

PROLOGUE



Land speculator James A. Faith, originally from Chicago, staked a townsite claim on a riverbank in what is now northwest Minnesota in 1882. Rivers were the heartblood of transportation and industry back then, and the Ojibwe people outnumbered whites five to one. The native people called the river Ahmiknibi, or beaver water, for all the dam-building creatures populating the shores. Faith called the rust-colored waterway Rum River. He made his claim on a wide flat spot next to a bend, and then packed up his pick and gold pan, intending to head west.

Three hundred yards from his claim, he encountered a group of Indians who, through a series of unintelligible (to James) words and increasingly frustrated hand gestures, led him two more miles upstream to the most beautiful waterfalls he'd ever laid eyes on. He had never been much for poetry, but if he'd been born in a different time and better-looking, he might have waxed on about how the air around the falls smelled of freedom and the water spray caught the sunlight like the jeweled crown of Mother Nature herself. But, since no man can escape his upbringing, he instead grunted, thanked the Indians for showing him where the best part of the river was located, and began to build a meager fence, enough to demonstrate that he'd improved the land.

The Indians grew increasingly agitated the more he built, their hands flying with an effort to get him to understand. Things may have ended differently if James A. Faith spoke Ojibwe, but he'd found English and a Sharps self-cocking Model 1851 were all the communication skills he

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needed. So when the Indians made the wavy signs in the air and talked about *ginebeagoos*, he listened exactly as well as he had when they pointed at the river and made biting motions and muttered “*Ahmiknibi.*”

In other words, he didn't listen at all.

“Well, thank you kindly,” he'd said, when he grew weary of their pantomime. He strung the last bit of barbed wire to a tilting fencepost, tossed them each a silver coin for their trouble, jumped atop his horse—a precarious proposition given his girth—and rode west, planning a brief detour to Fort Snelling to file his Minnesota Territory claim.

The Ojibwe watched him ride away, shaking their heads. When they'd steered him upstream, it hadn't been to show him the beautiful falls. It had been to point out the *ginebeagoog* that were about to surface all along the river.

Turns out, spurred by an internal clock only they could read, tens of thousands of snakes in this exact spot would unravel from a great, underground writhing ball and slither topside, devouring every small creature that crossed their paths. In fact, the earth was already rumbling with their birth. James A. Faith would have spotted the first of their heads poking through the spongy ground of the riverbank and heard the beginning of their susurrus song if he'd bothered to glance behind him when riding off. This section of the river was a powerful place, and also a very bad location for building.

The Ojibwe shrugged. They'd tried to warn him.

After filing his claim, Faith rode as far as the Black Hills in the Dakota Territory, where he caught the front end of the gold rush and made a name for himself as a loud, red-faced drinker with a lucky nose for land. He fell in love with an Oglala woman named Lootah Maka who he

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met while hunting bear in the Black Hills, and he was true to her—a first for him, despite his name—until he drew his last breath.

He liked his Black Hills fame and never returned to the town he'd named after himself or the landmark where he'd staked his claim. He carried a fondness in his heart for Faith Falls as it was the first land he'd ever titled, but he believed it was too far off the beaten track to amount to much. He died in 1897 in his yellowed underwear, his throat slit by a stranger he'd cheated in poker the night before, never having returned to Minnesota.

“I ever tell you all that before?” Albrikt Gottfridsen asked, pausing in his story. “About him dying in his underwear?” He and Philander Willmar rocked in separate chairs on Albrikt's front porch on River Street. Both men puffed on fresh-dried tobacco in their corncob pipes. It was April of 1907. “An Ojibwe used to come by the store regularly told me the whole tale. I imagine the Indian embellished a bit, but what's a good story otherwise?”

Philander rocked silently.

Philander and Albrikt had been the first white settlers in Faith Falls, arriving two years after Faith staked his claim. They'd witnessed rutted paths evolve into dusty roads and hewn-log cabins become storefronts, the latter crafted of fresh-sawn hardwoods purchased from Albrikt's upstream mill.

Faith Falls had become a hub in the northwestern section of the state. Farmers and foresters brought their goods into town for trade, and their business supported saloons, restaurants, and hotels, along with doctors, dentists, and assorted paper collars. The population grew enough to support two churches, one Lutheran and one Catholic, each assuring the other that there was plenty room for both with a smile and a curse.

