

CHAPTER ONE

Dominion Day, 1944, fell on a Saturday. Elsewhere across Canada, the shipyards and factories worked on without ceasing, turning out the materiel of victory. But in Wakefield, New Brunswick, population 5,783, nothing that was postponed until Monday was going to lengthen the war by one second, so the town took its holiday as usual and staged the parade that in some form or other it had staged every July 1 since 1867.

In front of the cenotaph a small reviewing stand had been set up, decorated with red, white, and blue bunting, and as noon approached a thin crowd of people—the patriotic, the bereaved, the lonely, the poor, the idle—began to gather near the courthouse. They waited on the sidewalks in such shade as they could find, and as the town clock began to strike twelve, they heard from out of sight up the street the drums and bugles of the local company of the Royal Canadian Army Cadet Corps. It was the signal for the reviewing party to descend the steps of the courthouse and take their places on the stand—the mayor of Wakefield with his chain of office, Captain Ernest Fraser of the Seaforth Highlanders of Nova Scotia, and Colonel (retired) J. MacGregor Blaikie, late of the 85th Infantry Battalion, now honorary commander of the local branch of the Royal Canadian Legion.

There was a minute of expectancy, and then around the curve of the street, under an arch of elm trees heavy with summer, the parade appeared, led by Corporal Drost of the RCMP in his dress scarlet and a colour party of the Legion bearing the Union Jack, the Red Ensign, and

the Legion banner. Behind them marched the brass band of the local militia, and as the colour party approached the reviewing stand, it took over from the bugle band and struck up “The Maple Leaf Forever.” Colonel Blaikie and Captain Fraser saluted. The mayor stood stiffly at attention. The band passed and was followed by a company of the Legion, then the bugle band and two platoons of cadets, and finally, not so much the climax of the parade as an ignominious afterthought, a platoon of Captain Fraser’s Seaforth Highlanders.

As they passed, Colonel Blaikie pointedly dropped his salute, and there was a scattering of derisive whistles from the crowd. Captain Fraser had known that marching them would be a mistake, but Area Headquarters had ordered them to be marched, so marched they had to be.

The difficulty about Captain Fraser’s Seaforths was that they were what had become known popularly as “Zombies”—men who had been conscripted but who had refused to volunteer to go overseas and could not under existing law be forced. Now with the casualty lists rolling in once again from France, they had become an object of furious debate in Parliament and of growing unpleasantness on the street.

Most of the Zombies were hidden away in camps in the West, where they were supposed to be waiting to repel a Japanese invasion, but some of them were scattered around the country, guarding things the army had decided ought to be guarded. In Wakefield, they guarded a makeshift basic training camp that had been set up in the summer of 1940 on a big island in the middle of the river, used to train one battalion through one bitter winter, and then abandoned.

The buildings that had been run up still stood there, unused and useless—jerry-built huts already rotting away under their leaky roofs—but four times a day a guard detail of half a dozen Seaforths marched down Main Street and across the bridge to the island, and the detail they had relieved marched back. It was an operation that had about it, like many things that went on in those days, an atmosphere of dreamlike absurdity, and it was possible to imagine the army forgetting about the Seaforths altogether and leaving them to march back and forth there forever.

It had befallen Captain Fraser to command the Wakefield Armoury, the Wakefield Basic Training Camp, and this platoon of military outcasts, not because he himself was a Zombie, but because he was thirty-nine years old with eyesight too bad to allow him to be assigned to a combat unit. Nevertheless, as he watched the platoon slouch past, not so smart even as the high school cadets, and as he saw out of the corner of his eye Colonel Blaikie drop his salute, he felt that something of their disgrace inevitably rubbed off on him, and he resolved once again to set about pulling strings to get some kind of overseas posting. Or, failing that, any posting anywhere away from this dismal hole and these dismal misfits.

When they had passed, Fraser ended his salute with the snap he had been taught long ago before the war. He shook hands with the mayor, saluted the colonel, and descended the reviewing stand, revolving in his mind some act of vengeance for the day's humiliation. A route march would be the thing. On Monday, a punitive route march for sloppiness on parade. March the little bastards in full kit until their legs fell off. He would have Sergeant MacCrae see to it.



