

Part One

March 1934



**E**ach minute this morning hangs perilously, like long cigarette ash. She flicks her wrist. Grey flakes fall onto the grey marble floor. All around her is the click-click of shoes and dollied steamer trunks that rumble in the rotunda of the Great Hall. Her eyes are steady. Watching intently the line of suckers at the ticket window and the bills that emerge one by one from their pockets. The first is a fiver, the next two are singles. She smiles. Sees clearly now the corner of a ten-dollar bill and leans forward, budging the moment when they will begin to head her way. She takes another drag. Tendrils of smoke curl around her hand.

Here they come.

He takes the 9:20 train from Gravenhurst. Loosens his tie, leans his forehead against the window. Reflection all the way. He sees his own eyes, the familiar expression that locomotes down rural routes, passing across farmhouses into pale flat land. Studies this face, the crow's feet and jawline that jump with each jolt of the tracks, that align themselves with the speed of the train so his mug is oddly still within the restless geography. This is how he heads home. Takes a deep breath and the blur on the other side of the window continues to accelerate. Silos blink past. Town after nameless town disintegrates behind him. Eli slouches in his red leather seat and watches each one vanish.

The train pulls into Union Station. One last jolt and he lurches out of his seat. Looks around. Passengers yawn and retrieve their hats from overhead. Jam the aisle. A welter of hips along the length of the car. Behind an angora beret, Eli takes small steps. Maunder and pause, maunder and pause. They advance tediously and then disembark, with traincases and a sigh, onto the platform. Move single file through a set of doors.

An arrant crowd on the arrivals concourse. Hustling redcaps go blue in the face, lugging huge bags in their thin arms. Around them, dozens of people offer tips and gesticulations. This way this way this way. Elbowing a path from the ramp loggia to the

taxi stand. This way this way. Eli, a tight grip on his satchel, negotiates the hollering. Finds brief open spaces and makes his move, zigzagging here and there. He keeps on his toes, almost midway, when his route is cut off by a murmuring couple. He stops, steps back suddenly and bumps into an old woman. Pinched face and a scent of rosewater.

Well I never, she says.

Eli shrugs. Picks up again the circuitous pace and feels a slight dispersal in the crowd. Just stragglers now in wider spaces. Waiting and waiting, all the expectant eyes focus on the arrivals gate. For the hundredth time this hour, a cigarette is crushed under a shoe.

One level up. Light from clerestory windows cuts a series of pale lines through the crowd. A gaggle of hats and torsos gone lucent. Mona Kantor keeps watch. In all the comings and goings she can see shades of possibility. A sucker who fumbles with a street map, another dickering with smash. Her eyes all over these men, her sense of the grift roving under footfalls and around a farewell hug before hitting her mark. Six-footer in a tilted homburg, reading the frieze of destinations on the north wall of the station. Port-Arthur, North-Bay, Sarnia. His lips on the move. Mona looks to the opposite wall. Chesler, in the arranged spot, offers only hat and hands around an open newspaper. His eye rises over the corner in silent accord. He folds the paper, buries it in his armpit and steps away from the wall.

Through the bodies they move, scissoring the floor of the station. Two thieves in step with the mark, appearing casual despite the practiced footwork. A shuffling celerity. Passengers from all directions slowly clog the ramp of the departures concourse. Chesler slides in behind the tall man, a signal to Mona. She positions herself in front of the pair, just off to the left. The pace becomes languid now, each movement huddled around another. Mona removes her hat and wipes her brow. The felt hat dangles in her hand, a good grip on the brim. Her elbow in a hard angle almost touches the wrist beside her.

Chesler keeps one eye on the loose collar of the mark. The jacket is an ill fit, with a noticeable sag down the back. He coughs a gentle back-of-the-throat cough.

Mona drops her elbow, her hat shading Chesler's fingertips as they scurry along the left-hand pockets of the mark, coat and pants, fingertips so sentient they are in fleet accord with all the geometries of scratch. There is a roll of bills in the side pants pocket and a wallet in the back pants pocket. Chesler is set to cop.