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“I said, Philander, have I told you the story of the founding of Faith Falls before, and of Faith’s old underwear? I’m sure I have. The part about the snakes is certainly pure bull, but I enjoy the detail of the yellowed underwear.” He chuckled and scratched at a mosquito bite on his arm. Albrikt and Philander were white-haired by now, having front-row seats to the birth and growth of their town.

“Suppose it’s the full moon making the ground rumbly and the people so sulky?” Albrikt asked, switching subjects. The ground in and around Faith Falls had been echoing for a week, sparking talk of earthquakes in Minnesota. People had been short with one another, riled up by the early and warm spring, similar to the one that had occurred the year James A. Faith staked his claim, if Philander had bothered to add the facts up. An accidental bump in the street was likely to turn into a fistfight, and honest children were driven to steal sweets and marbles for reasons they could not explain.

Albrikt took short puffs deliberately out of sync with his rocking, the missing joint of his pinky finger—a trait he would pass on to 80% of his descendants, along with hair the color of copper—outlined by the pipe. “Because,” he continued, 25-year’s accustomed to Philander’s quiescence, “If Emma breaks one more dish and then hollers at me for it, I’m going to have to start increasing her sleeping draught.”

Philander rocked some more.

“With this warm spring, there’s worries about the mouse plague coming. Did you hear that, Philander?”

Philander finally nodded, his white hair unmoved by the breeze. He had been an apothecary his entire working life, and a small-town one at that. Talk of plagues perked him up like nothing else could, at least for a short while.

“The *Daily Republican* reports Fargo being overrun,” Albrikt continued. “The mouse plague started out West with this unnatural warm spring, and it’s moving east right along with it. The postman has family in Fargo, and he says the rodent noise is enough to make an honest man drink. Always chittering and scurrying. Millions of mice, he says. They run up your legs, steal your hair for nests while you sleep, and poison any animal that eats ‘em. The whole town reeks of mouse piss, and there’s hardly any food left. You can’t even tie up a side of salt pork because the mice’ll climb any wall to get at it.”

Philander had dozed off in the middle of Albrikt’s musings, his smoking pipe clutched close to his chest, so he missed the first breeding ball of garters choosing that exact moment to roll past like a toy escaped from the underworld. Albrikt spotted it, though, and choked in mid-sentence. His pipe dropped from his mouth with a clatter, red embers scattering in the warm April breeze.

“What in the Sam Hill...”

A scream soon followed as more mating balls rolled down Main Street. Those garters not lucky enough to join a group slithered solo until the streets ran like mercury with snakes. It was exactly as the Ojibwe who’d told Philander the story of James A. Faith had predicted, if Albrikt had bothered to listen on a deep level, one that required commitment. As it was, Albrikt could only mutter a begrudging, “I’ll be *goddamned*. That old Indian was telling the truth.”

The invasion lasted three days, during which people dared not step outside if they didn’t have to. That didn’t stop the snakes from entering buildings through cracks in the floors to nestle in empty boots or curl next to sleeping babies, as the nights were still chilly despite the unseasonable heat.

The light scraping sound of their bodies was repulsive, the sheer numbers and the sight of crawling, writhing serpents even worse, but it was the smell that was unbearable, like a jar of urine and sweat left in the sun too long. Some in town wanted to write to the state government for help, but they were too afraid to leave their homes for the post office.

For all the horror, the snakes also brought providence. A boy climbing to escape the snakes found a lucky quarter he'd hidden from his sister and forgotten about. An alto in the church choir bolted into the Faith Falls Saloon to escape the squirming serpents and collided with the preacher she would later marry, he with no intention of stopping in the sleepy town until the snakes made it impossible to simply pass through. Albrikt's own wife ran to escape the snakes, fell, and broke her clavicle. If not for the subsequent chest x-ray, her tuberculosis would have likely gone undiscovered until it was too late.

And, as suddenly as they arrived, the snakes disappeared.

Some claimed the unholy creatures slid west to feast on mice, and indeed, newspaper records reveal the Fargo Mouse Plague ended shortly thereafter. Other townsfolk crossed themselves and declared that the snakes had returned to hell to gather more numbers. Albrikt, always a sensible man, reassured everyone who entered his sawmill that it was no more than a freak gloaming, though he quietly invested in taller boots.

