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FRAMED IN FIRE

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

PROLOGUE

THE MAN STOPPED THE CAR. He got out and, standing for a moment, gazed along the edge of the forest. The evening was almost golden, the way the clouds filtered the setting sun. Even the air, with the March chill closing in, felt fresh, just as he loved it. There was another car nearby, its hood shining in the sun. Someone fishing, no doubt.

He could hear the creek cascading over the rocks toward the lake. He went along the path he knew so well.

Approaching the cottage, he didn't think about what he would say. He pushed open the small gate and walked up the two steps to the door. A crow called out from somewhere in the forest, its voice rising over the sound of water. He listened to that call—gravelly and dark, the way crows are—and smiled. He did not think it a warning. He turned and rested his hand on the doorknob. There was a male voice, and the door was thrown open. A tall man filled the doorway.

“What do you want?” The voice low and furious, the

“you” emphasized, as if the man had warned him off before. And then the man in the doorway turned his head slightly without removing his eyes from the man on the step and called out, “Get me that rifle.”

The surprised man put up his hands, chest high, palms outward. A gesture of calm. He wanted to say, “Take it easy,” but the rifle was pointed now. What the hell was this?

He stepped backward down the steps, his hands still up, in an attempt to calm. “No need for that,” he managed. He heard a scream, and a shot exploded into the silence. The crows flew up out of the tender trees that grew in a circle near the cottage and raised their voices in anger and fear.

CHAPTER ONE

March 1948

LANE WAS JOLTED AWAKE IN terror, her body seized by the certainty of death. She found herself sitting up, gasping in great draughts of air, her heart pounding in the dark. Her eyes focused on the faint drift of the curtains, lifted by a gust of cold air coming in through the open window. It was an ordinary movement. She was not dying. But she still felt herself taking in air as if she had somehow stopped breathing in her sleep. Darling was, amazingly, still asleep beside her, lying on his side so that his back was to her. How had he not heard the commotion of her gasping? She was grateful he hadn't.

She swung her legs off the bed and reached for her dressing gown, slipping it on as she crept out of the room. Once in the hallway, she could see the cold stretches of light from the full moon coming in through the sitting room window and reaching along the floor, as if feeling for some unquiet sleeper to wake. She leaned against the

wall and put her hand to her heart, relieved to be out of the bedroom, certain of what would come next.

Perhaps she could forestall it. Before she had married, she had been able to sit up in bed, turn on the bedside lamp, read, go fetch a glass of hot milk, or just wait it out. She made her way to the kitchen and gently shut the door so that light and noise would not wake Darling, and then sat for a moment looking at her hands lying palms down on her lap. She could feel the shaking beginning somewhere inside her.

This hadn't happened since she'd been married. She knew that she had secretly hoped the closeness to another creature she loved would banish these episodes. She stood up and ran water into the kettle and put it on the burner and then realized the hot water bottle was in the bathroom cupboard and she would have to tiptoe down the hallway to fetch it. God, she thought, looking at the clock on the wall. It's two thirty.

Instead, she stood uncertain and immobile, feeling more alone than when she'd actually been alone.

"RASHERS OF BACON on a weekday. How far have we sunk into dissipation?" Darling asked, appearing in the kitchen smelling of soap and resolve, as he did every morning when he was preparing to make the long drive from King's Cove to Nelson, where he was in charge of the police station.

"I thought we could use cheering up," Lane said, cutting slices of bread.

Darling looked at her, and then went to where she stood over the breadboard and said gently, "Why don't I handle

the toast?" He put his arms around her and held her for a moment. "Do we need cheering up? It's the middle of March at last, the month when spring comes."

She relinquished the bread and the toaster. "You pretend you're being helpful, but you are motivated entirely by not wanting burned toast."

"You must admit, you do sometimes like it darker than is absolutely necessary. How did you sleep?" Darling opened the wings of the toaster and positioned the bread.

"Fine. I mean, I had a nightmare." Lane realized the truth of this as soon as she said it. She had forgotten there'd been a nightmare. What had it been about? She busied herself with dropping eggs into the frying pan. She felt a tension in her throat. Why could she not just tell him she'd been up what felt like most of the night and only crawled back to bed at five thirty? After all, she had warned him before they were married that she had these episodes. It would not surprise him.

Darling abandoned the toast to its fate, pulled Lane away from the stove, and made her sit opposite him. "Darling, are you all right?"

"Of course I am. I was just a little rattled. It's ridiculous, I don't even know what it was about." His solicitousness somehow made her feel worse, as if she were feeble. "There, that's done it. You've incinerated the toast!" She got up and went back to the stove, her mind a turmoil. It occurred to her that what she was feeling was shame. Shame about her own weakness. She had never felt this embarrassment before about these episodes; they were simply what they were, but there'd never been anyone else to see them or

need them explained. They were infrequent enough that they hardly made a dent in her life, and she knew she was luckier than many. Look at poor Robin Harris, her grouchy apple-growing neighbour, thirty-five years after the Great War, still haunted by guilt, his whole being transformed into a kind of permanent surliness. God knows what his nights must be like, she thought.

