



T H E L A S T S P I K E

Three hours before the avalanche hits, William Everett is sitting on an upturned crate, waiting for his father.

The town doesn't even have a name yet. Nailed to a crooked post at the side of the train track is a messy hand-painted sign that says only: *Mile 2553*. Paint has dribbled down from the bottom of each number and letter. Yesterday when Will and his mother stepped off the train, the conductor shouted, "End of the line! Farewell Station!" But Will wasn't sure if Farewell was the town's name or if the fellow was just in a hurry to say "Good riddance."

The station is an uncovered wooden platform. There is a water tower and coal shed to fuel the trains. A telegraph pole slings a wire to a shack, where the station master dozes on his

stool, his crooked door shut against the November chill.

The town feels like it's just been carved from the forest. Behind Will is a halfhearted jumble of wooden houses set back from a street of churned mud and snow. There is a general store, a church, and a large rooming house, where his mother waits. She's tired out after their five-day journey from Winnipeg, and so is Will. But he's had his fill of small spaces, and people everywhere, and he wants to be alone and breathe fresh air.

He's grubby. His hair needs a wash. He's not sure, but he might have lice again; it's itchy back behind his ears. In their rooming house the single bath was in high demand last night, and Will didn't get a turn.

On the wooden planks beneath his boots someone has carved the initials of two lovers inside a clumsy heart. He wonders if he'll ever put his initials inside a heart. He pulls his collar closer about his neck. The cold seeps through the worn patch under his right armpit. He's too thin, his mother says. But right now his body doesn't want to be any other way.

At least his feet are warm. The boots are the newest things he owns. The laces keep coming undone, though, even when he double knots them.

He looks at the track, gleaming as though it has just been set down. Will imagines his father helping lay those long measures of steel. He follows the track west, where it's quickly swallowed up by dense, snow-cloaked forest. His eyes lift to the towering mountains—like the very world has raised its gnarled fists to keep

you out. How could you cut a road through such wilds? Clouds graze the icy peaks, painting restless shadows across the furrowed slopes of rock and snow.

That's the direction his father will come from. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow. And Will's going to be here to greet him.

From his coat pocket he takes his sketchbook and pencil. The sketchbook is homemade from the pieces of packing paper his mother brings home from the textile factory. Will has learned to fold the pieces in a special way and slit the edges to make a booklet of sixteen pages. A few quick stitches bind them together. He peels off his threadbare glove so he can get a good grip on the pencil stub.

Across the tracks two big tents and several smaller ones are set up in an otherwise vacant lot. Amongst the tents are carts, some still loaded with luggage and crates. Horses nose the scraggly earth. Across the biggest tent is written: KLACK BROS. CIRCUS. Several shabby men set up booths. The sound of their hammers echoes, lonely off the hills.

Will chews at his pencil for a few moments, then tentatively roughs in the scene. Next he begins to capture the texture and folds of the canvas tents, the fitful light on the foothills.

“What are you drawing?”

He looks up to see a girl about his age standing before him. Why didn't he see her coming? She wears a drab gray dress, her straight, fair hair parted in the middle and pulled back into two braids.

“Nothing much.” He closes his sketchbook.

With dismay he watches as she steps closer. Talking to people isn’t something he’s very good at, especially strangers. Especially girls.

Beneath thick eyebrows her eyes are grayish blue and lively. When she smiles, he sees a slight gap between her front teeth. She isn’t all perfect and pretty like Theresa O’Malley, but there’s something striking about her that makes him want to keep looking. Maybe if he drew her, he could figure out what it is. But he’s better at things than people. People are very tricky.

“Can I see?” she asks.

He doesn’t like showing people his drawings. It’s something he mostly keeps hidden, especially from other boys, because they think it’s girly. This particular girl just waits patiently. Her face is awfully bright.

He shows her.

Her eyes widen. “Dang! I wish I could draw so well! Who taught you?”

“No one. Just me, I guess.”

A couple years ago he was ill, and bedridden for weeks. As a trick to distract himself, he invented a drawing game. It didn’t matter what he drew: a chair, a shirt on a peg, a shoe. He pretended his eyes were the point of his pencil against the paper. And as he moved his eyes very slowly over the outline of the object, he moved his pencil, too—without ever looking at the paper. He got so lost in it that he forgot about his burning ember eyes and

aching limbs. Time disappeared. And he was often surprised at how accurate these blind contour drawings were—better than anything he could have done while looking at the paper. And when he recovered, he kept drawing, so that now he took a hand-stitched sketchbook everywhere.

Without asking, the girl takes the book from his hands and starts turning pages.

“Hey!” Will says.

“And these, too! Where’s this?” She points to a picture of a trestle bridge under construction across a deep gorge.

“The Rockies.” She seems so friendly and interested, he can’t really be angry with her.

“Do you work on the railroad?” she asks.

He laughs at the idea, though he’s pleased she thinks he’s old and strong enough. “My father does. He’s building the Canadian Pacific Railway.” He feels proud when he says it. “I draw the things he describes in his letters.”

