

## Chapter 1

### **Mylor Church Cornwall, England March 3, 1840**

Conversation died. We both heard it—slow, deliberate footsteps on the gravel road up on the plateau behind. The cadence was familiar. I didn't turn. Neither did Father, sitting at the other end of the bench from me. Only with the iron gate to the churchyard creaking open did I venture a peek. We'd been discovered. There, picking his way carefully down the steep, bluebell-lined walkway was Uncle Benjamin Carvosso, coming in a direct line for us. If not for the canes he would surely lose control. They struck the stones in rhythmic, regular clunks, reminiscent of our hall clock back at Dowstall Farm. I winced but didn't move. When he finally reached us, alarmingly out of breath, he manoeuvred himself onto the bench opposite and grinned. We didn't acknowledge each other. Father's gaze held to the sloop now working it's way off the English Channel and into the shelter of Mylor Harbour. Mine was fixed on the latest additions to the family tombstone—my older brother, now gone thirteen years, and that of my mother, not quite two years in her grave.

Father and I had come here to discuss an urgent matter without interference from Uncle Benjamin, the man who now fancied himself the family patriarch. Dowstall Farm was abuzz; I'd come to a decision and it was not going down well with Father. My enrolment in 1837 at a Cornwall business school had convinced him I was not about to fall to the evangelicals. Now, three years later, I'd shocked the family with news that not only was I soon to be ordained—in five days to be exact—but would be heading immediately to a far-flung outpost few Englishmen had ever heard of. He'd been researching and believed he might still dissuade me. I knew better. But granting him one last

opportunity to try was his right as much as it was my duty to listen. Now, the opportunity was about to be lost.

I wasn't embarrassed by the tepid reception given to Uncle, nor was Father. But the same could not be said for Benjamin, as evidenced by his fading grin. Shock, I assumed. So be it. Hardly Christian not to gush out a welcome, but these would be my final moments alone with Father and, once again, this man was working his way between us. From here on the discussion would be brothers-in-law in combat, with me sidelined in the wings.

Immediately before me stood Mylor Church of England, the sanctuary that had been my place of worship until Grandfather Carvosso and Uncle Benjamin had won me over to the Wesleyan Methodist persuasion. Coming as an offshoot of the Church of England, it wasn't as precipitous a shift as some might imagine; especially considering that both Grandfather and Uncle had been pastors of some renown in this new, refreshing branch of Christianity. That Father held with the Church of England sat well with the family.

Over the years, Mylor Church—granite of walls and slate of roof, with portions dating back to the Normans—had been a calm oasis from a busy household for Father and me; our place to discuss the great issues of heart and soul. We would sit on this Cornish hillside gazing overtop the church to the bobbing masts coming in from far-flung ports—Bombay, Rio de Janeiro, New Orleans. Soon it would be my turn to take the Carrick Road down to the sea, but not, I hoped, without Father's blessing. Now, with Uncle Benjamin on the scene, and with my remaining time in England down to hours, the intimacy of our conversation was about to be shattered.

Uncle hunched forward, shoulders heaving, the familiar cough coming from deep inside. I winced at its product, apprehensive as to how one disposed of bodily fluid on hallowed ground. My ancestors lay here. It was my wish that someday I would, too, should God see fit to ever return me to England.

"Suspected I'd find you here," Benjamin rasped, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve.

Father and I nodded in unison, but didn't speak.

He gestured with his chin to the gravestones. “All those Rundles and Carvossos,” he said, “family.”

Father raised his head. “Pray God that fate brings no additions in the near future.”

“Are you alluding to something?” Uncle asked.

“More than alluding, brother-in-law; this could well be the last we’ll ever set eyes on young Robert here.” He jerked his head in my direction.

I tensed, dreading the next few minutes. Moments before, he’d been blunt about Uncle and his role in launching me on a path that was taking me thousands of miles away. It would kill, he predicted, any chance of me ever finding eternal repose amongst my forefathers. “Meddling zealot,” had been his exact words. I swallowed as he continued.

“I’ve been weighing Robert’s prospects,” he said, staring straight ahead, “and, frankly, they’re bleak.” Uncle opened his mouth to protest, but Father had not spoken his fill. “I hold you responsible for this, Benjamin.”

Uncle stiffened. “You’ve no justification in speaking thusly. Your son’s decision comes from private consultation with the Lord and not from any intervention of my doing. ’Twas God alone who called him, and God alone will return him to us.” He rubbed his knees with his hands before adding, “When and how He sees fit.”

“Twaddle!” Father replied. With all your Wesleyan hand-clapping and spirit-calling, how could the boy possibly distinguish divine supplication from mere earthly proselytizing? Little wonder he’s muddled. You filled his head with wild ideas.”

