

## CHAPTER ONE

August 4, 1801

“**W**ill Finch! Let’s have some more water here!”

Will hoisted the clay water jug higher. *Water, Will Finch! More water!* Those words had been spoken to him so many times in the last five weeks that they were all he heard in his sleep at night.

He willed his legs to go faster. This was the third haying season he had spent working

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on his Uncle Martin's farm. Because he was the youngest member of the family and still too small to wield a scythe, he had been given the task of water boy. From the first rays of light until noon, he made endless trips from the well to his uncle and cousins as they worked in the field.

"Young Will's here at last! I'm afraid the sun has stolen the last drop of water in my body," Peter Ketcham said. Peter set down his heavy scythe and took the jug. Will's oldest cousin was tall, with arms strong from years of farmwork. His linen shirt was drenched with sweat.

"Don't drink it all down, brother," Daniel Ketcham said.

He was fourteen, two years younger than his brother, but he looked as though he could handle any task that Peter could.

Daniel took a long drink. Watching him, Will ran his tongue across his own dry lips.

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Daniel eyed him. "Will, you look as though you've been cutting the hay with the rest of us, and you've only been carrying water. You've barely the strength of a boy of eight."

"You know I'm eleven," Will protested weakly. He was short for his age, with arms and legs as thin as kindling, his Uncle Martin always said.

"Leave the boy alone, Daniel," Peter said. "It will be two years before he's expected to keep up in the fields with us. I'm sure Will will grow to be a strong boy."

"No doubt he'll grow more like his father instead," Daniel replied.

Will felt his ears burn with shame. Peter started to speak, but the deep voice of Will's uncle interrupted. "Back to work, boys! It's almost noon!" Martin Ketcham called from across the field. "Will, bring me the grindstone. My scythe needs sharpening."

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Daniel and Peter picked up their scythes. As they left, Daniel turned to Will and said in a low voice, “Be careful the grindstone doesn’t crush you under its weight.”

The loud caw of a crow caused Will to look up. The large black bird circled in the bright blue sky above. Will stood, watching the crow until it flew out of sight into the Catskill Mountains to the north.

“Will! The grindstone!”

His uncle’s voice brought Will back to earth, and he broke into a run.

Despite the hard work of haying, the morning flew by. Soon enough, Will heard his cousins let out a yell as his Aunt Rebecca came to the field carrying the dinner basket. The sun was high in the sky. Noontime.

Uncle Martin kissed his wife on the cheek. “I hope you’ve brought enough food in this basket.”

Aunt Rebecca smiled. “I’d be foolish not

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to.” She spread a cloth on the ground and began to take food out of the basket—salted pork, hunks of bread and cheese, and a jug of apple cider.

“Meat and cheese again. A meal fit for a president,” Peter joked.

“Only the best meal during haying,” Aunt Rebecca replied. “For you, too, Will. There’s more work to be done this afternoon. You’ll need your strength.”

Will had already taken a large bite of bread and cheese. He stopped, remembering his manners. “Thank you for bringing dinner out, Aunt Rebecca.”

“I’ve brought more than dinner, Will,” Aunt Rebecca said, her eyes shining. “I’ve brought news of the mammoth.”

“The mammoth!” Will’s eyes gleamed in the noonday sun.

Daniel laughed. “Ma, don’t get Will too excited. He’s already liable to faint from

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exhaustion. We need what strength he has left to help us with the raking.”

“If I recall, you were the first one at the Hudson River days ago to watch the delivery of Mr. Peale’s equipment, Daniel. Will’s not the only one on this farm who’s excited,” Aunt Rebecca said.

Daniel flushed with embarrassment, and Will flashed his aunt a grateful smile. More news of the mammoth! This was a subject Will never tired of. It had made the weeks of haying a little easier.

Everyone in Newburgh had heard of the giant bones that John Masten had discovered on his farm nearby. For weeks, Will had gathered bits and pieces of news about the bones after the Sunday church services. Some said that they were the bones of a mammoth creature that may have walked the earth before the Great Flood described in the Bible. Others said this idea was blasphemy, but most

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people agreed that the bones belonged to no living species.

When Masten put the bones on view in his barn, Will prayed they would be able to see them. Fortunately, everyone in Newburgh, including Will’s uncle, had wanted to see the bones. Will remembered when Uncle Martin had taken him and his cousins to the Masten farms before spring planting. The pile of giant bones was dirty, and many were broken, but that didn’t matter to Will. In his mind, he tried to reconstruct what such a creature might have looked like. The bones were like pieces of a puzzle waiting for someone to put them together.

And now it looked as though that someone was Charles Willson Peale. A few weeks ago, Will heard that the noted scientist had traveled all the way to Newburgh from Philadelphia to view the bones. He had arranged with Masten to dig up the land to find the

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mammoth's complete skeleton. Peale had even asked for help from the President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson.

Will could hardly wait for the digging to begin. The Ketchams thought Will was just excited about the thought of a giant beast, but it was more than that. Will knew he was destined to farm his uncle's land one day, but secretly he longed to be a scientist like Charles Willson Peale, or the great patriot Benjamin Franklin.