At seven o'clock it was still hot, and the sky was filled with gathering thunderheads—tall galleons of cloud that sailed in from the west in fleets. In the late afternoon, there had been distant rumblings to the north, but in Wakefield there had been no rain, only sudden, odd, little gusts of wind that raised tornadoes of dust along the roads and then subsided as abruptly as they had come.

With the approach of evening, there had also come clouds of blackflies and mosquitoes, nowhere more of them than around Daniel Coile's house on the Hannigan Road a mile west of town. It stood at the top of a high bank above a creek, which here spread itself out during the spring floods over acres of interval land, then retreated in the summer, leaving behind it stagnant ponds where blackflies and mosquitoes bred by the billions.

Unlike most of his neighbours, Daniel Coile had never built himself a summer kitchen, so the temperature in the house after supper had been cooked was in the nineties. With all the doors and windows open, the flies and mosquitoes found their way through the rotting screens and into the house, where they buzzed from room to room until they eventually blundered into one of the ribbons of sticky paper that festooned the ceilings or were squashed with a swatter by Matilda Coile.

For himself, Daniel Coile didn't give a shit about blackflies or mosquitoes, nor for any god-damned man who ever walked neither. What he did give a shit about was his good name and the obedience due him as a father.

"She ain't gonna talk to me like that," he said, sitting up very straight in his chair by the kitchen table. "She ain't gonna talk to me like that and go on livin' under my roof. I'll give her one she won't forgit in a hurry. I'll give her one that will make them soldiers think twice before they run around with her. By Jesus, them bastards better not cross me."

Upstairs in the bedroom she shared with her younger sister Unis, Sarah Coile half-listened to the rhetorical rise and fall of her father's voice, not making out the words especially and not particularly trying to or needing to. She had brought a pailful of hot water upstairs from the tank on the side of the kitchen stove and poured it into a large wash basin, and she was standing, naked except for her pants, in front of the mirror on the dresser, washing herself. She was a well-built girl with the kind of opulent Edwardian figure that still turned up occasionally on dirty postcards or flipcard peepshows at carnivals.

Her sister was sitting on the bed.

"I don't have to stay around here," Sarah said. "There's all kinds of jobs in places like Saint John. There are girls makin' a dollar an hour buildin' ships."

"Where are ya gonna git the money to go down there with?" Unis asked.

"Never mind," Sarah said. "I can git it if I really want to."

She washed her armpits and under her breasts, lifting one after the other, then stopping to look at herself, admiringly, in the mirror.

“Papa said he wasn’t gonna let ya go to the dance,” Unis said.

“Papa can go to hell,” Sarah said.

She towelled herself dry and got dressed in clean underwear and a white dress that she had bought earlier in the week and sneaked into the house when she got back from work. From the back of one of the dresser drawers, she took out a tube of lipstick and a compact of rouge and put them in her purse. Then she went downstairs, and Unis trailed after her.

Her father was still sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a cup of tea. He eyed her wrathfully from under his heavy brows.

“So where are you goin’ all dressed up like the Queen of England?” he asked.

“I’m goin’ to see Vinny,” Sarah said. “Maybe we’ll go to the movies.”

“Or to that dance hall,” he said.

“Maybe,” Sarah said.

“You ain’t goin’ to no dance. No daughter of mine is gonna hang around in no dance hall.”

He started to get up.

Sarah stopped by the door and turned on him.

“You better watch out. You lay a hand on me, you’re gonna be sorry.”

“If you go to that dance hall, you needn’t bother comin’ back,” he bawled at her. “If you ain’t gonna do what I say, you ain’t gonna live under my roof.”

“That suits me.”

She pushed out through the screen door and slammed it behind her.



The band that night at The Silver Dollar had three fiddles, a guitar, a banjo, and a mouth organ. The man who played the mouth organ could also play bones, and he liked to step dance, playing the bones off his elbow. They were playing a waltz now, not putting much into

it, and there were only a dozen couples on the floor, dancing in the slow, bored way people dance at the start of an evening.

