

WINDFALL

A HENRY LYSYK MYSTERY

BYRON TD SMITH



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For Tiffany, my sweetheart & partner in crime.

WINDFALL

CHAPTER ONE

It was a simple plan. He had crossed the border into Canada late last night, eager to get what he'd come for.

Downtown Vancouver looked to him like just one more neighborhood of Seattle. To the north, south, and west, the city sloped down to the water. Despite the drizzling rain, morning sun slipped between the tall surrounding buildings, making its way down to the dirty street.

At his feet, a young woman slept in the shelter of the doorway. Her head rested on a blue hiking pack, her hair running down in long, knotted rivulets to the sidewalk. He stooped and stuck a dollar bill between the concrete and the makeshift pillow.

The only open door in either direction belonged to the convenience store across the street. The plastic table and chairs on the sidewalk next to the store were less than inviting. A chain weaved through their legs, ending at a gas meter.

In another hour the streets would fill with transients, and visitors who had wandered a couple of blocks too far from the tourist strip of Gastown.

He pulled on the door of the pawnshop before him, careful not to wake the girl. The deadbolt was still locked.

Stepping back, he looked again at where the overhead sign should have been. The long, bare fluorescent bulbs sat dull and gray, either burned out or without power. Only the poster-board in the window which read *We Buy Gold* in uneven, red permanent marker, confirmed he had the right place.

This time, he knocked hard enough on the glass between the metal bars that a layer of street dust shook from the filthy pane. He wiped his knuckles on his jeans and squinted inside.

Am I early?

His only means of telling the time were his laptop and the face of an old digital watch that he'd left taped to the dashboard of his car.

His eyes passed over what he could make of his reflection in the powdery window, his hair and clothes giving up that he had slept in the car. He was perfectly aware of this fact, as his fifty-six-year-old body reminded him. He farted, stretched, pressed his shirt over his gut with his hands, and grinned at himself, something he ordinarily avoided doing since being teased in school. Other children had been eager to point out that when he smiled, his exaggerated round face widened like a jack-o'-lantern. Even unsmiling, his broad features and downturned eyes gave him the appearance of a miserable Cheshire cat. A Cheshire man.

But today was different. It was a good day.

The sound of scuffling came from the other side of the door, and it opened with a high-pitched scrape. Not waiting for an invitation, the man took one last look at the sleeping girl and shouldered his full frame inside.

He stood face to face with a pale man in his thirties or forties, too thin, and just about six feet tall.

"You're TreasureHunter1971?"

The Cheshire man nodded. His eyes were still adjusting to the light, which darkened towards the back of the store. “Is there anyone else here?”

“No,” the younger man said as he turned on the lights and stuck out his hand. “I’m Julian.”

“David. It’s nice to finally meet you.” He shook the small, bony hand and gave the Canadian his practiced smile. Julian was a stranger, and it should stay this way. So he had settled on the name David on the drive north the night before. It sounded biblical and trustworthy.

Julian re-locked the door and led them past the hanging guitars and the myriad retail cabinets of watches, rings, video game cartridges, knives, memorabilia, and other items sold or abandoned. “This is pretty amazing, eh? It has to be worth a fortune.”

The back room was even more confused. Metal shelves reached the nine-foot ceiling, stuffed with small items, mundane and odd. At the end of the shop was a metal loading bay door; the Cheshire man reasoned this must exit to the alley where he’d parked his car.

Another smile.

The loading bay was cluttered with stacked furniture: dining room chairs, kitchen tables, old stereos, and record players as big as couches.

Julian waved a hand at a haphazard pile of boxes bearing dates. Loose papers spilled on the floor, covered in shoe prints. The old exterior sign leaned against the cardboard stack. Brittle-looking and faded from age and weather, it read *Fullarton Bros. Silver & Gold*.

“Don’t worry about stepping on this crap. It’s all getting chucked. My uncle could sweet talk anyone out of something he wanted, but he never got rid of anything himself.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Maybe that’s a good thing, eh?”

The Cheshire man barely registered the story. His eyes fixated on the large safe, equal in height to his six feet and with not one, but two combination dials.

“But I’ll bet this is where you keep the best stuff, huh?” He reached out and touched the larger dial.

“Sure. Let’s get down to business,” Julian said. “This is crazy, right? If this is the real thing . . . What did you say it was worth?”

“To a collector? I don’t know. Maybe a thousand bucks?”

“Awesome. I barely clear that in a week here. I can’t believe he was sitting on it this entire time. He never told anyone until he told me, and that was just before he died.”

“We agreed on a grand, right?” The older man shook the knapsack on his shoulder. “US Dollars.”

Julian placed his hand on the side of the safe. “And you’ve got cash?”

The older man nodded. “Yeah. That pretty well cleans me out. That and a bit for gas to get home.” He gave the dial a small twist. It clicked, and the hair on his arm stood on end.

Julian looked the Cheshire man in the eye for a long moment. He gave a quick nod, pulled back his hand, and dropped it into his pocket. His lanky body twisted as he struggled to pull out a bulky ring loaded with dozens of keys of various ages, shape, and size, sticking out in all directions.

