INTO THE ABYSS

CAROL SHABEN

MACMILLAN

It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

INTRODUCTION

I first learned of my father's plane crash from the *Jerusalem Post*. I was twenty-two and working as a journalist in the Middle East. The crash happened on October 19, 1984, but I didn't find out about it until two days later. I was sitting at my old metal desk with a cup of mint tea and the morning paper. That day it wasn't regional conflict or politics that caught my attention, but the headline of a short news item buried at the bottom of an inside page: *Party Leader Killed in Alberta Plane Crash*.

The article was tiny—fewer than fifty words—but its impact was staggering. "Grant Notley, leader of the New Democratic Party in Alberta, and five other people were killed in the crash of their twin-engine plane," the Associated Press reported in the opening line. I read on in disbelief. Four survivors had spent the night and much of the next day huddled in deep snow and sub-zero temperatures before being rescued. Among them was the provincial housing minister, Larry Shaben: my father.

I dropped the paper, grabbed the phone. My brother James picked up.

"Dad's fine," he assured me, but for some reason I didn't believe him.

"Put Mom on," I practically yelled.

"He's okay," my mother told me. "We were going to call, but it's been crazy and, well . . . we didn't want to worry you."

I was crying, feeling very far away. "I'm coming home," I said.

It was Christmas before I could get time off work to return to Canada. Two months had passed and my father's physical wounds had healed. Inside, however, something elemental had changed. He was subdued, quietly haunted, in a way I had never seen before. He'd lost a close colleague that night and had seen others from our town and the surrounding communities die.

My family had experienced the event firsthand and assimilated its extraordinary details. The survivors of the crash—a rookie pilot, an accused criminal, a cop taking him to face charges, and my dad, a prominent politician—had boarded the plane as total strangers. Men from wildly different backgrounds, they had helped one another survive a long, bitter night in the Canadian wilderness. The story had a mythical quality that tested the bounds of reality.

Distance, the crash's impact on my father, and the unlikely friendships that formed between the survivors lodged the event firmly in my psyche. Who were these men? What had they experienced on that snowy, fog-drenched night as they struggled together to cheat death? How had it altered them? If I faced a similar near-death experience, would it change me? Would I continue to live my life as I had been living it?

My curiosity was insatiable. Though I peppered my dad with questions, his answers were disappointingly vague or simply not forthcoming. The crash had affected him deeply, but *how* remained a mystery he kept largely to himself. He refused to discuss the people who had died or what he had shared with the men who had survived.

"It was a long, cold night," the *Edmonton Journal* quoted him as saying shortly after the crash. "We talked about things, private things I'd rather not discuss."

"He has nightmares," was all my mother would say.

In the months and years following the crash, my father forged extraordinary bonds with his fellow survivors, especially Paul Archambault, the twenty-seven-year-old criminal on the plane. Every so often, the scruffy drifter would arrive unannounced. No matter how busy my father's schedule was, he always had time for Paul. My dad would talk about these meetings with delight and obvious affection. Their relationship was important to him in a way I never fully understood. He cared deeply about how Paul's life was progressing and worried during his long absences, as a father would for an itinerant son. After one visit, my dad spoke enthusiastically about a dog-eared sheaf of papers that Paul had brought with him, a manuscript he was writing about his experience that night.

My dad also kept in touch with Erik Vogel, the young pilot who had flown the plane. Every year on the anniversary of the crash, Dad would call him to talk about how lucky they were to be alive. Erik had been just twenty-four—two years older than I was at the time—when the crash occurred. Years later, though juggling the demands of parenthood and my own business, I felt compelled to seek him out. I found him working in a nearby city as a firefighter and living with his family on a quiet tract of land less than an hour's drive from my home.

I arranged a meeting and drove out to Erik's farm. The former pilot's first words to me were "I've been waiting years for you." Over coffee in his kitchen, within sight of a solid wood butcher-block table on loan from Scott Deschamps, the fourth crash survivor, Erik shared his story. Though almost twenty years had passed since the ordeal, he cried as he recounted the events of that night. They had never left him. Nor had his burden of guilt over the deaths of six passengers.

When I drove away hours later, I carried his dust-covered leather flight bag—a tote the size of a small suitcase in which he had filed away his pilot logbook, years of airline rejection letters, court documents, photos and every newspaper clipping he had seen about the tragedy or those involved. Sifting through the contents of Erik's flight bag was like opening the door to a lost world. All of a sudden an event that had seemed surreal came into sharp, dramatic focus. My dad, it turned out, was not the only one to have been transfigured by what happened that long-ago night.

Joseph Campbell, the American mythologist who coined the phrase "follow your bliss," wrote extensively about man's quest for meaning. According to Campbell, all heroic journeys, from the time of the ancients to the present day, begin with a call to adventure—a challenge or opportunity to face the unknown and gain something of physical or spiritual value. This call often comes in the form of a transformative crisis, an event that kicks out our foundations of complacency and makes us examine universal questions of existence: Why was I born? What happens when I die? How can I overcome my fears and weaknesses and be happy?

Few of us will ever face the kind of life-and-death trauma experienced by the men in this story. Their ordeal forced them to confront the precious and limited nature of their existence on earth. In the words of Campbell, they entered the forest "at the darkest point where there is no path." How these four men found their way forward that night and in the years that followed is both remarkable and inspirational.