"Aunt Rebecca, what's the news of the mammoth today?" Will asked eagerly.

"Well, Mr. Masten says the bones are buried in a marl pit under twelve feet of water. But the army equipment President Jefferson sent isn't strong enough to pump the water out of the pit," Aunt Rebecca said.

Will's heart sank. "Does that mean the expedition will be cancelled?" he asked.

Aunt Rebecca shook her head. "No. Mr.

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Peale has a solution. He's asked Simon Campbell, the millwright, to help him construct a contraption that will bail the water out of the pit."

Uncle Martin frowned. "Peale's going to keep Campbell occupied during the busiest season of the year. We'd all be better off taking care of our farms than worrying about a bunch of old bones."

"But it's science, Uncle Martin," Will said, too excited to check his words. "It's important to study things like the mammoth bones."

"Learning doesn't put food on the table. Hard work does," Uncle Martin said gruffly. "Hard work is what's made this farm one of the most prosperous in the country. That's why we sell our wheat crop to England while most farmers can grow only enough for themselves."

Will lowered his eyes. It was stupid of him to anger his uncle. But all Uncle Martin

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thought of was this farm. He rarely looked beyond his own plot of land.

Daniel jumped on the chance to rile Will some more. "I've always said you need to do less thinking and more working, cousin." He sprang up and grabbed a small battered school primer from Will's trouser pocket. "Maybe this book is what's made you such a weakling, Will."

Will rose to his feet, his fists clenched. *He knows it's all I have in the world to call my own,* Will thought. *It's the only book to be found on this farm, and the only thing left of my mother.*

"I'll have that back, Daniel!" Will cried.

"What will you do, fight me for it?" Daniel was grinning.

"That's enough, both of you," Aunt Rebecca said. "Daniel, return the book to your cousin."

"Yes, Ma," Daniel said sheepishly.

Uncle Martin acted as if nothing had

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happened. "It's back to work for us, boys. Got to get this hay spread before dark."

Will took a last drink of cider. He held back as the others started toward the field. Aunt Rebecca put her arm around him. "Mr. Peale's work is important, Will. You're right to be interested in it."

Will watched his aunt walk back to the house. Mr. Peale's work *was* important. The haying would be finished soon, and then he could see the contraption Simon Campbell was making. He had to.

"Will, bring the water jug!" Peter called.

Will grabbed the jug and hurried toward the field.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
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The next day passed without further mention of the mammoth bones. Aunt Rebecca hadn't brought any more news about Mr. Peale with dinner, and Will, afraid to anger his uncle again, hadn't asked her.

At supper that night, Will picked up his fork as soon as grace was said and attacked his potatoes and cabbage. All day, he had helped his uncle and cousins spread the mown hay in

the barn so it could be cured. The hard work increased Will's appetite tenfold.

"Looks like the haying will be done day-after-tomorrow," Uncle Martin announced at the supper table.

Daniel and Peter let out a cheer, and Will joined in, despite a stern look from Aunt Rebecca that told him such behavior wasn't for the supper table. The wheat still had to be harvested and threshed, the corn brought in, and the potatoes dug up, but the end of haying season meant the hardest work was done. Before long it would be winter, and Will could go back to the schoolroom.

They heard a knock on the door of the small pine house, and Will's aunt and uncle exchanged puzzled looks.

"Who could that be at such a late hour? It's nearly dark," Aunt Rebecca said. She went to open the door.

"Why, good evening, James."

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Will dropped his fork on his plate as his father entered the doorway.

“Good evening, Rebecca. Good evening, Martin,” James Finch said in his soft voice. He looked at Will. “Son.”

“Good evening, sir,” Will said, finding his voice.

Aunt Rebecca took the hat from Will’s father’s hands. “James, please have supper with us. There’s plenty.”

Uncle Martin shot an angry look at his wife that Will clearly saw, but James seemed not to notice.

“Thank you, I will.” James pulled a chair from the corner and sat down at the table.

Everyone seated at the table stared at the food on their plates in silence. Will studied his father. James Finch was a slight man, a good two inches shorter even than sixteen-year-old Peter. His reddish hair framed a face that told the story of his life. On his chin was

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the jagged white scar delivered by a Redcoat’s bayonet when James, still a youth, fought in George Washington’s army. His left ear bore a more recent scar, one Will didn’t like to think about. James got it trying to pull Will’s mother, Betsy, from the fire that killed her.

The last time Will saw his father, there was frost on the ground. Will knew there must be an important reason for this visit. The room was too quiet. He wished someone would speak.

Uncle Martin cleared his throat. “I assume you’ve come to ask a favor of us, James. That’s your usual reason for visiting.”

“I’ve come for the boy,” James said, leaning forward. “I’ve been hired to help with Mr. Peale’s excavation. Simon Campbell needs a carpenter, and I want Will to come with me. I can’t do the work without an assistant.”

Daniel let out a low whistle, and even Will felt a small gasp escape him. His father’s

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direct manner didn't surprise him; that was his way. But could his father really want him on the mammoth expedition? Will wasn't sure he had understood.

