

One

APRIL 12, 1916
CARIBOU MOUNTAINS
NORTHERN ALBERTA

All night, beneath an amazement of stars, Corporal Jack Creed of the Royal North West Mounted Police pushed a course due west through the knee-deep snow of the black spruce forest. The ponies with their grim burdens followed in an easy line. There was the sound of his breathing, the jingle of tack, and the muffled hooves but little else on this still night. Creed glanced back from time to time, making sure the bodies had not shifted. He hadn't had sufficient rope to secure them all properly and if one slipped off, the wolves that were following would be on it in a heartbeat.

The senior officer of the patrol, Inspector Armstrong, had been a tall man. The pony that carried his body was a small quarter horse. It was an unfortunate match. Slung across the pony's back, the Inspector's fingers brushed the snow. Creed should have trussed the arms up as he had with Cunningham and Reas, but the day was fading and by the time he had the others loaded and secured, the evening temperatures had plummeted despite the fact that it was nominally spring. The

Inspector was stiff and Creed couldn't bring himself to force the frozen flesh of the raised arms to the man's sides. He just bent him over the horse—his core not fully frozen—and roped him down. So now in death Inspector Armstrong reached out with bare, lifeless fingers, probing the passing texture of the deep, crystalline snow.

Jack Creed was confident inside his five-foot-nine-inch frame, a good balance between strength and speed that had benefited him on the playing fields of Upper Canada College in Toronto, where he excelled at football and cricket, captaining the first eleven. At UCC he knew he was above his station, but he didn't mind. His father, a cattle farmer outside Peterborough, after a few prosperous years had paid good money to send him to the college to rub shoulders with the Eatons, the Gooderhams, and the Masseys. He had enjoyed the friendship of his wealthy classmates but was not really of their world. Off the cricket pitch he read everything he could get his hands on, from Tolstoy to Twain, Conrad to Kipling. His father called him a dreamer, but Creed wondered how that could be a bad thing.

Creed had also been called handsome by various women, not infrequently, but this too meant little to him. His intelligent brown eyes saw the world around him with clarity, often a sense of irony, but never cynicism. He believed in humankind, despite the battering his faith in it had taken by what he had seen so far in his twenty-eight years of life. He looked to an improved future.

The aurora borealis crackled and whispered behind him on the trail. He tried to whistle the lights down closer. Sometimes it worked. They were keeping him company. Creed found corpses very poor company. He looked back again. All seemed secure. His eyes held on the slightest figure, slung across the pinto. Reas was just a boy, a farm kid from Weyburn, Saskatchewan, proud

as hell of the uniform he wore—the broad-brimmed stetson on the saddle horn, military tunic under his fur coat, the woollen trousers with the yellow stripe. All of that would be sent back to his mother. It still deeply troubled Creed to see a boy cut down so suddenly, even after his months on the front in Belgium. He thought it'd be different here.

Like his older brother, Charles, before him, Creed had joined the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in 1915, against the strong wishes of their father. One son was enough. He needed him on the farm. He called him a fool. In retrospect his father had been right, but Creed had been determined to go and find Charlie.

Creed pulled his hand from his mitten and slid it inside his fur coat to rub at his shoulder, where an old wound was aching from the efforts of the day, or perhaps the ache had been triggered by the memories that had surfaced from the smell of gunpowder and blood. The third body, on the last horse, was his friend Cunningham, a good, seasoned officer. Begley had recognized this threat and shot Cunningham first. Creed would deeply miss Cunningham. They had shared a non-cynical nature. They could spend congenial days on the trail together and not say a word. On the trail there was really little need for talk, and when you did, it had to mean something.

THEIR SPRING PATROLS had been fairly routine. The officers separated to do solo rounds of two dozen hunters and trappers in the north section of the Caribou range. That had been the best time for Creed. It had been a hard winter, with little or no game. The Mounties brought extra flour and tinned meat and fruit to the desperate. It gave a lot of satisfaction to put sweet slices of peach in the tin cup of a starving man. The four officers had met up again south of Buffalo Lake for the final leg back down to their detachment at Hay River.

There was one last call: check on a couple of trappers named Ross and Begley at a remote cabin high in the Caribou near the source of the Buffalo River. No one had seen them all year. In the last of Ross's letters he had said that Begley had been acting odd, arguing, hoarding food, and stealing his things. And some who knew Begley said he could be unpredictable. The Ross family in Halifax was concerned and had asked the Mounties to look in on them during their patrol.