Sarah sat on a chair on the right side of the dance hall where the female stag line always sat, just as the male line always sat across from it on the left. Sarah knew or half-knew all the other girls in the line, but she didn't join them. Instead, she sat a few chairs away and watched Vinny and her boyfriend, Brick, as they shuffled around among the other dancers.

Brick was a big boy, over six feet, over two hundred pounds, and he was nicknamed Brick because of his mat of red hair. Vinny was only the latest in his succession of girls, and it had surprised Sarah when Vinny had told her that Brick had begun taking her out. Vinny was pretty, but she was barely five feet, barely a hundred pounds, and there didn't seem to be enough of her to be a girl for someone like Brick. Sarah knew it wouldn't last, and she felt sure that she could take Vinny's place when it ended, but that wouldn't last either. With Brick, nobody was going to last.

She turned her attention to the male stag line on the other side of the hall. It was a good deal shorter than the female stag line. It always was. Once, four years before, when the battalion had been training on the island, it had been the other way around, and she still heard stories from the older girls about how in those days any girl no matter how homely had half a dozen soldiers chasing her to go to dances, to go to movies, even towards the end to marry them. But she had been only twelve then, too young for it to do her any good. And the thousand men of the battalion had left, and so had several hundred men from the county, and the twenty or thirty Seaforths who had arrived a couple of years later didn't begin to make up.

There were half a dozen of them in the stag line now, sticking together as they always did, not dancing yet until things had sorted themselves out a little, waiting for the strays whom no one was going to fight over. Sarah knew them all, more or less. Some she had danced with. Some she knew about from other girls. The rest of the stag line was made up mostly of sixteen- and seventeen-year-old kids who in spite of all the stag girls would end up with nobody because

they didn't know how to dance or what to say to a girl when they did. Sarah hardly looked at them.

The set ended. Vinny and Brick came back, and Brick went off to the canteen and got a bottle of ginger ale and three paper cups. Sarah and Vinny got up, and the three stood tight together while Brick poured rye into the bottom of the paper cups and then topped them up with ginger ale. It was against the law to drink in a dance hall, or anywhere else in public, but at The Silver Dollar this was interpreted to mean that you didn't openly show the bottle, so that if the Mounties arrived, the owner could claim with something like the truth that he hadn't seen anybody drinking.

Brick hadn't stinted on the rye, and Sarah still had a finger in her cup when the band started up again and a local singer in a white cowboy suit slid into "It makes no difference now." Vinny dropped the rest of her drink into Sarah's and went out again with Brick.

Sarah sipped the drink and watched the soldiers on the other side of the floor. Some of them now and then watched back, but none of them made a move, and she was still there holding her empty cup when the number finished.

"Take your partners," the man who played the bones shouted, "for the first reel of the night. And here's Daddy MacDade to call."

An enormous fat man came down the hall at a heavy trot, like a milk cow someone had thrown a stick at, and heaved himself up onto the stage.

The reel brought out most of the soldiers from the stag line, and even some of the kids who couldn't dance one to one but could be hauled and pushed through a reel. There were enough for two lines almost the whole length of the hall. Daddy MacDade did a little step dance and gave a whoop. The band threw itself at "Soldier's Joy," and the evening began to take off.

Sarah didn't get one of the soldiers. She got a soft, pimple-faced boy named Herbie Booth. But with a reel it didn't matter. What mattered was that he got her out there, so that while he clomped around, getting lost in the clockwork down the middle of the lines, she was breaking the ice with some of the others.

“What are you doing with that jerk?” one of the soldiers asked her as they spun.

“Tryin’ to git rid of him,” Sarah said. “What are you doin’ with that scarecrow?”

After five minutes, “Soldier’s Joy” abruptly stopped and Daddy MacDade shouted, “Now waltz them partners,” and the band slid into “The Tennessee Waltz.”

