to work performing "public works." The theory was that such work gave people the chance to feel useful, a principle Joseph understood. In practice, however, the work programs became what the *Chicago Tribune* termed "boondoggles." For political reasons, useful activities such as building houses for the homeless, paving roads and improving water treatment facilities were avoided. Too often, men found themselves picking dandelions or raking leaves: doing busywork, in other words. In any event, the ins and outs of

the public works system were purely academic for men like Joseph and Ethan, as a person had to live in a town or a city for a year and a day to become eligible for $11 a month for rent and $15 a month for food. The reason for this policy was obvious: the homeless should not be allowed to bankrupt a place.

So Joseph could identify with the young man when he said, "Haven't eaten in a few days and was sure I'd be putting another notch in my belt. Started knocking on doors, I did. As I said, no one wants to help a bo. Wanted nothing to do with me, until you folks. Right Christian of you, right Christian."

Ethan's chatter went on in this fashion all through dinner. He talked constantly between bites, perhaps because in Tilda's comfortable kitchen he felt safe for the first time in who knew how long. Only near the end of the meal did his torrent of words slow to a trickle, and he showed signs of leaving. Joseph gave the boy credit; he knew better than to overstay his welcome.

"Well, you folks been right decent, right decent. Hope I can repay you some day," he said at the door. He shook hands with Henri and Joseph, bowed to Tilda and waved to the kids. Joseph thought he saw his brother sneak a dollar into Ethan's hand.

"Poor boy," Tilda said when Ethan had gone. "I don't mind feeding a starving man. The problem is, if you feed one, they tell their friends and pretty soon they're all at your door. Henri caught one of them putting a chalk mark on our front gate the other day, to let others know we're a soft touch. We usually leave Jasper outside. There's not a man alive interested in opening the gate when that beast is loose."

From where Joseph sat he was able to see Ethan walk toward the street. Listening to the young man talk, he had wondered how Ethan could be so cheerful. But as Ethan walked away, evidently thinking himself unobserved, the young man's shoulders drooped and his posture suggested a certain vulnerability. A lonely boy, for a boy was all he was—homesick, moneyless, defenceless. Where would he spend the night? Leaning against a tree somewhere?

Under a railway bridge? Certainly not in the entryway of a store, where he would be hounded or arrested. Joseph's eyes went to Nolan, probably no more than seven years younger than Ethan, and he was filled with a sudden and overwhelming sadness.

CHAPTER 6

At home that evening, Joseph kept thinking about Ethan. He looked down at his sleeping children, his heart aching at the thought that any of them might have similar experiences one day. He could not imagine Nolan and Cole, his beautiful boys—mischievous Nolan, gentle Cole—being cold, hungry and frightened. The thought made him feel ill.

He knelt down beside the children. Nolan had flung his arm over his face and was muttering something in his sleep. Sarah was smiling. Cole stirred, rolled over and began to snore softly. In her pram, Clare slept quietly. Very lightly, so as not to waken them, Joseph stroked each head in turn.

With the children asleep, he sat down with his dictionary. He did not want to think about the loss of his job, or his lack of money and prospects. If he allowed himself to dwell on his disappointments, he would tie his mind in knots and never get to sleep. Opening the old dictionary, he began to leaf through it for an interesting new word. His eyes paused at "abandon." Despite his resolve not to focus on his situation, the word led him to think about his childhood.

Three days after the death of Joseph's mother, his Aunt Jackie had stopped by the house to check on the family. To her horror, she discovered her brother-in-law gone and eight-year-old Joseph feeding his younger sisters pickles and raw potatoes he had found in the pantry. Joseph's father had abandoned his children. Jackie and her husband Peter brought Joseph and his sisters to live with them and their own three young children—sickly youngsters aged

one, two and three, who were in constant need of attention. With so many children in the small house—Joseph's sisters were five and three—the boy was largely overlooked.

