

IONA WISHAW

DEATH IN A
DARKENING
MIST

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

CHAPTER ONE

December 1946

THERE WAS A FAINT DUSTING of snow on the treacherous road, but more was threatened by the dark clouds banking along the mountains. The road to Adderly wound sharply, so narrow in places only one car could go through, and, for one long stretch, carved out of a seemingly sheer cliff that dropped hundreds of feet to the lake below. Angela drove it clutching the steering wheel and leaning forward as if this action would keep the station wagon anchored on the dirt road and heading in the right direction. Lane Winslow, who'd agreed to this trip on the grounds that it was to be a lovely day out at the local hot spring, wished she'd offered to drive—indeed was wishing she'd stayed safe at home. But that, she reflected, was because they'd reached the most terrifying section, and at the moment she was on the side that dropped over the cliff. Even Angela's three rambunctious boys, Philip, Rolfie, and Rafe, were sitting quietly in the back, as if they knew their stillness was critical to everyone arriving alive at the swimming pool. Though it was barely ten in the morning, the lake below was dark and brooding. Lane dared herself to look towards the edge of the cliff, just under

her, and hoped that this was not the day she would die. She wasn't to know that it would be someone else's day to die.

She forced herself to admire the shades of deep blues and greys in the roil of dark clouds, the water, the mountains, so that she would not think about whether they might encounter someone coming the other way and be forced into a dangerous standoff on this narrow road. The faint overnight snowfall had barely covered the ground, and clearly a vehicle had already been along here earlier. She shuddered to think about this road covered in a deep, slippery layer of snow.

It was at this moment that Angela chose to glance at Lane and say, "Has that nice Charles Andrews from the bank come out to see you again?"

Wanting to cry "Keep your eyes on the road!" Lane said through tight lips, "Yes. No. I mean, he's been out twice. Oh God!" They rounded one last long curve and then she let out a long slow breath of relief when the precipice was exchanged for ordinary deep pine forest on either side. "Crikey! How do you drive that without losing your nerve?"

"Don't try to change the subject. Is he as nice as he looks? All that wavy blond hair must mean something."

"He's perfectly pleasant, but you are making something out of nothing. His aunt lives nearby and he stops out to say hello. I feel a bit sorry for him. He got some sort of shrapnel in his leg, and he limps. He was in the 4th Infantry and got wounded just near the end. He used to be an athlete. It's hard to live with the loss of your powers."

"That's how it starts! You feel sorry for a guy, and then one thing leads to another." Angela was actually winking.

Even on this perfectly straight bit of road, Lane wished Angela would keep both eyes open.

“Nothing is leading to anything, I assure you. He is not my type.” Lane was pretty sure this was true, though she could not precisely say why. He had come only a few days ago, before the snow, on a crisp, sunny day. She’d been raking leaves with a bedraggled bamboo rake she’d found in her barn when she’d seen his deep blue Studebaker pull up and stop outside her metal gate. He was wearing a long camel coat, and he removed his grey hat to wave at her. He reminded her of a well-cared-for cat. Things must be going well at the bank, she’d thought. It was not entirely kindly meant, she realized immediately, and was sorry. “Mr. Andrews, how nice of you to take the trouble!” she’d called.

On his first visit a few weeks before, he’d just stopped by to say hello, and looked admiringly around her beloved house, but this time she had invited him in and made them both some cheese sandwiches. It had given her a chance to experience how truly charming he was. He had expressed a flattering interest in her, and had been large and comfortable in her kitchen in a way that made her think of his physical presence after he had gone.

“Well, I think he is gorgeous,” Angela said.

“That’s only because he’s always giving you money.”

At last a small cabin appeared to their left, and then a wooden house, and finally a tiny main street that, were it not for a few parked cars, could have been the main road of a ghost town. Not a single person was in evidence.

Their object was the hot springs in the little mining town. The boys, the dangerous road behind them, began to

jostle and pummel each other as they approached the town.

“Can we go in the store?” they asked. They were passing a wooden building called Fletcher’s Store, but Angela drove on and turned up a steep incline where she pulled the car to a stop in a clearing.

“After our swim,” she said.

Lane got out and breathed away the tension of the drive, amazed at how relieved she was to be standing on solid ground, reminded, not for the first time, how being in a war, being dropped out of airplanes, does not take away the ordinary day-to-day fears that life serves up. Just below the parking clearing, through a bank of bare birch trees, she could see the quiet street laid out before her.

