

Come Sit Prologue & Chapter 1

Prologue - *LET ME EXPLAIN...*

On a hot July day in the year 1900 - no doubt while my mother's older sister Clara was somehow making mom's impending birth all about *her* - Mary Marie Rawlings was delivered by my great-grandmother and great aunt.

Years later, I was told the community doctor had been occupied at the next homestead delivering a third set of twins for my grandparent's neighbor, Mr. and Mrs. Harvey.

Anyway, about every eighteen months for nineteen years my grandmother was delivered of another new addition to the Rawlings clan.

My mother Mary was born second into a pioneer Saskatchewan family that was eventually ten surviving offspring. My Aunt Clara, of whom my mother once described; *the most gentle, but the most spoiled, and the most hopeless female God ever gave life to* – was the Rawlings' first born.

After my mother Mary, my Aunt Edith arrived third then Aunt Loraine was a fourth daughter. For a homestead farm family in the early 1900s girls were not deemed much of an asset by farming fathers as their plowing, seeding, harvesting, fencing, roofing, firewood chopping and haying abilities were regarded as limited.

So, while the long line of hungry female mouths to feed kept growing my grandfather had to rely on seasonal hired help and tried not to panic.

His prayers were finally answered when Uncle John was born as the fifth offspring with Uncle Arthur arriving next at number six. Regardless, there was still the need of hired help for several more years and fortunately that was plentiful from friendly nearby Cree villages.

Aunt Louise became number seven followed by Uncle Charles then Uncle Gilbert and finally my Aunt Matilda.

Seven months after Matilda arrived offspring number eleven was in fact left on my grandparents' back porch doorstep asleep in a produce basket.

Regardless, my grandmother wasted no time.

The very next Sunday that newborn was promptly baptized Harry Herman Rawlings. His *adoption* by my grandparents was duly noted before the new United Church pastor who was the official record keeper of Torch River County.

When Harry was baptized, Uncle John was only six years old and Uncle Arthur only five. However, with a fifth boy my grandfather was content that over the next eight years he'd gain enough viable muscle needed for livestock and field work.

With a family of thirteen there was always plenty to do.

Outside the house the girls were in charge of four dozen chickens and a vegetable garden. Inside they were in charge of everything else: cleaning, sewing, mending, knitting, canning, cooking – much of which Clara managed to avoid, while *appearing* to work.

The summer my mother turned sixteen, she married James Harvey - August, 1916. James Harvey was one of the two older sets of twins on the farm one mile from my grandparents.

Relieved that she no longer had to deal with Clara my mother moved into a small two-story cottage style house built from a Sears Catalog kit, five hundred feet from her in-laws' kit home. My older half-brother, Edward was born the following May, 1917 then my older half-sister Lois arrived March, 1918.

However, three months after Lois was born my mother's domestic calm abruptly ended. Two Royal North-West Mounted Police officers found James and his twin brother Joseph in their pig barn and ordered them to report for military duty 200 miles south in Regina.

Rural Saskatchewan had managed to dodge the ravages caused by an international flu epidemic, but not international politics.

England's entry into World War I, four years earlier had found its way to the lives of nearly every able-bodied male over the age of seventeen throughout the British Commonwealth. When several members of the Rawlings and Harvey families saw James and Joseph off at the new Nipawin train station all that anyone could do was hope and pray.

The war officially ended five months later. Five months after that Joseph returned with the lower half of his left arm so badly injured, it eventually required surgical amputation below the elbow. James was still listed as missing in action.

Summer became fall then just after harvest, two military police officers arrived to inform my mother that human remains with James' identification tags had been found in the ashes of a building in a French village.

At the age of nineteen Mary Marie Rawlings-Harvey was a widow with a two-year-old son and one-year-old daughter.

Just before Christmas, Aunt Edith married Joseph Harvey, James' twin brother. Edith and Joseph moved into the original cabin on the Harvey homestead.

A year later in late spring 1920, my mother couldn't bear to be reminded of James everywhere she looked and decided to visit my grandmother's sister in Calgary, Alberta.

Taking a train from Nipawin to Regina then Regina to Calgary with toddlers was a two-day ordeal. At some stops there were other children who played with Ed and Lois and other adults who

distracted them for a short while. However, after they arrived in Calgary all three of them slept for twelve straight hours.

Eventually my aunts including Clara and uncles – including Harry migrated from Nipawin, Saskatoon, then Saskatchewan to Alberta. Some to British Columbia. Most farmed at Claresholm or Nanton, Alberta. Others moved to Calgary, Alberta, where this continues...