That hurt, but I let it go. I didn’t hold with any of that speaking in tongues stuff he was referring to. Nor did Uncle Benjamin, for that matter, but Father’s image of the evangelic practices of Wesleyan Methodist adherents was unshakable. I considered jumping in to set the record straight, but sensed this was their argument. Besides, Father’s anxiety was strangely comforting. He feared for my safety in the world I was about to enter, and however misplaced, I loved him

for it. I was putting myself in God's hands. What could be safer? And what did it matter—life here or in the ever after?

Across from me, Uncle Benjamin's shoulders collapsed as the cough returned. We waited for him to regain control. "Brother-in-law," he sputtered finally, "you do our boy an injustice, yourself, too. Your Church of England provided him with the means to distinguish between God's will and that of earthly mortals, like this humble servant."

A sidelong glance at Father revealed the blood draining from his face. I sensed the floodgates opening. "Benjamin," he pressed, "the moment your brother came into our home, the turning of Young Robert was underway. It was twenty-six years ago—1814, as I recall. Robert was three. For impressible ears, how could Episcopal dignity compete with Methodist ways? Then, when your brother died, you took up the torch with all those tales of your Christianizing triumphs in far-off New South Wales. So don't deny blameworthiness in this affair."

I wasn't sure how long I could hold my tongue. Hearing Father suggest that I was not master of my spiritual self was as disquieting as it was off the mark. It saddened me to realize we'd grown so far apart. Still, better judgement forbade me from interrupting. This was something he and Benjamin would still be working out long after my departure.

Uncle resorted to a beatific smile. A mistake. He must have noticed my furrowed brow, because he immediately dropped it for something less grating from his pastoral kit. "My dear Robert," he began, "should we not rejoice that the Almighty has chosen your Robert to bring the Gospel to the savages of Rupert's Land?"

Father looked at me. I tugged at my collar. "Excuse my blunt words, son. If what I say is hurtful, I beg forgiveness, but there are times when others see us in a clearer light than we could ever see ourselves." With that he turned back to Benjamin. "You know the boy's weaknesses as well as I, yet you encouraged him."

"Weaknesses?"

"Physically, he's not up to this, and you know it."

“He’s strong where it counts—in his faith.”

“What about the anaemia, headaches, and shortness of breath? Has there ever been a sickness to which he has not fallen victim? Imagine the conditions he’ll be facing—vicious winters, primitive conditions, wild animals, strange insects. And how close will the nearest doctor be? Two thousand miles? Foolishness.”

“Don’t undersell the boy, he . . .”

“Not to mention scalp-taking savages and those half-tamed Scots working for the Hudson’s Bay Company.”

Benjamin’s lips moved silently before responding. I wondered if he was praying, or searching for a rejoinder. My hope was that he would simply play down the danger and let it go at that. “Your ignorance surprises me, Robert. The Hudson’s Bay Company has had two hundred years to assert control. They care for their men. Dead employees do not get furs to market. Yes, he’ll be in a far-flung outpost—Fort Edmonton, I believe it’s to be—but there’ll be walls around it.”

“So, he’s to be walled up and safe, is he?”

“Mostly. Of course he’ll have to venture out on occasion, but I’m told they do that in armed groups.”

“Oh, and all on good roads, I suppose.”

“On heavily travelled rivers. Think of them as new-world highways.”

Father shook his head. “Heavily travelled all right, by red Indians out to pillage and kill.”

“Come, come,” Benjamin retorted. “In the old days, maybe, but they’ve been tamed.” I noticed the return of the pious smile. “Look, I can see why you might be upset at losing your son for a bit. But it’s *English-controlled* territory he’s going to. Surely, that gives you comfort.” He leaned forward for emphasis. “Do Englishmen not spread civilization where’ere they go? Was I boiled in a pot in Australia? Of course not, because English law has paved the way for

men of peace and love. Not to blow my own trumpet, but the gratitude of the aboriginals for my efforts verged on idolatry.”

“So you keep reminding us.”

“Would you rob your son of an opportunity to bring the Gospel to the Indians?”

I looked from Father to Uncle, not liking where this was going. Neither of them seemed to understand that the discussion was moot. My contract was already inked, with no provision for backing out. It had been my decision, and I was comfortable with it. It remained for Father and Uncle to do likewise.

“Where do you think he’s going, Benjamin?” Father pressed. “Scotland? Ireland? The Lake Country?”

Benjamin gave him a feigned look of incredulity. “Hyperbole does not become you, brother-in-law.”

“It’s not hyperbole! Does the word Blackfoot hold any meaning for you? As in *Blackfoot Confederacy*?” Benjamin gave his head an almost imperceptible shake. I inhaled deeply. “Well, they’re out there, and sensible whites tremble at their approach. Recently, some American Wesleyans advertised for missionaries to the Blackfoot of their west. I can’t recall the exact wording, but it went something like: ‘*Searching for two suitable men to bring the gospel to the Blackfoot Nation; must be unencumbered by family and possessing of the spirit of martyrs*’

“Martyrs, Benjamin; expendable preachers who don’t come home. Ever! It’s a death sentence.”