Scott Deschamps—the rookie RCMP officer who had boarded the flight handcuffed to Paul Archambault—was no exception. Unlike Erik, however, it took me three years to persuade Scott to be interviewed.

Perhaps more than any of the survivors, he had deliberately, painstakingly, rebuilt his life as a result of his experience. His resistance to share his story, Scott told me, was rooted in its deeply personal nature. He had spent more than a decade trying to understand what had happened to him the night of the crash. He eventually agreed to be interviewed only because of my family connection to the story.

Researching Paul Archambault's life was far more difficult. How does one go about unearthing details about a vagabond who'd been drifting since he was fifteen? Thinking it was a long shot, I placed ads in newspapers on either side of the country—one in the city where Paul was living at the time of the crash and the other in the town where he'd grown up some 3,800 kilometres away. To my amazement, my phone started ringing almost immediately. Those who called not only remembered Paul, they told me that he had made a lasting impression on them. Though Paul's parents were dead, an aunt in his hometown of Aylmer, Quebec, contacted me. When I met her, I soon realized that she and her husband hadn't been close to Paul since he was a child. Nor were they in touch with other members of his family, with the exception of a younger brother who had been institutionalized for much of his early life. They didn't know the brother's whereabouts, but told me that he called from time to time.

"When he does, could you give him my number?" I asked without hope. Months later Paul's brother called. Miraculously, in his possession was the tattered sixty-page manuscript my father had spoken of a quarter century earlier.

By that point, the story had sunk its hooks into me. At its underbelly was a compelling and dangerous truth about the commuter airline industry. Across the globe, barely a week passes without news of a small plane crash. Contrary to public perception, commuter airlines

represent the largest sector of commercial aviation in North America and perhaps the world, accounting for more than half of all domestic flights. In Canada, a country characterized by its sparse population and rugged, remote terrain, small planes are a lifeline for residents in isolated, northern communities like the one in Alberta where I grew up. Commuter operations are the workhorse carriers that connect thousands of people to larger population centres and provide a vital source of supplies and medical support.

Bush flying, as it is still known in Canada's north, has always been a dangerous business—a hard-driving, high-risk profession ranked as one of the deadliest in North America. The pilots are often young and idealistic, driven by a desire for freedom and adventure. With few exceptions they are trying to work their way toward careers with major airlines. First, however, they must pay their dues by building logbook hours flying for small airlines. Some pay with their lives. Inside Erik's battered flight bag, he'd kept a file thick with articles on dozens of small plane crashes that had occurred in the years since his tragedy. "It's frustrating to see it happen over and over again," he told me.

The more I read about the commuter airline industry, or heard about yet another small plane crash, the more shocked I became. A major investigative report on Canadian aviation incidents between 2000 and 2005—before the federal government reduced public access to its aviation occurrence reports—noted that during that five-year period there were literally thousands of reported incidents involving danger or potential danger to aircraft passengers. How was it that the flying public wasn't in an uproar?

Typically it's only when large jets fall from the sky that people take notice. Outraged by the body count, they demand government investigations and seek ironclad assurances that the airline at fault addresses safety concerns. Meanwhile, small passenger planes continue to crash with frightening regularity. But apart from the loved ones of those

who die, few sound the alarm. When they do, it's a faint cry in the wilderness that goes unheeded. Even fewer consider the pilots in these crashes—often young and frequently scared—who battle fatigue, terrain, weather or mechanical malfunction on a daily basis.

As is sadly the case when one tries to apportion blame for the vagaries of fate and circumstance, I came to see Dale Wells, the owner of the airline involved in my father's crash, as the villain in this tragedy. It took me years to summon the courage to talk to Dale. Our eventual rendezvous at an Edmonton restaurant completely reversed my opinion. Dale was both humble and forthright. Like Erik, he had also kept meticulous records. After our meeting he walked me to his car in the parking lot and handed over a massive box filled with files and documents.

"Say hello to your father," he said as we parted. "I always thought he was a wonderful man."

My father didn't live to see me finish this book. In April 2008 he was diagnosed with cancer. He died less than five months later. As I was preparing to board the flight home to Alberta to be at his bedside, I asked him if there was anything he wanted me to bring.

"Your manuscript," he said.

I'd written only a few rough chapters, but it didn't matter. He insisted.

I spent two days at the hospital. And during those two days I read to him. It was the last time we were together.

This book is my tribute to my father, Larry Shaben, and to Erik Vogel, Scott Deschamps and Paul Archambault. Their strength, courage and dignity are an inspiring example of how individuals can journey from the depths of tragedy and loss to the riches of lives begun anew.

PART I

Fate rules the affairs of mankind with no recognizable order.

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA

DEPARTURE

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1984

Erik Vogel was in over his head and didn't know how to get out. There were half a dozen reasons why the twenty-four-year-old rookie pilot didn't feel comfortable flying tonight, but with his job at Wapiti Aviation on the line—or so it seemed to him—none of them counted. Erik had been in and out of cloud for most of his outbound flight from the small northern Canadian city of Grande Prairie, Alberta, and had watched wet snow continue to fall. The wheels of his ten-seater plane had touched down at the municipal airport in Edmonton, Canada's most northerly provincial capital, just as the last light of day was leaving the murky sky. He was running behind schedule and working hard to make up time. Standing 6′3″with a lean, athletic build, warm brown eyes and a wavy crop of dark hair, Erik appeared every inch a young, attractive and confident aviator. Inside, however, he was scared.

