

chapter one

CARDIFF, WALES

Liz Thomas shifted in her pew and returned her attention to the words flowing from Rev. Arthur Hammond. She wanted the funeral service in the Methodist church to be over. She touched her handbag, where the mysterious four pages of faded type were demanding her attention. She had discovered them in a creased brown envelope among her mother's possessions, along with a handful of other bits and pieces.

What on earth could a confidential Canadian military report from October 1944 have to do with her mother? And why had it been hidden in a safety deposit box, in a bank that Liz had no idea her parents ever used?

The envelope was addressed, in faded blue handwriting, to "Mrs. Kristin Evans, c/o The Manager, Lloyd's Bank, Cowbridge Road, Cardiff, Glamorgan, S. Wales." The envelope bore a Canadian stamp with the head of King George VI on it, and a return address in Calgary. Liz had gone alone and collected the package from the bank's vault the day before, after her mother's lawyer had taken her aside and handed her an envelope containing the deposit box key and a letter from her mother authorizing Liz to open the box. Her parents had never done their banking at anywhere but the nearby Midland Bank branch, of that she was certain. She had asked the Lloyd's Bank manager how long her parents had the safety deposit box.

"Your mother has had it since long before I came," he said, "and I started as a clerk twenty-five years ago."

Finalizing the funeral arrangements had kept her too busy to do more than take a quick look at the box's contents. "Your *mother* has had it ..." Not, "Your *parents* ..." That's what he'd said.

Liz touched her handbag, felt the package of papers. She knew her mother wouldn't have minded her impatience. Kristin Evans had told Rev. Hammond, two days before her death, "Remember, don't keep the people there long, they'll have things to get on with." She spoke in that slightly rounded Canadian accent that hadn't altered a whit since she crossed the Atlantic in 1947.

Liz nodded her approval as Rev. Hammond caught her eye and

smiled. He was paying tribute to her mother's lifetime of contributions, to society in general and to her family in particular. "... selfless individual ... devoted mother ..."

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Liz's son David touched her arm and gave it a light squeeze. Her daughter Bronwen, pregnant with her first child, touched a tissue to her face. Liz's husband Michael sat at the end of the pew.

Liz considered herself a fortunate woman. She'd had caring parents, a loving and reliable husband, and both her kids had survived growing up and had made sensible career choices and marriages, which these days, well ...

"Kristin Evans ... a loving wife ..."

And there were the photographs she had glimpsed in a couple of the smaller envelopes.

The vicar continued listing Kristin Evans' qualities. He had eulogized Liz's father in a similar fashion six years before. The vicar had lauded Gareth Evans as a courageous veteran of the Canadian forces in World War II, a former prisoner of war, and later as a respected and crusading journalist who had campaigned for the underprivileged during his lengthy career with the *South Wales Echo*.

Liz's parents had never spoken much about their early years. She knew that they had been born in the same year, 1912—Kristin in Lethbridge, Alberta, Gareth in Aberdare, in the Rhondda Valley not far from Cardiff. His family had moved to Canada when he was a child. She knew that they were high school sweethearts and after they married they had lived in a small town where no one lived anymore, that was nothing more than a name on a map, Willow Creek, in southern Alberta.

"Report on the Incident at Willow Creek." Right there on the first page.

For their times, they must have been an unusual couple to have been married. Liz had determined that they had waited twelve years before having a child. There had been the war, of course, with her father away for almost six years. But the six years before that, well, problems with conceiving were not unusual.

She'd had different relationships with each parent. Her mother was warm and affectionate. Her father was often withdrawn, detached, as if he saw her only from a distance. She could not

remember receiving many hugs from him. Not that he had been a poor father. Quite the opposite. She had wanted for very little as she grew up as an only child. But she often wished she had brothers or sisters. She had asked about that, just once, when she was in her early teens. Her father had continued reading his newspaper. Later her mother said it was "just one of those things" and left it at that. Sometimes Liz caught her father looking at her with a kind of sadness, bordering, she thought, on disappointment. She mentioned it to her mother, adding the thought that maybe her father would have preferred to have had a son.

"No, it's just the way he is," her mother said. "His mind is often somewhere else. You have to remember that the war did strange things to people."

The vicar's words hinted at conclusion. "And in her final days ..."

There would be one more hymn before they moved to the cemetery for the interment. Then the gathering of neighbours and friends at home, with a lunch of her mother's favourite Wye salmon, cold-cuts, and drinks.

Liz glanced down at the tan leather handbag, a present from her mother on her last birthday. She itched to read the mysterious report. It was addressed to the District Officer Commanding Military District No. 13, Headquarters, Calgary, from a Major Gordon Muir of the Canadian Army's Provost Corps. Under the words "Copy" and "Restricted" was the heading "Report on the Incident at Willow Creek, Alberta, on August 30, 1944." A few sentences of handwritten notes had caught her eye at the bottom of the last page. Liz guessed that the writing, large rounded loops, was a woman's. The initial "M" concluded the notes, and then a sloping "P.S." and a couple of scribbled sentences, something about a shop. Also in the envelope was what looked like a wedding-invitation card, two or three smaller white envelopes, apparently containing letters, a couple of black-and-white photographs, and a newspaper clipping with head and shoulder shots of several young soldiers in uniform, including Liz's father. The story was dated December 10, 1944 and the headline said, "War heroes to be repatriated."