Herbie was somewhere in the confusion as the reel broke up, and Sarah slipped away. A lot of the dancers were getting rid of one partner in hopes of a better one, and Sarah saw close to her a soldier she had danced with the week before. His name was Owen Williams. He would do, for now anyway. She took his elbow and swung herself into his arms.

She saw him blush. He wasn’t much taller than she was, slightly built, with rather pale skin and very thick black hair. On his chin and along his jaw line, even though he was close shaven, there was a dark shadowiness. He smelled faintly of some kind of shaving stuff and of something else, something like leather, some sort of army smell, different from the smell of farm workers or garagemen.

“I’m Sarah Coile,” she announced. “Remember me?”

“Yes,” he said, “I remember. I’m Owen Williams.”

“Are you now?” she laughed. “I thought you were Hopalong Cassidy.”

The floor was still crowded with the dancers the reel had brought out, and Sarah let herself be pushed closer to Williams than he would have brought her on his own. He wasn’t a bad dancer, but stiff and nervous, inclined to hold her at arm’s length. She put her head on his shoulder and hummed along.

“I was dancin’ with my darlin’ to the Tennessee Waltz.’ I like that song,” she murmured, “don’t you?”

“Sure,” he said.

She looked at his dark eyes, recognizing in their depths a look he would not have wanted her to recognize.

“I had a couple of drinks,” she said. “I’m feelin’ a little tipsy.”

“All change,” shouted Daddy. “All change.”

The fiddlers sawed their strings tunelessly, and someone took Sarah's arm from behind and turned her around away from Williams. It was Huddy Foster, one of Brick's friends, a drinker, a fighter, small, wiry, quick as a weasel. Sarah was afraid of him, but she couldn't get away.

The band started another waltz, and Huddy danced away with her. There was nothing shy about Huddy. He danced her close, one leg almost between hers, his hand low down on her back. When the dance finished, he followed her back to join Brick and Vinny, and the four of them went outside. They stopped in the shadows back of the dance hall, and Brick took his bottle out and passed it around. There was no ginger ale to put into it this time, and Sarah was conscious of the heat of it going down.

When the band started up again, they went back to the dance hall together. Huddy walked beside Sarah, and she worried that he might be trying to take her over and wondered how she could get rid of him. But inside, he and Brick went off together, and after five minutes, an old boyfriend of Vinny's came along and asked her to dance, and she went off with him. When Brick came back, he was alone. She had thought he might be angry about Vinny, but he didn't seem to care.

"Let's you and me do it," he said.

Like Huddy, he held her close, his belly rock-hard against her.

"Why don't we go out for a drive some night," he said. "We could go over the lines some night maybe and go to a movie."

"Vinny wouldn't think much of that."

"Vinny don't own me."

"I know. But she's my friend. She's been a real good friend to me, and I don't want to make her mad."

The hard strength of him excited her, but in spite of the rye she still held to the knowledge that no matter what they did together she wouldn't last either.

"Well," he was saying, "we wouldn't have to tell her, would we?"

After the dance, they went back to the place by the wall that had become their spot for the evening. Vinny was alone, and Sarah thought she saw a flicker of jealousy in her look when she saw her with Brick. But nobody said anything about anything. They simply watched the crowd.

Further along the wall, Sarah saw Williams looking at her. She met his eyes, not signalling anything exactly, but not breaking the thread either. In the end, it was he who looked away, but after a few seconds his eyes drifted back to her. She put both her hands up to her head and with the palms slowly pushed her hair back from above her temples, lifting her breasts inside her dress and letting them slowly descend, watching Williams all the while as she did.

But when the music started, it was Herbie Booth who got to her first. She told him no, and he smiled his foolish smile and just stood there. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Williams hesitate and then come on.

“I had this dance promised,” she told Herbie.

“Did you want to dance with him?” Williams asked when they were out on the floor.

“I wouldn’t dance with him if he was the last man in the place.”

“You were dancing with him before.”

“That was just a reel. That don’t matter.”

As they danced, she moved closer to him and again put her head on his shoulder.

“What did you do before you went into the army?” she asked.

“I had a job with a lumber company,” he said.