After unloading his passengers and their luggage, he'd crossed the tarmac to the terminal building to collect his outgoing passengers. He glanced at his watch: 6:40 p.m. That gave him only twenty minutes for ticketing and check-in, refuelling, and loading the luggage and

passengers for the return flight north. There was no way he'd be off the ground by his scheduled departure time of 7:00.

His only hope was that tonight would be a repeat of last night and that there wouldn't be passengers bound for the small communities of High Prairie and Fairview, which had tiny airports with no air traffic control. He also prayed that by some miracle he'd pick up a co-pilot. As he approached the check-in counter Erik was overjoyed to see Linda Gayle, Wapiti's Fort McMurray agent, already selling tickets. Wapiti retained Linda on a part-time basis for the Fort McMurray flights and she wasn't obliged to help out pilots flying other routes, but tonight she'd decided to do him this favour.

"What have we got?"

"We're fully booked," she replied.

"So no chance of a co-pilot?"

Linda shook her head.

His stomach churning, Erik asked the question that had been plaguing him ever since he'd talked to the pilot who'd flown the morning schedule. "Any passengers bound for High Prairie?"

"Four," Linda told him. "Plus two on standby."

A town of 2,500 people 365 kilometres northwest of Edmonton, High Prairie was on the other side of a high ridge of rugged and densely wooded terrain known as Swan Hills. Because the airport had no control tower, regulations dictated that pilots could fly into High Prairie only in visual conditions, meaning when the weather was clear. The pilot on the a.m. sked had warned Erik that there was a lot of snow on the runway and he'd had a hard time taking off.

As Erik stood wondering how the hell he was going to manage the flight, two men approached. One, about 5′10″, bull-chested and casually dressed with a hedgehog coat of close-cropped auburn hair, dropped his shackled left hand heavily on the counter. Handcuffed to him was another man. Of similar height, he had a brawny build with

an unkempt mop of frizzy brown hair, and deep blue eyes that softened the strong angles of his face. Sideburns stretched like woolly carpets down either side of his cheekbones and above his upper lip, a generous arch of moustache curved over small, even teeth.

"Where do you want me to sit?" the first man asked. Below a prominent brow, green eyes regarded Erik intently as he explained that he was an RCMP officer escorting a prisoner to face charges in Grande Prairie.

Erik swallowed hard. He remembered the story of a prisoner getting loose on a charter flight out of Vancouver and trying to attack the pilot.

"At the very back," he said, regarding the prisoner warily. The man exuded a nervous energy like a charged circuit, and wore only jeans, a wool-lined jean jacket and an open-collared shirt: not exactly appropriate for the weather.

"I'd like to board him first," the cop said.

Erik nodded, then asked Linda to finish ticketing the passengers while he went to the nearby weather office to see if Luella Wood, High Prairie's airport manager, had filed her customary 6 p.m. weather report. She had, and the news wasn't good: the cloud deck was broken at 500 feet and overcast at 900. A visual approach required a 1000-foot ceiling and 3 miles' visibility.

As he walked back to the counter, Erik surveyed the other passengers in the departure area: four men and two women heading home on a Friday night. He stepped behind the counter and grabbed the PA system mic.

"Attention, passengers on Wapiti Flight 402," he announced. "I'm not sure whether we're going to be able to land in High Prairie because the ceiling is so low. If we can't, we'll have to go on to Peace River because they have a controlled approach. If there are any passengers headed for High Prairie who don't want to take the flight, please let me know."

Erik scanned the faces of the passengers in front of him. Regardless of the weather, they expected him to get them home. They weren't going to give him an out. He ran a hand wearily across his forehead, trying to erase the tension that had settled there. He'd done what he could. At least if he overflew High Prairie, it wouldn't come as a surprise.

As he walked outside to load the luggage, an icy wind whipped along the tarmac, wet flakes dampening his face. The airport—a dark triangle of land slashed out of the bald northern prairie—was shrouded in fog and beyond its muted southeastern border, the lights of downtown cast a dull violet glow. A collection of squat buildings flanked the airport's southwestern perimeter and beside them silhouettes of airplanes perched like frozen birds, wings outstretched as if already in flight.

Erik took a deep, shuddering breath to calm his nerves and tried to focus on the positives. He'd warned his passengers about the flight, so there wouldn't be any flak if he ended up taking High Prairie passengers on to Peace River. Linda had done the ticketing, so he'd been able to check the weather—a luxury he seldom had time for. He'd even had a dinner of sorts, eating the untouched half of a sandwich left by a Wapiti pilot who hadn't had time to finish it.

Erik's efforts to stay upbeat didn't last. When he got to the plane, the fuelling service hadn't yet arrived and he had to scramble to get the tanks filled. By the time they finished, he was behind schedule. He hastily piled some of the luggage into the plane's nose compartment and then crammed the rest into the rear hold behind the seats. Though regulations required that he calculate the weight and balance for the aircraft, he didn't bother. What difference would it make? Erik didn't feel he could leave passengers or their luggage behind, and in winter conditions like tonight it would be foolish to skimp on fuel when he didn't know whether he'd be able to get into

the uncontrolled airports on his route. He estimated the fully fuelled, nine-passenger flight would be overweight to the tune of about 200 kilograms, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. The queasy feeling in his stomach grew as he walked back to the terminal to escort the cop and his prisoner outside.