She knew that her father had served with the King's Own

Calgary Rifles, had been taken prisoner by the Germans after the abortive raid on Dieppe, and before the end of the war had been returned home under some agreement with the Germans. Liz had found it bizarre that warring nations could be civil enough to discuss and practise the exchange of prisoners.

Her parents rarely mentioned details of their life before leaving Canada. Liz knew only that she was born in Prince Rupert, on the north coast of British Columbia, on October 14, 1945. She knew that her father had been born in Wales and taken to Canada with his parents as a young child, and that a couple of years after the war he had chosen to return with his wife and daughter to the country of his birth. Liz had never met her Welsh-born Canadian grandparents, both long since dead. In their day people didn't just up and travel thousands of miles for family visits.

In earlier years Christmas cards would arrive from her father's sisters and their families from places like Lethbridge, Calgary, and Edmonton, and once, she remembered, from Yellowknife, in the Northwest Territories. She had looked it up on a map and had imagined polar bears and Eskimos. Her mother, who had no relatives of her own, wrote cards back. Her father never showed any interest in the exchanges, even though they were his sisters. Once, it must have been fifteen or so years ago, there was a letter with news of one of the sisters dying, then after that, nothing.

The graveside ceremony was mercifully brief, which would have pleased the no-nonsense Kristin. Back at the house on Greenwich Road, Liz kept busy until the last guest had left. Bronwen and David's wife Kyla helped her clear up while the three men quietly talked and worked their way through much of the remaining drink.

When all was cleared away, Liz poured herself a glass of Bristol Cream sherry and said she wouldn't mind a few minutes on her own. She went into the sitting room and closed the door behind her. She found her reading glasses on the sideboard and made herself comfortable on the chintz-covered settee under the bay window. She opened her purse and removed the four typed pages and unfolded them. She took a sip of her sherry and started reading.

To:

Brigadier J.L. Watson, V.C., M.C.
District Officer Commanding
Military District No. 13
1111 1st Street W.
Calgary, Alberta

From:

Major Gordon Muir
Canadian Provost Corps.

Oct. 2 1944

Subject:

Report on the events of Thursday, Aug. 30, 1944, at Dorney's Farm (also known as the "Spook House") near Willow Creek, Alberta, hereafter referred to as the Incident. (For the record: Camp 10 is one of our hostel camps, a much smaller version of the establishments such as those at Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, which hold 10,000 and more German POWs. Camp 10's POW population is 120. The camp, which was established one year ago, is situated approximately two miles east of Willow Creek, which itself has a population of about 340. The POWs, most of whom were regularly assigned to work in areas around the community, generally were accepted and reasonably well received by the local people.)

Preamble:

It is possible that Veterans Guard of Canada Cpl. Steve Roper could have prevented the tragedy, had he chosen to intervene at some earlier point by reporting the events that took place involving Sgt. Major Jack Bishop and the German POW Kruger and the boy, David Evans.

The Report:

The incident appears to have had its beginning on July 8, 1944, when the three boys, David Evans, Ian Mackenzie and Pauli Aiello, first saw the German POW, Eric Kruger. While there is no evidence of direct contact between the German and the Evans boy at this stage, it would seem to be as reasonable a point to begin as any. There is little doubt that the relationship that eventually developed, innocent as it appears to have been, was a catalyst for what occurred. Much of the information about the events of this first day came from interviews with Pauli Aiello.

Liz looked up from the page, her brow creased.

David Evans. A relative? One of her Canadian cousins? Maybe her father had a brother who had children, although she had only ever heard of his sisters. Had one of the sisters married into another Evans family, and was this David her son? Liz sat back and sipped her sherry.

chapter two

JULY 8, 1944

WILLOW CREEK, SOUTHERN ALBERTA

The gopher stopped its dumb whistling. David thought it looked like a near-sighted little old man as it stood on its back legs.

Heavy rains in the last two weeks had transformed a dry and browning land into a rolling panorama of vivid greens and the delicate yellows of ripening wheat. The colours blurred and blended as the prairie flowed westward until it reached the base of the distant foothills, beyond which loomed the vast shapes of the Rockies. Towering pillars of cloud dominated the sky, tiers of deep blue and puff-ball white stacked one atop the other, like a gigantic layered cake. Between each layer the sun forged a band of brass. Twin rainbows had dissected the sky, one of them forming a complete arch—pots of gold!—on the tail of a brief warm shower.