She flipped the eggs quickly and slid them onto plates along with the bacon. Darling was at the garbage bin, scraping the toast.

"This, according to Angela, is what Americans call *over easy*. See what you think," said Lane.

"This, I'm afraid, is what is universally called *burned toast*."

"Nothing a little butter and jam won't fix. Now then, what have you got on today?"

"The usual mayhem, I expect. Petty crime, drunken fights. Ames is following a robbery from the bookstore the night before last."

"The bookstore! Cash?" Lane asked.

"No, funnily enough, books. The owner is going to give us an inventory today of what is missing. The thief broke a pane of glass quite carefully and managed to unlock the door from the inside. Minimum of mess."

Lane felt herself relaxing. Stealing books was an interesting crime. "How fascinating. Ames will soon sort it. Is he well read?"

Darling shrugged. "Well enough, I suppose. I imagine he mostly reads paperback thrillers, but for all I know he reads himself to sleep with Spinoza every night like Jeeves. Why?"

“I was just thinking, if there was some pattern to what was taken, he might be able to develop a profile of the thief.”

“I shall pass that on. No doubt he will gush his appreciation as he always does where you’re concerned. What are you up to today?”

Until that moment, Lane had had no idea beyond trying to gain back her equilibrium, but she said, “You know, I think I’ll drive up to New Denver and see Peter Barisoff. I haven’t seen him in ages, so perhaps he’d welcome a visit. I have a box of chocolate biscuits I could take with me.” In fact, she hadn’t seen him since the horrible business of his friend being killed at the hot springs the previous winter.

When Darling’s car had been swallowed into the rising mist hanging over King’s Cove, Lane stood at the door, looking at the yard through the window. It may have been March, but the brown, trodden-down grass and the layers of flattened and greying autumn leaves still covered the ground, and the sky had been an ever-changing moody grey for the last few days.

She turned back. They had bought a wireless, and she thought of turning it on to hear the news—and, more importantly, the weather—but she could not imagine shattering this quiet.

She washed the breakfast dishes thoughtfully. She knew her reluctance to speak about these intermittent nighttime fears could affect her ability to talk honestly with Darling, and it worried her. If she could not tell him, could not come to understand why it was that she suddenly felt shame, she would slowly and inexorably retreat into the solitariness that could begin to fill her marriage with shadows.

She made a cup of tea and sat on the window seat looking out at the lake. The longer she waited to say anything, the harder it would become. What was the nature of her reluctance? She didn't want him feeling sorry for her. She imagined herself resisting his embrace, saying, "Just leave it. It's all right." Imagined him being hurt by these rejected attempts to comfort her.

Then she remembered when she had learned that her father had died, and how Darling had responded then. They hadn't even really had a relationship then, but he had brought her a cup of strong, sweet tea and then taken her to lunch, only talking about it if she seemed willing. He had reacted by being practical and by listening. In fact, respectful solicitude had always been his way. Why would he not do the same thing now? She was creating a problem that did not exist; she could see that. She knew that her instinct to close herself off had begun in the depths of her own childhood, when her father had called her a coward. Perhaps somewhere inside she confused emotion with cowardice.

She got up with determination. Seeing Peter Barisoff, who had coped with more in his long life than she ever had, would give her some perspective. As a Doukhobor, he and his people had been forced to flee Russia to protect their mode of worship and their pacifism. At first, they had been welcomed with land that they farmed communally. But over the years, internal strife, government suspicion of their religion, their clinging to the Russian language, and their insistence on educating their children on their own had led to the collectives being broken up. Now Barisoff lived on his own in a rented cottage.

Anyway, she thought, what happened to her the night before was no different from what had happened to her in the past. The only difference now was that she was in a relationship that provided friendship, love, and companionship that she had never dreamed would be hers, and this quintessentially lonely struggle was suddenly thrown into sharp relief by contrast. She would use the drive to and from New Denver to try to understand this. One thing she knew: she could not lie to Darling.

"GOOD MORNING, SIR. Nice ride in?" Sergeant O'Brien greeted Darling from his stool at the front desk.

"Very nice, thank you. Ferry was on the right side for a change. Anything?" Darling paused with his coat over his arm and his hat in hand before going upstairs to his office.

"As a matter of fact, someone tried to burn down a house up on Ward Street. Householder's apparently a light sleeper and got onto it before much damage was done. Put it out with his garden hose. Two thirty or so in the morning."

"We've already determined it's arson? How do we know it wasn't a faulty furnace?"

"That, sir, is because the householder found a gas can right at the back where the fire started."

"Hmm. Well, get Terrell onto it. If Ames has a break in his stolen bookcase, he can go with him."

"Sir."

