

"Willia Knox. I'm a journalist."

"From what publication?"

"Freelance, at the moment. I've worked for a few."

Mr. Hawk stood about five feet tall and wore a clean, extremely dated three-piece suit. His white hair was shoulder-length but tidy, his white beard neatly trimmed, and his skin so nearly transparent Willia wondered if he might have a pigment disorder.

"Knox," he repeated. "Willia like the author?"

Willia smiled. People rarely made the connection. "Yes. My mother was a Cather fan. She led kind of an Antonia life."

His eyes narrowed slightly at these motley credentials. "Would you like the Cook's tour, or help with finding something specific? Or would you rather I just leave you to poke around?"

He sounded youthful. She gave the white hair a second look, wondering if it was deceptive. The clothes were definitely old but maybe the man wasn't, if he had albinism. His features were taut and perfectly unwrinkled, like those of a human carved of wax. She pulled her eyes off Christopher Hawk and they sailed right back to the chair made of cow horns. "Thanks, I might need some guidance."

"That chair belonged to Charles Landis. I assume you know the basics there."

"Of . . . cowboy furniture design?"

He didn't smile. "Captain Landis had exotic tastes. That was a Victorian aesthetic. The discovery of the world's frontiers reflected in the home. Primitives and oddities were the rage."

"Tell me about Landis."

He drew back in a faint wince, as if she'd said, *Remind me again about George Washington*. "Charles Landis was the founder of Vine-land."

"Right, I've heard. Land developer and utopian visionary."

"Exactly."

"So he set up this place as a planned community? When was that?"

"He bought the land in 1861. Surveyed it, laid out the roads on a grid, brought in the railroad, and started a newspaper to put out the word. His dream was a self-sufficient colony of agriculture and intellectual enterprise. Fruit growers and freethinkers flourishing side by side."

Willia smiled. "How'd that work out for him?"

"Very well, in fact. We have his book, *The Founder's Own Story*. Obviously it's his version of events."

"Obviously."

"We have a deep archive here, including every copy of the *Vine-land Weekly* and other local newspapers dating back to their first issues. Also artifacts and the personal papers of a lot of Vineland's prominent citizens over the years."

"Great," Willa said, trying not to betray her thinking about the curatorial technique here. Organization aside, the place was damp and dusty, probably hot and damp in summer, prone to mildew.

"The full-length portrait you see over there is Landis as a young man. In the one on the left he's twenty years older."

Willia studied the famous autocrat, with his ruddy cheeks and odd flop of hair. A little tawdry looking for a land baron, she thought, but the standards of a particular time were hard to gauge. People hadn't always bathed, for example. Mr. Hawk was still ticking through his inventory. "That landscape in the gold frame hung in his original office on Landis Avenue. The dress and shawl on the mannequin belonged to his wife. The curios on that table were collected on one of his trips overseas."

Willia understood she'd flipped a switch on the Landis gusto, and wondered what this man did in here all day when he lacked an audience. He gave off a whiff of Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations*—the old lady still in her wedding dress fifty years after



getting jilted, wafting around her cobwebby house with the caved-in remains of the nuptial banquet on the table. She fought off an image of this pale man rolling out a mummified wedding cake.

"Was Vineland so different from other towns of the time?" she asked.

"Very different. Landis believed human improvement was a cooperative venture. Everyone who purchased property agreed to certain stipulations for establishing residence within a year and improving the land according to his system of public adornment."

"The shade trees and all that jazz."

"Shade trees, setbacks, shrubbery, and so forth."

She smiled. "The happy Victorian dream. Unlimited growth that never gets out of bounds or turns ugly."

"Beauty was only the beginning," he said, pretty snippily for a docent, she thought. Though she knew she was baiting him. "He introduced a modern system of education open to all races, a hundred years before US schools were integrated."

"Really. That's impressive."

"Yes it is. He was very forward thinking. His work agreements made land accessible to poor and immigrant farmers, while he also set up progressive societies to attract some of the most prominent intellectuals and reformers of the time."

"Such as?" She couldn't decide whether to keep egging him on or back away slowly.

"It's a long list. The inventor William Daggett. Thomas Welch, inventor of unfermented grape juice. Mary Treat, one of the best-known woman scientists of the nineteenth century, who corresponded with Darwin. Quite a lot of suffragists. Susan Pearson, even Victoria Woodhull for a period of time."

"Whoa, back up. Inventor of unfermented grape juice?"