David guessed the end of the rain had brought the gopher out of its hole. He pressed his right cheek against the butt of the single-shot .22 Winchester. If he shut both eyes and concentrated hard, he could feel his dad's strong, tanned hand adjusting the rifle in his grip, could smell his pipe tobacco and his sweat through one of the wool shirts he always wore. David shifted his left hand forward on the gun's forearm and let the smooth wood rest between his forefinger and thumb. He cocked the oiled bolt and slid it back, and picked up one of the slim brass-jacketed bullets that lay in the grass beside him. He slipped the shell into the breech and slid the bolt closed, pushing the shell into the firing chamber. He dabbed sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and wiped the damp onto the leg of his coveralls before bringing his hand back onto the polished stock, resting a curled forefinger on the trigger.

He blinked and stared down the barrel.

"Nail the sonofabitch!" Ian whispered.

David choked back laughter. Ian was eleven now, a year older than David, and he swore all the time. According to Pauli Aiello, Ian even used the F-word when his mother could hear it. But then Pauli said he had also heard Ian's mother use it herself, telling one of the cats to get the fuck out of her way. David wasn't sure if

he believed it. Pauli laughed with his face buried in the tall spear grass that hid them from the gopher.

David was flat on his belly, legs splayed out behind him, like Johnny Canuck when he was mowing down Germans in the comics. An image from the comic he'd read the night before jumped into his head. It showed a newspaper called *The Berlin Blat*. The headline said, "Brontz Munition Factory Sabotaged—Johnny Canuck Believed Responsible," and below that was a sketch of Adolf Hitler, eyes wide and glaring, shouting at some Germans, "Ach, fools! You promise arrests but dot svine Canuck goes on destroying our war machine!"

David fervently hoped so.

He squinted through the V of the rear sight, lining up with the narrow wedge of the front sight and centreing on the gopher, which continued to stand upright, twitching its comical mouth and nose. The sun's reflected heat rose in tiny rippling waves from the sides and top of the .22's slim barrel.

There had been a real row when his dad had brought the gun home.

His mother protested. "He's far too young to have a gun, Gareth. The damned thing's nearly as big as he is!"

His father replied, in that quiet tone he used when he'd made up his mind, that the sooner David got to know how to handle a gun safely, the better. That tone always made David's mother mad as could be.

"I'm not Olwyn!" she would yell, which was a reference to David's grandmother, who usually did what his grandfather said, with no argument. His mother would add, "That might have worked in the old country, Gareth, but it's not going to work here! This is not bloody Wales."

But his father got his way with the gun argument. A few days later he walked into the house and, in the same firm voice, told them he was joining the army. David thought that was the bravest thing he'd ever heard. But his mother's face went white. She turned, left the room, ran upstairs, and slammed the door behind her.

David blinked, then closed his left eye. He heard his dad's voice: "Take a slow, deep breath in, let it out real easy, then squeeze the trigger. Don't pull it, squeeze it."

The gopher suddenly jumped and danced a step sideways, before folding like a dropped glove. It twitched once before lying still.

"Great shot, Davie!" Ian scrambled to his feet and galloped down a shallow hollow and up a slight slope toward the crumpled brownish-yellow corpse.

David remained staring down the rifle barrel, the sharp smell of ignited gunpowder crinkling his nose. Ian's patched flannel pants and the tops of his cut-down, hand-me-down black leather boots filled the rifle sights as he galloped the twenty yards or so to the dead gopher. He swept the animal off the ground and held it up like a hand puppet, wagging it at David.

"*Kapow!*" Ian shouted. He waved the dead gopher over his head as he trotted back to their ambush position. "Right in the head, Davie!"

Where the gopher's face should have been was a stew of fur and blood, speckled with fragments of white bone.

David made a face. "*Yeuch!*" He rolled over onto back, waving away Ian who danced around, jiggling the dead animal at him. Pauli joined him, whooping and jumping about.

David laughed at them, then closed his eyes and scrunched his face up against the blinding heat of the afternoon sun. Sweat beaded on his brow and cheeks and ran past his ears and into his damp, coppery hair.

"You're a bloody sniper, Davie!" Ian yelled, and David sat up, grinning.

Pauli took his turn with the gun, but the gophers had gone to ground and Pauli had to make do with a long shot at a red-winged blackbird. It squawked angrily and flew away as Pauli's shot thudded into the base of a nearby tuft of grass.

"Shit, you couldn't hit a cow in the ass," Ian scoffed.

David retrieved the rifle and removed bits of grass and soil from the barrel and the stock. He laughed as Ian pushed Pauli to the ground and gave him a knuckle rub on the side of the head until Pauli cried out, "*Owww! Ouch! Quit it!*"

Pauli got to his feet, holding his head. His face was red and he was almost crying. He muttered, "What a jerk you are, Mackenzie."

"Takes one to know one, Spaghetti," Ian laughed.

Pauli wagged the middle finger of his right hand.

It would have ended with Ian pounding Pauli into the dirt until

he cried uncle, but a distant sound and movement had caught David's attention.

"Listen up, you guys," he said, waving a hand to still the other two. He shaded his eyes and squinted across the half mile of rolling pasture and croplands between them and the main street of Willow Creek, to the east.

A convoy of three olive-green army trucks, trailed by a rising veil of dust, bumped along the road into Willow Creek from the south.

