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THE COST
OF A HOSTAGE

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

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TOUCHWOOD

For Diego, my dad's geological partner, who once saved me.

PROLOGUE

September 1942

SHE PUSHED OPEN THE DOOR of the farmhouse, and the two men at the table turned to look at her. It was dark, except for the flickering of the oil lamp casting an eerie light on their faces. It was cold outside for early September. She knew she should have brought more clothes. She wasn't going back, no matter what happened. She'd thrown her lot in with him, and this was it. Still panting from the run to get there, she stood for a moment catching her breath and then closed the door behind her. This was supposed to be a Special Operations Executive safe house. How had they known? They must even now be waiting for one of the agents to come with a radio. Charlie, maybe? She didn't know. But she knew who he would be meeting here. And she couldn't care anymore, she just couldn't.

In a moment she picked out Ean where he sat at the head of the table, smoking. She didn't know the other man but saw three glasses. There was someone else there as well.

She was about to apologize, but he stood up, tossing his cigarette on the earthen floor, and approached her.

“Why are you here now?” he whispered. His anger shocked her. He had said he loved her, had sworn it. But now he gripped her arm hard and pushed her into the little room opposite the kitchen. The light from the lamp made no dent in the darkness of this room. His breath smelled of garlic and drink.

“I came . . . I came with the money. I want to give you the money and come away with you.” She knew it sounded desperate and was not at all what they had planned.

“Why?” His voice was icy, and even in this obscurity she could see his eyebrows pulled together. She was pierced by his coldness. She felt suddenly as if she didn’t know him at all. “No one told you to come here,” he hissed. “You have a job. Leave the money, go back. You do what he says.” He lifted his chin toward the other room.

She put her hand on his chest, resting it delicately on the rough wool of his sweater, the buttons on the shoulder only half done up. “I want to be with you. I know you’ll understand. I’ll come with you, fight with you . . . I’m very good with a rifle . . . I just can’t betray . . .”

“*Merde!*” he said, giving up on whispering. He pushed her away and turned as if he would walk off and leave her there, but he came close to her again. “Then you will tell us when the next drop is, who comes after the man with the radio, *then* you can show us your shooting skills.”

“I . . . I can’t. You see, that’s the point. I can’t. Anyway, you already know about Charlie.” She prayed it would be Charlie. “If you don’t want me, I’ll go back, and I’ll ask to be reassigned so you don’t have to see me. Here, I’ll

leave this money like you said.” She put her hand in her jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope. “Everything he gave me is there. I don’t want it.” She pushed the money toward Ean, anxious to be rid of it. He only stared at her, shaking his head. Even in the darkness she could feel his dark eyes piercing her.

“My God, woman, what world do you live in, eh? Are you out of your mind?” He jabbed violently at his own head with a large finger.

She began to be afraid, really afraid. She was here alone, rogue, without any sort of cover. She felt suddenly a great hollow sense of her own madness. *Had* they known about Charlie? Or had she . . . ? The utter despair of the betrayal washed over her. Ean’s, her own. She’d thought he loved her, that she was coming to be with him, to make his cause hers, his life hers.

“Well?” He had her wrist now and was yanking her upward, as if she were a toddler misbehaving. “There is no point, madam”—he ground this word out with violent sarcasm—“unless you can tell us what we need.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. I just can’t.” She could feel tears burning her eyes. “If you were me, you wouldn’t either.”

“Ean, what’s going on?” It wasn’t the man she’d seen in the other room when she’d come. This one was English. With a gasp she realized who it was. Why was *he* here? She could hear a chair being dragged, but now the Englishman and the other one were speaking Breton, and she couldn’t understand.

Ean answered him through the door, and she could hear the man sit down. “Don’t you English call a stupid woman a

cow? You're a real cow." Ean took her upper arm and flung her away from him, making for the door. She fell against something hard. Her neck snapped back and she hit her head on the floor. She felt herself slam hard and then she lay still, smelling the acrid odour of the pounded earth floor, covered in ash and spilled food and God knew what else. In that moment of complete darkness, she heard the door locking behind him, and she knew then how wrong it all was, and how very bad it would become.

CHAPTER ONE

August 5, 1948

LANE WINSLOW CLOSED HER PROUST and frowned out at the lake. It was a beautiful early August day, and she wasn't entirely sure she was putting it to good use. August 5. What did that remind her of? Something from so long ago it was just a date hanging loose in her memory. And then it came to her. Alma's birthday. She felt her heart lurch. This was her second assault on this book. But it was her very own *temps perdu* she was drawn to suddenly. She'd been reading Proust in the bedsit she shared in London with Alma during the war, she remembered, until that awful day. She closed her eyes and could see herself lying on the bed with the book. That scrap of a pillow with the poky feathers rolled up under her neck. Had she been reading or pretending to read to block out poor Alma's chatter?