“It’s like those pictures in magazines. It’s the Platonic perfection of a Canadian mining town. That store looks to be from the last century,” Lane said.

The boys had run ahead, their towels trailing from the bundles under their arms, and were pounding up a long, trestled wooden stairway that took visitors from the parking area to the outdoor pool. They’d reached the first landing and were shouting at Lane and Angela to come on.

“I’ll take us into the store after,” said Angela. “It’s very quaint. That and one other building, the hotel, were practically the only buildings to survive a big fire in the nineties. The boys like to buy chocolate bars there. You wait. We’ll be completely enervated after this and will need chocolate.”

Feeling some doubt that Angela’s troop would ever be enervated by anything, Lane followed Angela up the stairs. At the top landing Lane saw, through a thick miasma of steam, the swimming pool and a long wooden building at

one end. Change rooms, she supposed. Just dimly visible through the steam over the pool were one or two dark shapes decorously doing a breast stroke. Angela knocked on the wooden frame of a window labelled *Tickets*. After a brief struggle and an uttered obscenity, a short, cheerful artificial blonde finally managed to shoot the window open.

“I should get Frank to oil the damn thing. Hello, dearie! I haven’t seen you and yours here for a good while! Who’s this?”

“Hello, Betty,” said Angela. “This is Lane. She moved to the Cove in the summer. Lane, Betty—the doyenne of the Adderly Hot Springs.”

“How do you do?”

“Ooh—you’re English. You must fit right in with them others up at King’s Cove.”

Lane, who, because of her international upbringing, wasn’t sure she really fit in anywhere, smiled at the middle-aged woman. Betty, squeezed into the brown wool jacket she wore against the cold, returned to the task at hand. “That’ll be ten cents all round, dears.”

The change rooms were a series of little cubicles smelling of damp wood and lit only by two bare light bulbs in the passageway. The floor was slatted wood to aid drainage. She wished she had brought plimsolls to wear out to the pool area because the wood had a damp, unwholesome feel on her bare feet. As she hung up her clothing, Lane could already hear the boys splashing into the water and shouting. She wondered how the decorous swimmers were taking the addition of noisy children to their quiet, misty winter morning.

She slid gratefully out of the freezing air into the white, murky depths of the warm pool. The air had a pleasantly sulphurous quality that made the experience seem vaguely medicinal. The miasma of steam was so thick that though she could hear the children, she could not see them across the pool.

“This is heaven!” she exclaimed.

“I told you,” Angela said.

“And this is just directly out of the ground?”

“I think so. You can’t see them, but the caves I told you about are over there. The water is much hotter in the caves. When we get too used to this we can go sit in there and parboil like a couple of eggs. Perhaps they add some cool water to bring the temperature down in the pool. We’ve been here when the snow is a foot deep, and we get all heated up and then roll in the snow.”

“It’s a good thing your lads are such good swimmers. I can’t see my hand two inches under the water. If anyone drowned here, you’d never find them!”

It wasn’t, Lane decided, a pool for doing exercise laps. The steam prevented one from seeing far ahead, and in any case the temperature suggested a regime of just floating about. So she did, on her back, looking upward through the mist at the grey textures of the sky.

“Come on. Let’s go to the caves.” She heard Angela from somewhere behind her.

They climbed out of the pool up a calcium-encrusted ladder at the deep end and stepped over a thigh-high ledge into the mouth of a cave. The experience was like getting into a slightly too-hot bath. There was a ledge to sit on just

at the entrance, and the two of them sank onto it, looking out at the winter morning behind them.

“How far back does it go?” Lane asked. It was pitch dark only a few feet from the entrance. Water dripped from the ceiling. Somewhere she could hear a cascade splashing onto the surface of the water.

“It goes all the way around and connects to the other cave opening. Maybe twenty feet to the back wall. You have to mind how you go, because it narrows towards the back and you can bump your head on the pokey bits. You can’t quite stand up, and it’s shallow, so you sort of float along on your belly. I’ve only done it once. You have to feel your way along. I’m always afraid of grabbing someone’s knee in the dark.” Angela stood up. “I’d better go check on the boys. It unnerves me when I can’t hear them. You stay here and bask. I’ll be right back.”