In contrast to Joseph's father, who had been somewhat of a tyrant, his mother had been a loving woman. She had heaped abundant praise on her first-born, who had responded to her attentions by being obedient and helpful. After her death he'd felt compelled to gain his aunt and uncle's approval by continuing his excellent behaviour. He did his chores quickly, earned A's in school and was obedient. But he was frustrated when his good conduct garnered no notice, let alone praise, from his relatives. Eventually he began to act out, in an effort he only now recognized, to get the attention he craved.

Joseph's tricks were relatively harmless, at first: a dash of pepper in his uncle's drinking water or salt swapped for sugar in his aunt's baking. The pranks got him whippings, but at least his existence was acknowledged. Soon he was getting into fights at school. He stopped doing his chores and he began to talk back to his uncle and aunt, all of which certainly got him more attention, though not the gentle kind that he craved.

When his minor offences began to be ignored he came up with new ways to get into trouble. One hot summer night he sprinkled powdered milk over his aunt and uncle's double bed: it stuck to their sweaty bodies while they were sleeping, and they woke up in a gooey mess. Uncle Peter used a switch to punish the offence, cutting Joseph's hands and the backs of his legs.

That Hallowe'en, Joseph filled neighbourhood mailboxes with manure. It wasn't the most heinous of Hallowe'en pranks, but for Uncle Peter, who had fed and sheltered the "ungrateful little hellion" for more than a year, it was the last straw. Joseph was separated from his sisters and passed on to another aunt and uncle.

The next relatives were little different from the previous ones. They, too, had children of their own, and took Joseph into their home only because they considered it their duty as good Christians

to do so. Joseph's behaviour, as should have been expected, did not improve.

A year later he was forced to move again. This time he was sent to his Uncle David, a bachelor who used Joseph as slave labour. Without waiting for the boy to misbehave, at school or home, his uncle hit him, called him stupid, and told him his father had abandoned him because he was worthless. "He's like a colt," he informed anyone who would listen. "He has to be broken before he'll be of any use." The merest misdemeanour, even if it was unintentional, was punished harshly with beatings and days without food or shelter.

Eight months after Joseph began living with his uncle, David came home drunk one night and passed out in the kitchen. Joseph tried to rouse him. When he was unsuccessful, he tied two splints made from wood and strips of cloth to one of his uncle's legs, from hip to ankle, immobilizing him. Next morning Joseph told the unhappy man that he had broken his leg jumping over a ditch on his drunken way home, and that the doctor had ordered complete bed rest for at least a week. He solemnly assured his uncle that he would take care of him and keep the farm running in the meantime.

Superficially, at least, the boy appeared to be keeping his word, preparing his uncle's meals and going to the barn to do his chores. Initially mistrustful of Joseph, and watching him as closely as he could, David eventually came to the happy realization that he had trained Joseph so well that it was safe for him to relax during his nephew's absences from the house.

When his week of convalescence ended, David went to the kitchen expecting breakfast. Finding none, and getting no response when he shouted for his nephew, he hobbled to the barn. There he gazed about him in horror. Stalls had been destroyed. The horses and cattle were gone. Chicken feathers and blood were everywhere.

Managing, somehow, to reach town, he found the doctor who had supposedly splinted his leg. Upon learning the truth, David

tore off the splint and went in search of his nephew. After making a few inquiries he found Joseph at the hotel, living off the money he'd made from selling his uncle's animals. Joseph's punishment was a terrible beating with a knotted rope, so severe that he was unable to walk, stand or touch his face for a few days.

When he had recovered somewhat, and knew his uncle was out searching for his remaining horses and cattle, Joseph struggled to his feet. Weak from hunger and thirst, he knew he had to get away. He understood that after what he had done, none of his relatives would take him back. If he wanted to survive, he needed to fend for himself. So he raided a neighbour's garden, gorging himself on fresh peas, then stumbled off in search of work.

He found a job topping beets at a local farm. His task was to pull out the beets and lop off the tops with a very sharp knife. A few times he also cut chunks from his fingers. Instead of complaining, he tore strips from his shirt, bound his wounds and kept going down the rows.