When they arrived at the aircraft he watched uneasily as the constable unlocked the handcuff from his shackled wrist and snapped it closed around the prisoner's free one. Erik pulled open the hatch and gave the go-ahead to climb aboard.

Behind the terminal doors, Larry Shaben squinted through thick wire-rimmed glasses at the snow falling in white waves across the tarmac. Forty-nine, with a broad, balding forehead, olive skin and enormous brown eyes, Larry was immaculately dressed in a navy suit and brown ultra-suede topcoat. A second-generation Canadian of Arab descent, Larry was an elected member of the Alberta government and the country's first Muslim Cabinet minister. His executive assistant had driven him to the airport directly from his office at the Alberta Legislature just in time to catch his flight home for the weekend. Now he waited impatiently to board.

The doors opened and the pilot entered, bringing a blast of frigid air with him. It blew the thinning strands of dark curly hair from the crown of Larry's head and he quickly smoothed them back into place. The politician had watched the pilot frantically working to prepare everything for the flight. He was young and seemed on edge. Larry had detected strain in his voice when he'd made the announcement about possibly not being able to land in High Prairie, and had immediately called home to let his wife, Alma, know.

"I'll tell you what . . . if we can't land and you have to pick me up in Peace River, I'll buy you dinner."

Though he hated the thought of Alma driving on the highway in these conditions, there wasn't another option. And it was only 130 kilometres. Larry would drive the two of them home after dinner and let her sleep in the car.

It had been a gruelling week at the Ledge, as he and his colleagues often called the Alberta Legislature. That morning the government's fall session had begun. For the next six weeks Larry would spend his days sitting in chambers debating and voting on bills and motions. In preparation for the time away from his office, he had spent the past week working twelve- to fourteen-hour days to get on top of the mountain of paperwork he had to deal with as the Minister for Housing and Utilities.

As he typically did every Monday morning, Larry had flown south from his home in High Prairie to Edmonton, where he rented an apartment five minutes' walk from the Legislature. By Friday, he was so tired that he couldn't imagine driving the twenty minutes across the city to the municipal airport, let alone the four hours north to High Prairie. Now that the weather had turned, the thought was even less appealing.

As he'd dashed out to his aide's car, Larry could feel the chill weight of moisture in the air—unusual for Edmonton, which was prone to brittle cold and clear skies. The city roads had been thick with slushy new snow and Friday night traffic crawled.

When he'd arrived at the terminal Larry had little energy for conversation, but among the cluster of passengers at the check-in counter were some he knew well. One, Gordon Peever, a next-door neighbour whose kids had grown up with Larry's own, was director of finance at a vocational college near High Prairie. Gordon often travelled to Edmonton for work and that morning he'd caught a ride to the city with a friend to attend a meeting. Gordon had planned to take the bus home that afternoon, but for some reason

decided to catch a cab to the airport in hopes of getting a flight. He'd worried he'd be on standby, Gordon told Larry, but had been lucky enough to get a seat after a passenger cancelled. Larry also greeted another local resident, Christopher Vince. The young British-born man had recently moved from Calgary, a city three hours' drive south of Edmonton in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, to take a government job training social workers. His wife, Francis, a schoolteacher, had just started teaching at the local junior high school, and the two seemed to be settling well into small-town life. Larry didn't recognize the other two men and women in the departure area, but had said hello. As a high-profile elected official, people often recognized him and he prided himself on being friendly and engaging, even at times like this when he felt utterly drained. Fortunately tonight the passengers' attention was elsewhere. They were abuzz with gossip about the rakish man in handcuffs who had just boarded the plane.

Scott Deschamps stiffly stood guard beside the ten-seat Piper Navajo Chieftain, the only departing plane on a barren stretch of tarmac. Snow had thickened the night, and an icy wind sent shivers through him. His prisoner and all but one passenger and the pilot were already aboard. Scott watched a trim, suit-clad man in his mid-forties hurry across the tarmac, briefcase in hand, and climb the few steps to the cabin. When he'd disappeared inside, the pilot motioned Scott to follow. He ducked through the open door and stood near the rear aisle seat next to the exit. The pilot entered soon after, his tall frame bent almost double as he pulled the hatch closed. He turned the handle and looked over his shoulder at Scott.

"Watch me." The pilot's voice was just above a whisper as he inserted the safety pin. "You need to know how to open this door in case of an emergency."

Dale Wells discouraged his pilots from giving safety briefings to passengers because he felt they frightened them unnecessarily, but Erik wasn't taking any chances.

Scott leaned forward to watch and listen. If there was one thing he was confident about, it was his ability to handle himself in an emergency. He gave the pilot a nod when he finished and watched him move up the aisle and settle in the cockpit next to the well-dressed passenger who had arrived late. Scott dropped into the empty seat, buckled his seatbelt and glanced at his prisoner. He was holding his handcuffed wrists in the air in front of him.

"Can't you take these off?"

Scott studied the man beside him. The constable hadn't known what to expect when he'd arrived in the city of Kamloops in British Columbia's southern interior that morning to pick up Paul Richard Archambault, who had a long rap sheet of B and E's and robberies dating back to 1976. As the day had progressed, however, Scott had been surprised to find himself enjoying the company of his prisoner, who had proven to be quick-witted and likable, with a ready if off-colour sense of humor.