“He was my mum’s brother, and my dad was a bit of a dead-beat. Uncle Kev took me under his wing a few years ago and asked me if I wanted to learn the business. Still, I never figured I’d take over the shop. Help me with this.”

Julian tapped the keyring against the side of a large, silver cash register, resting on a deep freezer he had been obscuring with his thin frame. He carried on talking as they lifted the heavy piece and lowered it to the ground. “He was pretty crafty, Kev was. Three years I worked here, and he kept this secret nearly the whole time. ‘You play your best cards last,’ he’d say.”

Julian tried the keys on the freezer, one after the other.

“Sometimes people would have to give him salmon or halibut, even venison, to pay back their loans and get their stuff. Turns out that it used to happen often enough that he got himself a freezer. You see it less and less now.”

He winked as he lifted the lid, clearly proud of his secret. “Best hiding spot in the house.”

The freezer was almost empty. Julian leaned in, his feet nearly leaving the floor before he straightened back up, holding two blocks of wood, held together with twisted wire. After some fussing, Julian separated the blocks to reveal a plastic freezer bag.

The Cheshire man took the bag with trembling hands.

This is real. I'm doing it.

“Can I take it out to see?” he asked, opening the bag.

“Careful, Dave.” Julian’s boastful tone was now tinged with uncertainty. “No one’s touched it in, like, forever.”

From the bag, the man who had lied about his name being David slid out a single American twenty-dollar bill. Time stood still as he took it all in. He’d seen thousands of twenties in his life, but this one was special. It pulsed with energy; a thrum that passed through his hand and up his arm.

“It’s real, right?” Julian said.

The older man reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out several folded sheets of paper, covered with numbers and letters in an impossibly small font. His eyes squinted, darting back and forth between the bill and the list of serial numbers. His fingers slid down page after page until, eventually, he found the range of numbers that matched.

I was meant to find this.

He felt the young man watching with the eyes of a gambler on his last dollar.

“Yes. It’s real.”

“I knew it.” Julian pumped his fist in the air, followed with a twirl and some running on the spot.

“This is just incredible,” the older man said. “It’s unbelievable that your uncle even had it, let alone kept it in perfect condition like this. All the others that have surfaced are damaged somehow. Where did he get it?”

“No idea. If this one is mint, it should be worth more, right?”

The Cheshire man twitched at the question. “We have a deal.”

“But you said this one’s different. Better. Really rare. How much more do you think it’s worth?”

“It’s nothing to you. It’s twenty dollars.”

“It’s a piece of history, man. A treasure map. You’re gonna get rich? Break me off a piece.”

“It’s more than that,” the older man said, melancholy in his throat.

Frowning, he looked again at the plastic bag lying next to the list of serial numbers on the freezer.

“What’s this other card with it?”

He slid an index card from the bag and turned it over in his hand. One side was typed on, and the other had numbers written by hand.

“That’s the old stock card,” Julian said. “We’ve got to write down the name and address of everyone that leaves us stuff. For the police. He kept them together for— What’s it called?” He scratched his head. “Providence?”

“You mean ‘provenance’. As in a record of who owned it and where he got it from.”

Julian trembled, and his voice rose. “Holy— That makes it worth even more, right? Like what? Ten grand?”

The man who had driven from Seattle, who had slept in his car, and who Julian knew as David stared at the small card.

Name and address? Am I that close?

He registered Julian's mouth moving, speaking, but there were no sounds. Perfect silence.

As though in slow motion, he held out the twenty-dollar bill, letting it go just before Julian's thin fingers could close on it. The small banknote rolled in the air, down to the floor.

With a sharp inhale, Julian bent to pick it up and, in doing so, added his own force to the knee rising to meet his face.

He shot upright and fell back onto the ground, slamming his head against the concrete.

The Cheshire man grit his teeth and grunted as he lifted the stunned Julian up, tipping him headfirst into the freezer.

The young man started to regain his senses. He kicked out with his boot, twisted his body, and scabbled with one hand at the larger man's belt.

Adding the weight of his torso, the Cheshire man slammed the freezer's lid on Julian's outstretched arm.

A scream of pain and fear echoed in the back room.

Julian's arm disappeared, and the older man briefly caught the light inside the icy tomb going out as the lid sealed shut.

The Cheshire man climbed atop the freezer. The shouting sounded distant, words indistinguishable. He felt the pounding from inside the freezer on the backs of his legs and looked down at the keys on the floor in dismay. They were too far to reach. He might have to sit here awhile.

Blood rushed in heavy, quick beats through his neck and arms.

With a trembling hand, he retrieved an orange plastic pill bottle from his jacket pocket. He shook two white pellets into his mouth and swallowed them down. He slid himself further onto the cooler, settling in. The keys, the bill, and the card lay on the floor.

It must be so cold to jump out of an airplane.

WINDFALL BOOKMARK & READERS GROUP

Thank you for spending time with Henry, Fred, and the cast of *Windfall: A Henry Lysyk Mystery*.

Jamie Keenan, who designed our cover, has also prepared an amazingly cool **Windfall bookmark in the form of a 1971 luggage tag for flight 305!** I can email you your own to print and use when you sign up to join my Readers Group.

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