At the end of the summer Joseph returned to school. He spent a few weeks hiding in the barn of a school chum, Ben. When Ben's parents found out about Joseph, they took pity on him and took him into their home. The boy helped Ben and his father milk cows, care for calves, fix fences, dig ditches and do whatever else was necessary. He joined the family at mealtimes and shared a room with Ben. He was happy for the first time since his mother's death.

His happiness lasted until the evening he overheard Ben's parents discussing their finances. The family was apparently having a hard time paying their bills. Although Joseph was reluctant to leave the people who had been so kind to him, he was determined not to be a burden to them. Without letting them know what he'd overheard, he packed his few possessions and left for the nearest big city, Hamilton, Ontario.

He'd never been in a town of more than a few hundred people. Now he was walking the streets with 70,000 other souls. Hamilton was huge, and bustled with activity. At first Joseph was confused

and overwhelmed. Wherever he looked he saw unfamiliar things: electric streetlights glowing in the night, eight-storey buildings and castle-like houses, trams moving without horses pulling them. He also saw many rows of men digging trenches and filling the channels with large iron pipes. The city was in the midst of a growth spurt and was spending a lot of money to upgrade and improve its sanitation system.

Joseph knew his way around a shovel. He was convinced he could dig ditches. Plucking up his courage, he asked one of the diggers to point out the foreman. The man's answer was incomprehensible, so Joseph asked a second man, who, in broken English, pointed out the foreman to him.

"So, you're lookin' for work," said the obviously Irish foreman, his words running together in a Celtic lilt.

"Can you use another man?" Joseph asked.

The Irishman grinned. "Sure, 'an I can. D'yah know one?"

Joseph heard a few chuckles, but didn't realize he was being teased. "Me," he said, as a few men within earshot leaned on their shovels, wiping the sweat from their foreheads as they watched the eleven-year-old ask for a job.

The foreman decided to have some fun with Joseph. "Don't mind working with Dagos, lad?"

Joseph had no idea who or what Dagos were. He did know he was hungry and would do just about anything to feed himself. "No, sir," he replied.

"Well, then, boyo. Pick up that shovel and go on with yeh to the end of the line."

Joseph did as ordered and began digging away at the hard earth. To the amazement of the other men, he kept up with them almost shovel for shovel. The work was tough, but he understood what was at stake. The foreman kept an eye on him, wondering when the boy would drop from exhaustion. By the end of the day, he was so impressed with Joseph's capacity for hard work that he asked him to come back again the next day. Exhausted, Joseph

fell asleep in a nearby doorway that night. A policeman woke him around midnight and told him to go home. Too tired to be frightened, Joseph found another doorway and sank back into sleep.

The next day he worked hard again, only stopping when he mistakenly thought he heard the foreman call him, "Hey, Joe." He was to learn that the other labourers all spoke Italian, and that the foreman, like other English-speaking Canadians, referred to these immigrants collectively as "Dagos" and individually as "Joe."

Joseph listened to the men as they worked. In a few days he had absorbed several basic Italian words—*per favore, grazie, buon giorno*—and used them when he spoke to his co-workers. Impressed with the English kid's friendliness, they were friendly in return. When they learned he had nowhere to sleep they brought him to a rooming house on Barton Street, where many Italian immigrants lived. Plaster fell from the ceiling and there were more men than beds, but the place was tidy and had a sense of community that made Joseph feel comfortable.

As foreigners in a country where anyone not of British descent was deemed second-class, most Italian men could only find jobs in the most strenuous and poorest paying work situations. The men Joseph roomed and worked with were either single men who had come to Canada to earn money to send back home to Italy, or married men who were saving their money in order to send for their families. Living in cramped quarters where the rent was low made it possible for them to do so. Their only extravagance, for the most part, was a keg of beer on a Saturday night. And, as if to give the shabby place some sense of warmth and personality, they pasted pictures on the walls above their beds—drawings, postcards from home or photographs cut from newspapers and magazines.