The Mounties came upon the small, well-built trappers' cabin mid-afternoon. An old fire was smoking a haunch of meat hanging on a neat tripod outside. The camp seemed well kept, with firewood stacked against the wall, a line of laundry drying.

Creed turned, his saddle creaking, to look out at the view of the mountains, young peaks extending to the west, plenty of snow still on their flanks and summits. He noticed Cunningham too was taking in the vista and nodded his approval. No question they had found a beautiful spot here, and Creed caught himself thinking how fine it would be to live in a place like this for a year or two. Do a little trapping, as he had done in Ontario as a boy. There'd be trout in the streams lower down. A few books and a deck of solitaire cards for wintering. Lonely. A long way from humanity, true. But Creed had had enough of humanity for a while.

"Dismount," Armstrong told them. They did so and approached as a foursome.

"Sir, why don't Reas and I just flank you a little over toward the trees?" Creed suggested.

"I don't want to spook 'em."

"Maybe just unholster our weapons then, sir?"

"This isn't a damn machine gun nest, Corporal. This is just a social call."

"Yes, sir."

Armstrong hailed the inhabitants of the cabin in a strong, congenial voice. "ROSS! WALTER ROSS? EUGENE BEGLEY!"

There was nothing for a minute, then distant ravens bickering aloft and a light wind in the trees. Finally the door unlatched and a big man came out to them wearing a long, heavy buffalo coat in the warm weather. He came several steps toward them. His small, pig eyes were a little wild, but they had all seen those bush eyes many times in the camps they visited. He would settle down with talk.

"Are you Begley?"

The big man nodded, his eyes still a bit startled. There was a wafting stench coming off him that made them all step back. Ross, they thought, must be the clean and tidy one.

Inspector Armstrong spoke to him calmly. "We're on spring patrol and thought we'd stop by. See if you're all right. If you need anything. Any messages or letters we can take back for you?"

"No." The word came out like a croak from a man who hadn't been speaking much recently.

"We're pleased to see you doing well." Armstrong gestured to the meat on the tripod. "This has been a bad game year."

Begley smiled and nodded, his wild eyes softening a little.

"How's Ross?"

"Good," he told them. "Off after partridge."

"You're both in good health, are you?"

"Never better."

"We'll wait around a bit. Say hello to Ross."

It was apparent Begley didn't like this idea. "Could be gone a couple days."

"Maybe we could have some tea," Armstrong suggested. "We brought tea, sugar, flour, and tinned peaches and apples."

Begley weighed this idea for a moment. "Sure. Come inside."

Begley turned and walked back toward the cabin. Reas carried

the bag of supplies. Creed casually unclipped his holster cover and folded it over inside the belt.

“Hell of a nice place you’ve got here, Begley,” Armstrong offered. “How was the trapping this winter?”

“Good. I’ll show you my furs.” Begley stood to one side of the door and gestured them all inside, smiling through his yellow teeth.

As he passed the smudge fire, young Reas stopped. The bag of supplies fell from his hands. He was looking at the fire. He took a step toward it, gasped, and fell to one knee, choking.

“What the hell, lad? You all right?” Armstrong asked him.

Reas was retching into the sandy soil of the path. Armstrong took a step away.

Creed bent down to Reas. “What is it, Jimmy?”

The boy recovered enough to speak one word. “Toes.”

“What?”

The boy raised his hand and pointed at the haunch smoking over the fire and said, “It has toes.”

Cunningham took a step closer to observe. “Jesus. He’s right.”

Begley raised and fired point-blank the double-barrelled shotgun he had taken from under his big coat. He hit Cunningham and then Armstrong, just as Creed was withdrawing his pistol. Begley swung the butt against Jack’s head and he fell stunned to the ground.

When full consciousness returned, Jack sat up and found blood blinding one eye. Through his good one Jack looked over to see Begley pounding young Reas’s head in the mud with the butt of the shotgun. The big man moved at an astounding speed. Jack located his old revolver beside him, but the cylinder had opened and slid off the spindle rod and the bullets lay in a semicircle in the snow. Jack, his head roaring like a forest fire, found the cylinder and slid it back on

the rod. There was one bullet inside. He located three more in the snow with his bare hand and loaded them with the calm, focused care he always had when he knew a mistake or hesitation would mean his life.

Creed was overcome by a stench and turned to see Begley standing above him, the shotgun raised again over his head. Jack locked the cylinder plate, cocked the hammer, extended his hand, and fired the first round of the small calibre into Begley's chest between the open lapels of the buffalo coat. Begley hardly flinched. The butt of the big man's shotgun came down an inch from Creed's face, deflected by his arm, glancing off his shoulder. Begley raised the gun again. Creed fired twice into the exposed chest. Begley looked down at him, his pig eyes vacant, the gun still held above him. Creed fired his last shot up under Begley's chin and the big man dropped dead on top of him.

