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## A SORROWFUL SANCTUARY

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

## CHAPTER ONE

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*Friday, July 18, 1947*

**W**HEN THE SHOT CAME IT deafened him. He fell backwards, down, down, until he lay rocking, facing the night sky, wondering who had been hit. Above him stars whirled like a carousel in the moonless dark, and he felt himself smile at their antics. There was the Great Bear, its north-pointing star, still in the maelstrom, a sign for him. He closed his eyes but felt the rain on his face, wet, falling, as he was. How had he mistaken the rain for stars? He opened his eyes, trying to will the stars back, trying to hear something besides the din reverberating in his skull. He did not hear the urgent whispers or the pounding of running feet, nor was he aware of the man hiding in the water under the pier, shivering with cold and terror because he had seen it all. He could not remember any moment in his life before this one had engulfed him.

*Saturday, July 19*

"HOW LONG HAS it been?" O'Brien said into the telephone. It was first thing Saturday morning, and the desk sergeant at the Nelson police station was having a difficult time with a caller. He was leaning heavily on the counter, prepared to take notes but already impatient at the woman's unnecessarily panicked tone. Young men rarely went missing. Gadding about, more likely.

"He went to work yesterday and he hasn't been back. It's not like him. If he's planning to stay away, he always tells me. He writes down the phone number if there is one, and tells me exactly when he'll be back."

"How old is he, ma'am?" O'Brien wrote *Friday* in his notebook and underlined it.

"He's twenty. And he never misses work. Mr. Van Eyck at the garage has no idea where he is."

"Are you sure he hasn't gone on a bender with some friends, or gone off to see a girl?"

There was a longish silence. "Are you going to help or not? I want to talk to somebody else." The woman sounded desperate and angry.

"I'll put you through to the inspector," O'Brien said. Let him deal with it. It was time he got back into the swing of things after his little holiday in London.

Darling was at his desk reading through the notes about an affray at the local hotel bar the day before. Both men had spent the night in jail and had been released that morning, rumped and smelling of stale beer. They'd fought over a woman. A bigger cliché was difficult to imagine, he thought. He earnestly hoped she would drop them both. The phone's

ring triggered a hope that some real meaty case was in the offing, or better yet, that it was Lane Winslow calling.

“That fellow I was talking to is a useless lump! Are you going to help me or not?”

Not Lane, then. “If I can, madam. Tell me what’s happened.”

“My son, Carl, is missing is what’s happened. He went off yesterday. He comes home from the garage at noon every day for his meal, only he never came back at all, and he’s not been seen since. As I told that imbecile a minute ago, it is not like Carl. I’m his mother. I should at least know what is and is not like him, and this is not.”

Darling was sympathetic. In his experience people not behaving like themselves was something to pay attention to.

“Can you tell me your name and where you live?”

“Vanessa Castle, and I live near Balfour. We have a poultry farm. My husband is dead, no surprise, and I’m running the farm. Carl works at the garage. He left in the morning, like usual, put on his hat, and went to work. Only he didn’t, because Van Eyck doesn’t know where he is. He was quite offensive. He asked why I thought he should have seen him.”

“And how old is he?”

Barely containing her impatience, Mrs. Castle snapped, “Twenty.”

“You’re worried something has happened to him,” Darling said, wanting to get away from the barrage of questions.

“Look, he’s always been a good, straight boy. Doesn’t drink, even after he signed up near the end of the war and was with those other fellows in training. He used to come

home on his leave and tell me some hair-raising stories about how they all behaved. He never did go overseas, but he liked the work on the vehicles and got a job at the garage. I called one of his friends from school, but he's gone up north to some mining camp. You have to believe me—what's your name again?"

"Inspector Darling."

"You have to believe me, Inspector Darling, when I tell you Carl would never go off and not tell me. He was none too happy with his dad's treatment of me, and he's kind of tried to make up for it."

"I imagine you've contacted anyone he knows?"

"That's not a long list. I had to wrestle the name of the mining outfit from his friend's mother, but I finally got through to him and he hasn't seen or heard from Carl."

"His friend's mother was not willing to tell you where her son was?"

"No, she was not. Kept telling me she didn't want her son involved."

That's odd as well, Darling thought. "Did she say involved with what?"