Joseph, who had never set foot in a museum or an art gallery, loved to look at the pictures. No matter that they were tattered or fly-specked or showed signs of wear, he looked at them often, moved by a beauty he had not known existed. The picture he returned to again and again was the portrait of a woman with long

dark hair and a half-smile. Her face bore an expression which he could not give a word to until years later, when he found it in his dictionary. The word was "enigmatic." Who was the woman, he asked. One of the older men enlightened him. The picture, he told Joseph, was very famous. It hung in a gallery in France, but the man who had painted it was an Italian named Leonardo da Vinci. Italians called the woman *La Gioconda*. Her English name was Mona Lisa.

In later years, when Joseph talked of the time he had spent living amongst the Italians, he was often asked about things people knew only from rumours and newspapers, about dirt and depravity, quarrels and fatal knife fights. But Joseph experienced nothing of the sort. Inevitably there were disagreements, unavoidable when 23 men shared too few beds, but he never saw or heard anything worse than some raised voices and insults. He could attest to the fact that the Italians had behaved no worse than the English Canadians he had met.

In fact, what Joseph remembered most vividly was how badly the Italians were treated. The trenches dug by Joseph and his co-workers often ran beside the tramlines. English-speaking shift-workers rode the trams to and from work. With shift changes occurring at various times of the day, the trams were often crowded. In summer, contemptuous passengers would spit their tobacco juice through the open windows, aiming at the Italian labourers only a few feet away. Usually they would miss their intended targets, but once in a while a filthy gob landed on a pant-leg or shirt-sleeve, whereupon the men on the trams would hoot, whistle, laugh and shout at the Italians, telling them to go back to their own country. In turn, the unfortunate recipient of the gob would shake his fist and yell back at the cowards on the tram. Afterward, as he cleaned off the mess, he would wonder whether he was crazy to think of bringing his wife and children to a country where they would experience such indignities.

Joseph had spent quite some time working in the trenches

when he learned of better paying positions being offered by some of the new steel mills that provided the manufacturing sector with raw material. He found a job at a steel mill and worked there until the start of the Great War in 1914.

Absorbed in his memories, Joseph did not hear the gentle tap at his door. It was only when the sound was repeated that he noticed it, and even then he was not certain where it came from. The walls of the house were so thin that the sound could have come from anywhere in the building. As it was, he was glad of the distraction and opened the door.

A man with short black hair stood there, his eyes lowered politely. His neighbour, Joseph knew, though they had never met face to face, and the father of the children who had peered into the hallway the day Joseph and his family had moved into the house.

"Good evening, sir," said the man. His accent, surprisingly, was British.

The man's name was Tom Wah. Still keeping his eyes down, he apologized profusely for disturbing Joseph's evening. He lived next door, he said. He and his wife ran a wet wash service. If Joseph wanted things laundered, he could leave them in a basket outside the Wahs' door in the morning and they would be returned the following day. Joseph had used such services occasionally in the past. Though he could take care of the children's clothing himself, towels and sheets would be hard to wash in the sink. He sensed Tom Wah and his wife would be happy to dry the washing as well, but that would cost more, and it would be easy enough for Joseph to hang everything on the clothesline in the back yard.

After thanking the man for stopping by, and saying that he might well use his services, Joseph held out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

As Tom Wah lifted his head and made eye contact for the first time, Joseph saw a look of surprise in his face. Then, ignoring the extended hand, Tom bowed and walked away quickly.

The small incident brought back to mind the Italian immigrants Joseph had gotten to know so well. Tough as conditions had been for them, he was aware that no one was lower in the social hierarchy of North America than the Chinese. It was depressing to think that a man needed to walk with his eyes down and head lowered in order to avoid confrontation and survive.

