

Valley of the Lost, by Vicki Delany

Poisoned Pen Press

February 10, 2009

ISBN: 978-1590585955

Chapter 1

The setting sun had slipped behind the mountains, and in the bottom of the valley, long ago carved out of ancient rock by the swift-moving river, the summer's night was hot and close. The scent of cedar and pine, decaying undergrowth, rich earth filled the air, and further up the street a pack of young people, sounding as if they'd already hit the bars, laughed at nothing at all.

Lucy Smith, known to everyone as Lucky, stood at the back door of the Trafalgar Women's Support Center to enjoy a rare moment of peace before walking to her car. It had been a long, hectic day, but a good one, and she was pleased with herself. Today she'd accomplished something. For once, the women seemed to be paying attention to what she'd been trying to teach them.

Lucky drove an ancient Pontiac Firefly. It was parked at the back, in a small gravel clearing chopped out of wild grass and weeds up against the bottom of the mountain. As she unlocked the door car, a soft cry came from the bushes. A cat? Lucky climbed into her car, paying it no further attention. The heat of the

day still clung to the worn seats, and as she put the key into the ignition, she rolled down the window to try to catch a bit of a breeze. She was about to turn the key, to start up the engine, when she heard it again.

Definitely not a cat.

How odd. It sounded like a baby.

Lucky reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a flashlight. She flicked the light on as she stepped out of the car, and pointed it into the dense brush beyond the parking area. The thin beam illuminated dead leaves, broken branches, grey and white rocks. A single black sock. A blue can of Kokanee beer shone in the light.

A small yellow package, lying on the ground about ten yards inside the woods.

Lucky tried to focus; the bundle shifted, and cried out.

She pushed her way through the undergrowth, heedless of branches reaching for her face and scratching her bare arms. She dropped to her knees, pushing a sharp stone into her flesh. She shifted to get off the rock, and shone her light into the folds of the yellow blanket. A scrunched up white face blinked back at her, trying to shut out the sudden brightness. Tiny fists waved in the air.

"Oh, my heavens. You poor thing." Lucky stuffed the flashlight into the elastic waistband of her snort, baggy pants

and reached for the baby. "What are you doing out here all by yourself?" She peeled back the blanket. The baby was small, no more than a few months old. He, Lucky guessed it was a he as it was dressed in a blue sleeper, opened his mouth and yelled. He was clean and at first glance appeared to be healthy. His clear eyes were dark blue, his cheeks pink and chubby, his head bald, and his cry lusty.

"We'd better get you inside. They call me Lucky, but you're the lucky one. Good thing I found you, and not a bear or a cougar. Where's your mom?"

Lucky gathered the baby into her arms, and stood up. The flashlight dropped to the ground and rolled over, throwing its light deeper into the woods, touching the edges of a dark shape underneath a large red cedar. With a pounding heart, Lucky scooped the flashlight up. She clutched the baby, now screaming with gusto, to her chest and took a few hesitant steps forward.

A woman lay on her back. Her eyes were open wide, but she wasn't looking at the branches swaying overhead or the stars barely visible through the thick canopy of branches, leaves and needles. Shifting the baby in her right arm, Lucky crouched down and touched the base of the woman's neck. Her skin was cold, and nothing moved under Lucky's shaking fingers.

Constable Molly Smith's boot slipped in a puddle of vomit. Instinctively her head jerked back to help her keep her balance and the man's fist connected with her mouth. Her head spun, and she tasted hot sweet blood, but she managed to keep her footing. She ducked in case a second blow was coming. Dave Evans grabbed the man from behind and wrenched his arms back. "That's enough of that."

The man was big, about six foot three with the weight to match, and arms bulging with muscle and tattoos. His hair was long, thin, gray, and greasy. The moment Evans touched him, all the aggression fled. "Hey, I'm sorry, buddy. I didn't mean to hit the lady. It was an accident, right? Can't we forget all about it?"

"I don't think so," Evans said, snapping handcuffs on meaty wrists. "You okay, Constable Smith?"

She touched her lip. Her fingers came away streaked with blood. "No harm done," she said, inwardly seething. Nothing Evans would like more than to think he'd saved her from the big, bad guy.

The crowd shifted and, sensing that the fun was over, those at the back began to move away. Flashing blue and red lights washed over them, making it look as though they'd all gathered for a party.

Smith and Evans had been called to the Bishop and the Nun, a cheap faux-English pub on Pine Street. Not even nine o'clock, but on a hot Thursday evening in Trafalgar, British Columbia, the bars were filling up fast and plenty of the patrons had begun the night's drinking in the middle of the afternoon.

Two men had been thrown out of the bar, told to take their fight outside. When they did a crowd gathered quickly, eager for excitement. At first the fight consisted of nothing other than a lot of obscenities, a bit of pushing and shoving, verbal threats and aggressive posturing. But as the police car rounded the far corner, colored lights flashing and siren on, one of the bystanders had broken away from the crowd, staggered towards the antagonists, and vomited all over the smaller guy's shoes. He took offense to that, and sent the bewildered drunk to the sidewalk with a strong right hook. One of the man's friends, or maybe just a stranger happy at the opportunity to instigate a good street brawl, ran forward, and the fight began in earnest.

The police rushed in to break it up. Whereupon Smith slipped and the big man punched her in the face.

Everyone stepped back. Once a police officer was involved, the crowd seemed to think, the fight was no longer harmless fun. Someone helped the vomiter up off the sidewalk, and the tattooed man tried to make his apologies.

"Save it for the judge," Evans said.

They stuffed the big man into the back of the car. His original opponent, the guy who'd thrown the first punch, had melted into the long shadows between the buildings the moment the police car came to a halt.

Evans took their prisoner, still expressing his regrets, downstairs to be processed into custody, while Smith went to the women's washroom to check her face.

A thin line of blood ran from the left corner of her mouth down her chin, making her look like Dracula's bride after a feast at the castle. She put her hat on the counter and scrubbed the blood off her face. It didn't look too bad, she thought, studying herself in the mirror, but her lip would be sporting a sizeable lump tomorrow.

She ran her fingers through her short blond hair.

She'd worn her hair long until a few weeks ago, tied into a French braid when she was in uniform.

Graham had liked her hair long; he liked to play with it, wrap it around his fingers, put the ends in his mouth and pretend to chew. She'd kept it long after he'd died, but recently she decided she needed a more professional looking haircut, so she'd ordered the hairdresser to chop it all off.

After which, she'd gone home and cried.

Her radio crackled. "911 call from 317 Cottonwood Street. Lady says she found a body. VSA." Vital signs absent.

Smith put her hat back on her head, and dried her hands on the seat of her pants as she ran out the door.