Eyes forward, Mona manoeuvres the mark into a vulnerable position using her back and elbows and buttocks. Plants her prat with gestures incidental but calculated, small moves so ordinary they are overlooked. Her hip brushes the side of the mark's hand and Chesler gets his duke down, fast, hidden behind Mona's hat. With only the first two fingers, he takes pleat after pleat from the lining of the pocket, money rising into his hand with amazing speed. He reefs an easy kick, a small wad of money in his palm. Once more he coughs. Mona shortens her stride. Each step is smaller and smaller, so small the trio is both fluid and inert. The mark is dull to rhythm and he moves into her. A slight swivel of the hips for misdirection. The surest way to get a man's mind off his money is to focus on the space between the pockets. Just for one priapic moment, a sucker's epoch. Chesler unbuttons the back pocket with a flip of the first joint of the index finger and the ball of the thumb. He pinches the poke and slips out beyond the jibing bodies. The touch has come off without a flaw, a thing of beauty in twelve seconds, in a whiz.

Leaving Union Station, the taxicab struggles in the noontime traffic. Pedestrians, autos and streetcars all take turns with the lurch and idle.

Slumped in the back seat, Eli pats his breast pocket. Through the fabric of his jacket, he can feel the edge of the folded page, the slim heft of his release papers. He closes his eyes and mouths two words that are lost to a sudden honking horn. Eli opens his eyes, looks out the window. All the automobiles, the main street that disgorges more and more hustle. Three women, laughing, dodge the imbroglio and then the cab follows suit. Makes a quick right and, for the rest of the way, moves quietly through a mesh of side streets.

Garron's Smoke Shop, on College west of Bathurst. In the big store window, ads for Sweet Caporals are pasted around a selection of pipes and the florid face of Garron's missus, who waves. Eli waves back. He enters off the side and up one floor. Walks down a hallway of crumbling plaster, taking the same unhurried steps he has always taken, to the last door on the right.

Inside. He drops his satchel on the floor and makes a small circle of the apartment. One step after the other, Eli rounds the room with slowly increasing wont. He tilts his head, blinks before an old armchair. Seconds pile into minutes while he eyes a tear in the upholstery. He leans close to a nightstand, lamp with a fake pewter base. Four minutes pass by the time he continues



to the kitchen, where look turns to touch. His left forefinger feels the dust-covered countertop and then runs a pale line clear across to the icebox. Up a wall. Stops on a calendar, two months out of date. Two months. Not much by the looks of it. Nothing more than a couple of pages. All the days he's been gone marked with tidy little boxes, check check check. The days counted out so effortlessly here. Not there. There, time passed only with a nurse's permission. A doctor's needle. But here, whole seasons can change with one flip of the page.

RIIIII-iip goes January. He reaches out for February now. Takes hold. RIIIII-iip! The two pieces of paper flutter down. Eli begins to catch up.

Three more scores and they call it a day. Tough to ankle when the going is good but no point burning up the place, so with tempered desire they weave and flow with the rest of the suckers. Slow down near the exit.

Chesler is counting the cash.

Mona lights up. Well?

Mm-hmm.

What's that mean?

Means mm-hmm.

Mona takes a healthy drag. Well, she says, hand mine over then.

Chesler hands hers over.

Sunlight pale and slatted comes through the colonnade of Union Station. Dwarfed by a massive column, Mona squints out at the movement on Front Street. Even off the whiz, she is observant of gait and pace, the telltale vulnerabilities in another's motion. She takes a drag on her cigarette and looks around. Chesler is long gone, ready to breeze the moment the last poke is pinched. Mona tends to linger – daffy habit for a stall, but spending so much time in the tip often leaves her a little twitchy in the initial open spaces. So, on the peripheries of action, she smokes. Inhale and exhale easing her out of the grift.

Strolling away from the station, she passes a pencil seller on the sidewalk. Over her shoulder are a cigar shop and an oculist and competing haberdasheries. Sees familiar faces in the shop windows because she often takes the same route home, walks the relentless city while autos zip past with growling regularity. Six-cylinder hubbub. A honking Dodge hustles past her. She flips him the bird and turns onto the side streets. Beat-up rowhouses on McCaul and Sullivan, with cracked toplights and, below them, the unemployed who drowse in the doorways. She cuts across Spadina and walks one block north of Dundas to Glen Baillie Place, an alley four houses deep. She stops at the last one, tosses away her smoke and opens the door.

