

This Tender Land

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PROLOGUE

IN THE BEGINNING, after he labored over the heavens and the earth, the light and the dark, the land and sea and all living things that dwell therein, after he created man and woman and before he rested, I believe God gave us one final gift. Lest we forget the divine source of all that beauty, he gave us stories.

I am a storyteller. I live in a house in the shade of a sycamore tree on the banks of the Gilead River. My great-grandchildren, when they visit me here, call me old.

“Old is a cliché,” I tell them, with mock disappointment. “A terrible trivializing. An insult. I was born along with the sun and earth and moon and planets and all the stars. Every atom of my being was there at the very beginning.”

“You’re a liar.” They scowl, but playfully.

“Not a liar. A storyteller,” I remind them.

“Then tell us a story,” they plead.

I need no goading. Stories are the sweet fruit of my existence and I share them gladly.

The events I’m about to share with you began on the banks of the Gilead. Even if you grew up in the heartland, you may not remember these things. What happened in the summer of 1932 is most important to those who experienced it, and there are not many of us left.

The Gilead is a lovely river, lined with cottonwoods already ancient when I was a boy.

Things were different then. Not simpler or better, just different. We didn’t travel the way we do now, and for most folks in Fremont County, Minnesota, the world was limited to the piece of it they could see before the horizon cut off the land. They wouldn’t have understood any more than I did that if you kill a man, you are changed forever. If that man comes back to life, you are

transformed. I have witnessed this and other miracles with my own eyes. So, among the many pieces of wisdom life has offered me over all these years is this: Open yourself to every possibility, for there is nothing your heart can imagine that is not so.

The tale I'm going to tell is of a summer long ago. Of killing and kidnapping and children pursued by demons of a thousand names. There will be courage in this story and cowardice. There will be love and betrayal. And, of course, there will be hope. In the end, isn't that what every good story is about?

CHAPTER ONE

ALBERT NAMED THE rat. He called it Faria.

It was an old creature, a mottle of gray and white fur. Almost always, it kept to the edges of the tiny cell, scurrying along the wall to a corner where I'd put a few crumbs of the hard biscuit that had been my meal. At night, I generally couldn't see it but could still hear the soft rustle as it moved from the wide crack between the corner blocks, across the straw on the floor, grabbed the crumbs, and returned the way it had come. Whenever the moon was just right and bright beams streamed through the high, narrow slit that was the only window, illuminating the stones of the eastern wall, I was sometimes able to glimpse in the reflected light the slender oval of Faria's body, its fur a dim silver blur, its thin tail roping behind like an afterthought of the animal's creation.

The first time I got thrown into what the Brickmans called the quiet room, they tossed my older brother, Albert, in with me. The night was moonless, the tiny cell as black as pitch, our bed a thin matting of straw laid on the dirt floor, the door a great rectangle of rusted iron with a slot at the bottom for the delivery of a food plate that never held more than that one hard biscuit. I was scared to death. Later, Benny Blackwell, a Sioux from Rosebud, told us that when the Lincoln Indian Training School had been a military outpost called Fort Sibley, the quiet room had been used for solitary confinement. In those days, it had held warriors. By the time Albert and I got there, it held only children.

I didn't know anything about rats then, except for the story about the Pied Piper of Hamelin, who'd rid the town of the vermin. I thought they were filthy creatures and would eat anything and maybe would even eat us. Albert, who was four years older and a whole lot wiser, told me that people are most afraid of things they don't understand, and if something frightened you, you should get closer to it. That didn't mean it wouldn't still be an awful thing, but the awful you knew was easier to handle than the awful you imagined. So Albert had named the rat, because a name made it not just any rat. When I asked why Faria, he said it was from a book, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Albert loved

to read. Me, I liked to make up my own stories. Whenever I was thrown into the quiet room, I fed Faria crumbs and imagined tales about him. I looked up rats in the worn *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on the school library shelf and discovered that they were smart and social. Across the years and the many nights I spent in the isolation of the quiet room, I came to think of the little creature as a friend. Faria. Rat extraordinaire. Companion to misfits. A fellow captive in the dark prison of the Brickmans.