“They’re so good, it’s like you’ve really been there.”

“No, I ain’t been anywhere really.”

He doesn’t tell her that this particular sketchbook is a present for his father. He hopes Pa will like it, as a keepsake of all his adventures on the railroad.

The girl turns a page and pauses. “Is that a sasquatch?”

He nods.

“Your father’s seen one?”

“Look at this.” From his pocket Will pulls his most prized

possession: a tooth, yellow and curving to a sharp point, that his father sent back months ago. “This one’s from a big male they had to shoot.”

She examines it with great attention. “A lot of people think they’re not real. This could be a bear tooth.”

Will’s indignant. “It’s no bear tooth! They’re real. They’re awful trouble up in the mountains.”

“How long’s he been away, your pa?”

“Three years. But he’s done now. We’re here to meet him. We’re moving west.”

She follows his gaze up into the mountains and is silent for a moment.

“You live here?” he asks.

“Just visiting.”

“You waiting for someone too?” He’s heard from their landlady that the town will soon be flooded with men coming down from the work camps.

The girl shakes her head mysteriously, then turns and steps off the platform. The workers have left a long plank across two rickety sawhorses. The girl hops up onto it. Arms out, she steps across, one foot in front of the other, chin high. Midway she does a handstand.

Will blushes at the sight of her pantaloons. He knows he should look away, but he’s so amazed, he can’t stop watching. She walks the rest of the way across the plank on her hands, then flips herself upright and curtsies.

“You’re in that circus!” he exclaims. “An acrobat?”

“A wire walker.” She hops down and returns to the platform.

“On a tightrope, you mean?”

Will has only ever been to the circus once, on a birthday, and he was enthralled by the people crossing the high hempen rope.

“They call me the Little Wonder.” She wrinkles her nose. “It’s a silly name. It’s just because I started when I was six. One day I’m going to cross the Niagara Falls. That’s eleven hundred feet! But what I really want to be is a great escape artist. There’ll be no chains that can hold me, or locks bind me.”

Will is speechless at her aspirations.

“Try to hold me. I can escape any grip.”

“I believe you,” he says shyly.

“Grab my arm. Both hands!” She takes his hands and places them on her upper arm.

Awkwardly Will clenches his fingers.

“Harder than that!”

He squeezes tighter.

Then she does something, very simple and fast, and is free of his grip before he knows what’s happened.

“That’s something,” he says. He nods at the tents across the tracks. “Who’re the Klack brothers?”

“Uriah and Crawford. Crawford’s dead. He was the smart one. It’s a pretty rotten mud show. But it’s work for the time being.”

Will feels suddenly childish. Unlike his father, the only adventures he’s ever had have been in his head, or drawn in

his sketchbook. This girl seems from another world. Looking at her is like catching a glimpse of unknown track: and immediately he wants to travel it to the horizon, to know what's at the end.

"You could be an artist," she says, pointing at his sketchbook. "Is that your dream?"

"Don't know." He is shy again. He wishes he were full of plans and dreams. "Just somethin' I do."

"It's silly not to use the talents you have."

"I ain't so good."

"I think you are."

Heat comes to his cheeks. Why does he blush so easily? It's a curse. To change the subject he asks, "You know all sorts of tricks, then?"

"Like what?"

"Can you do a disappearing trick?"

"Of course," she says after just a moment's hesitation.

"Go on, then."

"I don't feel like disappearing just yet."

When Will grins, one of his eyes closes more than the other. "Can't do it, can you?"

Her eyebrows lift haughtily. "It's rude to call someone a liar."

"I didn't call you—" he begins.

A distant locomotive gives a blast, and Will stands eagerly. He sees the train, still far away, but it's coming from the wrong direction.

“That’s not your father?” the girl asks.

Will shakes his head.

“Come see the circus tonight,” she says to him.

“How much is it?” He knows Mother is worried about money. She’s been worried about money all their lives.

“Nothing for you,” she says. “Bring your parents, too. Just tell the man at the tent flap, *Jeg inviterte.*”

“That some secret circus code?” Will asks excitedly.

“It just means ‘I’m invited’ in Norwegian.”

“You’re Norwegian?”

“Half-Norwegian, half-French,” she tells him with a shrug.

It seems incredibly exotic to Will. “I’d like to come,” he says.

With another blast of its whistle, the train makes its slow approach. The station master stirs from his stool and steps out from the shack.

“Will you do the disappearing act?” Will asks the girl.

She grins. “Promise you’ll come?”

“Yes, all right. Promise.”

He looks over at the train and sees it’s not a freight. It’s carrying only two cars, and they look fancy.

“Wonder who’s on this one?” he says, and when he turns, the girl’s gone. He looks all around and sees no trace of her. The locomotive pulls past him, alongside the platform. Surely she didn’t bound in front of it! He smiles to himself. Maybe she really could do the disappearing trick. He realizes he doesn’t even know her name—

And that she still has his sasquatch tooth! Frantically he pats his pocket to double-check. Empty. The train comes to a halt. The engineer and the brawny fireman drop down from the locomotive and holler instructions to the yard workers.