She hesitated. "I asked her what she meant, and she said something about it being better that her boy got away from all that. The war is over, she tells me. Best leave things be, she tells me. Then she rang off. The idea that Carl is 'involved' with anything is ridiculous."

Darling noted her hesitation. "Did he belong to a club, go to a legion or anything?"

"He went into town sometimes, after work, but he isn't a drinker. He'd always come home early."

There was that insistence again that he didn't drink.  
"And you've checked the hospital?"

"They don't have him. I wanted to be relieved when they told me that, but I'm more frightened than ever."

"Did he go off in a car?"

"Yes, his dad's old Chevrolet. Yellow, about ten years old. Are you going find him?"

"I'll need the licence number if you have it. Then I can get on to my colleagues in the RCMP, and my constable and I will come out to see you, if we may, to look at his room and so on. Please don't tidy up or touch anything till we get there."

"I don't know the licence plate. I'll look for it." She didn't sound hopeful.

Darling took down her address, resisted being reassuring, called down the hall to Constable Ames, and was rewarded by silence.

"Where's Ames gone?" he asked O'Brien irritably, picking up the phone.

O'Brien shook his head at the phone receiver. "You said he could have the morning off, sir. He's helping his mother move some furniture."

"Why can't she get moving men like normal people?" It was a rhetorical question, but O'Brien seemed to feel it wanted an answer.

"Because that's what sons do for their moms."

Darling thought about sons and their mothers. He never had opportunity to do much for his own mother. She had died an agonizing death from cancer when he was sixteen. To this day he couldn't think clearly about what that had meant to him. The shock of her suffering and the finality

of her absence had seared itself into his young mind, and he had stored the memory, tightly sealed and unexamined, in the farthest recesses of his consciousness. His father had once called one of his high school friends a “mama’s boy” and had made an unflattering observation that at least he, Darling, had been saved from that by his mother’s death. All he felt he’d been saved from was understanding women, and perhaps—he thought of Lane Winslow and swallowed—giving himself freely to a relationship without fearing that it would all be taken away.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that the morning was nearly over, and he was feeling a little hungry. He’d have to wait for Ames anyway. “I’m going next door for a quick sandwich. Tell Ames to meet me there.” O’Brien saluted and got back to the crossword puzzle he kept under the files he was meant to be working on.

“Good morning, Inspector. No trusty sidekick today?” the waitress at the counter said. Darling knew April because Ames had gotten into a lot of trouble with her the year before when he dropped her for his current flame.

“He’s helping his mother move some things. I expect him here soon, though, so get your game face ready.”

“A regular fair-haired boy, then. Honestly, I stopped being mad a long time ago. I just love to get his goat.”

“Me too. I admire your technique.”

April beamed engagingly. “What can I get you?”

“A grilled ham and cheese and—” The sound of the door opening caused him to turn. Ames was taking off his hat and advancing cautiously to where Darling was sitting. “And whatever he’s having. Make sure he gets the bill.”

**“THE INTERESTING THING** to me is what his friend’s mother said. That business of not wanting to get involved,” Darling said. They were third in line for the ferry ride across the lake. Both had their windows wound down to combat the heat of the day, and Ames had one arm dangling out his window. He hoped they would be able to keep the windows open, but the weather had been dry and the dust kicked up by cars ahead of them on the road could be bad.

“How much trouble would it be for someone to sling a bridge across here?” Ames asked impatiently.

Darling turned and looked with surprise at his constable, who was tapping nervously on the steering wheel of the maroon Ford that served as their police vehicle. “You’re not your usual sunny self, Ames. What’s going on? And let me caution you that if it’s your usual troubles with women, I’d prefer to be kept in the dark.”

“You act like it’s nothing, sir, but you wait till something happens with Miss Winslow and see if you think it’s nothing!” This shocking outburst was accompanied by an angry slap of the palm on the steering wheel and then almost immediately by an apology. “I’m sorry, sir. I was out of line. Oh, thank God!” This was because the ferry had arrived and put down the gate to disgorge the two cars coming into town.

“You certainly were,” said Darling, wondering if he was too dismissive of Ames. Perhaps Ames didn’t have anyone to confide in. And considering the anxieties he himself confronted in his newly minted relationship with Lane Winslow, he ought to be more sympathetic. He wanted Ames to go

to Vancouver in late August to take the sergeant's training, and hoped nothing would interfere with that.