“You’re getting carried away,” Benjamin answered. “What you describe is the American West. Robert is going to Rupert’s Land, which is in *British* North America.”

“Exactly. Where two-thirds of those blood-thirsty Blackfoot reside, right up to this Fort Edmonton he’s off to.”

“Robert will be in good hands. Governor Simpson of the Hudson’s Bay Company travels regularly across his domain without mishap. He’s promised to take him under his wing. As a pseudo-

employee of the Company, Robert'll be protected, housed, fed, *and* transported. They've even agreed to pay half his annual stipend."

"And I take it you find this Simpson man worthy of trust?"

I stiffened. So did Uncle Benjamin. Still, he wasn't about to abandon his position. "I see him as an English gentleman, using his office to bring the Gospel to simple natives. It's a wondrous opportunity and our Robert Terrill Rundle will be in the vanguard—the first protestant missionary to the Saskatchewan."

"Benjamin," Father replied, slowly and deliberately, "your grasp of political affairs out there is pitiful. My advice is to pay more attention to the press and less to the Scriptures."

"Press? Since when have they ever had much to say about Rupert's Land?"

"Are you even aware that Governor Simpson is in England?"

"Of course I am. He came in search of missionary timber for the Fort Edmonton post and has found it. It's all over the church bulletins."

"But it's a lie. He's really here to talk the powers that be out of it. This whole idea has been forced on him by a board of governors, who in turn are reacting to public pressure. Simpson sees missionaries as a millstone around his neck. Speculation is he'll dump them once back in Hudson's Bay territory. There he's judge and jury over all he surveys."

Uncle's handkerchief came up anew, but somehow he managed to check the expected cough. "It's not just Simpson who's put his imprimatur on this missionary initiative," he said, "it's the whole British government."

Father threw up his arms. "Oh, yes! The Americans are beginning to head into their west, and our government is determined to keep them out of ours. But that calls for settlers. Not an easy task. The Americans are trying to people their prairies, but the Indians keep killing them off. Enter Robert bound for Fort Edmonton. It's an experiment. If he can calm the savages, then other missionaries will

follow, and colonists after that. Think of the money our government would be saving should this all happen peacefully. But if Robert fails or is killed, it's the Hudson's Bay Company's responsibility and the government washes its hands. What's one missionary?"

"Where're you getting this nonsense, Robert?"

"Lord Lemon."

"Our Lord Lemon?"

Father nodded. "The gentleman whose land we till. We talk when I pay the rent. He had more information, too. He's convinced Simpson will do his best to see that Robert stumbles."

A small flock of rooks winged in through the trees in search of suitable roosts. I felt a sudden chill, but put it down to the sun's disappearance behind the granite church. Here was something new. If the company holding my contract was plotting against me, what were my prospects for success? And to what point was I to adhere to Hudson's Bay dictates over my duty to God? I felt the pressure rising in my head. The last thing I needed at this moment was another migraine; especially after father's reference to my "delicate" condition.

"It doesn't make sense," Benjamin replied. "Why would Simpson want missionaries like Young Robert to fail?"

Father took a deep breath and sighed. "I asked Lord Lemon the same question."

"And?"

"He doesn't think Simpson wants the Indians tamed."

"That's ridiculous . . ."

"Sounds plausible to me," Father interrupted. "Their hand-to-mouth existence is easier now, thanks to Hudson Bay goods. But they have to work hard for them. Now, imagine them Christianized. Suddenly, their way of life changes. They wander less, so their children can attend school, or opt for church on Sundays over trap



lines. And where does all this leave the mighty HBC? With fewer furs. 'Six days shalt thou labour,' but for the Indians it's seven."

"If Lord Lemon's correct," Uncle said, "why on earth would Simpson agree to this missionary experiment in the first place?"

"I told you, he's trapped by politics," Father replied. "The Hudson Bay stands to lose Rupert's Land if they don't comply."

"Then, surely, that obligates Simpson to take care of Robert for no other reason than to keep everybody happy?"

"One would hope, but bear in mind, the politics we speak of is on this side of the ocean. Over there, lost in the wilds, who's to stop him from carrying on as he pleases. My fear is that it'll be young Robert who pays the price."

"Surely, his head would roll if word got back that he was mistreating a man of God."

The argument continued, but the spark had gone out of it. My thoughts began to drift, overwhelmed by prospects of baptisms, marriages, and holy burials on the plains of North America. As for these dangers Father spoke of, they were too nebulous and far-removed to give me pause. At twenty-nine and unencumbered by wife or family, my mind was made up. I'd signed a contract with both man and God. In a few days I would be ordained then depart England for New York. From there it would be overland to Montreal to join the Hudson's Bay Company flotilla, destination, Fort Edmonton.