“She needs to be watered and fed, lads!”

Will runs along the platform to get around the train. Maybe he can catch up with her. From the passenger carriage a man suddenly steps down, and Will barrels right into him and goes sprawling. Before Will scrambles up, he catches a glimpse of gleaming shoes, still firmly planted on the platform.

“Sorry, sir!” he pants to the gentleman.

He’s a stocky fellow—no wonder he didn’t go over. He has a neatly trimmed mustache and beard. His hair doesn’t start till halfway back on his square head. A solid stomach swells his expensive vest and coat. Will is surprised to see that his eyes don’t flash with anger but with amusement.

“You’re in quite a hurry, lad.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but . . . there’s a girl. . . . She . . . took something. . . .”

“Ah. Stole your heart, did she?”

Will’s face blazes. “No . . .” he mumbles, mortified. “My sasquatch tooth.”

“Really?” says the gentleman, intrigued. He bends and picks up Will’s askew sketchbook. His eyebrows lift as he takes in the drawings.

Will just wants to disappear—with or without a puff of

smoke; he's not picky. But he can't leave without his sketch-book. And he can't very well demand it back.

"Fine pictures," the gentleman says. "I'm guessing someone in your family works the rails."

Will forces himself to meet the gentleman's eye. "My father, sir. I'm waiting for him."

The gentleman is starting to look familiar, though Will doesn't know why.

"Up in the mountains, is he? What's his name?"

"James Everett."

The gentleman gives a gruff nod. "A fine man."

Will thinks he must be joking. "You know him?"

"Of course. I make it a point to know my best workers. I'm the manager of the CPR. My name's Cornelius Van Horne."

Van Horne thrusts his hand toward him. For a moment Will's paralyzed. Of course this man is familiar! Will's seen his portrait in the papers. His name has appeared in his father's letters. For the past five years Van Horne has overseen every detail of the railway's construction. He is general manager, engineer, visionary—slave driver, some call him, according to Will's dad. But Will's father has also told stories about how Van Horne has cut through virgin forest with a forty-pound pack on his back and forded a raging river. Will shakes his hand. The rail baron's grip is swift and powerful.

"What's your name?" Van Horne asks him.

"William Everett. Sir."

“Been a while since you’ve seen your pa, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Tell you what, William Everett, why don’t you come up with us. We’re headed into the mountains ourselves.” His eyebrows rise, and his high forehead creases with sudden mischief. “You can surprise your father and come back with him before nightfall. And maybe find yourself another sasquatch tooth.”

Something shifts inside Will, like a door opening. Maybe it was meeting the circus girl, maybe it was the view of all these new mountains like a gateway to a new and dangerous world—but he feels like his whole life is about to be upended. His father’s had so many adventures—maybe he’d be impressed if Will did something daring. Anyway, he hasn’t seen his father in ages, and how could he pass up the chance to see him all the sooner?

“Is there time to go tell my mother?” Will asks.

As if in answer, a uniformed conductor leans out from the carriage and calls, “All aboard, sir!”

“Are you coming, William Everett?” says Van Horne. “It would make a good story, don’t you think? And it’s always good to have a story of your own.”

The rail baron turns and starts back to his carriage.

Will looks toward the boardinghouse, where his mother waits, then up at the mountains. The train whistle blows. He grits his teeth and inhales sharply. He looks over at the station master, who’s watching him with curiosity.

“Will you please tell Lucy Everett I’ve gone to the camp to

meet my father? She's at Mrs. Chester's rooming house!"

And it's done. He bounds toward the train and up the steps.

Inside the carriage he comes to an abrupt halt. Instantly he feels shabby and out of place. He's never been in a fancy parlor like this, or amongst such finely dressed gentlemen. They are all muttonchop whiskers and top hats and vests. They trail their own atmosphere of cigar smoke and brandy. And they are all looking at him.

"I see you've brought an urchin with you, Van Horne," one of them says.

"Bite your tongue, Beddows," says Van Horne sharply. "This is William Everett, the steel layer's son. He's coming up to meet his pa."

Will notices one of the gentlemen open a window. He can't imagine he smells worse than all the cigar smoke. Still, he wishes he could fade into the velvet wallpaper.

But Van Horne puts a large hand on his shoulder and begins introductions with a satirical grin. "William, this bearded fellow here is Mr. Donald Smith, the president of the CPR. And *this* bearded fellow is Walter Withers; and this *excessively* bearded gentleman is Sandford Fleming, another of our surveyors and engineers. . . ." And so it goes, Will taking in none of this, just nodding and trying to meet the eyes of these famous, wealthy gentlemen. His insides twist. "And this beardless man here is Mr. Dorian," Mr. Van Horne finishes, indicating a tall man with curly black hair.

“How do you do, Will?” Unlike the other gentlemen, he approaches Will and shakes his hand. He has strikingly high cheekbones, a warm hue to his skin, and a dark, penetrating gaze.

“Good, thanks,” murmurs Will.

