

CHAPTER ONE

One

My father is trying to teach me how to prune a tree. “Here,” he says, holding the center section of a young tree in one hand and angling the clippers toward it with the other. “See these two terminals growing close together. That won’t do. They are competing. One has to go.”

His large hands hold the clippers easily, almost carelessly as he bends his tall frame over the young tree. I watch his fingers squeeze over the orange grips. The blades snap. A long, slender branch slides down the length of the tree. “You have to find the leader, make a decision, then cut.

“There, now we’ll just top the one we’ve left a bit.” He bends the tip of the tree’s new leader toward me and fingers the silver, bullet-shaped buds. “You always want to cut just above a bud.” His clippers snap again. This time the length of tree falls onto his boot. He bends down and grabs it, then flings it over his shoulder. The cut wood lands with a thud in the broken winter grasses, startling the dog.

“These trees got away from us last year,” he says, still holding the clippers up as a pointer. “Look at all this side growth—”

My father interrupts himself to begin pushing down some of the side branches, or scaffold limbs, so that instead of angling up around the trunk of the tree, they jut out from the center of the tree at right angles. He studies the tree for a moment; then his clippers begin again, snapping a limb off here, another one there, twisting around the soft new growth, to cut the wood clean and close to the trunk. Each time he makes a cut, my father flicks his wrist so that the newly cut wood twists away from him, rustling down into the tree. Sometimes branches fall against his chest, but he just brushes them away without looking down. He has a vision for this tree: the strong limbs studded with red apples, the entire tree a green spreading focus to produce good fruit. No excess limbs to cut the light, a leader rising straight and tall.

I rub my gloved hands together in an effort to keep them warm and continue watching. My father's clippers flash silver in the cold winter air. Only when several more branches lie at the base of the tree does he step back to look. So much of the bushy side growth is gone that the tree looks awkward, shorn. The limbs and trunk are dotted with white marks where the soft underwood has been exposed. For really deep cuts on the older trees, my father will coat the surface with tar and turpentine to prevent disease, but for clipper cuts on a young tree like this, he will count on the tree's vigor to heal over the wounds. A leader now rises; evenly spaced side branches push out on all four quadrants.

"That's enough for now," says my father. "Next year we can work straightening out some of those side limbs, but I don't want to cut off any more fruit buds since this is its first bearing year."

While I pull the branches away, piling them in the center of the row so that they can be scooped up by the brush picker, my father pulls his gloves off and adjusts the wire guard around the tree's base. Then he pulls a handful of mouse bait from a coffee can and scatters it around the tree. "If we can just keep the mice and deer off of them, these trees should be okay."

I look down the rows of young Empires that now line the slope of the meadow as it cuts down from the garden.

“Here”—my father hands me the clippers—“you try the next one.” He walks back to the tractor with its wooden pruning tower and pulls out a saw.

I move down the row to a short tree, dense with limbs. I see only one central branch shooting up, no competition to clean out of the way. But the central terminal seems crooked and stunted. Sometimes my father looks at trees like this and decides to get rid of the weak leader and restart the tree. He cuts the old leader back and chooses one of the lower branches to be the tree’s new leader. Should I do that, letting one of the lower branches, already beginning to spire up, become the tree’s new center? I decide to go with that idea but then can’t decide which lower limb to choose as the new leader. The branches are all about the same size, all vigorous. I try pushing down the side branches, as I have watched my father do, to get a handle on which scaffold limbs should stay, but that only confuses me more. I want so much to get this right. I know it will please my father. When he heads out for the orchards, he is always glad when I come along.

But there are too many branches, each one twisting this way, that way. I tell myself I will just have to begin, start cutting somewhere. I bring my clippers up against a limb, pushing them close to the trunk to make a clean cut as my father has shown me, but just as I am about to squeeze the handle, I am overcome with fear. What if I make the wrong cut? I back up and study the tree again, but even then I can’t decide where to begin. I try a new tactic. I push myself into the center of the small tree so that I can look at the branches from that angle. But now I am simply wedged into the chaos of branches.

When I push my way back out of the tree, a branch snaps in my face. The sudden sting makes me only more determined to begin cutting in somewhere. I raise my clippers, but it is no use. I am stumped again. All the bottom branches

look identical. What if the one I choose to be a leader becomes stunted? Then I will have cut away the tree's other possibilities and chosen the wrong one.

My father, busy cutting a split limb off a nearby tree, doesn't seem to notice that I am just standing there, clippers poised. Everything seems to depend upon a kind of confidence I don't feel. Knowing how to prune a tree, like knowing how to handle a horse, is important here. I am already a competent rider. I will learn how to prune an apple tree. Tomorrow.

I push myself back into the center of the small tree and resume cutting the sucker growth off limbs. I know it is not real pruning, those cuts that determine the fate of a tree, just cleanup work. I snip quickly and decisively at the forest of suckers, thin, upright terminals that shoot up from each limb almost parallel to the leader. I hate the sense of defeat that I feel, but I will not admit to my father that I have no idea how to prune a tree. He makes it look so easy, like something I should already know.

Suddenly the dog leaps up and runs across the meadow and onto the frost-heaved expanse of back lawn, chasing a rabbit. His feet clatter through the large heart-shaped catalpa leaves. I look up for a moment at the borders of old shade trees that ring the huge yellow house. Lined with snow and ice, their unpruned shapes etch a mysterious calligraphy across the blank winter sky.