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CHAPTER ONE...

“No one else anywhere in Canada is getting a mink for Christmas! Not even Premier Reid’s wife is getting mink for Christmas! But *somehow* my sister Clara is getting mink for Christmas!”

From inside the hall closet under the front stairs and on the other side of the kitchen wall, ten-year-old Bruce Thomas and nine-year-old David Thomas listened to their mother’s strained voice.

Though her tone was low the fair, petite Mary Thomas clearly struggled through clenched teeth. “How is this even possible? It’s Christmas Eve, 1935 and we’re having a worldwide depression!”

“Lois for some reason has been highly emotional lately and now this with Clara! I’m ready to just have brandy instead of turkey for my Christmas - starting tonight!”

Each boy had one ear on their curly brown heads against the wall waiting to hear their father say something calming - as only he seemed able to do. But the boys were interrupted by a knock.

Outside the hall closet was their younger cousin Margaret. “I been looking everywhere for you. What game are you playing now?”

Margaret reclosed the door behind her. The three by six-foot space was dark once again except for a thin band of light visible beneath the door.

Then, came the sound of their front doorbell.

Annoyed by Margaret’s interruption and the bell, Bruce had missed his father’s reply. Resigned he opened the closet door then stepped out into the front hall.

“We’re playing detective,” David’s large blue eyes were wide as he lied holding a finger to his lips. “We must be quiet like we’re dead.”

Margaret nodded shaking her rust-colored ringlets. She eased down to sit on the wood floor beneath a row of hanging coats—eager to join in as usual.

As Bruce started toward the heavy oak front door, he noticed it was already open. He waited watching as his Uncle Bob walk into the front porch.

Uncle Bob spoke briefly with two uniformed police officers then returned to the front hall where Bruce stood at the foot of the stairs. “Is someone missing?”

The slender middle-aged man only six inches taller than his young nephew was at a loss. “Apparently your mother called the police station to report someone missing?”

Bruce shrugged. “I don’t know. Both Pop and Mother are in the kitchen, I’ll get them.”

Hurrying from the front door toward the swinging kitchen door, Bruce lightly tapped on the closet as he went by. He was sure his brother David wouldn’t want to miss whatever was happening now.

Living in a house with a second floor of five rented bedrooms, occupied by twelve other people and a third floor with his own family of six – there was *always something* happening.

So far the younger Thomas boys had grown up surrounded by people and continuous days with many *somethings always* happening.

When Bruce was four years old and David three their parents owned a small hotel one block from Calgary’s city hall. The hotel had burned down New Years Eve, 1929.

With no insurance on the hotel - Mary didn’t want to borrow to rebuild. Instead, she convinced George to find a buyer for their two-acre downtown lot then they began buying bank owned houses to fix and resell.

Over the course of the ensuing five years, they lived in, and renovated each of nine Roxboro houses, moving as many as three times one year, but they managed. Each house bought in the upper end neighborhood was a little larger than the last and for a while there were enough people with money despite harsh economic times.

There was, enough people with money that was, until they repainted and papered their tenth house this time in Rideau Park in the fall of 1934.

By early spring, 1935 George and Mary Thomas still hadn’t found a buyer for the sizeable property they bought hoping to resell for a profit. Evaluating their limited options - their three-story mansion was hurriedly converted to a boardinghouse.

George and Mary had hired their brother in-law Bob Lowe to help with nearly all of their projects. But, as the months slipped by many of Bob’s additional house painting jobs became fewer and fewer and payment for some of his work became chickens or individually owned art or personal items of worth such as, a mink collar.

Sister Clara and brother in-law Bob had answered the first Thomas classified ad for; *Rooms To Rent*. The relatives with their two young daughters, eight-year-old Margaret and five-year-old

Marion were the original four to join other struggling boarders, who moved into a room at #512 4th Avenue S.W.

Bruce burst through the door startling both his parents. "Mother! Uncle Bob let two policemen in the front porch."

George's thick dark brows frowned together. "Policemen?"

"It's okay." Mary patted George's arm then turned toward the hall door. "I telephoned the police just after breakfast."

George objected. "It's Christmas Eve! Why'd you call the police Mary?"

"It's not even noon yet." Mary checked the kitchen clock over her stove. "Police work Christmas Eve too and besides, I want to have some sort of report on Mr. Highland. If he has skipped out on us I want to know now."