He crawled out from under Begley and applied snow to the goose egg on the side of his head and cheek to stop the bleeding. He was relieved his collar bone hadn't been broken by the butt of the shotgun, but it was badly bruised.

Creed dug a shallow grave beside the cabin and, using the pinto, dragged Begley to it. He dug another, smaller one beside it for Walter Ross, and Creed buried what was left of him. First off, there was the smoked haunch. The head and hands were on a shelf inside the fetid cabin; Begley must have been keeping them for company. And there were some clean bones Creed found in a pot behind the cabin. Creed arranged them all neatly, respectfully, in a rough semblance of their original divine organization. He placed three layers of flat rocks on the graves to stop the wolves and wolverines from digging them up.

One of the four ponies had taken some shot and was lame. He didn't want to leave her alive for the wolves or bears, so he gave her the last apple from the can he ate for dinner and then led

her into the woods and shot her. He used Cunningham's large-calibre Colt to be sure the job was clean. She would distract the wolves from the graves.

Three ponies, three bodies. Creed didn't mind the long walk back to the fort at Hay River. It was very still. Not a breath rustled the frost-encrusted forest. Nothing between him and the cold and silence of outer space. His buffalo jacket, hat, and heavy mitts kept him warm. With the northern lights in front of him, the temperature staying even, and the hard snow crunching beneath his high brown boots, he indulged himself in the old feeling of euphoria that came from surviving an action when others have not. He was overcome with a sudden, reckless arrogance, even though it could just as easily have been Cunningham leading the horses. Or all their haunches could currently be smoking over Begley's fire.

Creed chuckled out loud at this grisly image and wished he could share it with the others. He could almost hear Cunningham's laughter. Of course, one day it would be his turn, but tonight he was very much alive, only hurting here and there. And he had a spiral of twisting green celestial flames for companionship in the black sky above him. He felt fine and strong. Today had been a good test for judgment and control. A song came to mind that had been popular in the trenches. He sang it under his breath.

I'm always chasing rainbows,
Watching clouds drifting by,
My schemes are just like all my dreams,
Ending in the sky ...

HAY RIVER WAS A RAMBLING, low-lying Royal North West Mounted Police detachment town on the south shore of Great

Slave Lake. Creed reported his grim news to the sergeant in charge. The community suffered a deep shock over the loss of a quarter of the detachment, including the commanding officer. Creed oversaw the local doctor's autopsies, a science he had given some study to, and then attended the burial of his three colleagues in the little RNWMP cemetery.

A breeze off the lake kept the blackflies at bay. Armstrong's pale, thin wife and wide-eyed daughter were at the funeral, and he spoke condolences to them and reassured them their father and husband had done his duty honourably and not suffered. He felt badly for them, alone in this rough land, and hoped they'd go back to her family in Minnesota. At the funeral a photographer tried to take Creed's picture and he turned angrily away from the camera. Creed hated photographs and shied away from attention.

A telegram came to the Hay River office ordering him to report back to his commanding officer in Edmonton. He had only been on loan at Hay River. He had his clothes washed, had a bath and shave, and put on his khaki field uniform in time to board the riverboat south to Fort McMurray, and from there, the train to Edmonton. Lulled by the gentle rocking through the hilly lake country and forests of scrub, white spruce, and aspen, he slept for a couple of hours, and then woke to the new topography of a few gatherings of poplar and white birch and the flattening prairie grasslands. He wrote a letter to Cunningham's wife in Toronto and one to Reas's mother in Weyburn to post in the city. Creed was good at these letters. He had written scores of them in France, always trying to put in a personal memory or two. As he finished the Reas letter he looked out ahead to see in the distance the multi-storey brick buildings of Edmonton, and as the train slowed for its approach into North Station he took a deep breath to calm himself and prepare for his re-entry into civilization.

EDMONTON HAD BOOM-TOWN enthusiasm. First it was the lucrative fur trade, then it was cattle transported east on the new railway. Then, during the gold rush of '97 and '98, it turned from a sleepy town to a city, a staging ground for the almost-impossible overland route to the goldfields of the Klondike. Edmonton hosted, provisioned, and fleeced those hardy souls, men and even a few women, who set off through forests and muskeg, across rivers and mountain ranges on vehicles as diverse as steam-driven tractors featuring enormous wheels and wind-driven wagons. They dragged flatboats hundreds of miles and pedalled bicycles until they sank to their hubs. Very few Klondikers who set off from Edmonton ever made it as far as the goldfields, and a swath of abandoned supplies and vehicles lay scattered for five hundred miles across the hostile topography that had defeated them. But the merchants of Edmonton counted their money and the city prospered.