Through the shimmering air, the boys could see hazy details. The backs of the trucks were open, the canvas tops rolled forward off the iron ribs and stacked against the cab. In each truck seven or eight figures were visible, seated on benches fitted along the sides. The rumbling of motors reached the boys, and they heard the pitch change, first on the lead truck, then in turn on the two following, as the drivers shifted down through the gears.

"Jerries!" Ian shouted. "They're going to your place, Davie, come on!"

The trucks were making a right turn off the road, pulling into the Willow Creek store and gas station.

"Come on!" Ian shouted. "I'll carry this!" He grabbed the rifle from Pauli's hands and the three of them ran, bounding down the slope, along a trampled path through the waving spear grass and onto the dry surface of a narrow rural road.

The army drivers had halted their vehicles and shut their motors off. The only sounds on the baked afternoon air were the thudding leather soles of boots and shoes on the road surface, and the quickened breathing of the boys as they raced to get a look at the latest batch of German prisoners of war.

chapter three

Incident at Willow Creek (Contd.) ...

A note on Kristin Evans: She appears to bear an intolerably heavy burden. It is possible that she feels guilty, even responsible for the events, although there is no apparent reason that she should. It is to be hoped that the good news she has recently received concerning her husband will mitigate her situation. She has requested that Lt. Evans not be advised of the situation until she can do it herself. She plans to be there for his disembarkation.

Liz Thomas sucked in a breath. She read the opening sentences again. Her mother had felt responsible, *guilty*, for what? She returned to the beginning of the report. It offered no explanation. Just names. The “good news” must surely have been about her father’s pending release. But the *guilt*, the *intolerably heavy burden ... requested that Lt. Evans not be advised of the situation?* What could it mean?

WILLOW CREEK

Kristin Evans looked up from feeding gas from the single Shell pump into the tank of Henry Jensen’s ancient Ford flatbed. Her conversation with Sally Marshall faded as they watched the military trucks park under the row of cottonwood trees shading the store’s forecourt. She rattled the nozzle, replaced the hose, and screwed the gas cap down. She wiped her hands on the front of her overalls and pushed her thick auburn hair back away from her forehead.

The truck drivers killed the transports’ throbbing motors. Behind Kristin, Henry Jensen, a grizzled farmer in his fifties, emerged from the doorway of the small general store. He handed liquorice strips to Sally Marshall’s twelve-year-old twins, Judith and Beth. The girls were dressed for a day in town. They wore identical pink cotton frocks that stopped above their sun-browned knees, and polished black ankle-strap shoes with short white socks. Each had a white ribbon tied in her straight, shoulder-length fair hair. Their mother, Sally, a short woman in her early thirties, wore a pale green chiffon frock with less room for manoeuvre

than had once been the case. The frock had a low neck, which showed her full breasts and was not quite long enough to cover her dimpled knees. Sally's blonde hair was swept back and fastened with a broad ribbon.

The five civilians studied the trucks and their passengers. Each truck held seven prisoners and a guard. The guards were either privates or lance-corporals. On their summer uniform khaki shirts they wore the oblong red shoulder flashes with dark blue letters of the Veterans Guard of Canada.

Most of the guards had served in the Great War, the war to end all wars, and were old enough to be the Germans' fathers. They carried rifles, some the old and unpredictable Ross rifles from their war, a few the modern, more reliable Lee Enfield .303s. They carried them casually, with no sense of intent. Neither they nor the men in their charge wanted or expected complications.

The Germans shot appraising glances at the two women, then looked away. One, younger than the others, winked at the Marshall girls and grinned. The girls blushed and looked down at their shoes.

The prisoners wore assorted items of clothing. Some still displayed parts of the service uniforms they had worn when captured, others wore the distinctive POW-issue blue shirts with the large darker blue or red circle that filled all but a small area of the shirt's back. The target, they joked.

Kristin examined their faces, several of them speckled with acne. *Boys, mostly, just boys. Jesus.*

One prisoner, sitting with his arm resting on the tailgate of the third truck, was older. He wore a peaked white naval cap, crushed and pushed back on his head. A wave of dark brown hair fell over his forehead. He would be about Kristin's age. He smiled as she caught his eye. Not a bold smile, but tentative, almost wistful. Kristin did not return the smile.

The passenger door on the lead truck opened and a slim man of medium height, wearing a corporal's two stripes on his rolled-up khaki shirt sleeves, stepped down. He had short silvery-blond hair, blue-green eyes, and a slight smile that suggested its owner perhaps had some knowledge others did not. Steve Roper was forty-four years old and had seen all the war he ever wanted to. That was during the two years from 1915 to 1917. His service to his

country had ended when shrapnel from a German hand-grenade shredded his left leg from ankle to thigh as the Canadian Corps advanced on German positions to take Vimy Ridge. He could almost conceal the limp it had left him with.

Roper's shirt was black with sweat. He grinned at Kristin Evans. "Outta smokes," he said. "Mrs. Marshall," he greeted Sally. She offered a brief smile and a nod, and a look that travelled and linked the short distance between him and Kristin at the gas pump.