“Mr. Dorian here,” says the rail baron, “has taken a great liking to a painting of mine.”

Mr. Van Horne walks over to the parlor wall where an oil painting hangs, and he smiles at Will. “I saw your drawings, lad. What do you think? Is it a good piece?”

Will studies it. There’s a house in winter, with several sleighs outside. A blacksmith tends to one of the horse’s hooves.

“I like it,” he says.

Mr. Dorian tilts his head. “I’m offering a fine price.”

“The price is irrelevant,” Van Horne says, laughing. “I won’t be parted from it. She’s my pride and joy. Don’t you have enough pretty baubles in that circus of yours?”

“Some baubles are prettier than others,” says Mr. Dorian. His voice is deep and carries the faintest hint of an accent. *Is it French?* Will wonders.

“Do you work for that circus near the station?” Will asks impulsively. Maybe he knows the girl and can tell him her name.

“Alas, no.”

“I heard they have a good wire walker,” Will says, wanting to sound knowledgeable.

“Is that so? Well, I’m always looking for new talent.”

To Will’s relief the gentlemen all resume their conversations

with one another. He retreats to the very back of the car and sits quietly. He watches and listens. He dares not even take out his sketchbook, in case that might be rude.

The man called Withers seems to be a photographer, because he and his assistant keep checking through several large cases holding a camera and all sorts of equipment.

The train shudders and surges higher into the mountains. Will hasn't seen a single sign of human habitation since Farewell. Often all he can see are the vast pines that grow along the track, but sometimes they thin and he catches a sunlit glimpse of a high bony crag, or a cataract of black water spilling over a cliff. Will jolts when the train steams across a wooden trestle and he peers down to the jagged, churning gorge, hundreds of feet below.

An attendant comes through and serves a luncheon of cold chicken cutlets, steamed vegetables, and boiled baby potatoes. Van Horne, after taking his meal, points the attendant back to Will, and the fellow grudgingly hands him a plate and napkin. Will sits for a while staring at the food, wondering how he's supposed to eat it, then realizes his cutlery is wrapped up in the thick napkin.

Copying how the gentlemen hold their forks and knives, Will tries to eat neatly. The food's very good—certainly better than the boiled something-or-other last night at Mrs. Chester's. Some sauce plops onto his vest. He tries to dab it off with his napkin but seems only to spread it, so he rubs it in as hard as he can until it disappears.

“I like to keep a sketchbook myself,” says Van Horne, sitting down near him. “What do you think of this, eh?”

In his hands he holds a beautifully bound volume. The paper is so thick and creamy, Will can’t help stroking it. Across two pages are drawings of a machine so extraordinary that it takes him several seconds to figure out what he is looking at.

“Is it a locomotive?”

“Indeed.”

“It can’t be so big, can it?”

“Mark my words, once she’s built, she’ll ride these tracks. Maybe you’ll ride upon her.”

“Van Horne,” says Sandford Fleming, “you are hopeless at keeping secrets.”

“There’s no need to keep this secret,” he replies, winking at Will. “I’m the only one who can build this train, and build it I will. And who knows, maybe one day someone like William here will drive it.”

“What will you call her, sir?”

“The Boundless.”

Laughter rumbles from a gentleman with an enormous white beard. “Building the track nearly bankrupted us ten times over—and the nation with it. I marvel at your appetite for risk.”

“It’s a keen appetite I have, Smith,” Van Horne replies, “and without it we wouldn’t have finished the railway.”

“Not to mention blind luck,” says Smith. “Now, who’s up for a game of poker?”

The carriage suddenly darkens, and Will thinks they've entered a tunnel. But when he looks out the windows, he sees dense trees on both sides, so close that their branches scrape and snap against the carriage.

"Why haven't these blasted trees been cut back?" Van Horne demands angrily. "I told them last time I was up. It's not—"

There's a loud thump, and Will turns in time to see a dark shape climb swiftly past a window onto the roof. Heavy footsteps sound overhead.

"Gentlemen, we have an uninvited guest," says Van Horne, drawing a pistol from his jacket.

"What is it?" Will asks, his throat tight. "Is it a—"

"Yes. Head down, keep away from the windows," Van Horne tells him.

Will can only stare, petrified, as the other men draw guns. Sandford Fleming takes a rifle from a rack on the wall and loads it. The railway men walk smartly to the windows, slide the glass down, and lean far out. Squinting, they take aim and begin firing.

The reports are deafening, but Will can still hear the frantic pounding of footfalls overhead. The ceiling beams shudder under the thing's massive weight.

Withers the photographer is crouched on the floor, his terrified gaze ricocheting about. His assistant whimpers softly. Mr. Dorian is the only other man without a gun, and he stands calmly in the center of the room with an air of faint amusement on his face.

“Quickly, gentlemen!” cries Van Horne. “If he gets to the locomotive, he’ll kill our engineer.”

They reload and redouble their efforts. Gun smoke stings Will’s eyes. Still the footfalls pound against the roof, making their way steadily forward—then pause.