Soon the promise of gold had waned, but the population in the east had grown and their demands with them. Now wheat was king and Edmonton grain farmers became rich. Then, with the war looming, her vast coal and oil deposits became her principal currency: a deep, rich seam was located directly under the main street of the town.

Wartime Edmonton had its share of boom-town cowboys, soldiers, roughnecks, and railway workers, but on the surface the city retained a certain Victorian dignity and order that her citizens energetically endorsed. It might be a western boom town, but it had class. The city had been well designed, laid out in a grid: streets going north and south, avenues going east and west, each given a number, with a few exceptions, such as the central Jasper Avenue. The city extended north and south of the broad, winding North Saskatchewan River in almost equal measure, with the downtown and government offices on the north side.

There were numerous churches of all Christian denominations. In the summertime, garden parties and strawberry socials were popular. There were riverboat rides out of town to picnic sites on the open prairie, bands accompanying with both classical and popular music. And on the short winter weekend days there were snow festivals with skating on the river, complete with Chinese lanterns and cauldrons of hot chocolate, often fortified from hip bottles and flasks in defiance of the prohibition.

It was apparent that Edmonton valued order and good government, and the citizens could be outspoken if the government didn't please them. There were labour strikes and public demonstrations against higher taxes. The good people of Edmonton were pleased with themselves and what they had accomplished. Deemed the capital of Alberta in 1906, the city had an image to maintain, unlike that crass cowtown to the south called Calgary.

The Edmonton RNWMP office and barracks had been completed only two years before. The patterned brick structure was nothing less than a castle, with battlements and towers, a fine stone entryway, and an extensive courtyard with lawns and gardens. A full moat was abandoned as impractical only in the later stages of construction. There was even a secret subterranean tunnel leading down into the river valley, presumably in case the inhabitants had to escape an attack by a marauding army from, say, Calgary. Or if the Cree and Blackfoot and Blood tribes, inspired by the ghost of Sitting Bull, put their differences aside to make an assault against the capital. This bold structure was built to provide tangible evidence to anyone inclined to oppose it of the strong and impassive presence of the law.

CREED IMMEDIATELY REPORTED to his commanding officer. Superintendent G.S. Worsley was tall and lean, with old-fashioned sideburn whiskers, a Church of England monarchist

who believed his life's work was extending sound English principles into the Northwestern Territories of Canada. He tolerated Creed's Scots Presbyterian upbringing as a lesser evil. "At least you're not an Irishman or a papist," he had told him. He was pleased to find a man who favoured extended, lonely patrols in the North. In this, Creed was a rare commodity. In turn Creed liked Worsley, despite his political views.

Creed entered the large, well-appointed office. On the wall were several English prints showing glorious battle scenes from the Crimean, Boer, and Napoleonic wars. Worsley was reading the report Creed had telegraphed from Hay River. Creed saluted him, standing at attention in front of the desk. Worsley called him to ease and expressed his sadness at the loss of his colleagues, the three good men from the Hay River detachment.

"How is the head injury?" The bruising from Begley's shotgun butt was still quite visible.

"Fine, sir. Looks worse than it is."

Worsley gestured with the pages in his hand. "Good report, Creed. On a sad, unfortunate episode. No way of predicting it."

"They were all good men."

"Yes. Well, congratulations on how well you handled it all under the circumstances."

"I appreciate that, sir." He waited a respectful moment. "Sir, Cowperthwaite mentioned to me there was another assignment. Someone lost beyond Fort Norman."

The Superintendent put down the Begley-Ross report and pushed it to one side, studying Creed. Though the man had been under his command for seven months, to Worsley he remained something of a mystery. He knew Creed had been a soldier early on in the war in Europe, and he noted how Creed's experience of the trenches lingered in his occasional long, haunted looks. Worsley had seen a nervousness in other veterans too, but in

Jack there was something else: a spiritual burden, a *gravitas*, a sadness. Worsley had not pursued it, of course; the man had a right to his privacy. And he had become one of Worsley's best men at a time when men were scarce.

"You just got back, man. And this could be a long one. I think you should take some time off after what you've been through. I'll send Svenson. He'll make a good job of it."

"What is the case, sir?"