Kristin's hazel eyes met the other woman's look and held it until Sally dropped her gaze and called to her daughters to get ready to leave.

"With you in a minute," Kristin told Roper. She glanced at the gas pump's register.

"And the liquorice," Henry Jensen reminded her.

"And the gas coupons, Henry. Two dollars and forty-five cents."

Henry Jensen handed her the gasoline ration coupons and three one-dollar bills.

"Willow Creek General Store. Gareth and Kristin Evans, proprietors" read the sign over the front entrance. Faded war posters were tacked to the walls on each side of the door. "Save to beat the Devil!" the one on the right exhorted, promoting the sale of war bonds. The horned Satan was a caricature of Adolf Hitler. The other poster displayed a ferocious-looking beaver, wielding a sword and wearing a soldier's tin hat with a maple leaf on the front. Marching alongside him was an equally ferocious lion armed with a sword and wearing a crown. Canada and Great Britain, side by side.

She turned as David, Ian, and Pauli trotted in off the road behind her, laughing and panting like puppies as they slowed to a walk then halted a few paces from the trucks. Kristin watched as the boys scanned the line of German faces now focused on them.

One of the prisoners was a youth in the grey field uniform of the German infantry. Kristin thought he looked as if he should be preparing to go back to school in a few weeks.

"Hello," he said.

The boys exchanged looks. Ian winked at David, then turned his face up to the youth. "Asshole," he said.

Pauli snickered. David glanced at his mother, then looked away.

The Veterans Guard private in the back of the truck snapped, "Hey, enough of that!" and pointed a stern finger at Ian, who only laughed.

The German boy may not have been certain of the word, but he seemed in no doubt about Ian's sentiment. His smile slipped and he dropped his gaze to his boots.

Kristin studied David, the tanned and slim, finely muscled arms, the dusty GWG bib overalls over the once-white short-sleeved cotton shirt. The hair, which she preferred him to keep a little longer than the stubby basin cuts sported by the other two, was the same deep chestnut shade as her own. He was an inch shorter than Pauli and barely came up to Ian's shoulders. He flicked his hair back from his eyes while he studied the Germans, inspecting each face in turn. She wanted to fold him in her arms and hug him, and by doing that make everything right again.

Beside her, as though he had read her mind, Steve Roper said, "He'll be okay." His hand brushed her sun-warmed arm. She pulled away and caught Sally Marshall's calculating eyes as she did.

Roper chuckled. "I'll put him in charge.

"David," he called.

"No, don't—" Kristin started to object, but Roper was already reaching up to the guard in the back of the first truck. "Gimme that," he said, indicating the private's Lee Enfield rifle.

The private grinned and passed the rifle down, butt first. The safety catch was on, but a full magazine was in place. David stepped over to him.

"Remember how to take the clip out?"

David nodded. "Yeah."

Roper handed David the rifle, and he turned and grinned at Ian and Pauli's envious faces. David held the rifle pointed to the sky, expertly depressed the spring-loaded release, and dropped the magazine with its load of five live rounds into his right hand.

"Well done, soldier! And next?" Roper prompted.

David worked the bolt several times, checked that the chamber was empty, sighted through the barrel, then pulled the trigger and heard the neutral click of the firing pin.

"I think we'll promote you to lance-jack." Roper laughed, and he ruffled David's hair.

Roper turned to Ian and Pauli with a military frown on his

tanned, lined face. "You two!" he snapped, every inch the parade square drill instructor. "Whad'ya think you're staring at?"

Pauli jumped and his eyes widened. Ian grinned and copied Roper's stance, his shoulders braced back and his skinny chest shoved forward.

"On parade here! At the double! And put that weapon down," he added sternly, pointing to David's Winchester .22 that Ian still carried. "Weapons experts only to be armed," he added, with a nod of his head to David.

The guards and the prisoners watched the show, most of them chuckling at the boys' performance.

Ian laid the .22 against the gas pump and Roper commanded, "Form up in threes!" Ian and Pauli trotted up and flanked David, grinning self-consciously.

"*Attenn-shun!*" Roper barked, and several of the prisoners in the trucks laughed aloud as the three boys jumped to Roper's command.

"Stand at ease!" Roper snapped, and the boys jumped into a smart hands-behind-the-back position that prompted two of the guards to applaud. "Stand easy," Roper ordered, and they relaxed.

"Not bad," Roper allowed. "Not bad. We'll have to work on it, though. You," he pointed at David. "Lance-Corporal Evans, you're in charge of this squad. Understood?" He frowned at David. "I said, is that understood?"

A Veterans Guard private laughed, "He's Bishop to a bloody tee, isn't he?" and the other guards nodded and smiled. Another added, "Not as big a prick, though," and all of them laughingly agreed.

David jumped to attention again, the rifle at the slope-arms position out front. "Yes," he said, squinting into the sun. "Yes, Corporal, I mean," he corrected himself.

"Good," Roper said. "And this squad is in charge of the convoy while I'm in the shop. Okay?"