He and Paul had been together since early morning and Scott felt like he had a pretty good read on the guy. He wasn't likely to be a danger. Scott fingered the key inside his jacket pocket. It was against RCMP regulations to remove his prisoner's handcuffs, but he felt comfortable with the risk. He fixed Paul with a stern look.

"Okay," he said, "but let there be an understanding: if there is any trouble, the full force of the RCMP will be on you."

Paul nodded solemnly and then a smile cracked the rugged lines of his face.

Scott slipped the key into the lock of the handcuffs, unfastened them, and tucked them into the briefcase at his feet. He turned to gaze out the small cabin window. Falling snow and a veil of cloud

muted the city lights. Beyond their glow, the world was darkly smudged. Scott exhaled heavily. It had been an exhausting day. Ten hours had passed from the time he first picked up his human cargo. Since then they'd been bounced unceremoniously from flight to flight. Scott had a confirmed booking for the two of them that morning on a flight out of Kamloops. However, when Scott arrived at the RCMP detachment, the staff hadn't done the paperwork for Paul's release and the men had missed their flight.

Finally, they were on the last leg. Scott had managed to snag two seats on one of the few planes flying north from Edmonton to Grande Prairie that night. The flight was a milk run with three en route stops, which meant it was going to be another couple of hours before he arrived in Grande Prairie. Scott was sick of take-offs, landings, and the confined space of airplane cabins. He laid his head back and felt something jut into the back of his neck from the rear cargo hold directly behind his seat. He turned to adjust the baggage so he could get comfortable. Above his head, he could see briefcases, small suitcases and a computer monitor piled precariously at a 45-degree angle to the ceiling of the cabin. The compact luggage compartment was completely full and there appeared to be nothing separating him from the cargo in the rear hold. Spotting his garment bag, Scott pulled it out and rolled it into a makeshift pillow. The fabric scratched the back of his neck, but at least it was soft. He wanted to close his eyes and sleep. But sleep wasn't an option. Not yet.

He'd sleep when he got home. The thought carried an edge of melancholy. Grande Prairie didn't seem much like home without Mary. Two months earlier his wife had moved back to the west coast to take a job. He supposed he couldn't blame her. After all, they'd had an agreement. She'd promised to give Grande Prairie three years. She'd stayed nearly five.

In contrast to the breathtaking stretch of southern coastal British Columbia where Scott had grown up, Grande Prairie was a rough-edged, northern prairie city attracting more than its share of transients and troublemakers. Just north of the 55th parallel, it was the largest and final urban centre between Edmonton, Alberta, and Fairbanks, Alaska. The city served as a provisioning stop for people travelling north, as well as a hub for the region's two economic powerhouses: agriculture, and oil and gas. In the midst of the oil boom, Grande Prairie had also been one of Canada's fastest-growing cities with its population nearly doubling from 13,000 in 1971 to its current size of 25,000.

The place had its own beauty. The open vistas and bright skies were a stunning contrast to the often grey and rainy coastal climate of British Columbia. Grande Prairie summers were pleasantly warm and the days languorously long. Bear Creek, a verdant belt of treed parkland, bisected the city from north to south. Beyond the city limits, the landscape, though relatively flat, was not featureless. Farm fields rolled out to the north, east and west in a golden patchwork of barley, wheat, canola and oats. To the south was a vast boreal forest extending to the foothills of the Canadian Rockies.

In many ways his first posting had been good for Scott. An avid outdoorsman, he'd loved being able to get into the bush to hunt and fish. He also enjoyed the steady income and the stature his job gave him in a small city where the locals treated you like family, and over time he'd built a circle of friends.

Winters, however, had been challenging. The days were short and bitingly cold, and temperatures frequently plummeted to -20°C. At times an unbearably fierce wind would barrel across the prairie, pushing the wind chill as low as -50°C. At that temperature, exposed skin would freeze almost instantly and locals would rush to plug in their vehicles' block heaters to keep the engine oil warm so their cars would

start. The snow often flew in late October and stayed until May. This year it had arrived even sooner. Yesterday, the first winter storm had swept across the region, bringing heavy snowfall. But Scott hadn't been in Grande Prairie to see it. Earlier that week the head of his detachment had asked for a volunteer to fly to Kamloops and bring in an accused criminal arrested on an outstanding warrant. Scott had jumped at the chance, hoping to tie in a brief layover in Vancouver to visit Mary.

It had been wonderful to see her, yet so much felt unresolved. Scott had put in for a transfer to the coast so they could be together, but there was no telling when or if it would happen. To make matters worse, Scott wasn't sure he was ready to start a family, the natural next step. He was only twenty-eight and just beginning to hit his stride as a cop. After five years he was making decent money. He'd recently banked enough to buy a BMW—the envy of the detachment. There would be plenty of time to have kids. Even as he thought this, Scott's confidence wavered. In this one area, he felt completely out of his depth.

Erik was running almost half an hour late and somehow he'd have to make up time. He clipped his lap belt and his eyes darted uneasily to the passenger in the co-pilot's seat—a last-minute arrival for the flight. Erik offered a clipped hello, wondering nervously whether the official-looking gentleman next to him might be a government air safety inspector. Transport Canada occasionally had inspectors ride along anonymously to check on airline operations, and recently Wapiti Aviation seemed to have had more than its fair share of scrutiny.