"Don't worry about it, Creed. Really. Take a rest. Stay here in Edmonton and help me with enlistment. Manpower is the problem now, with the war sucking away every available man. And you have your ... friendship with the magistrate's niece. Take some time in town. You have a bright future here in Edmonton."

"Thank you, sir, but can you tell me about the mission?"

The Superintendent paused, showing minor irritation at Jack's stubbornness, and then began. "All right. This report comes from Ottawa. Two years ago two papist priests ... oblates ... Fathers Rouvière and Le Roux, went north to 'convert the heathen.' Rouvière had been up there for a couple of years, guided by a trapper named Hornby. Rouvière was joined by Father Le Roux at Fort Norman, early summer of 1913, where they provisioned."

Worsley turned and gestured to a map of western Canada on the wall behind him, his hand tracing a line of breathtaking distance north from Edmonton. "Then from Fort Norman by canoe up the Bear River and across the Great Bear Lake to the Dease system. They had a cabin some miles up the Dease as a base. That summer they travelled past the treeline and portaged over the watershed up through the Dismal Lakes. They were sending letters and reports back with traders every couple of months. Those letters stopped more than two years ago. Some Cree said they saw them well north of the treeline. They may even have got as far north as the Coppermine River, inside the

Arctic Circle. Then recently a Métis trader showed up at Fort Norman with some of their belongings—some clothing, a rosary, a prayer book. Everyone believes the worst. Father Rouvière's a good friend of Bishop Breynat, and Le Roux is a second cousin of the French ambassador in Ottawa, with a wealthy family in Paris. Anyway, our orders come from the Office of the Attorney General. They want all the resources of the police dispatched. Well, until I re-man Hay River, I don't have much in the way of resources. I think the damn priests are probably just lost somewhere, unable to get letters out and so on. Svenson's a good man for the job."

"I'd like to take it, sir."

"I think you should sleep on this, Corporal."

"What are the specific orders, sir?"

"You go north as far as you can, possibly to the Coppermine River, find the priests, and bring 'em out."

"What if they don't want to come out?"

"Persuade them. Get at least one of 'em back to Fort Norman, anyway, and telegraph their people and Ottawa will be happy. After that they can do whatever the hell they want."

"And if they're dead, sir?"

"Conduct the appropriate investigation. If foul play is suspected, make an appropriate arrest."

"Yes, sir. Does Cowperthwaite have all the area maps, post locations?"

"This is the Coppermine, Creed. It's never been charted. No police posts. No credible maps at all beyond the mouth of the Dease River or south of the Arctic Ocean coast, except a few sketches from Franklin."

"Franklin? *The* Franklin?"

"Yes. An earlier expedition. The trapper Hornby operates along the southern edge, but he doesn't go into the Coppermine.

Other than that, Franklin was the last white man we know of to get that far. Except maybe the priests.”

Worsley was gesturing again to the map behind him, pointing to the Mackenzie River delta near the border with Alaska. “See, the Mackenzie delta here has whales ... and Hudson Bay has furs ...” He indicated the huge bite out of central Canada named after the captain whose mutinous crew put him and his young son out to sea in an open boat to perish. “But the Coppermine”—he pointed to the 100,000 square miles of empty, uncharted space between—“has nothing. It’s a wasteland. Samuel Hearne spoke of copper deposits, but no one’s had the courage to go and find out. Probably the most isolated place left in all the Americas.”

Superintendent Worsley turned away from the map. “There is one other element to this you should be aware of. It was in the orders from Ottawa. As empty and isolated as it is up there, it’s ours. Ottawa sees this as an opportunity to show the world a Canadian presence there, whether it’s a rescue or a burial.”

“Understood.”

“You’ll need to pick up a translator in Fort Norman, if you can find one.”

“My Cree’s good and I have some Inuktitut.”

“Copper Eskimo’s all different, they say.”

“I prefer to travel alone.”

“Take a translator, Creed. You don’t have time for language lessons.”

Creed hesitated, then nodded. “All right.”

“You’ll have to winter up there, of course, so take a year’s worth of provisions. Cowperthwaite’ll help you with all that. Any questions?”

Creed’s heart beat a little faster. An honourable mission. Months of solitude.

“No, sir.”

“You’re sure, then?”

“I’ll go.”

“You don’t want to talk to Miss Harvey first?”

“No, sir.”

Worsley paused a moment to study him. “I’m sure you have your reasons, Creed, but you should think about spending more time in the city. With people. Maybe after this one.”

“I’ll think about it, sir.”

IT WAS AFTER DINNER and several officers of “D” Company were smoking in the mess. Corporal Dewey, his boots up on a table, blew three perfect smoke rings from his cheap black panatela before posing the question.

