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A KILLER
IN KING'S COVE
A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

PROLOGUE

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THE BARN WAS A QUIET solace to the old man's agitation. The envelope from His Majesty's Government lay where he had thrown it that morning on the bare kitchen table, but his mind still felt partially colonized by his dark fears. As he cranked the engine, he became aware of another sound. He stopped and listened. A motorcar had pulled up along the front of his fence. Some bloody idiot asking the way, he thought. They weren't going to get it from him. He stayed in the shadow of the overhang and watched the road. Whoever it was would give up.

A young man emerged from the motorcar, and stood looking from the house to a piece of paper. He removed his hat to fan himself for a moment. He climbed the steps of the house and knocked on the door, waited, and then called out, "Hello? Is there anyone here?"

An Englishman! The old man went from irritation to misgiving to stomach-turning panic in one swift moment.

He took a step toward the barn door to go out and confront the man and then changed his mind. If he didn't show himself this person might leave. He waited while the

Englishman called out again, and then muttered “Bugger” under his breath. The old man could hear the other man’s progress down the steps and waited to hear the motor door open, but instead heard footsteps come around the house and toward the barn. He looked desperately behind him into the murky darkness of the barn. Not knowing why, he clutched the starter crank in his hand and felt frozen to the spot.

The young man reached the barn and peered in to the dusky interior where he suddenly caught sight of the figure cowering in the shadow and jumped back in alarm. “Oh, gosh, you startled me. Hello. My name is Jack Franks. With whom am I speaking?”

“None of your business,” said the old man, scowling.

Misunderstanding him, the young man reached into his jacket and pulled out a billfold from which he extracted a white identity card. “It’s quite all right. I’m legitimate. Here, I work for the British government.”

Something inside the old man froze. They had come, then.

CHAPTER ONE

LANETTE WINSLOW SAT ON A large wooden box that had miraculously arrived the same day she had and listened to the silence. Old Kenny Armstrong, whose mother's house this had once been, had disappeared along the path to the post office, leaving her with her keys and a plate of cold chicken that his wife, Eleanor, had sent over. Sitting in the shaft of afternoon sunlight that had broken through after rain earlier in the morning, she was grateful not to have to cook tonight.

In the kitchen, true to Kenny's word, all of his late mother's culinary equipment was neatly stored on shelves. Slightly daunted, Lane surveyed the many implements of cookery and wondered what she'd use, after all. After a lifetime of being cooked for, she'd become used to cooking everything in one pan on a single electric element in the shared flat in London. The mysteries of food preparation on any but a wartime, flatmate scale were an opaque mystery to her.

In anticipation of her arrival, Kenny had lit the fire in the Franklin stove in the drawing room at noon, to take

down any dampness, and she had only to add to it to keep it going. A neat, fresh pile of chopped wood sat in the basket next to the stove. Looking at the growing swath of sunlight, she thought she would not need to keep it going. She got up and found the kettle, the one implement with which she felt expertise, filled it, and plunked it onto the stovetop. An electric stove in this nearly wilderness setting seemed the ultimate luxury. She wondered if the late Lady Armstrong had insisted on it, or if Kenny had put it in against a future sale of the house. It was very nearly new. She had brought some bags of groceries from Nelson and she stowed them in the fridge, another unanticipated luxury, and then tested the kitchen light several times for fun, because it was hers and she'd never owned one before, attached to a whole house as this one was. After looking inquiringly at the kettle to see if she could hear it heating up, she took a delicious amble through the rooms. She ran her hand along the walls and around the door jambs as she went from room to room.

It was hers. Every board and window and foot of it. She paused in the bedroom and wondered about the north-facing windows. Had she heard somewhere that this was not lucky? Perhaps it was more that she had heard that in some cultures an east-facing room was important.