CHAPTER 7

Shortly after arriving in Philibuster, Joseph's days took on a certain routine. Clare woke up every night crying between 1:00 and 2:00 AM. Sometimes she would drink a little milk then go back to sleep. Other times she'd wake and remain inconsolable for an hour or two, and her father would stay awake with her. By 6:00 the other three children would be up. A weary Joseph would feed them breakfast, going without eating himself in order to stretch the family's food money, and then take them to Henri and Tilda.

After saying goodbye to the boys he would extricate himself from a tearful Sarah. The remainder of the morning was spent trudging from one business to another, knocking on doors and enquiring about work. Most people were not interested in talking with him, but on the odd occasion when he did have a chance to communicate with a potential employer, he did his best to promote himself, stretching his work experience beyond his true skills.

After many hours of unsuccessful job searching, a hungry Joseph usually returned to Tilda's home. Turning down her offer of a meal with the lie that he had already eaten, he would turn instead to the Help Wanted section of the day's *Philibuster Post*. Rarely did he see advertisements for men. And when he did see a position, for an experienced electric welder or mushroom grower, for instance, he was not qualified to apply.

After studying the few ads, Joseph would scan the rest of the paper, looking for any possible hint of work. He could not

help noticing how often the *Philibuster Post* trumpeted the successes of Mayor Westmoreland and the city council. One day the council voted to improve the sewer system, with the work to begin immediately. Another day it confirmed construction permits for new warehouses at the southwest end of town. Other enterprises were mentioned too, a packing plant and a brickyard relocating to Philibuster. Thinking that the various projects would need labourers, Joseph tried to find out more about them from Raven Mullens.

But Raven, manager of the Great West Sawmill, the potential source of lumber for the reported ventures, dismissed the articles as fabrication rather than truth. According to him, Westmoreland and his cronies were in the habit of faking these stories to make it appear they were performing their civic duties.

"Hell, you ever hear of bread and circuses?" Raven asked. "Two thousand years ago Roman politicians tried to win the votes of the poor by giving them cheap food and entertainment as a way of diverting them from more pressing problems. Westmoreland and those other bastards in office are doing the same thing, except that they aren't even giving out bread."

Discouraged by his lack of success, Joseph took to peeking between the slats of the wooden sidewalks, hoping to find dropped change. So desperate was he that whenever he saw the dump wagon go by, heaped high with cinders, garbage and street refuse, he wondered if he might find something in the pile that he could sell to a scrap dealer for a few cents. The afternoon usually ended when Joseph, tired and famished, stopped at Jackson's Grocery Store to pick up a few essentials for the family's dinner. Since his culinary abilities were limited—he fed the kids a steady diet of sandwiches or mashed potatoes with corned beef—it never took him long to decide on his purchases.

He usually passed Hoogaboom's store on his way to Jackson's. It still seemed odd to him that whenever the boys mentioned Hoogaboom's in Tilda's presence, she would sniff, as if at a bad odour, make a face, and tell the boys to stay away from "that place."

Fearing she might get into one of her snits—for Tilda tended to get prickly when she was upset—Joseph refrained from asking her why she objected to the store.

One Sunday afternoon while he was weeding Tilda's back garden—one of the many chores he did to repay her for looking after the children—he finally broached the subject with Henri. His brother was relaxing on the porch, and for once Joseph and Henri were alone.

Henri gave Joseph a long look. "Tilly does not like Beth," he said.

"Who's Beth?"

"Duh owner of 'oogaboom's."

"Why doesn't she like her?"

"Jealous!" Henri said, with a hint of satisfied amusement in his voice.

Seeing Joseph's curiosity, he began to explain. After leaving the logging camp in northern British Columbia in the spring of 1928, Henri had returned to Alberta, longing for the flat lands and big sky he fondly remembered. In Philibuster, he had become acquainted with Raven Mullens, who had found him a job at the sawmill.

About this time he also began to patronize Hoogaboom's, then owned and run by a stern man named Ambroos Hoogaboom and his pretty wife, Beth. Months after Henri arrived in the town, Ambroos was walking across the Elk River when melting ice broke beneath his weight and he drowned. Attracted to Beth, Henri had tried to woo her for a while, but she was not interested in him. Then he met Tilda, fell in love and married her. Not long after their wedding, he made the great mistake of telling his new wife about his recent crush on Beth.