She put the book firmly on the little iron table that served as the outdoor eating place at the home in King's Cove, British Columbia, she shared with her husband,

and stood up. She'd chosen this slightly mildew-smelling volume in French out of a sense of virtue. It didn't do to let one's few skills languish. Her skills, after all, included French, German, and Russian. They ought, she realized, glancing down at the lawn below the veranda, to include cutting the grass. Proust would be no help here.

With a sigh she put a slip of paper into the book to mark her page and pushed the volume back into her shelf for another time. It was after nine, and the dew had dried off the lawn under the already hot morning sun. With determination, she pushed the war behind her yet again, an exercise that seemed to get slightly easier with time and practice. This beautiful day in a beautiful place certainly helped. She slipped on her shoes and padded out to the garage to get the mower. She smiled at how smug she would be about her industry when her husband, Frederick Darling, got back from Nelson in the evening.

The lawn that lay between the house and the barn was quite shaded by the evergreens and therefore not only patchy, as lawns go, the years of fir needles choking the grass, but still damp. She pulled the machine down the slope past the weeping willow and the pond she'd been building and began to push it down toward the bushy edge of the green. Kenny Armstrong had come over a couple of weeks before with some sort of tool and sharpened the blades, so they sang through the grass now, sending up a shower of fragrant green tips. She was so busy trying to decide if she should mow back and forth in rows, or go around and around in diminishing circles, that she didn't hear the telephone.

“REMINDS ME OF *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* around here,” O’Brien said from his usual seat on the stool at the reception desk of the Nelson Police Station. “Nothin’ moving. Not even a lost dog or a stolen car.” Of course, this was exactly the way he liked things. He could get on with his crossword puzzles without even having to look surreptitious. “You must have memorized the contents of that whole thing by now.”

Constable Terrell, seated at his desk in the corner, did not care much for idleness and was reading his police officer’s manual. He looked up. “It’s very interesting. There’s a section here that says that admissions by the accused are evidence against him, as is his behaviour. For example, if he is silent when he’s accused of a crime that an innocent person would at once deny, that might suggest evidence of his wrongdoing.” He put the book on his desk. “I don’t know about that. There must be any number of reasons someone might not speak. They might be afraid, or wanting to protect someone else, or frozen by the shock of being arrested. I think you’d have to be very careful with this approach.”

O’Brien shook his head. “Better men than I must have put that together. The way things are going, we won’t be needing anything out of that book.” He turned back to his crossword.

Inspector Darling, the head of the whole outfit, was in his office thinking about being home in King’s Cove and perhaps lying on the wharf in the sun with a picnic basket nearby, Lane in her red swimsuit. His plan to tidy up the contents of his filing cabinet was momentarily suspended. After all, there was not much in the thing. All finished cases

were moved to the basement cabinets. He smiled happily at the thought that Sergeant Ames was at this very moment in that basement room with instructions to tidy up.

Ames was not smiling. He was sneezing. Knowing it was going to be his ill fate to clean up the place, he'd borrowed a feather duster from his mother and was now sweeping it inexpertly over the surfaces, sending up clouds of dust. "How the hell does it get like this?" he muttered. He'd been in the place less than a year before, looking for some old paperwork. He'd dusted it then, and it already had another thick layer. Pondering the science of dust, he sneezed again.

Into this pleasant summer lethargy, the door of the station was thrust open by a frantic young woman whose long dark hair had not been brushed that day and was bunched in a tangled mass at the back of her neck with a rubber band. "I need help!" she cried. "Someone, please!"

Both O'Brien and Terrell were on their feet in an instant.

"Now then, madam, take a deep breath. That's it. Constable, can you get the lady a glass of water?" O'Brien said. "Now then, what's happened?"

"My little boy, he's gone! I put him to bed last night and he wasn't there this morning." She choked back tears and her hands trembled. Terrell came with the glass of water, and she reached for it with two hands to try to keep it steady, and then put it down on the counter with a thud, without drinking.

"Perhaps he's gone to visit a little friend?" O'Brien suggested, taking up a notebook. "What's his name, madam, and his age?"

“He’s called Rocky Junior. He’s only five! Where would he go off to on his own? I called Bonny, she has a boy the same age, but he hasn’t been there.”

“And what is your name?” O’Brien continued.

She groaned as if having to give her name was the least of her worries. “Radcliffe. Linda. Please, we have to find him!”

By this time Darling had plunged down the stairs, three at a time, and Ames had come up from the basement, duster in hand.