Her tour took her upstairs next, to the second floor. The fourth stair creaked and she smiled, stepping backwards to hear it again. It was the voice of her house. There was no door at the top of the stairs into what Kenny had referred to as the attic. It was all one large room, occupying the full second floor, with banks of windows on all four sides. It had been equipped with sliding cupboards under the

windows, in which, no doubt, boxes of Lady Armstrong's accoutrements, accumulated over her lifetime in two countries, were now stored. She had told Kenny not to move anything on her account; she was quite happy to store anything of his mother's. She wondered about moving some of the cookery items in the kitchen up into storage, but then chided herself. She must learn to use them. That was the meaning of a full life in the New World, where there were neither servants nor war to limit one's experience of it. Light bucketed into the room, making it a canvas of warmth and shadows. She was surprised to find the west-facing windows, which looked out over the lake below her, were standing open. Perhaps Kenny had opened them to air the house out, though it was a peculiar thing to do when rain must have been pelting down in the morning, if the mud in the driveway was any indication.

She closed and latched the windows, looking at the damp on the floor and judging that it would dry all right in time, without damaging anything, and went downstairs to have tea and begin to think about her crate from England. Tomorrow she would explore her outbuilding, a large, weathered but well-constructed barn that was positioned to the left of the driveway that led from the road to the house. The nascent archaeologist in her thrilled to the prospect. Her childhood home had been a rambling of no-longer-used outbuildings and attics, where she had explored with a gnawing feeling of excited dread that these places would all be forbidden to her if her aunts but knew where she went. Perhaps her barn, where she had glimpsed the shapes of things, tools she supposed, hanging in the

small dusty windows, would yield that same sense of the now-silent stories of lives lived in an unknowable past, where all the world had smelled of rust and the acrid tang of decaying chemicals and oil. But that was for tomorrow.

KENNY ARMSTRONG KICKED the mud off his boots before taking them off and then stood thoughtfully in the doorway.

“Well, that is a lovely girl!” he declared enthusiastically. “And there’s no accounting for tastes, because she took the keys right out of my hands. I thought we’d never sell the thing and we would have to turn it under and plant apples over it to get rid of Mother.” He moved in and fell into his chair by the stove and began pulling off his thick wool socks.

Eleanor, his wife of nearly thirty-four years, smiled and pulled open the stove to push in another stick of wood. “Maybe she’ll stop haunting the place now that there’s someone in the house. It’ll be jolly good having someone else young around here.” Aside from the Yanks, who didn’t count, the place was turning into a community for super-annuated and shell-shocked vets from two world wars, and their mad wives and mothers. “She’ll get to meet them all at the vicar’s tea. Poor girl! I do hope the Mather boy isn’t going to be bothering her. Who knows what she’s been through in the old country. I’m sure she’d just like some peace and quiet.”

LANE WOULD HAVE been surprised by Kenny and Eleanor’s enthusiasm for her looks. She was not vain, having had very

little time to develop vanity because of the pressures of her work, which began smartly in 1939 when the war started and she was only nineteen. She was slender but strongly shaped with bigger feet than those of her friends and because she couldn't be bothered redirecting her eyebrows higher up on her brow ridge as many of the girls had done, she was sure she looked a bit like a gorilla. She had been surprised when Angus had run his thumbs gently along the length of her brows that day so long ago and said, "Lovely, lovely!" She had never felt worthy of Angus, truthfully, and he was the furthest thing from her mind now, as was everything from her life in the last seven years, pushed determinedly away by the green presence of this new land.

That was the best thing about relocating an ocean and a continent away. Her whole dark past would recede into the mist, like the skyline of Liverpool, from where she'd embarked. She was here now. She had met no one yet but Kenny and Eleanor, who had been left this house by Kenny's mother but who preferred to stay in their cottage on the other side of the creek. The cottage had been designed before the turn of the century to house the post office for the sparsely populated and far-flung community and it suited their modest view of what was necessary for happiness. It was tiny and comfortable for the two of them and had a big west-facing porch overlooking the garden.