George shook his head. "I don't see the need for any panic yet. In September, Mr. Highland paid for a full six months in advance - *to* the end of February! He's the only tenant we have who paid rent that far in advance."

"We should wait Mary. Eric Highland could be with family in Ontario. And, since we haven't seen him for an entire week already, calling police *could* have been delayed until *after* Boxing Day..." But George spoke his last five words to Mary's back as she hurried from the kitchen.

It had snowed lightly the night before and Mary was relieved Bruce and David had finished sweeping the front walk. Then soon after breakfast the weather system appeared as though it might move east. Between breaks in some cloud cover, a vivid sun shone with clear intensity through multiple panes of glass that warmed the enclosed front porch.

Two uniformed men sat in wicker chairs on opposite sides of a round wicker table. They both stood when Mrs. Thomas walked through the doorway into the porch.

"I'm Mary Thomas. I'm the one who called."

"Mrs. Thomas, I'm Staff Sergeant Paul Scott and this is Senior Constable Frank McNeil."

"Gentlemen," Mary nodded as she pushed the heavy front door open wider then stood to one side. "Please come in."

The officers walked from the wide front porch into a spacious almost square front entrance.

The ceilings were ten feet high. A paneled wall of dark oak blocked a clear view of wide 'U' shaped stairs that led to a second floor. The entire floor of the front entrance was covered with a multicolored Turkish carpet. The same carpet pattern ran up the center of oak wood stairs.

To their right the officers noted more ornately carved oak that framed a tall, narrow mirror placed above a narrow fireplace converted to gas heat. On either side of the mirror were several hooks

for hats, scarves and umbrellas. Below the hooks on one side was a built-in bench. On the opposite side were two built-in shelves packed with several sizes of winter boots.

Further down and to the left, against a wall facing the stairs was a narrow library table eight feet long, but only twelve inches wide. On the table, in a row beside a tall lamp were seven pine wood, office style *In* and *Out* boxes. One box was labeled *Mail-Out*. The other six boxes had been labeled with the surname for each tenant and the boardinghouse landlord.

Staff Sergeant Scott spotted mail in a third box down from the lamp labeled; *HIGHLAND*.

Beyond the end of the library table was another four feet of hallway then a swinging kitchen door, beside which stood two young boys and a small girl. Staff Sergeant Scott winked at them knowing from experience they were likely itching with curiosity.

To the officer's left was double pocket doors inset with a frosted etched glass pattern of cattails. The doors filled a wide nine-foot opening to a sitting room. One door on the right side opened. A middle-aged man of medium height with salt and pepper graying hair and a strong square jaw stepped into the front entrance hall. "Merry Christmas, officers, I'm George Thomas."

The police officers shook hands with George introducing, themselves a second time.

A grandfather clock in the sitting room chimed eleven and Mary found her voice again. "What exactly is the procedure now? Do I fill out a form? Do you need to meet with only George and me or everyone who lives here?"

"That will not be necessary yet." Staff Sergeant Scott

nodded to Senior Constable McNeil. The constable produced a leather-bound notebook and a pencil from a pocket inside his wool jacket.

Neither Bruce nor David or Margaret moved. The kids remained partially hidden by a slightly open hall closet door. They were eager to remain as invisible as possible.

The boys didn't want their mother to send them to their room now. Absolutely - *not* now.

"If there is a place where we may talk privately for the next ten or fifteen minutes that should help enough to get an inquiry started." When Staff Sergeant Scott smiled his thick graying mustache moved like a second upper lip.

Under his police cap the staff sergeant's hair was gray at the temples, but his face and dark hazel eyes was that of a much younger looking man. Both Calgary police officers were the same height. And though the constable's hair was a thick dark, brown with no hint of gray his skin was weathered.

Mary looked up at George. "Do you know if Lois finished watering the plants in the sunroom?"

Silently Bruce pointed to the inside of the closet. All three kids moved completely out of sight.

George nodded. "Yes, and then she took a fruitcake over to Arlene Kado." He turned to the officers. "Mrs. Kado and her husband Barnat are old family friends. They live three blocks west."

"Well Lois better come straight back and not try to see that boy, Harold." Mary had a stern expression of resolve on her face.

Her slim five-foot frame walked through the partially open pocket door. She led the police followed by her husband single file across a spacious sitting room and passed inquiring pairs of eyes from some tenants and relatives.

Through a second set of double pocket doors was a dining room, twenty feet long and fifteen feet wide. A mahogany table was already set with sixteen places ready for a midday lunch.