Erik tried to put the man beside him out of his mind, and reached forward to grab his headset. He was stopped short by his shoulder strap's broken recoil mechanism. It was just one of the small

maintenance issues that irritated him. He flicked the useless strap from his shoulder, pulled on his headset, and radioed for clearance. Edmonton Departure gave him the go-ahead, and he taxied to runway 34. Above him the sky was black. Wet snow smacked the windshield and Erik felt his heartbeat marking time amid the roar of the engine. He checked his watch: 7:13.

"Wapiti 402," a voice squawked into his headset. "Runway three-four cleared for takeoff."

"Four-oh-two rolling, three-four," Erik replied.

Within minutes, they were off the ground, climbing toward a bank of thick cloud.

As the plane flew north from Edmonton, Erik brooded. He needed to get a handle on what he was going to do. He had filed an instrument flight plan to Peace River, an airport 385 kilometres northwest of Edmonton that had an instrument approach. That meant that even if Erik could see only a few hundred feet in front of him, he could still get in safely. But Erik had to get in and out of the airport at High Prairie first. The runway there was a short, dimly lit strip of asphalt equipped with only a single non-directional beacon—a simple radio ground transmitter that did little more than help Erik pick out the airport amid a vast swath of snowy terrain. The only way he would be able to land was to drop below the clouds and try for a visual approach, a tall order considering the cloud ceiling there was 500 feet off the deck and broken, and completely overcast at 900 feet.

Erik was in the untenable position of trying to obey two masters. The first was Dale Wells, his boss at Wapiti Aviation. Erik felt pressured to get into his destinations even if it meant pushing the weather, though Dale never came right out and said it. Many bush pilots face direct pressure from management: "Do whatever's required to get the job done, and if you have to bust the weather to land, don't get caught."

The second master was the Ministry of Transport, whose regulations stipulated that a visual approach wasn't even legal on a night like tonight. In short, Erik needed to follow one set of rules without getting violated for breaking the other.

He felt like a condemned man. If he didn't get in he could lose his job; if he did, he could lose his licence. Nervously, Erik shot another look at the man beside him.

The Piper Navajo's flight path was Alpha 7, a low-level controlled airway passing just east of High Prairie. Erik's plan was to stay on the airway, flying on instruments, until he was beyond the high terrain of Swan Hills. Then he'd alter course slightly west, transit into uncontrolled airspace near High Prairie and drop down to see if he could spot the airport.

Flying on instruments—also known as IFR or Instrument Flight Rules—is akin to flying blind to the world outside the cockpit windows. Much more complex than flying visually, it's a skill vital to pilots who fly at night or in bad weather, requiring them to navigate solely by reference to cockpit instruments.

The land below was invisible, obscured beneath a blanket of cloud and darkness. Erik raised himself in his seat and looked for any sign of lights, but the earth was lost to him. He had been so preoccupied he'd paid little attention to the windshield. Now he noticed a delicate trace of rime blossoming along its edges. Ice was the last thing he needed. He continued to ascend, keeping a close eye on its slow advance. He reached his clearance altitude of 8,000 feet and the plane was still in cloud, rime closing like a lace curtain across the windshield. He flipped the switch to activate the de-icing boots and turned on the landing lights to get a better look at the wings. A thin crust of ice had begun to layer their leading edges. Erik strained to see the movement of the de-icers, rubber membranes covering the wings that expand to break the ice. Nothing was happening. His palms were

slick with sweat as he clutched the yoke. He needed to get above the cloud, and fast.

"Departure, 402," Erik radioed Edmonton Departure Air Traffic Control. "Level eight requesting ten thousand."

"Wapiti 402, cleared to ten thousand."

Erik nosed the plane skyward and at 8500 feet it broke clear. He exhaled. Holding altitude, he turned his attention to what lay ahead.

First, he had to make up time. It was already 7:30 and he was due into High Prairie at 8:00. He throttled forward and increased his airspeed to 175 knots. Now he needed to acquire his bearing. Edmonton's distance-measuring equipment extended only 120 kilometres from the airport. Without a distance readout, Erik was forced to use dead reckoning, a skill he'd learned but far from perfected as a bush pilot. He tuned his automatic direction finder to a ground transmitter near the town of Whitecourt, which was directly along his flight path to High Prairie. The automatic direction finder or ADF is a simple navigation tool that, when tuned to the radio frequency of a fixed ground beacon, causes a directional needle to swing toward the beacon. The pilot adjusts his heading so the needle points to the nose of the plane, indicating the aircraft is tracking directly toward the beacon. The problem with this rudimentary navigation system is that it doesn't tell the pilot how far away the plane is from the beacon.

Typically, Erik would have used a second ADF to help him determine this distance by tuning it to a non-directional beacon located in the high ridge of rugged terrain further along his flight path to High Prairie. As his plane flew past that beacon, the needle on the second ADF would swing around 90 degrees and point off the wingtip, giving Erik a cross bearing or intersection point. Then, using dead reckoning—a complex series of calculations involving speed, elapsed time and course—he could figure out his distance from his destination.

Unfortunately, only one of the plane's two ADFs was serviceable. That meant he would have to toggle his single working ADF back and forth between the frequencies of two different ground transmitters. The thought of doing this to determine his location, as well as dealing with everything else, all without the help of a co-pilot, made Erik stiff with apprehension.

After a moment he homed in on the Whitecourt beacon and adjusted his course so that the needle of his ADF swung to point toward the nose of the plane.