Lane was sure that no matter who lived in King's Cove, she would be happy because she had her house, and it would be possible to begin shaping her life away from the past and into the future, away from the shadows and into the light.

CHAPTER TWO

“CUCUMBERS TODAY,” ELEANOR ARMSTRONG SAID a few days later, her warmth intensified by the sheer size of her false-teeth smile. She pushed the mail through the wooden window and followed it up with two long, deep green, spiny cucumbers. Eleanor never just gave out mail. It was accompanied in the spring with flowers, in the summer and fall with vegetables, and in the winter with cookies, generally some Victorian gingery recipe no one had ever been able to duplicate. It was the driest June anyone could remember, and memory here went back fifty years, well before the first war.

Lane still wasn't used to this largesse. “They're spectacular!” she said. “I shall eat nothing else for a week. Do me good.”

Eleanor waved a self-deprecatory hand and then leaned forward and bobbed her head, not a hair on her white coif moving out of perfect place. “Has Lady Armstrong been giving you any trouble?”

“She's been very quiet. Perhaps she's left?” Lane said, raising her eyebrows in a kind of shrug they might

recognize in France, where she had lived for a brief period after the war.

“Don’t kid yourself. She’s not going anywhere, though if Kenny fixed the latch on those attic windows, it might take care of most of the haunting. Oh dear,” Eleanor whispered suddenly, leaning toward Lane and giving a discreet little point to the door with her chin. Lane turned to the sound of the screen door opening and the little bell tinkling. Mrs. Mather. Lane had seen “Mad Mather,” as Eleanor had called her, only from the rear, as she’d made her way up the road the day before. Reginald Mather had collected the mail a few days earlier and she saw now that his debonair, smart presentation was in complete contrast to his wife. Mrs. Mather now stood imperiously in the doorway, her cane momentarily at rest, giving the appearance of being about to thwack someone’s calves. Her grey hair had been twisted into a bun, from which much of it now escaped, and contrary to her somewhat military bearing, she was wearing a faded, dark blue dress with a man’s belt cinched vigorously about her waist. Her eyes, though a somewhat rheumy and washed-out blue, had a wild and penetrating quality.

“Good morning, ladies,” she bellowed. She looked annoyed that there should be anyone but herself in the post office. She eyed Lane critically.

“You’ll be the new girl, then,” she commented and then turned away as if the addition of a new member to their community were an everyday occurrence, instead of something that had only happened twice in the last thirty years.

Eleanor glanced at Lane, gave an imperceptible shrug,

and then looked pleasantly at Mrs. Mather. "I have some lovely sweet peas today, Alice," she said.

"I'm off!" said Lane, collecting her cucumbers and letters. Mrs. Mather deigned to glance back at her and lifted her cane in a brisk salute.

"See you tomorrow, love!" cried Eleanor.

The screen door swung closed, and the voices of the two older ladies disappeared behind Lane. She took a great breath and walked across the grassy yard of the post office, past Kenny Armstrong's new truck, a gleaming red 1940 Ford. She smiled at it. Eleanor had told her he'd used a horse and wagon until this year and now suddenly he'd precipitated himself into the modern world. It took him twenty minutes now to drive down to the wharf to pick up the mail. His horse, which had retired to the meadow that ran along the roadway to the post office, was tearing up mouthfuls of grass contentedly.

She walked up the dirt road until she came to the little path through the bank of birch trees that made the border between her place and the Armstrongs'. The birches, with their leaves quivering in some almost imperceptible gentle movement of air, looked fragile and incongruous amidst the looming fir that occupied every space that had not been carved away and planted into orchards and gentler, more domestic species. A wooden footbridge carried her over the gully and she emerged from the copse of trees into the sight of her house. She loved this moment. She hoped she'd never stop loving that first sight of the house as she came across the bridge. The White House. Home of Lady Armstrong, late of this Saint Joseph's parish. And sure

enough, the windows of the attic were again cast wide open as if an elated young woman longed to see the shadows of the cumulus cross the surface of the lake. She enjoyed the fantasy that Lady Armstrong occupied the hereafter opening her windows. She would set up her typewriter today, she thought. Perhaps the old lady would be something of a muse.