"Yes, Corporal!" David replied. Ian looked fiercely at the Germans and squared his bony shoulders.

"Right then, men, do a good job, keep your eyes on them, don't let any of those buggers get away. I'll be back," he promised, and he turned and marched back to the steps where Kristin stood, her arms folded and her face grim.

"I *wish* you wouldn't do that," she said.

"Ah, look at them. They love it."

He chuckled at the sight of the three boys formed-up and maintaining a steely watch on the convoy, their heads sweeping from truck to truck. David's slim fingers were wrapped around the barrel and the butt of the .303. Most of the Veterans Guard members had lit cigarettes, conceding their guard duties to the newly assigned squad.

Kristin snapped, "That's the trouble, isn't it?"

She entered the store and Roper followed her.

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The German prisoner with the white naval cap had watched everything since the trucks had stopped. Eric Kruger, late of Admiral Karl Donitz's "Grey Wolves"—Germany's submarine service, which had the highest mortality rate of any of Hitler's armed services—would have bet that Cpl. Roper often ran out of cigarettes just about here. He had sensed the silent current flowing between Roper and the woman, seen the woman's tension, and noticed the pinch-mouthed disapproval of the other woman with the two girls.

Eric studied the three boys. He easily made the connection between the good-looking woman and the smallest boy, the one Roper called David. Even if they hadn't exchanged the little unspoken greeting, the one that flipped Eric's heart over, the likeness was unmistakable. The hair, the fine planes of the face, and the deep hazel eyes behind long, dark lashes. He chuckled involuntarily at the other two, the tall one with the spiky red hair, throwing back his shoulders to make the most of an almost skeletal chest, and the tubby one who threw repeated sideways glances at the other two and modified his posture to copy theirs.

The boy David was inspecting him, his eyes moving from Eric's patched blue shirt with the faded chief telegrapher's badge, up to the hat with the submariner's crest above the squashed-in peak, and now into Eric's eyes. Eric saw another young face as the boy examined him, a face he carried with him on a cracked and fading photograph in his wallet, a face from what felt like a lifetime away, which he had no idea he would ever see again. As he watched the boy he let a smile reach his eyes. The boy looked away.

Inside the store an electric fan creaked in its perch on a high shelf. The room was filled with household items, dried and canned goods, and cases of soft drinks. The shelves were packed and much of the floor space was covered with goods.

Kristin was behind the broad mahogany-topped counter, her back to the main shop floor as she reached up to the third shelf where she kept the cigarettes. She turned around with a carton of Sweet Caporals and caught the transparent look in Roper's eyes, and flushed. She tore open the carton and pushed two packs across the scarred countertop.

Roper slid coins toward her and as she reached for them he placed his hand on top of hers.

"Don't," Kristin said. She pulled her hand free and stepped back from the counter.

Roper smiled. "I'm off duty at six."

"Good for you," Kristin said. "Enjoy your evening."

"You could guarantee that," Roper said.

Kristin shook her head. "You never quit, do you? I've told you, you're wasting your time."

"Mrs. Whatsername doesn't think so. See the look she gives you? I know what she's thinking."

"I can't help what she's thinking!" Kristin fired back.

Roper grinned.

"And I don't *care*," she added.

"Good. In that case—"

"Jesus!" Kristin spun away from him and began rearranging a row of canned peaches on the shelf behind her.

"Hey, don't get mad, eh? I'm not that bad when you get to know me. I—"

Henry Jensen's voice interrupted him. "Fine bunch of boys, Steve."

Henry was squinting, adjusting his vision in the relative gloom as he jerked a thumb toward the door and the new prisoners. "I wouldn't mind a few of them, come harvest time."

Roper turned away from the counter. "I wouldn't either if I was getting them for four bits a day," he laughed. "No problem, Henry. That's what they're here for. Get your application in and I'm sure they'll be more than happy to come and work for you."

Your reputation as a kind and generous employer is known the length and breadth of this country, and likely by now all the way to Berlin."

Henry's weathered face crinkled and his spare body shook with quiet laughter.

Roper turned back to Kristin. "Be seeing you." He slipped the cigarettes into his shirt pocket.

"Not if I see you first."

Roper laughed and said, "So long."

Kristin turned her attention to Henry. She glanced at the doorway as Roper left and they heard his boots clump down the three steps and across the blacktop.

"Your change, Henry,"

"Nice feller, that Steve," he said. "The Jerries, them prisoners out there, should think theirselves lucky, I would think."

The farmer slipped the change into his pocket. "I'll be back in town tomorrow, Kristin." He winked. "Coupla nice pork chops and some bacon for you."

Kristin's face lit with genuine pleasure. "That's great, Henry! Thank you!"

He smiled, then he nodded, suddenly thoughtful. Kristin knew what was coming next and she braced for it. "They say it'll soon be over, Kristin. Hitler's on the run now all right, eh?"

"That's what they keep saying, Henry."

That's what you keep saying, Henry. Every time you see me. They say it'll soon be over. Every time. But it never is, is it?

"Right, well, keep smiling, eh?"