"She's a nice girl, Violet," said Ames, driving onto the ferry deck.

"She puts up with you," agreed Darling.

"But today I was helping my mother, and Mom suddenly said that she wondered if Vi was the right girl for me."

Darling frowned. "I thought it was normal for parents to disapprove of their children's choices."

"Not my mom. She's never said anything about any girl I've dated. She's very cautious, which is why it stood out. And maybe I could have ignored it, except Vi and I had a fight over children a couple of days ago, believe it or not."

"Good God, Ames, you're not—"

"Really, sir! No. I was talking about that case with that kid who robbed the cash out of the register at that grocery store at the bottom of the road, and Vi says, 'I'd give him a good thrashing. Kids need to know who's boss.' I pointed out that the kid was only eleven years old, and she says, 'There you are, then,' like it was the answer."

"It's a pretty normal response. Most children get a spanking once in a while, don't they?" He had.

Ames was silent until they were on the road. The two cars ahead of them had both turned off the road almost immediately, so they were able to keep the windows down.

"I don't believe in it, sir. That boy was thrashed most of his life by his drunken father. How do we know that wasn't what caused the problem? My father generally didn't go in for it, but a couple of times he felt he had to, and I don't think it improved me much. You go on about

my ‘sunny temperament,’ and I think I got that because generally my parents didn’t believe spanking me would do much good. I think there’s enough suffering in the world without parents hitting their children. It’s not fair, apart from anything else. They’re smaller than us. When my mother said that about Vi, I asked her why, and she said something like, ‘She’s a nice girl, I can see that, but she’s not like you.’ And I have to say, at that moment I got worried that she was right.”

“So the long and the short of it is that you’re in this lousy mood because you’re thinking you’ll have to break it off.” Darling offered this in a sympathetic manner.

“I was close to thinking about popping the question. Now I don’t know, but I think she’s expecting it. She’s been hinting quite a bit. I feel backed against a wall.”

“Well,” said Darling, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, “I don’t have much experience with these things, but I wouldn’t recommend marrying when you aren’t sure. It’s bad enough having the town swimming in your angry ex-girlfriends. Fill the place with angry ex-wives and you’ll have to join the Mounties and go up north somewhere. I’m not paying for you to get your training so you can take it to Prince George.”

Ames knew his boss was right and appreciated the real concern being cloaked by Darling’s mockery, but in a way that made it all the worse. If he admitted to himself that he couldn’t marry Vi, then he would have to face that putting it off wasn’t going to be the answer, and hiding out in Vancouver while he took his training would only delay things. He had no idea what to do. To his relief Darling took up the subject of the missing man.

“This boy’s mother is entirely certain he would not go off without a word. Is she right, or has he been keeping secrets from her?”

Knowing this to be Darling thinking out loud, Ames did not answer. He would have said mothers often lived in the dark, but his own mother’s astute observation had rattled him.

“I’ve told her to leave his bedroom alone. I hope she has. She seems very fond of her son. If she finds something disagreeable, she could get rid of it, and we’d probably be missing a crucial bit of evidence. Of course, we could get there and find he’s safely at home telling her comforting lies about where he’s been.”

“Is this where we turn?” Ames asked, slowing down. He’d been watching the odometer, and they were about a mile past the turnoff to the Balfour store. Getting a nod from Darling, Ames turned right onto a road that bumped down toward the lake. It ended in front of a small house, neatly painted and fenced, flanked on both sides by a large kitchen garden. They parked where they assumed the yellow Chevy the missing man had gone off in would normally be parked and got out of the car. They could see behind the house fenced-off outbuildings from which a gentle chorus of clucking emanated. It was clear immediately that the young man had not come home. The minute Ames turned off the engine a distraught woman appeared at the top of the stairs. She was waving a piece of paper.

“God. She’s been through his room,” Darling said. “The very thing I told her not to do.”