“I’m Inspector Darling,” he said, pulling a chair out. “It’s important to get as much information as possible so we can focus our search. Where do you live?”

“Just up on Silica and Stanley.” Mrs. Radcliffe swept a hand across her eyes to wipe away her tears.

Darling thought about whether a child of that age might find his way to the water. “Has he wandered off before?”

“No, never! I don’t understand it.”

“Have you been down to the beach lately?”

“Yes, we were all there yesterday. We took a picnic.”

“Can you describe him, please.”

“He’s blond, about this tall. Blue eyes. He has a slight scar on his forehead where he fell and cut his head when he was three. He’s in his pyjamas, I guess. They weren’t in his room.”

Darling gestured to Terrell. “Get down to the waterfront instanter and look there. Ames and I will start at the house.”

“Sir.” Terrell took his cap and opened the door in one move, and was gone, running down the hill toward the water, his heart in his mouth.

Ames drove Darling and Mrs. Radcliffe up the hill at a speed that belied the torpor of this August morning.

“Ames, house to house, please. Corner store, that sort of thing,” Darling said. “Mrs. Radcliffe, can you show me his bedroom?”

Inside the house, a small wood-frame home like most on the street, Rocky’s mother led Darling down the hall to the end bedroom. “I tucked him in last night after we said our prayers and read a book. He has always been a good sleeper. He was out like a light before the story was finished.”

“This window is open. Do you keep the window open at night?”

“Oh, yes, especially on these warm nights. We have nothing to—” She paused. “I was going to say ‘to fear,’ but now I don’t know. Could someone have taken him?”

Darling was at the window. Eight feet to the ground? An older child might attempt it, but a five-year-old? “What about the front and back doors? Do you lock them?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Those I lock. I live alone. I know it’s very safe here, but I don’t know. Since his father left, it just makes me feel more secure.”

“When you came out this morning, were they locked?” Darling’s mind was already racing ahead to the father.

She put her hand up to her face and frowned. “Oh, I didn’t think, I just ran out. Yes. No, no. Wait. I think the front door was unlocked. Did he just open it and go out?”

“Let’s go have a look in a minute. Just tell me about what you see here. Do you see his clothes missing? Shoes? Did he have a pair of slippers?”

“His slippers are gone.” She looked around. The bed had been slept in, and the covers were pushed toward the foot of the bed. She pulled them straight and then cried, “Oh! His rabbit is gone. He has a stuffed rabbit. It’s brown with a little red jacket.” She pulled open the closet door. There was a small chest of drawers inside. She pulled open the three drawers one after another. “All his clothes are here.” She turned and looked back around the room. “He has a bathrobe somewh—” She stooped with a sob and pulled a terry-towel belt out from behind a small toy box. “The robe isn’t here!”

Darling took the belt. “Anything else?”

She sniffed, looking around the room once more, and then shook her head.

“You say your husband left?”

“Yes. I mean, we’re still married. I’m Catholic, or I’d have divorced him long ago. He’s in the Yukon with some tart.” Her bitterness was palpable.

“How long has he been gone?”

“Almost two years now. He sends a bit of money. Not enough. I have to badger him for it. He acts like he doesn’t even have a child.”

“So Rocky Junior has always lived with you?”

“I would never, ever give him up.” She looked angrily at Darling, as if he’d suggested she might. “Anyway, he left, and he said a child should be with his mother, so I can credit him with that much sense, anyway.”

“Can you give me your husband’s full name and address?”

In answer she went into the kitchen and took an opened envelope out of a mail holder on the wall and pointed at

the return address. "Here. It's all on there. As you see, he's called Rocky as well. I thought that was cute at the time. Now I feel sorry for Junior. But at least he's nothing like his father."

Darling went to the front door. It had a simple Yale lock on the inside, which was pulled back and latched in place. "It was unlocked like this when you came out this morning?"

"Yes." She took a sharp breath. "You *are* saying you think someone kidnapped him?"

Darling looked noncommittal. "It's one possibility. In these cases, it is sometimes the absent parent. In a way, that can be good news since the child is likely to be safe."

She screwed up her face. "All the way from Whitehorse? Why? He never wanted him to start with."

"Parents can change, begin to miss the child. Had there been any discussion lately about a visit?"

"No. He's never shown any interest. I mean, he tried to get me to bring him up there a year ago. I told him a flat no. The poor kid was only three when his father left, but he was devastated. He used to waddle around and around the house looking for him. I couldn't stand for him to go through that again."

"Do you have a separation agreement?"

She hesitated and then looked slightly defiant. "I did go to court to get an order for Rocky Junior to stay with me."

