

Prologue

Outside Amiens, August 23, 1918

In the fading light, the officer strides across the floor of the quarry towards the ramshackle wooden hut, the gravel rattling under his boots. He tries to keep his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him, but they keep being drawn to his right where a solid wooden post is embedded in the ground. Eventually he stops walking, sighs and turns to stare at the stake. The memory is too vivid to be denied. He closes his eyes, but the scene plays itself out on the back of his eyelids.

It is dawn, some three months earlier, in a different quarry several miles to the north. A boy, no more than eighteen years old, is being half dragged, half carried towards a similar post. He is sobbing uncontrollably.

Ten men stand with their backs to the post, fidgeting nervously. Ten rifles lie on the ground before them.

The boy is tied to the post. He has to be tied tightly because he keeps sliding down onto his knees. A bag

is placed over his head, muffling his sobs, and a rectangular envelope is pinned over his heart.

An order is given and the men bend, pick up a rifle each and turn to face the boy.

Another order. They aim.

A third order. A flock of crows in the neighbouring field rises in raucous flight at the rifles' report.

The boy's head is slumped forward; his sobbing has stopped. Three ragged holes puncture his chest. No one hit the envelope.

The soldiers rest their rifles on their shoulders, turn and march out of the quarry. Two of them are weeping silently.

The officer realizes that it was his voice that gave the orders.

“Damn this war to hell,” he mutters under his breath as he continues his journey to the shed. He unholsters his pistol and hands it to the guard outside for safekeeping. He opens the door.

“Am I to be shot?” The voice comes from the thicker darkness where a shadowy figure can just be made out, sitting at a rough table beneath a grubby window in the rear wall. The air smells stale and dusty.

“I don’t know,” the officer says, stepping forward. He stands, silhouetted in the door frame, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He can hear the man breathing.

“If you haven’t brought news of my reprieve, then why are you here?” the soldier asks, an edge of bitterness in his voice.

“I’m here so you won’t be alone tonight.”

“Another guard, more like.”

The officer pulls over a chair and sits at the table. He strikes a match and lights the candle that sits between them. In the flickering light he can see the soldier clearly now. He is young, not more than seventeen or eighteen, but his eyes look old.

“It’s true, I cannot let you escape, but that’s not why I’m here.” The officer takes a bottle of rye whiskey from his pocket and places it on the table.

The soldier’s gaze flicks over to it and returns to the officer’s face. “You think I want to spend my last hours drunk?”

The officer shrugs. “Some do.”

“We shoot a lot of our own men, do we?”

“Too many,” the officer replies. He holds out his hand. “My name’s Paul,” he says. “I’m from Sarnia.” He hesitates, as if unsure what to say next. “It’s the oil capital of Canada.”

The soldier stares at Paul’s outstretched hand. He sighs. “Listen. Unless a reprieve comes through, in about eight hours they will tie me to that post out there and ten of my fellow soldiers will try to make my suffering as short as possible.” His voice quavers.

He closes his eyes and breathes deeply to bring himself back under control.

“I don’t want to get drunk,” he continues. “I don’t want to make small talk and I don’t want to hear about Sarnia. But I do want people back home to know what happened.”

“If you give me your parents’ address, I promise I’ll write to them.”

“And say what? That their son died bravely for King and Country? They don’t need lies about what’s going to happen to me here tomorrow. I’m talking about telling the truth so that, maybe, some of this insanity makes sense. I need to record everything that happened to bring me here. Do you have paper and pencil?”

The officer takes a notebook and the stub of a pencil out of his uniform pocket and pushes them across the table.

“Not for me,” the soldier says, “for you. You might as well do something worthwhile. You’re an officer, you must have had a gentleman’s education. Can you write shorthand to dictation?”

The officer nods.

“Good. Then write down everything I say in that notebook. I’m going to tell you a story.”

“What sort of story?”

The soldier smiles. “A true story.”

Chapter 1

The Calm Before the Storm

Nicola Valley, British Columbia, early years of the war

I grew up on my father’s ranch in the Nicola Valley in British Columbia. My dad was Irish, a McBride from outside Dublin. He reckoned that I was crazy wanting to come out to this war.

“What d’you want to fight somebody else’s battles for, Allan?” he asked me. “Back in Ireland, they been fighting each other or the English for hundreds of years and a lot of damned good it’s done anyone.”

I wish I’d listened to him now, but I didn’t. You see, my dad and I are very different. He’s practical, good at building a fence or shoeing a horse. He thinks his way through a problem. I take after my mom. I do what feels right. A born romantic, that’s me. Tales of doomed rebellions against the English and hopeless last stands on top of some forgotten hill could reduce me to tears.

Anyway, come my seventeenth birthday, a year ago last March, I announced I was off to Merritt to get the CPR down to the coast and join up. Mom cried a lot, but Dad just said, “Why?”

Well, that was a tough question.

"I want to see the world," I said. "The Valley's too small and I don't want to be a cowboy or go down the coal mines."

I think my reasons were close enough to those that drove my dad out of Ireland for him to understand and give me his reluctant blessing, but I hadn't told him the truth.

The truth was, I was trying to be Ken Harrison. Ken was four years older than me and he was my hero. He was tall, fair-haired and had a face that seemed always about to break into a broad grin. He grew up on the ranch beside ours and since we were both only boys, we spent a lot of time together. He taught me to fish the lakes for trout before the sun got too high and the ospreys and eagles came out and drove the fish deep, and he showed me the best places to find blue grouse and mule deer.

I became a good hunter. I got to recognize the animals' signs, knew what trails they used and where they would be at certain times of day. I was a good shot, too, but I always let Ken do the killing, at least after that first time.