“So, at what point do you decide to eat your partner?”

The contents of Creed’s Ross-Begley report had been circulated.

“You have to be damned hungry,” Svenson, a tall, muscular blond man with a stained moustache, concluded.

“Or damned irritated.”

“Two winters in a one-room cabin could do it,” a little Yorkshireman named Woodard speculated.

“My question is,” Dewey continued, “was it the irritation or the hunger? When you can’t stand him anymore, do you slit his throat and then say to yourself, ‘My, what a tender little shank.’ Or is it the other way around? And what the hell d’you eat first?”

Corporal Lyle Cowperthwaite spoke through the laughter and speculation. “This is all sick, and you’re ruining my digestion. Begley was obviously an insane murderer.” Cowperthwaite was slight, with jet-black hair framing a pleasant, cherubic face often given over to indignation.

“What if we were out on patrol and I died of starvation before you, Cowper?” Dewey inquired. “Would you die before eating me?”

“Yes!”

“You’d be a goddamned fool.”

“Come on, Cowper. If the man died of natural causes—” Woodard prompted.

“Doesn’t matter. Human flesh is sacred.”

“So is human life. Isn’t it?”

“This case isn’t about survival. This is about the murders of four men. Almost five. Imagine what Creed’s been through. Surprised he’s still sane.”

“Assuming he was.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cowperthwaite glared at Dewey.

“Creed’s a bit of an odd duck.”

“He’s just quiet, unlike some!”

“Do we know anything about him? Where he’s from? What he did before the force?”

“He put in his war service, like Ralph and Frank here.” Cowperthwaite gestured to a trooper with a glass eye and another with a wooden leg. “I heard he saw the worst of it.”

“Was he wounded?”

“Don’t know.”

“Don’t get me wrong, he seems a good fellow—”

“Jack Creed is one of the finest troopers—”

“Oh, shut up, Cowperthwaite. We all love Creed. We’re just talking ...”

All fell silent as Creed entered the barracks and put down his knapsack.

Cowperthwaite stood up. “Hi, Jack.”

“And here he is,” Dewey said expansively.

There were reserved greetings all around, several condolences for the lost men, and acknowledgement of the tough patrol. Creed smiled thinly, a little awkward in their midst as he shook their hands, warmed by their respect. He ended with Cowperthwaite, who leaned in to ask quietly, as if in collaboration, "Did you take the new assignment?"

Creed looked at him. "Yes."

"Up to the Coppermine. Alone?" Dewey asked. They all knew.

"They're short of men at Hay River. I don't mind."

"My God, man, it's almost to the North Pole."

Sergeant Freeman looked up from his book through wire-rimmed glasses. "You'll be meeting Paleoeskimos." Freeman enjoyed a photographic memory. While most of the troopers owned a couple of books, Freeman's parents had sent him an entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which he'd set about reading from page one, and he retained most of it.

"Oh, listen to who's got to the Ps."

"Paleoeskimos: probably the most primitive humans on earth. Quite distinct from our Indians, you know. Closest relatives: the Chukchi people of northern Asia and the Koryaks of Siberia. It's now universally accepted that they crossed the ice bridge from Siberia thousands of years ago." Freeman looked around at the faces, pleased with himself.

"Well, I think it's brilliant," Cowperthwaite continued. "Patrolling that far north. Rescuing people, bringing civilization to the remote corners of the country."

For a second Creed's face flashed impatience. "I don't want to bring civilization anywhere, Lyle. Just want to see that the priests are all right. There any hot water left?" Creed was in a hurry.

"We saved you some."

Creed was headed for the showers, checking his watch and taking it off.

“You know, Creed,” Dewey said, examining his panatela, “you’ll almost be up to where the Franklin expedition was lost.”

Creed hesitated in the doorway. “I’ll give your regards to his ghost.”

“He’s probably found the Passage by now,” Svenson speculated.

“You know, they were eating each other at the end,” Dewey said, looking to get a reaction out of Cowperthwaite.

“Oh, shut up, Dewey. It’s never been proven. I can’t believe Englishmen would eat one another.”

“I don’t know, but if that’s the local cuisine, Creed, better pack a bottle of Worcestershire.”

Creed smiled as they laughed. Dewey slowly, carefully, blew another ring. Creed could hear their talk in the mess as he turned on the shower and waited for it to warm up.

“Eating human flesh. It’s unthinkable!”

“You know, Cowperthwaite, I’ve often thought, with some carrots and onions, you’d make a nice little stew.”