In the hub-bub of the receding snakes, he and other members of the Faith Falls' Boosters almost missed welcoming a new couple to town: Eva and Ennis Catalain. It was curious to Albrikt that the reptiles had arrived around the same time as the Catalains, and that the two comings seemed tied together, somehow. It wasn't because the snakes and the new couple were alike in their appearance, though there was something animal in the way Eva's green eyes flashed with secret knowledge and how Ennis always seemed to be measuring people, despite his

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hearty handshake and open smile. Nor was there any similarity between the townspeople's reactions to the reptiles or their feelings toward the husband and wife. The snakes woke a primal fear, whereas the Catalains were loved, at least at first. It wasn't even the coincidental timing of their arrivals because the memory of the snakes vanished like molt, but once you met Eva and Ennis, you could never forget them.

Maybe it was because like the snakes, the Catalains brought magic to Faith Falls.

Where exactly they had come from had never been clear. Some said New Orleans, some said Boston, but whatever the specific city, everyone knew they came from money. After she and Ennis built their gorgeous Queen Anne, Eva threw elaborate parties in her home and organized town dances and the annual mummer's parade. Her homemade spirits were legendary, and a charming rumor began to circulate that her mulled hard cider was so delicious that it could turn back time, though surely only those who drank too much believed it. She welcomed enough people from every class into her home that gossip against her was impossible to sustain, though some inevitably tried.

Ennis was an impeccable host and active in local government. He and Eva also travelled frequently, bringing back curious and new styles from faraway lands. They were the sparkle in Faith Falls until their house went up for auction during the Great Depression, and they disappeared from the town and the lives of its inhabitants.

At first, the talk was of how dreary the town was without them, and concern for their well-being. Soon, though, the memories of Eva's graciousness and Ennis' cascading belly laugh faded. The stoic Scandinavians instead focused on the Catalains' frivolity, and how they never seemed to work, and how their baby girl Velda was practically raising herself. Within ten years, the name Catalain, when remembered, brought a sneer and a sharp, bile-scented story, one that

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could make the listener's heart burn. He in turn would grow angry at the Catalains for that pain and pass it down the line.

And like the memory of the snakes, the Catalain's Queen Anne began to fade, and become blurry around its edges.

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Forty-three years after the Catalains arrived, Faith Falls experienced another unseasonably warm spring and the rumbling of the earth began to attract the attention of the U.S. Geological Survey in Mounds View, Minnesota. By this time, both Philander and Albrikt had passed on, permanently gone from the town they'd built on the back of Faith's claim and a mammoth nest of snakes.

People rejoiced in the sixty-degree weather, women prematurely yanking their pedal pushers and spring dresses out of storage and men driving with their tops down. Ice cracked early on the river, and the water flowed free. The lilacs shivered but were not fooled. This wasn't spring. It was another gloaming.

"Snakes Take Over Faith Falls, Minnesota," read the March of 1965 headlines as far away as San Francisco. The town was overrun, businesses closed, and residents' lives were turned inside out. The snakes continued to pour like a spring-fed river down the streets.

Even more fantastical than the legions of snakes were the stories of miracles accompanying them—a paraplegic in the Avignon neighborhood who could suddenly walk, lovers reunited in the Faith Falls nursing home after 40 years of fruitless searching, a man living in a downtown apartment who thought he heard snakes in the walls and began ripping out the plaster and lathe and instead discovered a fortune in gold. People began to buzz, and the stories of snakes and miracles spread throughout the country.

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And quietly, hardly a blip amidst all the publicity and excitement, the husband of Velda Catalain, daughter to Eva and Ennis, was murdered and buried without investigation, though Midge Gottfridsen, granddaughter to Albrikt, noticed, and the injustice burned her deeply. She had loved Henry, after all, though he had never returned her affections beyond a single night stolen from Velda.

Then, two days after the snakes arrived, a farmer in Oklahoma witnessed a flying saucer land on his silo. He claimed it used a mounted ray gun to suck up cows like spaghetti noodles. His picture proof looked suspiciously like a Jiffy Pop container resting astride a painted oatmeal canister. Nevertheless, newspaper reporters covered it voraciously, headlines screaming about an alien attack, and soon, the nation forgot about the snake invasion.

And as before, in Philander's time, the people of Faith Falls forgot as well. But science never forgets. This is why the Country Inn and Suites on Highway 210 is currently booked solid, hosting herpetologists from all over the world who are assembling in Faith Falls to witness and record the emergence of the world's largest redlined garter snake communal ball. The weather pattern is right. The Richter scale has measured the telltale temblors. The snakes are certainly on their way. Again.

This time, they were not only bringing magic, but also a cataclysmic confrontation between the Catalains and the Gottfridsens that's been a long time coming.