The next day, he leans his head back. Each new angle of the eye offers another storey, a gaze that climbs the spandrels, clammers over a dramatic setback and then a subtler one higher up the shaft. Eli at the corner of King and Bay stares up all twenty-two floors of the Star Building. Motionless on the sidewalk, but his eye wavers and wavers at the top. Tips over. A vertiginous drop all the way down to the main doors. He straightens his tie.

In he goes.

I'm talking about character. I'm talking about temperament. Christ, you know what I'm talking about: the news game is no place for nerves. You got deadline pressure, you got the goddamned *Tely* boys on your ass. You really take your licks in this business.

Eli shifts in his chair. Takes a deep breath. The entire news-room stuffed into a single moment of respiration: the incessant clack-clack of keys, phones that ring through the blue smoke and blue language. The eyes of all the other reporters landing on him while Bert Murneau, the city editor, sits on the edge of the copy desk and sighs.

We've been friends for how long, Morenz?

Five years, says Eli.

Five years. So you won't squawk when I say this: I talked to your doctor yesterday.

Eli cocks an eyebrow.

He was a little cagey at first, but we managed to cut through a lot of the mumbo-jumbo. He says the rest did you wonders. Says you're much better. Says it's time to try the next step. Reintegration at a higher level, or something like that. Can't remember the exact phrase, but it all boils down to putting you back on the payroll.

Okay.

Of course, the payroll's just been cut. All I could wrangle for you was some voucher jobs. Nothing steady.

Okay.

Half the town's on relief, Morenz. You're lucky they even let you back here.

It's okay, Bert. Really.

Really? says Bert.

Eli taps his temple. Temperament, he says.

Back in the tip. The terminal crammed today, women and men who scurry and lug their way out of town. She sees whistles and waves; all the eddies of movement end up fifteen feet from the ticket window when a lanky bates juggles the crowd. Mona hard on his heels. Deliberate and innocuous, she needs only seconds to adjust to his loose jangly gait. Her mimicry moves from the announcement boards to the baggage check before she feels Chesler fall into place. Hears him cluck, an office that asks her to come through. So she does. Moves from the front of the mark and doubles back, a subtle reversal that opens enough space for Chesler to score the pit. Another office now, a muttered *ahem*, hits her ears and she knows they have pinched another poke.

Between scores, she wanders the terminal. Lights up.

From the Front Street portico comes an elderly couple. They shuffle along slowly, laboured breath and halting steps. As Mona settles in for the frame, she can see the old man tap his wristwatch.

Durn thing.

I told you to get it fixed.

I know.

I told you to take care of it. I told you it's no good but do you ever listen to me? Do you?

Mona plants her prat, then hears Chesler office that the touch has come off. With a sideways glance, she watches the couple nudge their way down the departure ramp, so eager to catch their train they won't savvy the lost poke until they are far out of town.

In the Bowles Lunch, where empty cups and full ashtrays cover the tables and hollow-eyed men scan the want ads in a shared newspaper. Eli, waiting here three days for his first assignment, kills time with the city news. A slow reacquaintance with stick-ups and social programs that jangles his caffeinated nerves and gives him a full-on jag by the end of page two. He takes a sip. Chews his lip. All the bunk about three squares and regular sleep plays well out in the country, but this business is something else entirely. The news game is all about questions. Not just the ones he has to ask – the whos, whats, wheres – but the ones he'll have to answer. How *are* you, Morenz? You okay, Morenz? You *okay*? Everyone at the paper has this scoop: the long days and late nights he needed to pound out copy, pages and pages of it that piled up until Eli couldn't go any further and the words began to dwindle. To die. And after a while, there was nothing left to say so he said nothing. Not a word. The doctor had a bunch of names for it. Nerve strain, melancholia, depression. Back then, Eli ignored any clinical hokum. But now, when the depressed man returns to the depressed city, his smile is thinner than a vein.