It came to pass that on Sunday, June 16, in weather people declared was more August than June, Eleanor Armstrong made good on her promise to welcome Lane properly to King's Cove by inviting her to the annual vicar's tea party. Perhaps lulled by the general lack of society she had become accustomed to in the days since she'd arrived, Lane stepped into what felt like a hubbub when Kenny swung open the screen door of the little cottage. Where the house was usually quiet except for the crackling of wood in the stove, or the scraping of branches along the roof at the back of the house during a midday breeze, now there was a veritable din of voices, and a loud and vigorous woman's laugh.

"What on earth?" she asked Kenny. "Where have all these people sprung from?"

To which he merely nodded his white head and smiled. "Come on through. Everyone is waiting, and the tea is just at its perfect pitch. Eleanor is about to pour." Befuddled by what she had thought would be an event with about six people, Lane followed Kenny through to the back porch where a comfortable array of rattan furniture and a swing seat were all occupied by an assortment of people. A couple of younger men and three small boys were seated

on various levels of the steps down to the lawn. The boys were drinking something cold and iced-tea-looking from glasses and had already gotten hold of some cake.

“Wonderful!” cried Eleanor. “Our new neighbour has arrived! Everybody, this is Lane. She has, I’m sure you have heard by now, settled in to my late mother-in-law’s house across the way.” All faces turned toward Lane now, except for two of the little boys, who were occupied in a tussle over who got the larger piece of cake. Eleanor showed her to a seat, just vacated by a short dark man, who had jumped up the minute Lane came in. “Tea with?” she asked Lane.

“Milk and sugar. Two. Thank you.” This attention was acutely embarrassing, Lane found, used as she was to being, as she saw it, rather unimportant.

Eleanor sensed her discomfiture, and whispered, “Don’t worry, my dear. It is the annual summer tea that we throw for the vicar. Have a sandwich. You’ll need it!” Eleanor looked at a plate of sandwiches of such beauty, variety, and delicacy that they would be at home at a pre-war tea at her aunt’s house in Surrey. Selecting something that looked like it might be cucumber with a few intensely green chives poking out of it, she was just considering a bite when the man with the two children plunged forward, holding out his hand.

“Hi! I’m Dave. Bertolli. The squabbling boys are mine, as is the woman currently to pry them apart. We’ve only been here three years, so we will count as ‘new people’ together.”

Lane wrestled briefly with the difficulty of balancing her as-yet-untouched sandwich on the edge of her saucer in

order to free up a hand, which he took and shook warmly. He looked, she thought, like a good man. His face was open and his dark eyes, given a cast of worry by brows that gathered slightly at the bridge of his nose, looked kindly into hers. She took an instant liking to him, and he had a charmingly American accent.

“Hi, yourself. Lane Winslow. I think Kenny told me you live up the hill toward the east. I’m barely getting a sense of the layout. I can’t believe three years would qualify you as a new person. I’ve only been here a minute!”

“Oh my dear, you have no idea. Though I think people will take to you quicker, being English and all. We Yanks don’t rate very highly, and our last name’s Bertolli. American Italians. We might as well be from Mars.”

“How do you find yourself here? It seems very far away from anywhere, really.”

“I’m a composer and I’ve come out to write, as a matter of fact. I got sick of the rat race in New York, and my old man the shopkeeper died and left me with a bundle and instructions to keep the business going. I figured he wouldn’t care where he is now, so I sold up to my brother and came out to the quietest place I could find. We got an old log cabin and have added on to it and stuck a grand piano in it and it’s as dandy is it can be. The boys love the country life, and Angela has been doing okay. She’s a painter, though it’s hard to get much done with that bunch. She’s ecstatic to have a friend younger than sixty!”