That first night in the quiet room, Albert and I were being punished for contradicting Mrs. Thelma Brickman, the school's superintendent. Albert was twelve and I was eight. We were both new to Lincoln School. After the evening meal, which had been a watery, tasteless stew containing only a few bits of carrot, potato, something green and slimy, and a little ham gristle, Mrs. Brickman had sat at the front of the great dining hall and told all the children a story. Most dinner meals were followed by one of Mrs. Brickman's stories. They usually contained some moral lesson she believed was important. Afterward, she would ask if there were any questions. This was a conceit, I came to understand, to make it seem as if there were an actual opportunity for dialogue with her, for the kind of conversation that might exist between a reasonable adult and a reasonable child. That evening, she'd related the story of the race between the tortoise and the hare. When she asked if there were any questions, I'd raised my hand. She'd smiled and had called on me.

"Yes, Odie?"

She knew my name. I'd been thrilled at that. Amid the sea of children, so many that I didn't believe I would ever be able to learn all their names, she'd remembered mine. I'd wondered if maybe this was because we were so new or if it was because we were the whitest faces in a vast room full of Indian children.

"Mrs. Brickman, you said the point of the story was that being lazy is a terrible thing."

"That's true, Odie."

"I thought the point of the story was that slow and steady wins the race."

"I see no difference." Her voice was stern, but not harsh, not yet.

"My father read that story to me, Mrs. Brickman. It's one of Aesop's fables. And he said—"

"*He* said?" Now there was something different in the way she spoke. As if she were struggling to cough up a fish bone caught in her throat. "*He* said?" She'd been sitting on a stool that raised her up so everyone in the dining hall could see her. She slid from the stool and walked between the long tables, girls on

one side, boys on the other, toward where I sat with Albert. In the absolute silence of that great room, I could hear the *squeak, squeak* of her rubber heels on the old floorboards as she came. The boy next to me, whose name I didn't yet know, edged away, as if trying to distance himself from a place where he knew lightning was about to strike. I glanced at Albert, and he shook his head, a sign that I should just clam up.

Mrs. Brickman stood over me. "*He* said?"

"Y-y-yes, ma'am," I replied, stuttering but no less respectful.

"And where is he?"

"Y-y-you know, Mrs. Brickman."

"Dead, that's where. *He* is no longer present to read you stories. The stories you hear now are the ones I tell you. And they mean just what I say they mean. Do you understand me?"

"I . . . I . . ."

"Yes or no?"

She leaned toward me. She was slender, her face a delicate oval the color of a pearl. Her eyes were as green and sharp as new thorns on a rosebush. She wore her black hair long, and kept it brushed as soft as cat fur. She smelled of talcum and faintly of whiskey, an aromatic mix I would come to know well over the years.

"Yes," I said in the smallest voice I'd ever heard come from my own lips.

"He meant no disrespect, ma'am," Albert said.

"Was I talking to you?" The green thorns of her eyes stabbed at my brother.

"No, ma'am."

She straightened herself and scanned the room. "Any other questions?"

I'd thought—hoped, prayed—this was the end of it. But that night, Mr. Brickman came to the dormitory room and called me out, and Albert, too. The man was tall and lean, and also handsome, many of the women at the school said, but all I saw was the fact that his eyes were nothing but black pupils, and he reminded me of a snake with legs.

"You boys'll be sleeping somewhere else tonight," he said. "Come along."

That first night in the quiet room, I barely slept a wink. It was April, and there was still a chill in the wind sweeping out of the empty Dakotas. Our father was less than a week dead. Our mother had passed away two years before that. We had no kin in Minnesota, no friends, no one who knew us or cared about us. We were the only white boys in a school for Indians. How could it get any worse? Then I'd heard the rat and had spent the rest of those long, dark hours until daylight pressed against Albert and the iron door, my knees drawn up to my chin, my eyes pouring out tears that only Albert could see and that no one but him would have cared about anyway.

FOUR YEARS HAD passed between that first night and the one I'd just spent in the quiet room. I'd grown some, changed some. The old, frightened Odie O'Banion was, like my mother and father, long dead. The Odie I was now had a penchant for rebellion.

When I heard the key turn in the lock, I sat up on the straw matting. The iron door swung open and morning light poured in, blinding me for a moment.

"Sentence is up, Odie."

Although I couldn't see the contours of the face yet, I recognized the voice easily: Herman Volz, the old German who oversaw the carpentry shop and was the assistant boys' adviser. The man stood in the doorway, blocking for a moment the glare of the sun. He looked down at me through thick eyeglasses, his pale features soft and wistful.