I was about twelve and Ken had led us up the end of the valley to search for deer. We crawled up a hill and saw four of them below us beside

the river. One was a nice buck and, through signs, Ken told me to take the shot.

It was a long shot, but I estimated the distance and set the sights. I aimed for a heart shot — behind the shoulder, just where he'd taught me — and squeezed the trigger.

I don't know if I set the sights wrong or if the kick threw the barrel up, but the bullet went high and caught the deer in the spine about the middle of the back. The hind legs collapsed and it went down, but it was still alive, throwing its head in the air and trying to stand on its front legs.

I didn't think, just ran down the hill. When I got to the deer, it was still struggling, breathing in huge gasps and with strings of snot flying from its nose. Its eyes were bulging and it was making a weird, high-pitched screaming sound. It sounded almost human.

"Finish it," Ken said as he came up behind me.

I raised the rifle and aimed and, almost as if it knew what was going on, the deer stopped struggling. I couldn't look at its eyes, so I closed mine and pulled the trigger.

When I looked, the deer was dead, a small black hole in its head. There was a thin line of smoke rising from the hole.

I threw down the rifle and collapsed, sobbing.

Ken tried to comfort me, but it didn't do any good. For days I moped around, thinking of the dying deer, and for weeks afterwards I was plagued by nightmares. I'd wake up screaming with the vision of that deer's dying look fresh in my mind.

I guess that's the other part of having a romantic soul — sensitivity. After that, I still used to accompany Ken when he went hunting, but the only things I shot at were rocks and trees.

Once we took a couple of ponies and went into the high mountains after sheep. While Ken was working his way into position for a difficult shot, I went off on my own. I climbed too high and fell. The snap my leg made was so loud, you could hear the echo come back off the far valley wall. Ken found me, strapped the leg up and got me down just ahead of the first fall blizzard. He saved my life for sure.

Ken's one of those people who figures life's always simple. You look around, make a decision, live with it and things just seem to turn out. So it was natural when the war came in August of 1914 that he would be one of the first to volunteer.

"Got to go and do my bit," he told me cheerfully. "Can't let the Germans go charging all over Europe invading any country they please. Someone's got to stop them."

"I'll go too," I said.

"You can't, Allan," Ken said with a laugh. "You're too young. Besides, the war'll be over long before you're old enough. To tell you the truth, I'm scared the war'll be over before I get there. Finished by Christmas, they say."

Ken was wrong about that, but then so was nearly everyone else. I spent 1915 and 1916 reading about the war and waiting until I was old enough to join up.

Looking back now, I can't believe that I never once made the connection between the way I felt about shooting a deer and how I might feel having to shoot a man. In the stories that I read, it was always *us* — brave, strong and right — and *them* — evil, twisted and inhuman. I believed every story in the newspapers about wicked, cowardly Huns shooting helpless nuns, nailing Canadian soldiers to church doors and bayonetting babies. No one told me the truth.

Ken came home on leave for Christmas 1916. He was a lieutenant by then and I thought he looked wonderful in his uniform. He said he had had some kind of wound but he was never specific and, much as I nagged him to show me the scar and tell me the story, he never said a word. He did look pale, though, and often when he thought I

wasn't watching, he would drift off and his gaze would fix on something in the far distance that I could never see.

He stayed with us for a few days when his parents went up to Kamloops to visit a relative and, at night, I would hear him walking about the house. Once I woke to what I thought was a scream, but I managed to convince myself it was a bird or a rabbit being taken by a weasel.

I pestered Ken to tell me tales of the battles he'd been in, but he only ever told me stories about trips he'd taken to Edinburgh and London, practical jokes he and his friends had played on the quartermaster when the battalion was at rest, and soccer games they played against Scottish regiments. I suppose he did it to protect me, but it backfired. His stories only reinforced my idea that the war was all good fun.

I kept reading reports of battles in the newspapers and worshipping the heroes they talked about. I asked Ken why he hadn't won a medal yet, but he just looked at me sadly and said not everyone could have a medal because then they wouldn't mean anything.

I saw nothing except the view I had gleaned from the books that I grew up reading, the adventure stories of Rider Haggard and Henty. In the

pages of books like *King Solomon's Mines* I could trade the confines of the Nicola Valley for the exotic reaches of the Empire. I suppose I thought the war must be like one of my adventure stories. The hero would struggle against adversity, he'd triumph in the end and only the bad guys would die. There was nothing in the papers or in what Ken told me that Christmas to make me think any different.

The day Ken left to go back, I went to the station to see him off.

"I'll come out and help as soon as I can," I blurted as I handed him his kit bag through the carriage window.

A look of almost terror crossed his face before he got himself back under control.

"You stay here and look after the ranch," he said.

The train jerked and started moving down the platform in a cloud of steam. I struggled through the crowd to keep up.

"No way!" I shouted. "You can't have all the excitement. I want to be part of the adventure, too."

Ken shook his head and shouted something back, but it was lost in the scream of the train's whistle. Then he was gone.

Four months after that the newspapers were shouting about how the Canadians had stormed up a place called Vimy Ridge and taken the heights that had defeated the French and British for two years. That decided me. A week later, I was standing in front of the recruiting sergeant in Vancouver and telling him I wanted to join Ken's unit in France. I had to add a year onto my age, but they were so desperate for soldiers, no one questioned it.

The weeks of basic training outside Calgary, the train across the country and the ship over to England and then France are all a blur in my memory. Every day I saw or heard or learned something new, but everything that summer was a part of the old world that doesn't exist anymore. My new world, and my introduction to the hell that has led me to this shed tonight, began the day in September I arrived at Etaples.