The laughter rose again. Creed smiled, then he turned and stepped into the luxury of almost-instant hot water.

AS CREED LEFT THE BARRACKS and walked quickly down Jasper past Wellington Terrace and into the market district, he was shocked by the city noise and congestion. Horse-drawn wagons vied with muffler-less motor cars, honking trucks, and pedestrians. So many people, heading intently in all directions, like a disturbed school of trout. He made hesitant progress through them toward his rendezvous.

She was waiting at the corner of 103rd Street and smiled broadly when she saw him. Nicole Harvey was the most beautiful woman Creed had ever seen—curly golden-blond hair

cropped in a modern style, a healthy blush to her flawless skin, inquiring hazel eyes, a perpetual smile on her full, responsive lips, and beneath the stylish cotton dress the generous curves of a woman. When she spoke, his words dried up. When she took his hand, his strength left him. When she laughed, his knees weakened. What Nicole Harvey saw in Creed, he had no idea. But here she was.

She had come west from Toronto to live with and care for her favourite uncle, Horace Harvey, a respected magistrate whose beloved wife had died of diphtheria two years before. Nicole loved and confidently embraced the West, though she maintained an eastern sophistication. After only a few weeks of seeing each other they had, surprisingly, made love, once, in the library when the magistrate and the servants were out and they had had more than one glass of sherry. They had been a little awkward in a pleasant way, but quite successful, and neither regretted it. Nicole had been excited and pleased by it all. A second opportunity had not arisen, and to invite her to a hotel room seemed sordid.

She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek, then saw the bruising on the side of his face. "Oh, darling, what did they do to you, poor thing? Does it hurt?"

"No."

He was relieved she did not ask for the details of the killings. It was another world and he was happy to be in the comfort of this one, with her, enjoying the waft of her perfume, the closeness of her body, the music of her voice, if only for a short while. As they walked west on the new cement sidewalks of Jasper Avenue, gazing in the shops, she held on to his arm and talked away about fashions, and news that Creed had missed: the discovery of a fresh oil field northwest of the city, the capture of the German-held town of St-Eloi by a Canadian regiment,

discussions with the Americans about them joining the war, a woman who had killed her husband with an axe while he slept.

“But my question is,” Nicole teased, “did she use the blunt end or the blade end? It didn’t explain that in the papers. The blunt end is less messy.”

“Guess it depends on how she felt about him.”

She released her sparkling laugh that made men on the street turn and look. “You’re funny, Jack.”

They stopped for a moment while Nicole dug in her handbag for a silver cigarette case, and with a furtive glance up and down the street she put the Sweet Caporal between her lips. Her uncle Horace disapproved of women smoking, but he would still be in court. Creed vaguely disapproved himself, not because she was a woman but because the smell reminded him of the trenches. Everyone smoked in the trenches. The smell of tobacco and rum before an attack, the smell of tobacco and blood after. But here, as he lit it for her, he found he could not take his eyes off her full lips on the cigarette and the way they parted when she exhaled.

And yet he had chosen to leave her again and go north. Something powerful within him rallied to the offer of extended solitude. How could he explain it to her when he didn’t understand it himself? He was determined to tell her now. He was going to leave her and the friendly exuberance of this young town again, and go off, much farther this time, into the barren lands for a year.

“I assume you’re going to take me to the garden party on Saturday night? I have a new gold dress that will look smashing beside your blue serge.”

“Garden party? Where is it?”

“At your barracks, you donkey. Don’t they tell you anything? Mayor Henry and his wife will be there, and some of the cast from *Gloria’s Romance*.”

“Who’s Gloria?”

“It’s a play, Jack. At the Majesty. Billie Burke’s in it. With a five-piece band. I went with Harold and Ruby last week. I’d go again if you want. I’ll get tickets for Thursday night.”

“I’d like to, Nicky, but I have something to tell you.”

At his serious tone her lips reconfigured into the slightest of frowns.

“I’ll be going away again for a while. Another assignment.”

“Going where? You just got home.”

“Two priests have got themselves lost up north.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Months. Maybe a year.”

She stopped and turned to him in shock, throwing the cigarette into the street. “A year! That’s not fair! You don’t have to do that. They can’t make you. Someone else can go. I’ll have my uncle talk to Worsley. They can find someone else. It’s ridiculous—”

“Nicole, the priests could be in trouble. I want to go.”

The hazel eyes appraised him. The real pain suddenly reflected in them startled him. “You *want* to go? You *want* to leave me? I thought you loved me. I thought we were going to talk about ... a future together.”