“You mean sawin’ up logs?”

“No. I worked in the office. I did accounts and stuff like that.”

“You been through high school?”

“Yes. In Fredericton.”

She looked at him.

“I never got through grade eight,” she said. “My father said no one needed no more school than that, not a girl anyways. Not boys neither unless they were gonna work in town jobs. So I had to quit and go to work. I work at the dairy now.”

“What do you do?”

“I wash milk cans mostly. There’s a big machine. But I’m gonna git a job on the ice cream counter maybe the end of the summer.”

They danced in silence while she thought about all that. She hadn’t known that he had been through high school. Not many people who

came to The Silver Dollar had been through high school. Mostly they worked on farms or in garages or drove trucks. And mostly they lived in places like her place.

“What does your father do?” she asked.

“He’s dead. He had a farm. My mother went on running it, but she died a couple of years ago too.”

“So you ain’t got nobody?”

“Uncles and aunts. Cousins. Things like that.”

“No steady girl back in Fredericton?” she asked teasingly.

“No,” he said.

The dance ended, and they stood together, awkwardly, in the middle of the floor.

“It’s gittin’ awful hot in here,” Sarah told him. “Why don’t we go outside and git some fresh air?”

“Sure,” he answered with a touch of...what? she wondered. Surprise? Shyness?

“I’d like some ginger ale to take out,” she said. “Would you git me some? I’ll give you the money. I ain’t tryin’ to make you treat me or nothin’. It’s just hard for a girl by herself up there.”

“I’ll treat you,” he said. “We just got paid.”

She went with him to the canteen and stuck close to him, so that Huddy or somebody like that wouldn’t think she was free and try to pick her up.

When he had got the ginger ale, they went out. All the light had gone from the sky now, and it was filled with stars. Sarah took Williams’s arm. They picked their way along the darkness by the side of the hall and found themselves a spot at the back a few yards away from another couple, who were standing close together talking in low voices. Williams also had a small bottle of rye, and they spiked the ginger ale.

They drank, awkwardly, without speaking, and when they had finished and thrown the cups away, she lifted her face towards him, and he kissed her briefly, his lips closed, his body tense.

She put her arms around his neck, so that her breasts pressed against him. When they had started to grow towards their present

heaviness, they had embarrassed her, but she understood their power now and would not for anything have traded them for Vinny's little-girl figure.

She could feel Williams's heart pounding heavily even through his thick tunic.

"Do you like me?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said.

"I like you too," she continued to whisper.

He kissed her again, this time putting his arms around her, and she saw his eyes close. Then suddenly he stiffened and drew away from her. Three figures had crept around the corner of the hall and were watching them.

"Hoop and drive her there, soldier," one of them shouted.

"Don't pay no attention to them," Sarah told him, low so they couldn't hear. She was afraid that Williams might get lured into a fight.

Inside, the music started. The peeping Toms waited for some response from Williams, then drifted away into the darkness.

"Don't git yourself smothered in them big tits," one of them shouted back.

"Let's go back and dance," Sarah said. "I came here with Vinny, and I better let her know where I am. If you'll walk me home, I won't need to go with them. It isn't very far. Would you do that?"

"Yes," Williams said. "Sure."

They didn't see Brick and Vinny at first, so they danced. She sang along with the music, her face down against the rough wool of Williams's tunic. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine."

Later she saw Vinny and Brick and waved at Vinny.

When the set finished, the band played a few bars of "The Bear Went Over the Mountain." This was the signal for intermission. The band climbed off the stage, and among the dancers there was a general move towards the canteen.

"Would you like something to eat?" Williams asked.

"No," Sarah said. "Let's go outside again."

"What about your friend?"

THE CASE AGAINST OWEN WILLIAMS

“She knows I’m with you.”

There were more couples outside this time, their cigarettes glowing along the side of the dance hall and around the parked cars.

“Let’s go somewhere there ain’t so many people around,” Sarah whispered.

She took Williams’s arm and led him towards the darkness at the edge of the woods. As they faded into it, someone whistled shrilly and gave a wolf-howl.