UPSTAIRS, DARLING HUNG up his coat and hat and surveyed his desk with that little thrill of satisfaction he always got seeing it aligned and tidy, inbox squared with the corner,

writing pad centred, chair pushed in. He could begin his day with his mind clear. But in the next instant he knew his mind was not entirely clear. He turned to look out over Elephant Mountain, his usual locus for thought. It was shrouded in mist from the rains the night before. Lane had looked tired. He suspected she'd had a bad night but was determined to paper it over. He had tried to ask her, and she had . . . not rejected him, exactly, but moved away almost imperceptibly. He'd woken briefly when she'd come back to bed early in the morning, felt her trying not to disturb him. He had too much respect for her to get involved where he wasn't wanted, but he wished she could feel able to share her pain. Was he hurt by it? He wasn't sure, but he knew he was a bit worried. Could her pulling away begin to eat into the sense of intimacy he'd come to love? He'd never imagined in all his life he would love someone as he loved her or be close to someone in quite this way. His own father had been distant as he was growing up, and Lane had been a miracle. Perhaps pain, even when not inflicted by a partner, naturally caused people to try to pull away. He felt for a moment a kind of powerlessness about how the drift might even be stopped.

He got up and stood, still looking out the window at Elephant Mountain, solid, always there when he needed it for his contemplation. His love for her, he thought, was like that. Perhaps that was all he could do. Just be there. He turned back to his desk. There was always work to distract him in the meantime.

"THE LIST OF books is pretty unrevealing," Ames reported to Darling later. "A row of Penguin papers, authors ranging from F to J, and one large coffee table sort of book called *The Grand Opera* that was displayed on a nearby shelf. It looks like they just swooped an armload into a box or something and fled. There were three copies of a biography, several novels, a couple of mysteries."

"Hmm. Your Miss Winslow thinks you might be able to learn something about the thief by the books that were taken. Who was the biography about?"

Ames scanned his list. "It had just come in. *Samuel Turner, A Life*, by . . . hmm, Samuel Turner. Never heard of him. There were a couple of copies of a book called *Turn on the Heat* by Erle Stanley Gardner. It's all here." Ames handed over the list. "I wonder if she's right, that we could learn something about the thief from seeing what he took." He bit his upper lip in a meditative manner. "It's a pretty mixed bag."

"You can ruminate on that later. Go with Terrell and find out what you can about the arson attempt on Ward Street. Is Mrs. Treadwell at the bookstore all right, by the way?"

"A bit shaken up, as you can imagine. She's pretty well on her own there. Her granddaughter used to work with her at the shop, but she's gone off to the coast to university. I suggested that she hire someone to help her, at least part-time. She said she'd be okay till her granddaughter gets back in May. She got the glass repaired, so that's something."

Darling shook his head. "I think there's a fat chance of that granddaughter coming back here in the long run."

Young people who got an education tended to go elsewhere to put it to use.

THE SLOW APPEARANCE of the sun through the clouds lifted Lane's heart no end. She had driven with her usual trepidation along the narrow single-lane Adderly Road, with its precipitous drop-off to the inky lake far below, and was relieved to meet no other driver coming the other way, which would have necessitated an awkward standoff. She was especially relieved when she saw that a large truck was just leaving Adderly and would soon be on that bit of road. Pity anyone coming north who met that on the narrow curve!

In the uplift of the moment, Lane began to see her problem in a new light. Of course she could tell Darling what was weighing on her, she told herself briskly. To love him and marry him, she had had to overcome all kinds of natural inclinations to be private and not risk her heart; this was just one more. And if he was overly sympathetic, it was just a sign of his kindness.

By the time she reached New Denver and was crawling along the appallingly rutted road that led to Barisoff's farm, she was in a much more cheerful frame of mind and looking forward to speaking Russian again. She parked the car by the path that led toward the house.

The modest wooden cottage with its greying clapboard looked peaceful nestled among the evergreens. Too peaceful, she realized. There was no smoke issuing from the chimney. But it was turning out to be a beautiful morning, and it was dispelling the listless feeling of exhaustion she

had been carrying around after a bad night. Perhaps Mr. Barisoff was at the back in the garden or visiting his adult son, who, she remembered, was supposed to have taken over the second house on the property.

She took the tin of chocolate biscuits and went to knock on the door, but there was no answer. Disappointed, she made her way around to the back, where Barisoff, with what she suspected was his usual industry, had begun work on his large garden. Some rows of dirt had been turned over, and a shovel stood against a small tool shed, but there was no sign of the man himself. Beginning to fear that the whole expedition would be in vain, she walked along the path to the second house, but not only was there no one there, it had the air of a place that was not being lived in at all.

She was just going to turn back, her mind on why his son had not returned as he had been so insistent on doing the year before, when she saw that there was a path that led through the woods.

She had always been unable to resist the lure of a path and she walked along this one. Grey-yellow fronds of dead grass encroaching from the sides of the otherwise well-worn path deposited dew onto the bottoms of her trouser legs, but the intermittent slashes of sun through the trees transported her to a solitary sense of golden peace. The path curved and began to head slightly downhill until it opened onto a down-sloping meadow, with a gaspingly beautiful view of Slocan Lake.

The morning sunlight, establishing itself more firmly against the dark clouds that had covered it, now sparkled off the lake. The silence was blissful. Lane scouted about

until she found a little outcrop of rock where she could sit and be warmed.

She saw him before she heard him. He was emerging from the woods at the edge of the meadow, and for a moment Lane thought she was hallucinating both man and horse. He moved a few yards into the clearing, and then stopped and gazed at Lane, his horse nodding against the reins.