“I would like that. I’d like that very much.”

“Then why is it you want to go off and live like some nomadic hermit? Do you hate me so much?”

“Of course not. It’s my job. It’s what I have to do.”

“I don’t understand you, Jack.”

“It’s not you, Nicole. You’re wonderful.”

“Then what is it? Why do you want to leave a comfortable life with people who care about you and go off into the bush where you’ll freeze to death or drown or get eaten by a bear?”

Her rising, angry voice projected well even in the din of the traffic and pedestrians slowed to look at them.

“I just need to be out there a little longer. I don’t think it’ll be forever. Maybe this will be the last time.”

She was fighting back tears as she studied him. She knew he was a good man and she believed he was fond of her. She had let him make love to her once and had never regretted it. He was polite and congenial and would make such a good husband, but she sensed within him the presence of doors that were closed to her. Though he listened and said the right words, she sometimes sensed she never had his full attention.

“Please don’t go.”

Creed looked at her in silence.

“It would just help if I knew why you’re doing this. Going back out there. What do you get out of it?”

Creed thought about this a moment and came as close to the truth as he ever had.

“Peace.”

Nicole’s lips trembled. “I have to go.” She turned and walked away from him. Though he wanted to, he did not follow.

JACK TOOK NICOLE to the garden party at the barracks on Saturday, and she was right—her gold dress and his formal blue serge uniform complemented each other beautifully. She smiled proudly when guests found out he was to leave again.

“Oh, you know Jack, hightailing it for the bush every chance he gets. I try not to take it personally.”

She is magnificent, Creed thought as he watched her put on a brave face despite the pain he caused her. *She’s probably too good for me.*

He was scheduled to take the train north on Tuesday. She was civil with him as he prepared to depart, and even made jokes. They did not discuss the trip. On the evening before he left, there was a small gathering at her uncle’s house and she

toasted his journey and wished for his success and safety, and he marvelled again at her poise and selflessness.

She dutifully saw him off at the station the next morning, and for the first time since he had told her of the mission, there were tears. They embraced and kissed, but then she looked into his eyes.

“Jack, I love you. You’re the only man I want. Please take good care, my darling. I don’t want to lose you. You find those priests. You do what you have to do, and come back home to me.”

“All right. Thank you for understanding, Nicky.”

“Fine, then. Good luck.”

She did not kiss him again. She stood for an awkward moment, then before the tears got worse, she turned and left him. For a moment he felt the hollowness of regret. He hated that he was such a disappointment to her. But there was nothing he could do. He turned and stepped onto the train.

CREED WAS THINKING about that moment now as he stood on the deck of the little steamer named, with a determined lack of imagination, the *Mackenzie River*, making its way north between the shifting sandbars and the deadheads of that noble waterway. She had said she loved him, at the station. He had said nothing in return of love. He had never been sure of what that was and whether he was capable of it. He hoped so. But did he love Nicole? This he didn’t know.

Creed was in his field-uniform shirt sleeves, and in his hand was the journal of Samuel Hearne’s travels in the Arctic, *A Journey to the Northern Ocean*. It was an early edition, a gift from Cowperthwaite. Hearne had been the first white man to see the Arctic Ocean, in 1771, and his personal impressions, told in a florid but accurate accounting, would be pleasant company on the voyage. He had that and *The Valley of the Moon* by Jack

London and Ford Maddox Ford's new novel, *The Good Soldier*. Lyle Cowperthwaite had also given him a dubious collection of Robert Service poems with a bookmark at "Clancy of the Mounted Police":

In the little Crimson Manual it's written plain and
clear
That who would wear the scarlet coat shall say
good-bye to fear
Shall be a guardian of the right, a sleuth-hound
of the trail
In the little Crimson Manual there's no such word
as "fail."

Creed had left the simple-minded book on the train.

He now felt the power of the huge river beneath the sturdy little boat and looked across its vast surface, which cut between the Franklin Mountains in the east and the Mackenzie range in the west, their snowy summits in stark contrast to the deep azure skies. He looked up to see an immense golden eagle riding the thermals high above the river, too high to spot prey, apparently just for pleasure. And Creed considered for a moment the bird's point of view. He imagined what he himself must look like, a tiny, warm creature carried on the wide water in a little vessel far below, hardly more than flotsam. He was heading into the great North again, moving even farther away from the clamorous din of humankind with its righteousness, arrogance, and death. And Creed realized suddenly why he loved the North so much. He could now answer the question she had asked of him. It was the freedom of insignificance within this enormous country that breathed life into his ailing spirit and lifted the weight from his heart.