“Can’t see him anywhere!” hollers one of the gentlemen.

Mr. Dorian takes the remaining rifle from the rack and walks calmly to the front of the carriage. He stands listening, the color high in his cheeks, and then fires a single shot through the ceiling.

There’s a massive thump against the roof, then a scratching sound. Will whirls as a brown shape drops past the window. He hurries over and catches just a glimpse of a massive, furred creature crumpled alongside the tracks. He feels hot all through, and his heart’s suddenly hammering. He sits down.

“Steadies the nerves,” Van Horne says, offering Will a small glass of brandy.

Will accepts it with a shaking hand and downs it in one fiery gulp.

“Nearly there,” Van Horne tells him, clapping him on the shoulder. The rail baron looks over at Mr. Dorian. “Well done, sir. You’re a useful fellow.”

Windows are closed, guns disappear, cigars are relit, and brandy is poured all around. As the train climbs higher, the ride gets rougher. The train jounces over uneven sections of track, screeches around corners. Despite the two stoves in the carriage,

it becomes chilly. Staring out at the landscape of granite and forest and snow, Will wonders if he should have stayed back in Farewell.

After thirty more minutes the locomotive gives a whistle blast and begins to slow.

“Well, gentlemen,” says Van Horne, rising, “are you ready to make history?”

When the train stops, Will waits for the gentlemen to get off first. He hopes Van Horne will tell him where to find his father, but the rail baron seems to have forgotten about him. Will is left alone.

“Off with you, then,” says the attendant with a grimace.

Will steps off. There is no platform, just gravel. Despite the sun, it’s very cold up here, and the snow is deep on either side of the rail bed. The smell of pine is keen in his nostrils. He fills his chest and starts walking.

To the left of the tracks, the land slopes down into sparse forest that ends at an abrupt precipice. From below rises the sound of a swollen river. Up ahead, to the right of the tracks, some of the trees have been cleared for the work camp.

Wood smoke rises from the chimneys of rickety bunkhouses. Men mill about outside. Will is too shy to call out his father’s name. He supposes he should go over and ask someone but dreads the prospect.

The company dignitaries are walking up the tracks toward a gathering crowd. Withers the photographer brings up the rear, he

and his assistant lurching under the weight of their equipment.

“William?”

Will looks over and sees someone walking toward him, not a gentleman but a tall working man in a cap. His face is tanned by wind and sun, and he is leaner than the person Will has drawn and redrawn from memory over the past three years. But when James Everett grins his familiar lopsided grin, he is suddenly and powerfully Will’s father.

“Will!” he says, and pulls him into a tight hug. Beneath the musty clothing, his father’s arms and chest feel as hard as the granite he’s blasted from the mountains. Will feels completely safe.

“Mr. Van Horne said you came up in the company car!”

“He invited me!”

James Everett shakes his head. “Well, that’s something.”

“There was a sasquatch on the roof!”

“I’m not surprised. Where’s your mother?”

“Waiting back in Farewell.”

“Good. She knows you came, though?”

“I sent a message.”

His father holds him at arm’s length. “You’re a good height. You’ll be taller than me soon. A fine fellow through and through.”

Will grins, trying to find himself in his father’s face—and sees it in the lopsided grin. Will is built like him, though he has yet to fill out. His red hair is his mother’s, but he has his father’s large hands. His father reminds him of those trees he saw on the train

trip from Winnipeg, the ones that thrive on hardship and get stronger and more stubborn.

“I brought you something,” Will says tentatively, for he’s worried his father might not like the gift, might think it childish. He reaches inside his pocket for the sketchbook, but there’s the sound of a bell being rung.

“Will you show me after the ceremony?” says his father. “They’re starting in a minute. You’ll want to see this. They’re going to hammer the last spike.”

The last spike. It’s a phrase Will has read many times in the papers, and his father’s letters—and it has such power that it hangs in the air like the echo of a thunderclap.

Will leaves the sketchbook inside his pocket. His father leads him toward the growing crowd. Will smiles, enjoying the weight of his father’s hand on his shoulder. Set off a ways from the main work camp is a second. There are no wooden bunkhouses there, only tents and miserable lean-tos, where Chinese men are drinking tea and packing up their tattered bags.

“Aren’t they coming to the ceremony?” Will asks.

“Not them,” his father answers quietly. “They’ve got no love for the railway, and I don’t blame them. They had the most dangerous jobs and lost a lot of their countrymen.”

Then Will sees something that makes him stop and stare. Spiked to the top of a tall pole is a head. Flies churn about the rotted flesh, and for a moment Will thinks it’s human, until he sees the mangy, sun-bleached patches of fur.

“Sasquatch?” he asks his father.

James Everett nods. “That one came in the night, killed one of the Chinese blasters, and tried to drag him off.”

“Why did they do that to its head?”

“Some of the men think it scares them off. It doesn’t, though. Not since we started shooting them.”