Uncle Martin stood up. "James, are you mad? We've got to get the haying in. We've fed and clothed the boy for three years, and we need his help now, as little as he is."

"Most farms in this county are only a day or two away from the end of haying season. I'm sure you are, too," James said. "I need Will. He knows his way with tools. From what I've seen, it will take a lot of hands to do what Mr. Peale wants."

Uncle Martin's cheeks grew red. "This doesn't surprise me, James. You expect us to take care of the boy for you, so you can fetch him when you need an extra pair of hands. Well, I won't have it."

"Martin, not here," Aunt Rebecca said.

James rose from his chair. "He's my boy."

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"He certainly is," Uncle Martin said, his voice rising. "He's always either daydreaming or reading a book, never giving any effort to his real work."

Aunt Rebecca laid a hand on her husband's arm. "Martin, please. Think of Betsy," she said softly. "The haying's nearly in. Let him go."

Uncle Martin looked away. "Do as you want, James."

"Fine, then," James said. "I'll be back for Will in the morning."

Will excused himself from the table after James left. *Why does he want me to go with him?* Will wondered. But it didn't really matter. Tomorrow, he was going to be part of a real scientific expedition.

THE ROAD TO JOHN MASTEN'S farm was a rocky one, but enough people had traveled over it to keep the way fairly clear. Tall pine trees lined the path like soldiers at attention.

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Will bounced in the ramshackle wooden cart as James's horse pulled them along the path. The day was dry and hot, and Will was bursting with questions. Would they see the bones? Would they meet Mr. Peale? Will knew enough to keep to himself. Since his mother's death, Will's father had preferred silence to conversation.

"Farm's up ahead," James said without turning his head back.

Will strained to see. He remembered the farm from his trip to see the bones during the spring. His father was taking a route that led directly to Masten's fields.

Not long after, they came upon a crudely built shack and several tents set up about ten yards away. When they approached the shack, a finely dressed, white-haired man stepped out.

"You are Mr. Finch, our carpenter, I hope? We have great need of you," the man said. "I am Charles Willson Peale. And this must be

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your son. You look so much alike."

James nodded. "This is my boy, William."

"Splendid! I have always involved my sons in my work. They have proven to be invaluable. In fact, my son Rembrandt is assisting me on this expedition. I'll introduce you later." As he spoke, Mr. Peale grabbed their horse's reins and began to tie her to a nearby tree. Will had to run to keep up. Charles Willson Peale was in his sixties, but he had the energy of a man much younger.

Mr. Peale started toward the shack. "Come, both of you. Let us see the work that lies ahead of us."

Will followed his father into the shack. Another man about James's age was working wood on a lathe set up in the corner.

"Good day, Simon," James said. Will guessed that this was Mr. Campbell, the millwright.

"Good day, James. I see you've brought

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Will with you.”

“So he has,” Mr. Peale said. “What do you think of our construction, Mr. Finch? I would value your opinion as a carpenter. Mr. Campbell and I built this just a few days ago.”

“You built this shack? But you’re a scientist,” Will asked, too surprised to be polite.

“Yes, science is one of my specialties, and for science I will do whatever necessary to accomplish the task at hand,” Mr. Peale said. “And that includes building shacks.” He walked to a wooden table and spread out some sheets of parchment. “Now let me show you what we must do.”

Will peered over the table’s edge. Mr. Peale had sketched a machine that featured a very large wheel at its center. It was the contraption Aunt Rebecca had spoken about, for clearing the water out of the pit.

Peale pointed to the sketches. “As you may already know, the bones we seek lie under

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twelve feet of water in a marl pit,” he said. “We were able to procure a ship pump and several hand pumps from New York, but they are simply not powerful enough to do the job we need. So I designed this device.” He pointed to a large wheel on his drawing that reminded Will of a water wheel. “As the wheel turns, these pulleys will also turn, lowering a string of buckets into the water. When the buckets come out of the pit, they will be filled with water.”

“I see!” Will said, pressing in more closely to the drawings. “When the buckets reach the top of the pulley, they’ll dump the water into that trough you’ve drawn. I suppose the trough will carry the water away to a safe place away from the marl pit.”

“That’s right, Will,” Mr. Peale said, obviously pleased. “We’ve found a natural basin in which we can dump the water so that it won’t drain back into the pit.”

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“That’s ingenious,” James said, a look of respect on his face. “I do have one question. This looks like a giant water wheel you’ve drawn. How can a water wheel turn on dry land?”

Mr. Peale smiled. “The wheel will be powered by the oldest source known on earth! Man!”

Will couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Do you mean that a person walking inside the wheel will make the wheel turn?”

“Precisely!”

“But where will you find enough men to power such a thing?” James asked.

“If my thinking is correct, we will have an abundance of curious parties willing to help us with our important work,” Mr. Peale said. “If not, then I shall walk inside the wheel myself. Exercise is good for the body and the soul.”

“It sounds like a task of *mammoth* propor-

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tions,” James said. Will turned to look at his father. Had he actually made a joke? Will laughed.

“So it is!” Mr. Peale smiled. “And now, to work!”