Lane watched Angela disappear into the mist, calling out the names of her brood, and then she tentatively moved away from the mouth of the cave and came to rest in the dark at what she assumed was halfway along. The mouth of the cave shimmered, throwing light only a few feet in. The droplets from the roof of the cave fell with tiny echoes in the silence. Alone in the dark with her musings, her mind turned backwards, as if the darkness was pulling her into her childhood. Newfangled psychological claptrap, she scolded herself lazily. But there she was, in the Latvian winter, visiting a hot spring. Where? She closed her eyes to try to picture where she had been. She must have been very young. Who had taken her? Not her father. He was always away on “diplomatic” business. Madame Olga?

“Da. Zdyes.”

Lane’s eyes flew open and she peered into the darkness. Had she just imagined someone saying, “Yes. Here” in Russian? There was only silence. Her memory was a bit too vivid, she thought. She supposed someone could come here for some good, old-fashioned Freudian regression. She began to move back towards the entrance, unwilling to regress just at the moment, when she heard it again, in Russian: *“Ya zdyes”*—I’m here.

Lane moved back to the entrance of the cave and sat on the ledge to see if the speaker would appear. The voice had sounded closer the second time. Outside by the pool, she could hear the children as well as Angela exhorting them not to bother people and to stay at the shallow end. Through the mist they sounded far away, as if shouting from a dream.

“Aha, Piotr, there you are. I’m going out now. I will see you at the café,” said the same voice in Russian, and simultaneously a bearded man with short, pale yellow hair rose directly in front of her, making for the entrance. From somewhere behind him she heard another voice.

“Fine. Ten more minutes and I’ll be there.”

The bearded man, as he emerged into the light, looked to be in his late forties, with a worried cast to his eyes. Or was it just the effect of adjusting to the light? He was muscular, and, perhaps because of the temperature of the water, a scar across the top of his arm stood out, a great red welt.

“Excuse, madame,” he said in heavily accented English, climbing past her, out of the cave.

For a moment Lane considered talking to him in his own language. It had unleashed such nostalgia in her to

hear him speak the Russian that had surrounded her in childhood. But she held back. He could prove to be someone she didn't want to know, or she might hold him up if he was in a hurry. Besides, if he were an English speaker, she probably would not have talked to him. Thus she sat, watching him splash along the edge of the pool, stopping halfway back to the dressing area to lift a handful of the sparse snow from the raised bank that formed that edge of the pool, vigorously rubbing his limbs with it.

When he had disappeared into the mist between her and the dressing room, she sank back into the hot water until her chin rested on the surface. With her eyes closed, she gave in to the nostalgia of her childhood, of the Latvian winters and the saunas. That time suddenly felt more intensely real to her than the Charles Edwardses, or all the things that had crashed about her life since she had come to King's Cove the previous June.

She remembered the vast stretch of white country where she used to cross-country ski with her friends. Winter was her favourite time. The cleanliness and distance, the silence, and the aura of possibility that only the young could feel. Would she ever feel that again? She was barely twenty-six, but she felt old against the memories, as if the war had wrung her out and left only this shell that required her to sit, like an old woman, in a hot spring to ease the aches. Lane had worked for the British Secret Intelligence Service from the age of nineteen till the end of the war. There was plenty to be weary about, which was why she'd moved out to British Columbia. Here in the middle of nowhere she was free to be herself, she thought, with no tiresome blond bank clerks to bother with.

Her melancholic reverie was interrupted by Angela, suddenly blocking the light as she climbed into the tunnel with a shudder. “Oof. I still have three boys, and they aren’t quite tired enough yet. If I sit in here and don’t interfere, another fifteen minutes should do it. They have the pool to themselves. They seem to have frightened the other swimmers away.”

Lane was going to ask Angela about why there should be people speaking Russian here, but then worried that the second man, Piotr, might still be nearby, somewhere in the darkness of the cave, so instead she settled back in and sat with her friend in companionable silence. The boys were still audible in the pool, accompanied by the occasional splash, as one of them cannon-balled into the water, to the cries of indignation by his brothers. When the sounds of the boys began to die down, Angela said, “Good. Now we can go. It’s going to take me ages to cool down!” They climbed over the ledge, and Lane looked back at the other entrance to the cavern, thinking that next time she would go and sit at that end. She wondered what had happened to the second man. Perhaps he’d walked by towards the change rooms when she was in her reverie.