Will has read all of his father’s letters so many times, he has them nearly memorized. Last year, when the first crews entered the mountains, the Native Canadians warned them of the *sasq’ets*, the “stick men.” Plenty of the workers thought it was superstitious nonsense. It wasn’t. The young ones came first and were merely a nuisance, filching food from the mess tents, playing with the workers’ tools like comical monkeys. But there was nothing comical about the adults.

“Come on,” his father says.

They near the fringes of the crowd. Will’s father jostles him closer to the front. Nobody seems to mind as James Everett passes, for he has a friendly word for everyone, and people say, “Is that your lad?” and “He’s the spitting image!” and “Let him get a good view!” Before long Will finds himself standing not far behind the dignitaries he rode up with. With his top hat Mr. Smith is the tallest, and Will can make out Van Horne, talking to the man with the ferocious beard. Their woolen coats are buttoned snugly against their ample bellies.

Spread out on either side of the tracks are the workers, like Will’s dad, humbly dressed, some smoking, all

looking like they could use a hot bath and a square meal.

“Gentlemen, are we ready?” asks Withers, bent over his camera.

Will watches as Van Horne steps forward.

“This mighty road,” the rail baron cries out, “will connect our new dominion from sea to sea. Men, you’ve all toiled long and hard for this moment, and there’s not one of you who doesn’t have a share in the glory. Be proud of that, for there will never be another job like this in our lifetimes—and you will forever be a part of history!”

Will finds himself cheering along with the rest.

“And to complete this great enterprise,” says Van Horne, “Mr. Donald Smith, the president of the CPR, will drive the last spike!”

Another cheer as Mr. Smith steps forward, holding a silver sledgehammer.

A weedy-looking railway official approaches with a long, ornate velvet case.

It seems to Will that every man in the crowd takes a small step toward it. Like a sigh of mountain wind, a collective gasp rises. Will stands tall on his toes as Smith lifts from the case a six-inch rail spike. The dull luster of gold is unmistakable, as is the sparkle of diamonds, set deeply into the side of the spike, spelling out a name he can’t see.

“Heard it cost more than two hundred thousand dollars,” Will hears a man whisper bitterly behind him. “I could

work ten lifetimes, wouldn't make half that."

Will glances back and sees a man about his father's age, sandy haired, a bit of gray coming into his beard. He has chilly blue eyes. His nose looks like it's been broken more than once.

"You ask me, it's criminal, spending that much on a spike, after we slaved two months without the pay car coming. Bet Van Horne didn't go without his pay."

The man raises his eyebrows challengingly at Will, and Will turns away.

Quietly Will's father says, "Van Horne came through for us in the end, Brogan. He kept his bargain."

"Let's just say he got the better end," Brogan says, and sniffs.

"Ready when you are, Mr. Smith," says Withers behind the big camera.

Donald Smith positions the spike atop the final steel plate and grips the sledgehammer.

"Everyone still now!" cries out the photographer. "And, Mr. Smith, I'll need you to hold your pose once you hit the spike."

Smith strikes and freezes.

"And . . . wonderful!" cries the photographer.

But Smith's aim was off, and Will sees he has only bent the top of the spike without driving it in properly.

Van Horne gives a hearty laugh. "Smith, you've spent too long behind a desk."

"Let me straighten that out for you, sir," says the assistant, trying in vain to yank out the spike with his hands.

Van Horne steps forward and pulls it out with one swift tug. He takes the hammer from Smith and with a sharp blow straightens the priceless gold spike against the rail.

“Do the honors, Van Horne,” says Smith good-naturedly. “No one has given more of his life to build this road.”

“Perhaps.” Van Horne looks about the crowd, and his eyes settle on Will. “But this road is for a new generation that’ll use it long after we’re gone. Lad, would you like to try your hand?”

Will is aware of every set of eyes in the crowd fixed on him, more intense than the sun’s glare.

“Go on,” he hears his father whisper, and Will feels his hand upon his back. “You can do it.”

“Yes, sir!” Will says, so nervous that his voice comes out much louder than expected.

He steps forward, his legs feeling strangely disconnected from his body.

He takes the silver sledgehammer Van Horne holds out to him.

“One hand close to the top,” the rail baron tells him quietly. “Tight grip. Now you’ll want to raise it to your shoulder. Look at the spike the whole time.”

Will can now see the diamonds set into the spike’s side and the name they spell. He murmurs the word: “Craigellachie.”

“That’s the name I’m giving this place,” says Van Horne. “Now strike!”

Will tenses his muscles and strikes.

He doesn't even know if he's been successful until he hears the cheer rise up from the crowd.

"Well done, lad!" Van Horne cries. "The last spike!"

"You finished the railway, Will!" his father says, slapping him on the back.

"All aboard for the Pacific!" shouts Donald Smith.

From down the tracks the company locomotive blasts its whistle. Men take out their pistols and begin firing in the air. The shots echo between the snow-laden slopes, one great fire-work crackle.

When the shooting subsides, the rumble is so low that it is barely audible, but Will can hear it, and he looks at his father in alarm. James Everett is shielding his eyes and staring at the summit. Will sees a patch of perfect snow pucker and slip raggedly away from the pack. A dreamy white haze rises like sea spume as it plows a growing crest before it.