“Here, Bertolli, make room for the rest of us!” This exhortation came from a man in his early thirties, who smoothed his straw-blond hair back as he approached Lane.

Dave stepped out of the way, his mouth betraying the slightest grimace, and turned to look over the cake tray. Lane took a hasty bite of her cucumber sandwich, as she saw that she might be pinned in this chair for the foreseeable future, her tea getting cold and her food untouched. She had also caught sight of the cake tray, feeling a flicker of concern about the depredations that the Bertolli family as a whole seemed intent on making upon it.

“Sandy Mather, son of the household of the same name. Mater is over there and, between us, is on the eccentric side, and the pater is outside scowling at the way Armstrong has pruned his apple trees, no doubt. How do?” He too, like David Bertolli before him, put out his hand for her to shake. Any resemblance, however, ended here. His hand had a slightly damp feel that instantly caused her to recoil, in spite of its firm grip, and his face seemed to her to loom much too close to hers.

“How do you do?” she asked formally, extricating her hand as quickly as possible. She glanced almost unconsciously toward Mrs. Mather, who was holding forth to a woman with grey hair rolled along the nape of her neck in a style that pre-dated the first war. Seeing the woman’s hairdo and even this almost old-fashioned tea made Lane think of the ex-pat British community she’d grown up in. That phenomenon of time stopping for émigrés, while England moved on and was nearly unrecognizable, had overwhelmed her grandmother when she’d had to move to England from Riga in the early months of the war. Lane brought her eyes back to the son. “I do very well, especially now. We haven’t had a pretty woman here in an age.

Absolutely everyone is over fifty. I've been withering here, socially speaking."

He gave her an ingratiating smile, which caused some inner voice in her to say, Oh dear. She smiled politely and then looked quickly down, feeling more trapped than ever.

"Lane, my dear, please come and let me introduce you to the vicar. Would you mind letting her go for just a moment, Sandy? There, thank you so much." Eleanor had Lane by the hand, somehow miraculously insinuating a plate with a delicious-looking bit of walnut cake into it, and was leading her down the steps toward the garden where two men were standing with their hands behind their backs in unconscious imitation of one another, looking up at a tree. The afternoon was warm wherever the sun fell, and the leaves that had been a suggestion when she had first driven up the hill from the Nelson road in April with the house agent were well on their way to fully clothing their parent trees on this lovely mid-June day.

"Thank you," Lane said to her in a stage whisper before she turned her face brightly to the two men. One she knew was Mather, the other, she assumed, must be the vicar. This proved to be the case and now, not trapped in a chair and having consumed all but the crumbs on the tips of her fingers of the excellent cake, she gave herself with restored equanimity to the task at hand. The vicar proved to be charming and extremely well versed in just about everything. He came originally from Kent, though he had left it as a young man twenty years ago just after his ordination. "Anxious to convert the Canadian heathens!" he laughed. "Do you know Reg Mather?"

“Yes, he’s one of the people I do know. We met in the post office here. How are you, Reginald? Your son tells me you are an expert on pruning.”

“Oh, I used to toil in the apple orchard like everyone else. I’m hoping to diversify. You know, one thing or another. How are you getting along?” He smiled at her in a pleasant, avuncular way that made her think about how different a father and a son could be. The father, a man in his mid-sixties she estimated, clearly had at one time been a good-looking man. Tall and straight with a bearing that suggested an innate sense of superiority. His hair, thick and just starting to speckle toward grey, was, in a reflection of his personality, the aggressive opposite of his son’s thin, fair hair, and made him still a striking specimen. Lane could not shake the feeling, however, that he too was turning his charm on her and seemed intent on managing her in some way. Perhaps father and son had something in common after all.