Good, Erik thought. At least he was heading in the right direction.

Time passed. His head ached from the pressure of pounding blood. Suddenly, the ADF needle swung 180 degrees to point off his tail, indicating that he'd passed the Whitecourt beacon. Erik tuned the dial once more, this time to the frequency of the High Prairie beacon. Again, he adjusted his heading so the compass needle pointed toward the plane's nose. Now he needed to home in on the Swan Hills beacon, approximately two-thirds of the distance to High Prairie.

Having flown the route fewer than a dozen times in clear weather, Erik was under the impression that the Swan Hills beacon was on the summit. That meant when the needle swung to point directly off his left wingtip he would be abeam of the high point of land on his flight path and could safely begin his descent into High Prairie.

In reality, however, the terrain didn't drop off after the Swan Hills beacon, but continued to rise for 30 kilometres beyond it to the 4,000-foot summit of House Mountain. Only then did the land slope downward, though not steadily. Thirty-two kilometres southeast of the High Prairie airport the terrain rose again to the 2900-foot crest of a densely wooded hill.

Inside the cockpit, the loud hum of the engine vibrated in Erik's ears. He was feeling utterly cut off from the world when a voice crackled in his headset.

"Wapiti 402, if you read Edmonton, contact Centre now, one three two decimal zero five." He'd been on Edmonton Departure traffic frequency 119.5 and was now being asked to transfer over to 132.05—Edmonton Air Traffic Control Centre.

Erik adjusted his radio. "Wapiti 402."

"Wapiti 402, good evening," a voice said. "You're radar identified . . . what's your altitude now?"

"Eight five zero zero. We were given a block eight to ten," Erik said. "Ah, sir, I don't . . . I wasn't told to go over to Centre."

"You can remain on this frequency," the voice told him.

Erik was thinking fast now that he had ATC on the radio. He needed to let them know his plans.

"It looks like we're gonna have to go into High Prairie," Erik said, "so I'll be requesting a descent to MEA and then out of controlled airspace probably at 19:45, 50 sometime."

The High Prairie airport lay within a mile-wide strip of uncontrolled airspace between two ATC-monitored flight paths: Alpha 7—the one Erik was on—and Bravo 3, a flight path to the west. That allowed Erik to exploit a loophole in the system. He'd requested a descent to MEA, or minimum en route altitude, in this case, 7,000 feet above sea level. However, once he'd passed Swan Hills he'd begin veering west out of controlled airspace. Then he'd drop down below that to see if he could get a visual on the High Prairie Airport. Air Traffic Control knew it wasn't legal, but when it wasn't in their controlled airspace they turned a blind eye.

Erik had first seen the technique—known among pilots as a *bullshit approach*—flying in the Arctic, but he wasn't sure what his plan should be for High Prairie. He'd only flown into the town in poor weather on one other occasion, as a co-pilot on a route check a month after he'd joined Wapiti. On that flight, the plane had broken through the clouds 2000 feet above the airport. The thought of attempting such

an approach tonight unnerved Erik, but he felt he had to try. If he couldn't spot the runway, he'd climb back up and into controlled airspace. Then he'd reestablish radio contact with Edmonton ATC to let them know he'd overflown High Prairie, and could carry on direct to Peace River.

"Wapiti 402, I check that you'll be landing at High Prairie."

Okay. But how low should he go before he bailed out on landing? He thought for a moment, and decided on 2800 feet. The High Prairie airport was at an altitude of 1974 feet. That would give Erik an 800-foot safety margin, as low as he dared go on a bullshit approach on a night like this. Erik worried that if the plane didn't land, Dale would ask what altitude he had tried. Erik could then tell his boss he'd attempted at 800. Even Dale couldn't fault him for that.

"Wapiti 402, you're re-cleared present position direct High Prairie."

"We check that," Erik said. "The signal's not too strong so I may not pick it up for awhile. I'll just stay on the airway and after Swan Hills abeam looking for descent."

"Wapiti 402. Roger."

Erik had covered his bases. He scanned his instruments. His speed over ground was 189 knots, his altitude holding at 8500 feet. After a few moments, the needle of his ADF swung around and pointed off his left wing, indicating the plane had passed Swan Hills. Erik tuned the ADF back to High Prairie's frequency and adjusted his course several degrees west until the needle was again pointing straight off the plane's nose. Then he began to descend.

The Navajo reentered cloud at 8,000 feet, dropping steadily at 300 feet per minute. It was a rate Erik came up with after factoring in his time, distance, heading and rate of travel. He checked the windshield for ice. It was advancing once more along the margins, though not alarmingly. What he couldn't see were the crusts of ice building on the leading edges of each wing. What he did not realize was that ice,

his overloaded plane and an error in his dead reckoning calculations had put him at least 20 nautical miles, almost 40 kilometres, behind where he thought he was.

Erik watched the needle on his altimeter dial continue to whirl counterclockwise: 7,000 feet, 6,500, 6,000, and then 5,600—the minimum obstruction clearance altitude. He estimated he was now no more than ten minutes from the High Prairie airport. He'd hold at 5,600 until he passed over the airport's beacon and his ADF needle swung behind him, indicating he'd flown over the runway. In aviation terms this is referred to as *station passage*. Then he'd circle down to 2800 feet to see if he could make an approach. He knew that the small snow-covered airstrip would be difficult if not impossible to see in this weather, but if he could get under the clouds and spot the runway, he'd be okay.