An eight-foot buffet on the right was on the same wall as a second swinging door to the kitchen, laid out with serving dishes. To the left in the room was a wide bay window with a deep window seat that held firewood. On the opposite wall from the sitting room door entrance was a wood burning fireplace.

Two glass doors, one set on either side of the fireplace separated the dining room from the sunroom. Mary opened the glass door to the right.

Down two steps, the officers were in a room with slate floors and ceiling to floor windows on the west and north side. The eighteen-by-eighteen-foot room was unoccupied and furnished with many of the same pieces of wicker furniture as the front porch.

A large metal baker's rack held shelves of cactus plants against the east wall to their right. Two large Boston ferns hung from the ceiling where the window walls joined in the opposite corner. A third Boston fern rested on a metal plant stand just below the hanging plants. Beside the fern on the floor was a tall potted fig tree strung with small white lights.

"That's charming and different." The staff sergeant openly admired the full leafy tree.

"Our tenants Mr. and Mrs. Wu are Buddhists." Mary explained. "They celebrate our Christian Christmas, but also the winter solstice and for them a fig tree holds significance. This year they put lights on *it* too for the children."

Staff Sergeant Scott nodded then noticed a partially finished puzzle on a card table near the baker's rack.

On a small painted drop-leaf table, a chess game was underway. The top of one round wicker table was empty, but on a second were two decks of cards beside a box with the words *Monopoly* printed in large bold letters across the box lid.

The staff sergeant stopped by the table to study the box.

Mary indicated chairs around the cleared table for the constable then addressed the sergeant. "That is a new table game of some kind. One of our boarders, Grace Sadler, works at Eaton's Department

Store. She bought it as a Christmas gift for our younger boys David and Bruce. She was too excited to wait so she gave it to them early. They opened the gift after breakfast this morning before Mrs. Sadler went to work.”

“Never heard of it, but let me know if it’s any good. I have four kids who need to be kept busy when they’re inside on snowy or rainy days.” Staff Sergeant Scott joined everyone else at the second wicker table.

Bruce didn’t hear any footsteps or voices in the front hall. When he opened the closet door to check - the coast was clear. Quietly the kids left their hiding place tiptoeing away from the front hall toward the kitchen door.

On the other side of the door, the kitchen too was empty. With an eye on the back porch door Bruce hoped neither, five-year-old Marion, nor Mr. and Mrs. Wu’s young, son Wang-Yong would look for them. Earlier the younger kids had gone to the cellar below the kitchen to play hopscotch. With luck they would stay there until lunch.

“Let’s see,” police officer Scott began. “Mrs. Thomas, when you called earlier this morning – you gave the name of your missing tenant as Eric Highland. Is that correct?”

“Yes, Eric H-i-g-h-l-a-n-d.” Mary spelled the missing tenant’s surname.

Senior Constable McNeil printed the name in block letters.

“Is Mr. Highland employed and if so where?”

“He sells insurance for the Sun Life Insurance Company. The head offices are in Vancouver and Toronto, so he didn’t actually go to an office every day. But he was out every day and he always carried a briefcase. He joked that his briefcase was his office.”

“Did Mr. Highland regularly pay his rent and on time?”

Mary looked over at George then back to the ranking officer. “Oh yes. Labor Day weekend, he answered our second ad in the Herald. He was holding the entire *Classifieds* page in one hand when he knocked on our front door.”

“When George showed Mr. Highland the room, he took one quick look then immediately paid for six months in advance.”

“That’s remarkable.” Staff Sergeant Scott looked over at Senior Constable McNeil’s notes.

“We shall certainly check with his employer, but if you give us a detailed description of Mr. Highland that might help us locate your boarder without prematurely alarming his boss.”

Mary took a deep breath. “Well, he has fair hair and a thin blonde moustache. He always wears gold wire rimmed glasses. He’s about five feet-six or seven inches tall. He’s not too tall, about the same height as my brothers – though he’s not nearly as muscular.”

“Mr. Highland is a very dapper dresser. His shirts and suits are from the men’s custom section of Eaton’s Department Store. He’s very loyal to Eaton’s where Grace Sadler works. He buys all his shoes, socks and ties there too.”

Mary glanced over at George again. “What else?”

George smiled at his wife. “You forgot Eric’s pocket watch.”

He looked at both officers. “Eric has a very large chiming pocket watch. The day after he moved in he was admiring our grandfather clock in the sitting room. I told him the clock came over from Wales with my great grandfather and it had been in the Thomas family for five generations that I knew of.”