“I’m getting along fine, thank you. I’ve settled in and am just keeping an eye on what is coming up in the flowerbeds. Mostly weeds I fear at the moment; it’s been five years since Lady Armstrong died. Kenny, I think, has had a hand in keeping the orchard shipshape. I don’t know how he does it all!”

“Oh, I think you’ll find us like pioneers, Miss Winslow. A strong breed of man grows up out in the British Columbian climate. Some a damn sight too strong for their own good.” This observation was delivered suddenly and darkly at the sight of another figure coming off the stairs and into the garden.

Lane couldn't resist asking. "Who is that? I've seen him sort of at a distance once or twice in an orchard adjacent to my place."

"Robin Harris. An unpleasant and taciturn member of this otherwise excellent community. Shell shock, don't you know. I think you will find him a tiresome neighbour, should he ever take a dislike to anything you do. My advice is to avoid crossing his land, gumming up his creek, or otherwise bothering him and you should be fine. I can't think what induced him to come to this. He never sticks his head into the church, so it's certainly not for the vicar. Eleanor must have a remarkable hold on him to get him through that barbed wire fence and into the light of day!"

In any event, the mystery of how Eleanor had gotten Harris off his property and out to a tea, which beverage he didn't touch, was solved by Harris himself when he was introduced to her by Kenny.

"Came to see who you were," he said, his hands thrust into the pockets of a decidedly informal pair of overalls. He wore an expression that Lane would have described as "lowering" except that this was something you'd do when you were angry and clearly his face was set in this growly expression all the time.

Moved by what pain might be encompassed in the term "shell shocked," she put out her hand, saying, "How do you do?" and was obliged to take it back again when he made no move to remove his hands from his pockets.

"You planning to work the orchard?" was his next query.

He could, she decided, be fifty but he looked, perhaps because of his demeanour, closer to sixty. Like nearly

everyone she had met, he had a still-discernible trace of an English accent, as though they had all come here as children.

“I’m not terribly sure. At the moment, I’m just getting my bearings. It’s been beautifully kept up though,” Lane said, taken aback by the question. In truth, she did not see herself in coveralls with pruning shears but perhaps, between writing books . . .

“Oh, do leave her alone, Harris,” came the sudden voice of Sandy Mather. He took her by the elbow and steered her away, toward the newly dug vegetable bed. “He’s a dreadful old bore,” he confided to her. “I felt I was well on my way to finding out what a beautiful young woman is doing burying herself out in this godforsaken place when you were whisked from me.”

Lane considered whether the young bore was a good exchange for the old one and tried to decide how to tell him as little as possible about herself, as she was convinced that any information would be unsafe with him. “I’m just seeing how I like it out in Canada,” she managed, and then, “I do beg your pardon. I’m just going to help Eleanor.” She was sorry to invent this excuse but she didn’t think she could bear another moment of being pounced on. Taking refuge in the kitchen, she said to Eleanor, “What a lovely tea! It’s like the great pre-war teas of my childhood. What can I do?”

Eleanor laughed. “You mean, whom should you try to stick close to? Tired of the Mathers? Let me recommend the Hughes, *mère et filles*. They are harmless and wonderful gardeners. They’re over there by the lilac.” She pointed to a trio of women presided over by the older woman with

whom Mrs. Mather had been talking earlier. The chair vacated by Mrs. Mather now beckoned invitingly.

After a much more pleasant interlude with another piece of cake, chocolate this time, and the blameless Hughes, Lane finally made her apologies to Eleanor and was relieved to see that gathered at the front door, also ready to leave, were the Bertollis, whose children had probably reached their limit of exhibiting the behaviour required for one of these formal English teas.

Angela Bertolli turned on Lane with a great warm smile. “My dear Lane. Follow the road up, take a right at the Mathers’ imposing stone abode and turn in at the second drive about half a mile along. It is a lovely walk, and I will give you lunch one day soon. I must get to know you without the throng. Agreed?” Lane was delighted to accept this abrupt invitation, and, with a wave, walked the path back to her quiet house.