"For sure," she said.

"We'll soon have him back." As he turned and left the store, he nodded to a newspaper clipping pasted to the wall beside the till.

The clipping was from the *Lethbridge Herald*, a two-column picture over a headline and a short report. The photo was of a serious-looking young first-lieutenant in the King's Own Calgary Rifles. The headline said, "Local man confirmed prisoner." "Survived Dieppe," the subhead read and, under the picture, "Lt. Gareth Evans."

Kristin studied the clipping and reached out to touch the face.

Outside, Cpl. Steve Roper inspected his ad-hoc squad of three. He paced along in front and behind them, straightened an arm

here, a shoulder there, then marched smartly to stand in front of them. The boys sucked in their stomachs and shoved their chests out as far as they could.

"Well done, men," Roper said. "Bloody well done!"

He took the rifle from David, did a smart about-turn, and handed the weapon back to the Veterans Guard private he'd borrowed it from. He turned back to the boys, who remained stiff and still as sentries.

"Squad!"

They jumped.

"Squaaaad—diiiissmiss!"

The three relaxed, grinning. Ian bumped Pauli with his hip and darted away. Pauli chased after him.

"See you, lads," Roper called from the truck. They returned his salute as the motors of the three trucks rumbled and the convoy moved out onto the road.

Several of the Germans waved at the boys as the trucks moved away. Ian raised a stiff middle finger. When they were a safe distance away, Pauli put a thumb to his nose and waggled his fingers.

David watched the last truck recede. He was aware of the German with the white sailor cap watching him as they rumbled away. Heat waves shimmered around the vehicles as they grew smaller then disappeared as they turned onto the gravel road that led to the prisoner-of-war camp.

chapter four

Kristin checked the clock—a couple of minutes to noon—and went to the shop door. The three boys were near the road, engrossed in a game of marbles.

David was preparing to make his shot. His brow furrowed into two horizontal creases and his tongue slipped out and briefly wet his bottom lip. The image of his father when he had sat at the kitchen table, frowning, searching for a word, a phrase.

David flicked his thumb and a rainbow-coloured glass marble shot from his hand and scored a direct hit, scattering the six glassies and steelies from the circle drawn in the dust.

“Shit!” Ian’s response flew across the space between the boys and the shop. David laughed and grabbed the trophy marbles. He glanced toward the shop doorway, where Kristin had stepped back into the shadow.

The language was a modest sample from Ian’s extensive inventory of cussing, and deliberately delivered, Kristin knew. It was Ian commanding attention, the Mackenzie way. Not unlike his mother, Moira. Kristin had to chuckle at the thought of her. She waited a couple of seconds then walked out onto the steps.

“David,” she called, and the three boys looked up.

“Dinner time.”

“Okay, Mom, in a minute, eh?”

She closed the shop door and hung the Back at 1 PM sign on the knob while the boys sorted out their marbles and made final swaps. They held a quick whispered conversation that ended in a flurry of see-ya-laters. Ian and Pauli waved to her and shouted “bye” as they trotted off toward Main Street.

She knew Pauli would be expected home about now. Ian would go when or if he felt like it, and Moira Mackenzie might or might not be there when he arrived, with or without one of Ian’s various “uncles.”

Kristin knew the Mackenzie family story well. They had been a ranch family, not to be confused with a farm family. Farm families lived near enough for the kids to come into town daily for school, whether on foot, by bicycle, or pony. But the ranch families were from the remote valleys and plateaus of the foothills country,

many miles back. Moira Mackenzie had done what many ranch women did when their kids reached school age—she moved her three boys into town and rented a house. And she was not the first ranch wife to make the decisions that followed.

The usual understanding was that mother and children would return to the ranch when school shut down for the summer, and the Mackenzies did that, the first year. By the next summer though, Moira had decided that a town life suited her far more than that of the lonesome foothills country and the endless chores associated with the precarious business of raising beef cattle. She and the kids stayed in town. Her husband, Scottie Mackenzie, came in to see them, stayed a week, then returned to the ranch. The two older boys, twins two years older than Ian, opted to go with him. Ian stayed with Moira and neither had been back to the ranch, where the twins now had a second mother, a young Blackfoot woman Scottie had met at a rodeo in Pincher Creek. Moira, a rangy, laughter-loving redhead, enjoyed her pick of robust young men in uniform. They came from various Commonwealth countries' air forces. At the sprawling airbase east of Willow Creek, they were training to become pilots. They had money and Moira had the energy to help them spend it, as well as a generous nature. The ones who went out of their way to use the time-honoured going-off-to-war tune as a path to Moira's bed were singing to the choir.

"This is your uncle Alan," Moira would announce to Ian. And sometime later, with Alan bravely gone to face the enemy, "This is your uncle Jack."

The newly in-place pilot-officer or flight-sergeant would hand out quarters for candy and ice cream, usually with the stipulation that the fortunate recipient spend the rest of the day well away from the Mackenzie house.