There was a quiet knock on the door, and Mrs. Radcliffe jumped, startled. Ames pushed the door open, removing his hat. "It does not seem that he went to any of the neighbours. No one has seen him. I talked to the man at the corner

shop. He was in early to shelve some new stock, and he saw nothing except a delivery truck heading down the street at about six thirty.”

“Was there a business name on the truck?” Darling asked.

“Oh, I did check that. He said it was a new one to him. ‘Grace Produce.’”

Darling turned back to Mrs. Radcliffe. “I am going to alert the RCMP and contact Whitehorse. I’ve sent one of my men down to the waterfront, just in case. It would be best if you stayed here in case there is word. If you have a phone number for your husband, he ought to know about this, as the boy’s father. Do you have any relations nearby, the child’s grandparents?”

“Rocky’s folks are dead, but my parents live in Creston.”

“Have you told them?”

Mrs. Radcliffe looked away and then shook her head. “We don’t talk. They want nothing to do with me or little Rocky.”

Darling found that hard to believe. Even in some of the worst cases of estrangement he’d experienced, parents usually came around if there was a grandchild. “They don’t see him, or ask about him?”

She glared at him. “If you must know, they don’t even know about him. I haven’t spoken to them since I was eighteen, when I left home.”

A far cry from wanting nothing to do with their grandson. Darling kept his expression neutral. “And their names?”

“You don’t need their bloody names. I don’t want them interfering.”

LANE PUSHED THE mower back into the barn with a satisfying clang and then went through the house to the porch to gaze at the lawn. The air was redolent with the smell of new-mown grass. She was contemplating her next task but saw that it was nearly eleven, when the Armstrongs, who ran the little post office nearby, were likely to pause in their labours and have a cup of tea. She hadn't gone for the mail yet, so, happily wondering what sort of biscuit or cake Eleanor might have on hand for the mid-morning tea, she started for the door.

No sooner was she outside than the phone rang. She paused. Two longs and a short. Hers. Perhaps it would be Angela, her American friend up the hill, offering a glass of very sweet lemonade or iced tea, her preferred beverages in the heat of the summer.

“KC 431, Lane Winslow speaking.”

“Oh, Lane, thank heavens you're home! It's Isabel, you know, Bob's fiancée?” The speaker's voice was wispy, as if she had trouble catching her breath.

Surprised, Lane said, “Yes, of course, Isabel. How lovely to hear from you. I hope you are calling with good news of an upcoming wedding?”

“Oh, I wish I was!” Her voice caught. “I just tried to reach Frederick at the police station, but he's out on some sort of emergency. It's just that Bob's gone missing. Roger asked me to call. He's beside himself.”

A bolt of alarm ran through Lane. Bob was Darling's younger brother, and Roger, their father. “Missing? How do you mean?”

“He was in this place in Mexico somewhere. Some sort of American mine. He was supposed to be there for three

weeks as a consulting geologist. I don't know the details. He'd been phoning me or Roger every three days or so, but then we stopped hearing from him about a week ago. We called his office, and they contacted the mine manager to try and track him down. The manager reported that they had only just discovered he was missing. Bob and his crew were supposed to be gone for a week but didn't report back. I don't know what to do!"

"Oh, I am sorry, Isabel. How terrifying. Did they say if the police were involved?"

"His boss told me the manager was contacting the police. But I don't know. It's so far away. Anything could be happening!"

"Okay, look. Is there any sort of embassy in Mexico City? See what you can find out. And there might be a Mexican consulate in Vancouver I can call. I'll try to get Frederick. If I don't reach him, I'll drive into town."

"All right. Consulate. Good idea. I'll tell his father. Please, have Frederick call him as soon as he can."

Lane hung up and immediately put a call through to the Nelson Police Station.

"Mrs. Darling. How do? I'm afraid we're all at sixes and sevens here just at the moment," O'Brien said. "Child gone missing."

"Oh, how dreadful! I'm afraid it's a bit of a day for it. I've just had a call that the inspector's brother has gone missing in Mexico. I know no details, I'm afraid, but Frederick's father is most anxious that he telephone."

O'Brien was silent for a moment. "We're just organizing a search at this end for the wee kiddie. RCMP, that sort of

thing. I'm not sure how long he'll be, but I'll tell him right away. What a day this is turning out to be!"

"A missing child. Nothing more dreadful than that," Lane agreed. "The poor parents must be beside themselves."

"Just the one. Father off away. Left them for another woman." She could hear his disapproval.

"Could it be he?" Lane asked.

"We have Constable Terrell tracking him down."

"I should leave you to get on with it. In the meantime, I'll telephone my father-in-law in Vancouver and see what details I can get, so the inspector can spend his energies on the child."

O'Brien hung up the phone, wondering why everyone couldn't be as clear-thinking and sensible as Mrs. Darling.