"Avalanche!" James Everett bellows, pointing. "Avalanche!"

All is chaos as men run for cover, looking up at the plunging snow, trying to guess where it will hit. There are cries of "Not that way!" and "Climb a tree!" and "Stick close to the rock face!" Withers seizes his camera and tripod and pelts after the dignitaries toward the locomotive.

"Move the train! Back it up!" shouts Van Horne. "Men, take cover! The snow sheds are your best bet!"

"This way!" Will's father says, sprinting. Will knows the sheds are supposed to keep the snow off the track as the railroad skirts

the mountain face, but are the sheds strong enough to withstand an avalanche?

The sound of thunder builds. He runs after his father and trips, sprawling hard on the tracks. His wretched bootlaces! He tries to stand, but the toe of his boot is jammed beneath one of the ties. Fire jolts up his ankle.

“Pa!”

His father turns and rushes back to him. “Is it broken?” he pants.

“Jammed.” He’s trying to pull it free, but each tug only gives him more pain.

The ground begins to tremble.

“Never mind, never mind! Just undo the laces and slip out.” Will sees his father glance up at the snow and then back to the boot, fingers clutching at the laces. “Almost there. . . . Ease your foot out now.”

With a grunt of pain Will pulls his foot from his boot, and his father hauls him up.

“Lean on me.”

Not far away Will glimpses a man bent over the track, trying to lever up a spike with a crowbar. Then Will looks up at the snow and knows they’re too late. His eyes meet his father’s.

“I’m sorry,” Will says as the ice-streaked wind hits them.

“Stay on top of it!” his father yells above the din. “Swim!”

His father disappears in the blizzard, and Will is running, the pain in his foot forgotten. He runs blindly. The ground is a

white rug being pulled out from beneath him. He staggers, and knows that to fall is certain death. He throws his body forward and thrashes wildly, trying to stay atop the churning sea of snow. It pushes and pummels him with a terrifying weight. There is no time for fear, only a wild animal scrabbling as he tries to keep on top. He goes under, claws his way back up, gulping air, hurtled along by the avalanche's mighty muscle.

Something long and narrow whips past, nearly taking off his head—and he realizes it's a twisted measure of steel rail. Off to his right he catches the dim shadow of his father, swimming alongside him, before he vanishes once more. Some high branches of a buried tree jut out of the blizzard, and he makes a grab, but is swept past. He knows he is being washed down through the sparse woods that grow right to the edge of the gorge.

Another set of boughs looms up, directly in front of him, and he clutches at them and this time holds fast. His body is lashed about by the driving force of the snow, but he won't release his grip, even as his head is covered and snow rammed up his nostrils. He gags, choking for breath.

Stillness then, and silence. He releases one hand from the branches and burrows it back to his body to clear space around his face. Then he thrusts his arm high, scooping wildly and breaking free. Packed snow melts inside his collar, slithering down his back and chest. He sees a flash of sky and fills his lungs hungrily. Slowly he hauls himself from the snow and into the arms of the tree.

Shivering, he beholds a landscape transformed. The snow must be piled twenty feet high amongst the trees, some of which have keeled over. Debris is scattered everywhere, branches, steel rails jutting up, wooden ties. He can't see beyond the woods to the track or the snow sheds. Overhead the sun shines. Birds resume a cheery chorus. Will thinks of the sketchbook in his snow-sodden jacket, the pencil lines smearing on the wet paper.

From the trees comes a sound Will has never heard before, a series of gruff animal hoots that taper off into a kind of mournful sigh.

“Will, are you all right?”

Twenty yards to his left his father clings to a tree.

“I'm fine!”

“I'll come to you!” his father calls.

At the same moment they see it. A little higher up the slope, jutting from the snow, is the gold spike.

A rustling draws Will's attention. A snow-caked man clings to another nearby tree, a scarf tied around his face, revealing only his eyes.

“All right?” Will's dad calls up to him.

The man says nothing, just lifts a hand. His eyes, Will can tell, are on the gold spike.

“Help!”

This cry is muffled and comes from down the slope, where, not forty feet from Will's perch, the ground drops into the gorge and the rioting river. Will squints. On the very edge, clutching the

branch of a spindly bent pine, his legs dangling over the edge, is Cornelius Van Horne.

“Hold tight, sir!” Will’s father calls out. “I’m coming!” He looks at the man with the scarf. “Help me!”

The other man makes no reply and stays put.

From the trees comes another series of gruff hoots.

“What is that?” Will asks, but instinctively he knows.

“The branch won’t hold long!” Van Horne calls out with amazing calm.

“Pa?” Will says, a terrible fear spreading through him like cold.

“Stay there, Will. It’ll be fine.”

Will watches as his father carefully paddles down over the snow toward the rail baron, digging in with his hands and feet to slow himself. Off to the right a heaping drift mutters and creaks and spills itself into the gorge. Will feels the vibration through his body. Everything piled up along the edge could give at any moment.