Kristin guessed that Ian had no illusions about how his mother and the various uncles occupied much of their time. And he apparently was imbued with enough of his mother's uncluttered approach to life to accept the charity that came his way and not concern himself with things outside of his control.

Kristin worried about the influence the worldly Ian might have on David and, when it was possible and not too obvious, devised ways of keeping the two apart. She knew that to openly

order David to stay away from Ian was a sure way of provoking his stubborn side, Gareth's side, and inviting him to do just the opposite. These were her thoughts when David asked if he could stay over at Ian's house.

They had walked the short distance from the store to the house and Kristin was laying the dinner dishes on the good table in the dining room, one of the two large front rooms that looked out onto the wide porch that ran the length of the house and wrapped around one side. The other front room was the parlour, which was used occasionally for an afternoon bridge gathering.

"I'd rather you didn't," she said.

David groaned. "Why, Mom? What's the matter with staying at Ian's?"

"I've told you before. We don't want to impose on people."

David rolled his eyes.

She almost added, "And your dad wouldn't want you to."

She held her tongue. She had seen the flicker of resentment in his eyes the last time—one time too many, she'd realized—she had invoked his absent father. For one thing, it suggested the weakness of her own position, and in this case both of them would have recognized the statement as untrue. Gareth would not have objected. He would have said, "Let him go, he's growing up." And that was what Kristin feared the most, David growing up, and growing away from her. David was all she had. All she might ever have.

"We'll see," she said, and that seemed to satisfy David.

Kristin's glance rested on the picture of Gareth on the sideboard, smiling in his uniform. Handsome. The warrior.

Dear God, Gareth, you didn't have to go. You were twenty-seven, you had a family and a business. You didn't have to go!

--

He had followed her upstairs the day he told them he was joining up, and she had made the same protest.

"You don't have to go, Gareth. You don't have to go!"

He drew her face to his chest. She felt the rough wool of his shirt, the gentle thudding of his heart, smelled his warmth.

"That's the point, love. I do have to go," he said. "I couldn't live with myself if I didn't. I should have gone six months ago, when it started."

He gently pushed her away and looked into her face, seeking an understanding which she was never going to offer. "All those kids that joined up, Kristin? Most of them hardly out of school? I can't let them do my fighting for me, see?" *See?* The way the Welsh always ended an explanation, God damn them, almost as if it was Moses bringing the word down from the mountain. Gareth's speech had retained traces of the cadence that his family had brought with it from the coal-mining village in the Rhondda Valley. His father, Morgan, had served in the First War. He came with his collier's skills to work the mines, first in the Crownsnest Pass and then in the less forbidding landscape around Lethbridge. The senior Evans couple still lived there, close to Gareth's two older married sisters and their families.

In a rare display of independence, the two sisters, their husbands, and Gareth's mother joined Kristin in trying to talk Gareth out of joining the army. Gareth's father stayed silent, at least in front of the combined family force. Kristin was sure it had been a different story when Gareth and his father disappeared for two hours into the men-only side of the Willow Creek Hotel beer parlour. The old bastard. Always more than ready to step into other people's lives.

She and Gareth were just getting established, too. At least Morgan Evans had persuaded his son not to follow him into the filth and danger of the coal mines. And, she grudgingly admitted, had helped them as soon as they were married, with the downpayment on the store and gas pump. Some would have considered her cynical for thinking that the move was Morgan's subtle way of keeping a hold on Gareth, but Kristin had no doubts.

Morgan had laughed at Gareth's dreams of becoming a writer, dreams that Kristin herself thought a little far fetched, until Gareth sold a story to the *Saturday Evening Post* for the princely sum of one hundred and fifty dollars. Then Morgan jumped in to share the credit when the *Lethbridge Herald* reporter turned up with a request for an interview with the promising new author.

"The Evans have always had a literary streak, you see," Morgan explained. "Poets, really, in the old country." Bloody old hypocrite.

Gareth's next three efforts were all rejected, but politely so, and the editors encouraged him to keep working and they praised his potential.

And now what? Kristin wondered. What would he be like when he came back — *if* he came back? What would *she* be like? Some days she had to actually pick up the picture and stare at it to remember what he looked like. Four postcards in the two years since he was wounded and captured at Dieppe. The first major Canadian action of the war, the papers reported, and fifteen hundred taken prisoner and shipped off to God-only-knows where. The postcards simply said *Kriegsgefangenenlager* and *Datum*, and the last one was dated nearly six months ago, February 4 — Gareth's birthday. Four lines of cramped handwriting that bore no resemblance to his former sharp, confident style. All she knew for sure was that he had been alive when he wrote the card. The newspapers had said that at Dieppe the "valiant Canadians had shown the stuff they were made of."

If valiant was lying on a French beach with your life's blood staining the sand red, Kristin thought. If valiant was all the young men who now would never know a woman's touch. Valiant was just another word for dead.

She lit a cigarette, aware of David's interest as she struck a match, held it to the tobacco, and inhaled. She had started smoking just in the last couple of months.

"A girl's got to have one vice," she laughed, when Sally Marshall remarked on it.

And for what? Dieppe. For what?