"Thomas B. Welch. The bottling plant was an important industry here in Vineland." Hawk pointed his open hand at a mu-

seum case full of grape juice artifacts. "Before Welch, nobody had ever thought of bottling unfermented wine."

"And why would they? The fermented stuff being, you know." Willa grinned. "Good enough for Jesus and all."

"Temperance was crucial to the vision," he said coolly. "Landis considered his alcohol ban a protection for families and the industrious habits of his new settlers."

"Seems like it might put a damper on the free thinking, though." Still he refused to smile. "Within the first decade Vineland had eighteen public schools, including one of the first high schools in the country. Three private seminaries, fourteen churches, Masonic and Odd Fellows societies, a public library, and a hall built on Plum Street to host one of the country's most exciting public lecture series."

His complete humor blindness was nudging her toward the back-away option, but it wouldn't be easy now. He was launched.

"Susan Fowler and Mary Tillotson were early promoters of the Dress Reform movement. Tillotson spent time in the Vineland jail for wearing trousers. The Vineland Equal Rights Association hosted Susan B. Anthony here in 1868, which was the year the women of Vineland voted in the presidential election."

"I don't think so. That's pre-Nineteenth Amendment by around fifty years."

"They used a separate ballot box, set up next to the official one. It's over there."

Chastened by his look, and conscious of her muddy boots, she walked over to the exhibit, a slotted box covered in green velvet. An antique photo on the wall behind it showed bonneted women shouldering through a crowd of men on what appeared to be an election day of nineteenth-century vintage.

"There's no way their votes would have counted in that election. Did they know?"



"A common mistake in thinking about the past is to assume people were more childlike than we are now."

*Orin*. Willa wondered how often this prickly gent mingled with the public. She conceded his point, however.

"The Vineland Women's Caucus organized the 1868 presidential vote to protest the prevailing argument of the time, that women wouldn't be interested in voting even if they were allowed. It made national news."

"Wow. Was this the first place that happened?"

"As far as we know, yes."

"That's amazing, honestly." She leaned close to study the photograph. "So this could be the first authentic image of women voting in the United States."

"Yes, we think it is."

"Are you keeping the original someplace safe? I mean, fireproof, climate controlled?"

Hawk's pale eyes grew sad and Willa saw she'd unintentionally touched him back. "Our budget is next to nothing. We're one of the oldest historical societies in the country, dating back to the founding of Vineland. But people don't have much interest anymore and our endowments have dried up. I try, but I'm one person. The paper archives are a mess. A lot of our material is upstairs stored in beer cartons, to tell you the truth."

"Jeez. That's kind of terrible. You've got some treasures here."

Zero endowment for Vineland's crucial archives didn't bode well for Willa's gold-digging prospects. "I'm interested in all of this," she said. "I'd love to do a feature about Landis and the utopian ideal. But today I'm on an errand that's kind of specific."

Hawk rose above his despair. "I'm good at specific," he said.

"Then I'll give you a street address: 744 Plum Street. Big brick house with double chimneys, one down from the corner of Sixth. Can you tell me anything about it?"

"Such as?"

"This is fishing in the dark. I'm hoping for some kind of historic significance."

"You're interested in the possibility of historic registry, then?"

"I'm interested in *grants* that might go along with historic registry. The house is loaded with antique charm but it's in bad shape. We'd love to find somebody interested in paying us to keep it from falling down."

"Well, you've come to the right place, a few decades too late. As I said, this town has gone soft on historic pride. But never say die. Let me think." He stared at Willa with odd intensity. Suddenly he was all hers.

"Come with me," he said abruptly, turning and walking toward the door from which he'd first appeared. Stunned, she followed him into a long, narrow room lined on both sides with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Hawk went ahead of her, pulling down ledgers and slim file boxes as he talked over his shoulder.

"We don't have anything like an exhaustive listing, but we have photos of every house in town that was built before 1900. Do you think yours is that old?"

"Absolutely." Willa had no idea.

"Unfortunately that material is not well organized yet. A lot of it is in boxes. It would be tedious, but you could go through piles of photographs to see if you find your house. Assuming it's still recognizable and not wrecked by one of those savage architectural updates. Or another approach would be to go through these directories."

"Telephone directories?" Willa wondered when these had passed over from obsolete to historic. She couldn't remember when she'd last used one.

"No. Housing directories. Before telephones. We have almost every year from 1866 to the late 1870s. Landis published these