## CHAPTER TWO

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**L**ANE DREW BACK HER ARM and cast her line in an arc, hearing the gentle plop of the lead weight on her line hit the water below. A violent rain during the night had woken her as it slashed in waves against her bedroom window, but now the sky was a transcendent blue. Despite the coolness in the shade of the trees, the afternoon had become hot and dense. She relished the warm smell of the carpet of pine needles that came from the forest at the edge of the rocky point, rising some ten feet above the water where she stood. She could hear Kenny Armstrong conferring quietly with Angela Bertolli behind her. Angela had tried fishing once or twice but was taking advantage of Kenny's expert advice now, though Lane could see she was only partly attentive because Angela's three boys, Philip, Rolfie, and Rafe, were below them on the beach making a good deal of noise. Lane, smiling, gave a little shake of the head. She was certain all that racket would scare off any nearby fish. The would-be anglers had chosen Saturday, when they

would not be interrupted by the steamer coming into dock at the wharf just south of the point. They had hoped to set off in the morning, but any enterprise involving three children, Lane learned, was bound to be delayed, in this case until nearly three in the afternoon.

“Got it!” she heard Angela say. “I’ll try it, but I warn you, I’ll be hopeless!”

Lane fell into a reverie about the strangeness of life. Angela was her second real friend. She thought about what went into making a friendship. Until Angela, she would have said it was shared hardship.

Her first true friend was Yvonne Bernard, whom she had met through Yvonne’s work in the French resistance. Their bond had been formed in the extreme conditions of war—constant danger, loyalty, secrecy, and the imminent fear of capture or death. And now here was Angela, like a woman from another universe, American, sunny, effusive, and intelligent. It occurred to Lane now that it was possible to have a friendship based solely on proximity and cheerfulness. Lane’s mind wandered happily along the path that had brought her to this moment, including her new-found and completely unexpected happiness in her relationship with Inspector Darling, who was no doubt fighting crime from the police station in Nelson.

She smiled. It was a perfect day. The lake was still and almost glassy after the torrential rains of the night before, the only other signs of life a rowboat far out on the water. “I wonder if they’re having better luck out on the lake?” she said.

What Kenny might have thought about this was lost in what happened next.

Rafe Bertolli, pointing toward the bottom of the point, shouted, “Look! A rowboat! There’s no one in it!”

The boys by this time had gone up onto the end of the wharf and had been jumping noisily into the water. They swam like fish, Lane knew, but she could see that Angela kept one eye on them all the time. The shout, and a thud below her in the water, brought Lane back to the present. Rafe was not pointing at the boat out on the water, as she expected, but directly below where she stood on the rocky outcrop of McEwen Point. Frowning, she leaned forward, trying to see, but the slight overhang made it hard to see properly. Putting aside her fishing rod she scrambled down the slope toward the beach until the area below the point was visible.

“Can you see it?” Kenny asked, coming along behind her, followed by Angela.

“Now who would let their rowboat off the leash? It’s drifted here from somewhere. It’s lying pretty low and has one oar dangling off the edge as well. It’s obviously been taking on water.” Lane looked out across the lake, wondering what direction the boat could have come from. Then she heard a hoarse groan. “There’s someone in it!” she cried.

She bolted the rest of the way down the rocks to the beach, tore off her shoes and sweater, and splashed into the water, an involuntary gasp escaping her at the sudden cold. She swam along the edge of the rocks to where the small green rowboat was banging gently against the edge of the cliff. A frayed rope hung off a metal ring at the prow, trailing into the water. She needed to pull the boat to the beach.

“Horrors!” Angela exclaimed. “Is he alive? Children, up to the car, right now.” By this time the children had seen, from their vantage point above the water, that there was indeed someone in the boat.

“He’s bleeding!” Philip shouted. “I bet he’s dead!”

“Now!” barked Angela, pointing at where she’d parked the car near the apple shed at the top of the wharf. She had reached the wharf by this time and was herding the boys toward the car.

“I’ve got you!” Lane called out to the person in the boat. She had heard one more soft groan as she had approached it. Now there was only silence.

Lane pulled at the boat, heavy with water, with one hand, and swam toward the shore, relief flooding her when her feet met the ground. Kenny waded toward her, grabbing at the rope Lane was pulling. He pulled the oar out of the oarlock and threw it onto the beach, and between them they dragged the rowboat onto the shore, the wooden keel scraping along the pebbles and sand.

“Oh my word,” Kenny exclaimed, his hand momentarily over his mouth.

Lying awkwardly with his head thrust uncomfortably forward by the wooden slat it rested against was a young man, his arms at his sides, his head flopping with the movement of the boat. The deep wash of bilge water was dyed red and soaked his clothes so that he looked like he was floating helplessly in his own blood.