In the meantime, he decided to radio the airport to get an update on the weather. Luella Wood, the airport's sole employee, was expected to be in contact around the time Wapiti flights were due to arrive. However, he couldn't raise her on the radio and that distressed him. If Luella told him the cloud deck was below 800 feet, then he wouldn't even attempt to land.

Suddenly, from the blackness below Erik saw a flash of orange flame—a flare pot from an oil well burn-off. For a few seconds it illuminated the trees below like a blowtorch. Though he couldn't yet see the lights of the town, it seemed the cloud ceiling might be higher than forecast. The thought occurred to Erik that he might *actually* make it into High Prairie after all. He checked his watch: 7:55. According to his calculations he should be passing the High Prairie beacon any minute. *I'll just start creeping down,* he thought.

Larry had been hoping they wouldn't have to fly into Peace River and now it seemed he was getting his wish. The pilot had just told

the passengers to turn off all cabin lights and to fasten their seat belts. It was dim inside except for the warm amber glow of the *Fasten Seat Belt/No Smoking* lights. Larry couldn't wait to be home. His stomach growled and he longed for one of Alma's hearty Lebanese meals. He was craving a cigarette and looking forward to lying down on the comfortable couch in their family room after dinner to watch TV. Often, he didn't watch long before he fell asleep, and Alma would be gently shaking him awake, encouraging him to come upstairs to bed.

He felt the plane descending and checked his watch. Just after 8:00. Though they had departed late, it appeared they'd arrive pretty much on time. Larry had been one of the first passengers to board and had noted both the police officer standing alone outside the door and his prisoner already settled in the rear right-side window seat. Larry had shuffled up the narrow aisle and when he'd reached the front of the cabin, had laid a hand on the back of the co-pilot's seat. Then he'd hesitated. Typically, this was where Larry liked to sit, enjoying the view and chatting with the pilot. Tonight, however, he hadn't felt like talking, and simply wanted to put his head back and rest. He'd taken off his coat and slid into the seat directly behind the pilot. Gordon had taken the seat across the aisle from Larry. After a delay, Larry heard footsteps advancing hurriedly up the aisle and was surprised to see Grant Notley sweep past him and settle into the co-pilot's seat. The leader of the New Democratic Party, Alberta's official opposition, had planned to drive home to Fairview that afternoon with his wife, Sandra, but had instead remained in Edmonton for a meeting. He thought he'd have to stay overnight, but the meeting had wrapped up earlier than expected.

"I just got the call that Wapiti had room for me," he told Larry.

He was happy for Grant. Larry wouldn't wish the long drive north on anyone tonight, especially him. Two months ago on the highway

home, he'd hit an elk. The collision had totalled his car and Grant had had to crawl through the shattered windshield to get free of the wreck.

"I am lucky to be alive," Notley had said the next day.

As the plane continued its descent, Larry peered out the window. Flashing pulses from the wing lights punctuated the murky soup of night. He craned around the pilot's seat to watch the altimeter steadily falling—4,300 feet one minute, 4,000 the next. Suddenly he heard something bang against the side of the plane—one reverberating clang then another.

"What was that?" he asked

"Ice," the pilot replied, a note of alarm in his voice. "It must be coming off the propellers."

Larry squinted into the night, and saw nothing but a thick veil of cloud. He heard the pilot speak into his headset: "Traffic advisory High Prairie, Wapiti four zero two is inbound from the southeast on descent."

Larry looked at the altimeter once more: 3,000 feet. He knew the airport's elevation was just under 2,000. They *had* to be close. He turned to the window and pressed his forehead against it, cupping his hands around his glasses to blot out the light from the instrument panel. His lenses were inches from the window as he strained to see the lights of home. *Where were they?*

Erik radioed High Prairie, but once again received no answer. *Where the hell was Luella?* He didn't pause to consider that an error in his calculations had put him further back than he thought and that distance as well as the rising terrain he was rapidly approaching were obscuring radio transmission. He had other things on his mind. He'd been

so preoccupied with his dead reckoning calculations that he'd paid scant attention to the windshield. It had become opaque and the world outside blurred behind a frosty film. He could hear ice breaking off the props and banging against the plane as if someone was hurling rocks at the fuselage.

Erik sucked at his moustache with his bottom lip.

Jesus, there must be a hell of a lot for it to be doing that, he thought. Still his exhausted brain didn't register that that amount of ice would have slowed the plane's speed, and that he was 20 nautical miles short of his destination. Instead, his concentration was focused on the task ahead. When he flew past the High Prairie non-directional beacon the needle of his ADF would swing behind him. At that point, he'd look for the airstrip and if he didn't see it, he'd throttle the power back up and be gone. First, though, he had to pass the beacon.

The needle should swing any second now, Erik thought. *It's going to swing by. I'm right there. Why isn't the needle swinging?*

Then the thought occurred to him that he'd been fixated on getting into High Prairie. How the hell was he going to get *off* the runway if it was snowed over, his plane was overweight and his wings iced up?

The Navajo was moving fast now, lashing through cloud, making up time. The power was right up and Erik was sweating. He glanced at the altimeter: 2850 feet.

Holy shit, he thought. *I'm going to hit my 2800-foot minimum and the needle hasn't swung yet. I'd better level out.*

Erik started pulling back on the controls just as snow-covered treetops loomed suddenly out of the blackness.