Henri had not known at the time that Tilda's dislike of Beth was founded on a jealousy that went beyond her husband's erstwhile desire for another woman. As a pretty and rather proper young girl, Tilda had been much sought after by the men of

Philibuster. Her dance card had always been the first to be filled—at least, until Beth moved to town. She was a few years older than Tilda, and taller, with a strangely captivating appearance. Beth began to attract the men who had once wooed the younger girl. Beth didn't know about Tilda, but Tilda was very much aware of Beth, especially when a handsome older man named Ambroos Hoogaboom—on whom Tilda happened to have set her own eyes—married Beth.

But Beth's conquest of Ambrose Hoogaboom was not the only reason for Tilda's dislike of her. Tilda was unable to bear children. Beth had two healthy girls, and the initial dislike turned to hatred.

Henri's story sparked such curiosity in Joseph that he became like a child who'd been warned to keep away from matches, yet was unable to stop himself from playing with them. He had to meet Beth.

On the afternoon Joseph decided to visit Hoogaboom's, he noticed the birds chattering loudly and fluttering about nervously, as if they sensed something unusual was about to happen. Although it had been nearly 90 degrees at midday, the temperature had dropped significantly in just four hours. Joseph thought the drastic change in temperature odd, but was so grateful for the break from the oppressive heat that he didn't think to question it.

As he approached Hoogaboom's, the first thing he noticed was a church pew, a sturdy old thing made of poplar. Joseph recognized it immediately as a liar's bench. Every town had at least one, a place where men congregated and told stories—mostly exaggerated—of things they'd seen and done. Six men were sitting there now, conversing amicably together.

To the left of the bench, beneath a white awning that read "Hoogaboom's Grocery Store," was a single large window and a door. In the window were displays of canned goods piled into pyramids and the ubiquitous poster: "Do Your Duty! Get the Gopher!" As Joseph entered the store he heard a bell above the

door, and a radio.

"*… and, Dr. T. E. Shaw of the London School of Economics added, this world crisis would be brought to a swift conclusion if the world's leaders had the courage to say to their countries, 'We have lived beyond our means too long, and must have the boldness to pursue such actions as might prove painful in the short term but will be to everyone's benefit in the long*.'"

The radio was perched on a shelf by the back wall. A few men at the rear of the store listened quietly as the announcer continued.

"*In Chicago, the Boy Scouts of America National Council endorsed development of a scouting program for older boys, designed to give new avenues of adventure and appeal to those youths unable to find employment. Dr. James E. West, Chief Scout Executive, stressed the need of a program for youths forced out of school because of economic conditions at a time when jobs are at a low ebb.*"

The listening men shook their heads sadly.

"*In local news, charges of unlawful assembly were dropped against 46 city relief recipients for their part in the uprising in the south side potato patch last week. Initially accused of being communist agitators, the Court found a lack of evidence in the case against the accused. And that is your news of the moment.*"

When the bulletin ended and music took over, the men entered into an animated discussion over whether the relief recipients had been let off too easily. After all, nobody wanted "their" kind of trouble in this part of the country, and "the sooner we get rid of the communist rabble-rousers, the better off the country will be."

Joseph only half-listened to the chatter as he walked around the store. On one side, canned goods were stacked on wooden shelves, everything from tins of peas, corn and grapefruit to molasses, coffee, corned beef and salmon. On the bottom shelf sat baskets of produce—apples, carrots, potatoes, cabbages, onions, lettuce, rhubarb and more. Meat was in a glass cabinet on the other side of the store, minced beef, boiling beef, loin lamb chops and

bacon. Dairy products and soda pop occupied yet another cabinet. Bread and baked goods were on the counter.