After an unpleasant struggle to pull her clothes on to her damp body—the towel seemed unequal to the task of drying her properly in the wet confines of the dressing room—she emerged and stood listlessly waiting for Angela and the boys. Angela had them in several cubicles of the ladies’ side and was telling them to get a move on. Lane dried her long hair, more or less, and tied it back, slipping it under her scarf. She was still hot from the water, and wanted

to leave her jacket undone, but she knew that the cold would win out, and she ought to preserve some of the heat. Putting her bag down, she leaned on the railing, looking out at the parking area and the little street below, enjoying the crisp coldness of the air on her face. She imagined gold miners—is that what they mined here?—trudging out of the hills with their little bags of loot, looking for a drink at the bar. Suddenly she heard banging, and she turned to see a man pounding his fist on the wooden window of the ticket booth. At first she couldn't hear what he was shouting, and then she understood all too well.

“Help, somebody, quickly—*help!*”

The wooden window flew open and Betty was there, looking alarmed by the wildness of the man yelling at her.

“I don't understand you, lovie, you must speak English.”

But the man continued to shout in Russian. Lane bolted to the window and said to the man, in his language, “Can I help you? What has happened?”

The old man, still in his bathing suit, his white belly hanging over the waist, turned to her as if someone speaking to him in Russian were the most natural thing in the world. “My friend, in there . . . there is something wrong. I think he is dead!”

Lane looked towards the men's changing area where the door hung open, and then glanced back at Betty. “He says that there is something wrong with his friend in the dressing room. He thinks he is . . . ill. I'm going to check. If there is a doctor in the village, can you get him?” Lane hurried along the walkway toward the open door.

Behind her, Betty muttered, “I warn them. I tell them.

They're too old to sit for a long time in hot water. It's bad for their . . ." But Lane was into the passage of the dressing room now, saying to the old man, "Where is he? Which compartment?"

"There, at the end!"

Once inside, and accustomed to the dimly lit area, she could see at the end that the cubicle door was closed, but there was a figure stretched out, the top half of his body hidden inside, his legs splayed out under the high door, in the passage. She flung the door open and saw that the man was naked, lying supine, his head to one side. She could see instantly that this was the same man she had seen coming through the tunnel. She knelt down and gently shook him.

"Sir, sir . . . are you all right?" she asked in Russian.

He did not move, and even with the gentle shake, his head flopped ominously. She brought her hand to her mouth, unconsciously quelling her physical response. He was dead; she knew this with certainty. But how did he die?

"Lane, darling, what's the matter? What's happened?" It was Angela in the door of the passageway. "Be quiet and go wait by the car!" She added this last to the children, who had also begun a rising chorus of questions.

Lane reluctantly pulled her eyes away from the man's face. "Angela, get a warm blanket from Betty right now. And find out if she's contacted any kind of doctor," she called out, past the large body of the distressed friend. He was still standing helplessly outside the cubicle, and seemed to be blocking the whole of the narrow passageway. The "warm" blanket was nonsense, she knew, but she felt part of her mind tagging behind, to some moment when

he was still alive. She wished now she'd said something to him after all, as if that delay would have kept him from this meeting with Fate.

"He was like this when you found him?" she asked.

"Yes, just like this. He didn't move. I tried to wake him." He sounded close to tears now, and looked nervously behind him, as if expecting whoever had done this to his friend might pop through the door at any moment.

"Sir, go and get dressed. You will become sick in this cold. I have sent for help."

The man shuffled nervously backward, then turned, and Lane heard the door of a cubicle shut, farther down the passage. She swore at the darkness. This back cubicle was far from the bulb that hung halfway along the passage. She turned back to the figure and, craning forward, looked closely at him, thinking perhaps he'd had a stroke and banged his head. When she saw the wound, she frowned, glancing upward to see if a protruding nail could have caused it, but knowing already it was impossible—no nail was that big. Near the top of the back of his head was a dark spot. She reached out and touched it gently, feeling her finger dip sickeningly into the damp wound in his skull. She brought her finger away, shuddering at the dark stain on it. Blood. At that moment, Angela was coming along the passage with a thick grey blanket.

"What's the matter with him? Has he passed out?"

Taking the blanket and spreading it over him in some unconscious and superfluous bid to keep him warm until help arrived, she said, "I'm afraid he's dead."