"She wants to see you," he said. "I have to take you."

Volz spoke with a German accent, so his *w*'s sounded like *v*'s and his *v*'s like *f*'s. What he'd said came out, "She wants to see you. I haf to take you."

I stood, folded the thin blanket, and hung it across a rod attached to the wall so that it would be available for the next child who occupied the room, knowing that, like as not, it would be me again.

Volz shut the door behind us. "Did you sleep okay? How is your back?"

Often a strapping preceded time in the quiet room, and last night had been no exception. My back ached from the welts, but it did no good to talk about it.

"I dreamed about my mother," I said.

"Did you now?"

The quiet room was the last in a row of rooms in a long building that had once been the outpost stockade. The other rooms—all originally cells—had been turned into storage spaces. Volz and I walked along the old stockade and across the yard toward the administration building, a two-story structure of red stone set among stately elms that had been planted by the first commandant of Fort Sibley. The trees provided the building with constant shade, which always made it a dark place.

“Pleasant dream, then?” Volz said.

“She was in a rowboat on a river. I was in a boat, too, trying to catch up with her, trying to see her face. But no matter how hard I rowed, she was always too far ahead.”

“Don’t sound like a good dream,” Volz said. He was wearing clean bib overalls over a blue work shirt. His huge hands, nicked and scarred from his carpentry, hung at his sides. Half of the little finger on his right hand was missing, the result of an accident with a band saw. Behind his back, some of the kids called him Old Four-and-a-Half, but not me or Albert. The German carpenter had always been kind to us.

We entered the building and went immediately to Mrs. Brickman’s office, where she was seated behind her big desk, a stone fireplace at her back. I was a little surprised to see Albert there. He stood straight and tall beside her like a soldier at attention. His face was blank, but his eyes spoke to me. They said, *Careful, Odie*.

“Thank you, Mr. Volz,” the superintendent said. “You may wait outside.”

As he turned to leave, Volz put a hand on my shoulder, the briefest of gestures, but I appreciated what it meant.

Mrs. Brickman said, “I’m concerned about you, Odie. I’m beginning to believe that your time at Lincoln School is almost at an end.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I didn’t think it was necessarily a bad thing.

The superintendent wore a black dress, which seemed to be her favorite color. I’d overheard Miss Stratton, who taught music, tell another teacher once that it was because Mrs. Brickman was obsessed with her appearance and thought black was slimming. It worked pretty well, because the superintendent reminded me of nothing so much as the long, slender handle of a fireplace poker. Her penchant for the color gave rise to a nickname we all used, well out of her hearing, of course: the Black Witch.

“Do you know what I’m saying, Odie?”

"I'm not sure, ma'am."

"Even though you're not Indian, the sheriff asked us to accept you and your brother because there was no room at the state orphanage. And we did, out of the goodness of our hearts. But there's another option for a boy like you, Odie. Reformatory. Do you know what that is?"

"I do, ma'am."

"And is that where you would like to be sent?"

"No, ma'am."

"I thought not. Then, Odie, what will you do?"

"Nothing, ma'am."

"Nothing?"

"I will do nothing that will get me sent there, ma'am."

She put her hands on her desk, one atop the other, and spread her fingers wide so that they formed a kind of web over the polished wood. She smiled at me as if she were a spider who'd just snagged a fly. "Good," she said. "Good." She nodded toward Albert. "You should be more like your brother."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll try. May I have my harmonica back?"

"It's very special to you, isn't it?"

"Not really. Just an old harmonica. I like to play. It keeps me out of trouble."

"A gift from your father, I believe."

"No, ma'am. I just picked it up somewhere. I don't even remember where now."

"That's funny," she said. "Albert told me it was a gift from your father."

"See?" I said, shrugging my shoulders. "Not even special enough to remember where I got it."

She considered me, then said, "Very well." She took a key from a pocket of her dress, unlocked a drawer of the desk, and pulled out the harmonica.

I reached for it, but she drew it back. "Odie?"

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Next time, I keep it for good. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am. I do.”

She gave it over and her spindly fingers touched my hand. When I returned to the dormitory, I intended to use the lye soap in the lavatory there to scrub that hand until it bled.

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