“You’ll be all right, sir,” Will’s father says as he reaches the spindly pine and wraps his legs around the trunk.

He reaches out toward Van Horne. “I’m going to take your wrist, sir, and you take mine.”

The rail baron is a large man, and Will hears his father grunt as he takes his weight. Bracing himself against the trunk, James Everett pulls.

Will’s heart is a small panicking animal against his ribs as he watches his father struggle on the precipice. Van Horne’s other

hand stretches out and seizes a sturdy branch, and he pulls now too. After a minute, with both men straining, the rail baron reaches the trunk and holds tight. They lean their heads against the bark, catching their breath.

Will exhales and hears a rustling behind him. He turns to see the man easing himself down the slope toward the gold spike. He looks at Will and holds a swollen finger to his mouth.

“Shhhhh.”

He plucks the golden spike from the snow.

“You and me,” he whispers to Will, “got an understanding, ain’t we? You call out, I’ll find you and your pa and slit your throats. Got that?”

Terrified, Will just stares at the man’s obscured face, at the narrow band of skin around his chilly blue eyes.

I know you, Will thinks, but he says nothing.

The man called Brogan turns and begins churning his way back up the slope. He brushes a broken branch, and the end twitches and then clutches his ankle.

With a grunt Brogan tries to kick himself free, but the branch flexes and grows longer. Like some mutant tree unfolding itself from the earth, a long arm stretches out and sprouts a bony shoulder and narrow head, matted with snow. Brogan gives a cry of horror as he’s dragged back.

A skunky stench wafts across to Will as the sasquatch thrashes itself up from the snow. Will knows now why the Natives call them stick men, for their limbs are so thin yet powerful that they

look like they're made from the indestructible ingredients of mountain forest.

Will can see that it's a young one, quite a bit smaller than him. Though its mouth is wide, teeth bared, Will isn't sure if the beast is attacking or merely clambering atop Brogan like someone trying not to drown. Brogan beats at the sasquatch. From a pocket he pulls a long knife and stabs the creature in the shoulder. It crumples, sending up a terrible shriek.

For a moment Will thinks a treetop has snapped and fallen, for something thin and very tall hits the snow beside Brogan. But it's no tree. It is seven feet of fury, jumping down from above to protect its child. Will's insides feel liquid with fear. The creature's arms are vast knotted branches, its clawed feet gnarled roots. The adult sasquatch reaches down and grabs Brogan by an arm and a leg and in one movement hurls him. The golden spike flies clear of his clothing and lands in the snow, not far from Will. Brogan himself sails through the air, skids across the snow with a squawk of terror, and disappears over the edge into the gorge.

Chest heaving, the sasquatch checks on its young, and then turns and looks straight at Will.

"Pa!" Will hollers.

"Stay still!" his father shouts. "Don't turn your back! I'm coming!"

Gripping the tree, Will stares at the sasquatch as it shakes the snow from its furred body.

“She just wants her child, Will,” his father is calling. “Show her you’re no threat. Don’t look in her eyes.”

Will feels a tremor and sees the snow sliding slowly past his tree like a river toward the precipice. Great rafts of it pour over into the abyss. An ominous creak emanates from his father’s pine. It begins to tilt toward the gorge.

“It’s giving way!” Will cries, seeing the snow’s surface pucker all around.

“Swim!” Will’s father cries out to Van Horne, and the two begin thrashing their way uphill toward Will. The snow slips and shoves against them. To Will it looks like they’re scarcely moving, but they fight on against the tide.

When he turns back to the two sasquatch, they’re skidding straight toward him on the current of snow. Will clammers round to the far side of the trunk. Sliding with the snow comes the gold spike, and as it passes, Will seizes it.

“We’re coming, Will!” his father shouts behind him.

But the sasquatch are coming faster. He can’t help it—he looks into the creature’s face and sees eyes as old as the mountains and as merciless.

“Move back, Will!” he hears his father cry, and then there’s a sharp crack.

Will looks over his shoulder and sees Van Horne with a smoking pistol in his hand.

The mother sasquatch has collapsed in the snow, and her limp body is being carried by the current. The young one sets up a

frenzied shrieking, its sharp mouth wide. It's coming right for Will.

A huge net unfurls from the air and drops over the small sasquatch. The creature knocks against the tree, struggling and yelping. Will leans far out of its reach.

"Don't shoot it!" calls a voice from the trees.

Mr. Dorian emerges on snowshoes, along with three other large men carrying thick measures of rope over their shoulders. The snow has finally stopped moving.

"We've got him, gentlemen. It's quite all right," calls Mr. Dorian. "Take our ropes!"

Ropes are thrown out for all of them, and Will grabs hold. Mr. Van Horne and Will's father are pulled up alongside him.

"Will," his father says. "You're all right?"

Will nods, unable to speak.

"Well, Dorian," puffs Van Horne, "you didn't come just for my painting, did you?"

"I came for many reasons," says Mr. Dorian. "To see the greatest railway in the world finished—and to find a sasquatch for the greatest show on earth."