“That’s when he showed me his pocket watch. It’s the largest pocket watch I’ve ever seen. He said it was a gift from a great uncle, but due to its size he always needed to have the left pocket of his vests altered so the watch would fit. The case is smooth, polished gold and not ornate. It’s fairly thin, a full three inches in diameter and quite distinctive.”

Senior Constable McNeil did not look up, but kept his head down writing rapidly.

Staff Sergeant Scott pushed back his chair. “It would be useful if you would, please Mrs. Thomas help Senior Constable McNeil draw a layout of your second floor and your attic floor. We’d like the location of each room and the name of every person who occupies each room.”

Mary looked at George who nodded. She cleared her throat and waited for the constable to turn to a blank page in his statement book.

“I’m ready Mrs. Thomas.” McNeil looked up with a half-smile.

“This house is not a square shape,” Mary began, “but for your purposes we could make it square. There are three rented rooms on the west side. The largest at the front on the southwest corner is rented by my sister Clara and her husband Bob with my two young nieces Margaret and Marion. Bob Lowe is a painter and wallpapers by trade.”

“The room next to them is rented by Hazel and Vernon Ingram. Hazel takes in mending and Vernon is the manager of Brown’s Shoes across from the United Church. The Ingram’s have two grown sons, but they don’t live here. Dale is in the U.S. Navy stationed in Seattle and Gordon is in the Canadian Air Force here in Alberta. He’s stationed at Penhold.”

“Mr. Highland rented the last room on that side in the rear northwest corner. It’s not above this sunroom. His window overlooks the sunroom roof.” Mary pointed up.

“The largest bathroom is for the men and it’s between Mr. Highland’s room and the other back bedroom here.” She pointed. “We fitted it with two sinks and two showers, two urinals and a water closet.”

“Then the room beside the men’s bathroom is across from Mr. Highland’s room on the northeast corner. That room was rented by a young newly married couple, Grace and Lloyd Sadler. As I said before, Grace works at Eaton’s Department Store on the catalogue desk. Lloyd is a shift supervisor at the Robin Hood Flour Mill.”

“Draw the stairs right there.” Mary pointed again to a space on the paper. “The stairs are between the Sadler room at the back and Mr. And Mrs. Wu’s room at the front. The stairs are directly across from the Ingram’s room.”

“Liu Wei Wu and his wife Li Min rent our other front room with their five-year-old son, Wang Yong. Mr. and Mrs. Wu own Wu’s Market. It’s across from the Hudson’s Bay Store and two blocks from City Hall.”

“That fifth bedroom is the next largest, at the front on the southeast corner. The stairs are on one side and a bathroom for the ladies is on the other. The ladies’ bathroom is between Mr. and Mrs. Wu’s room and Bob and Clara’s room.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Wu were living above their store, but it was cheaper for them to live here and rent their two-bedroom apartment out. They were our second tenants.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Wu sold produce to us for our hotel restaurant, before the hotel burnt down.” Mary’s eyes misted over.

She looked away for a few seconds then recovered. “Wei and Min have been valued friends for eight years.”

Staff Sergeant Scott stood. “Mrs. Thomas, I’ll let you finish up with your family and visiting relatives on the attic floor.”

“Mr. Thomas, I presume you have a spare key to Mr. Highland’s room? I’d like to see it and take some photographs before we leave.”

Surprised by the request George stood too. “Yes, we have a spare key to each room. We keep them in a locked box in our bedroom. On the way I may as well show you all around each floor.”

George led the way from the sunroom back into the dining room then into the kitchen. “We moved the original wood stove from the kitchen to the smaller glassed-in porch through that rear door. We also have a washing machine with laundry tubs out there too.”

“The original owners of this house put a spiral staircase to the root cellar from the back porch, but we can also reach the root cellar from the garden outside.”

George then pushed opened the swinging door from the kitchen to the front hall. “There are still two outhouses behind a lilac hedge in the back garden. The former carriage house and stable we converted to a garage and workshop for me.”

The staff sergeant stopped briefly beside the library table

making a mental note of the return names and addresses on the envelopes mailed to Eric Highland.

They started up the stairs. “There are two full indoor bathrooms on the second floor, as well as five bedrooms. The third-floor attic also has five smaller bedrooms, but we made the room between us and the two younger boys into a family parlor, if we need to escape...”

The sound of Mr. Thomas’s voice faded away as he and the staff sergeant left the kitchen for the front hall then ascended the stairs to the second floor.

Bruce, David and Margaret remained quiet and completely unnoticed under the dining room table...