Checking prices as he went along—milk, nine cents a quart; bread, a nickel a loaf; round steak, ten cents a pound—Joseph thought Hoogaboom's prices were as good as or better than the prices at Jackson's. He grabbed two cans of Hereford corned beef and a loaf of day-old bread, filled a sack with potatoes, and walked to the rear of the store.

He was standing by the cash register, waiting for someone to attend to him, when one of the men by the radio shouted, "Beth! Customer!" An attractive woman with flawless skin, hazel eyes and dark hair pulled back in a bun appeared from the storage room. Joseph remembered Cole's comment that Mrs. Hoogaboom wore pants and men's shoes, and he saw that she did. He had the feeling he'd seen her before.

"If you old buzzards would stop hanging around my store I'd hear customers come in," she said. The comment was made teasingly, and the men grinned in response.

She smiled pleasantly at Joseph. "What can I do for you?"

Joseph felt awkward, as he tended to do around women. Unable to meet her eyes, he indicated his purchases and said, "Just these, please."

Mrs. Hoogaboom was weighing the potatoes when the bell rang, the door flung open, and one of the fellows from the liar's bench burst into the store.

"It's coming!" he screamed.

In a flash, Beth and the men by the radio ran to the window and stared west down the street.

"Great Caesar's Ghost!" Beth exclaimed.

Joining the nervous crowd at the window, Joseph wondered whether the day of reckoning had arrived. "What is it?" he asked urgently, as Beth and the men exchanged brief glances of surprise.

"A Black Blizzard," Beth whispered in awe. "A bad one."

The words struck a chord in Joseph: he had read about Black Blizzards. For thousands of years the natural grasses of the plains had kept the topsoil in place, even during times of drought. When settlers moved into the North American west and cleared the land to plant wheat, they had plowed the native grasses under. Years of intense plowing combined with an acute lack of rain or snow had robbed all the moisture from the soil. When the dry soil was hoisted aloft and blown by strong winds, immense dust storms—Black Blizzards—were the result.

Black Blizzard. Joseph heard that the dust from such a blizzard could cover the interior of a house even when all the doors and windows were tightly closed: the fine particles would leave streaks of dirt on floors, coat dishes in cupboards with light powder, and penetrate any food not sealed in Mason jars. He remembered other, more terrifying, details. Static electricity given off during a particularly bad Black Blizzard could be enough to light up a large city. Storms of sand and soil could create such high drifts that roads had to be closed, trains couldn't pass and cattle strayed over fences. A person driving a vehicle had to turn off the ignition to keep the dust from smothering the engine. Most frightening of all, a person out in the open had to find immediate shelter, because dust pneumonia, caused when the dirt was inhaled, could permanently impair even the strong, and kill the young.

Until today, Joseph had taken descriptions of Black Blizzards to be exaggerated. Now, for the first time, he realized the terrible dangers of the dust storm. He could see it coming in from the west, a wall of black, thousands of feet high. To Joseph it looked as though a massive, unbroken wave was moving toward him.

Unnerved by the wall of blackness, he raced to Tilda's, glancing backward every few steps to check whether the dark mass was about to engulf him. Reaching the house, he burst through the front door. Tilda and Sarah were stringing beads in the living room.

"Where's Clare?" Joseph shouted, as he dropped his groceries on the floor.

Tilda clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, my, Joseph! You scared me! Clare’s napping.”

“And the boys?” It was nearly four o’clock. The boys would be out of school by now.

Catching the fear in his voice, Tilda jumped to her feet. “What is it?”

“A Black Blizzard,” Joseph told her tersely.

Tilda ran to the window. She saw the approaching storm from between the houses across the street. Alarmed, she glanced at the clock over the mantle. “They dawdle after school.”

“I’m going to look for them,” Joseph yelled, running to the door.

“Hurry!” Tilda shouted after him.

Joseph was in a panic as he ran along the route he guessed Nolan and Cole would take home. Would he find the boys in time? They knew nothing about Black Blizzards. Unless the kids were safe inside somewhere by the time the storm hit, their lungs could fill with dirt and they could be killed.