

The book cover features a stylized illustration of a woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a green long-sleeved top, a dark blue skirt, and dark boots. She is standing with her back to the viewer, looking towards a landscape. In the background, there are rolling green hills under a blue sky with white clouds. A prominent feature is a large, grey, stone-like structure with a rectangular opening, resembling a tomb or a cold grave, situated on a hillside. In the foreground, there are some white flowers on a small patch of grass.

IONA WHISHAW

AN OLD,
COLD GRAVE

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

CHAPTER ONE

IT WASN'T QUITE THE FIRST day of spring, but the air had a softness, a promise of coming warmth, that made the people in King's Cove want to do things. Tidy up the garden, go through the sock drawer, fling open the windows to air out the house. Nothing in the splashes of sunlight stretching across the dormant gardens suggested that it was a good day to be confronted with the spectre of death.

Gwen Hughes, a woman in her fifties, who had lived in the same house since she was a child with her sister, Mabel, and their mother, Gladys, stood in the root cellar, scowling in the dim light thrown by the single electric light bulb hanging from the wood joist on the ceiling. Her gaze was directed at the wooden shelves that lined either side of the cellar. Vegetables and fruit in tall blue-green glass canning jars stood on the top shelves, and jams and jellies in small jars occupied the bottom shelf.

On the other side, wooden boxes containing root vegetables and apples were arranged along two planks that kept them above the dirt floor. A bowl of eggs sat nearest the door. There was a funny smell, and it was this that was

causing Gwen to search accusingly among the jars for the culprit, the eggs having already been exonerated. No one had given the place a good going over since the previous fall, when most of what was in there had been laid away to keep the Hughes women fed over the winter.

Much to the surprise of Gwen and Mabel, it was their octogenarian mother who had suggested the purchase of a small refrigerator a couple of years earlier, but they found very little use for it besides storing milk and setting butter-scotch puddings, a great favourite of hers. The rest of their provisions they kept in the root cellar, as they had for over forty years, with no difficulty at all, thank you very much.

Gwen pulled jars of runner beans forward and shone her flashlight into the dark behind them, and with a small victorious “aha!” she found carrots labelled “1944” that they had not gotten to within the year, as they ought.

“I told her,” she said out loud. She took off her woollen pullover, set it on a box of apples, and began to rearrange the jars, moving those they had canned the summer before to the back. There were four jars of carrots from 1944. Three years before. She didn’t like to waste them, but didn’t like to eat them either. One year, that was her rule.

She put them on the floor by the door and went back to her arranging. As she worked her way along the shelf, she identified one element of the smell: vinegar. At the back-most corner she saw where the difficulty lay. Part of the sod roof had fallen through the beams that made up the wood frame of the cellar and broken several jars. Pickled beans and beets and some canned carrots lay quietly mouldering on the shelf among the broken shards of glass. Feeling

sheepish about how quick she was to blame her sister, she removed all the sound jars, stacked them on shelves on one side, and contemplated the damage. The glass would have to be swept up and the sod repacked. Perhaps Robin could come and reinforce the roof a bit. She knew she or Mabel could do it quite well enough, but old Robin Harris would be hurt not to be called out for this sort of thing.

Gwen pushed open the cellar door, and the family's two cocker spaniels rushed from where they were lying at the front of the house to the top of the steps, wagging expectantly.

"Get along with you!" she said, waving her arms at them. In the mudroom she found what she was looking for: a dustpan, a small whisk broom, and a pair of leather gardening gloves.

"Mabel," she called into the kitchen, "the bloody roof has sunk on the back side of the root cellar and broken some jars. You didn't notice it, I don't suppose, last time you were in there?"

Mabel looked up from where she was kneading bread. "And I suppose if I had, I would have left it like that for someone else to clean up," she said. "And mind the eggs when you're in there. I put them up on the left next to the potatoes."

"And I found four jars of carrots from nearly three years ago. I thought we agreed we had to get to the vegetables within the year. I don't know why you bother canning carrots, anyway. We have a whole box of them. They're a root vegetable. They keep perfectly well. God knows what other horrors I'll find in there," Gwen countered. "I'm going to

sweep up the glass and the rotting vegetables, but Robin is going to have to come up and have a look. Can you telephone him?"

Mabel turned the mass of dough into a basin, threw a dishcloth over it, and wiped her hands on her apron. She did the baking and Gwen handled the contents of the cellar. "I heard him and his noisy tractor at the upper orchard not twenty minutes ago." She pulled on a sweater and sat on the bench in the mudroom to thrust her wool-stockinged feet into her wellington boots. "I'll go up and see if he'll come look at it. Mother's napping. You can give the carrots to the pigs." She pushed open the screen door and called, "Come on you two!" to the dogs, and set off across the garden toward the orchard.

Gwen watched her sister and the dogs disappearing into the orchard, and breathed in. It was early March, and the world was beginning to wake up. There had been four fine days in a row, and the furrows left by Robin's tractor in the ground, muddy from the early spring rains, were nearly dry. A few chives poked out of the soil in the herb garden, and the vegetable garden wanted turning over to ready it for the aged manure they had collected from the two pigs and the chickens.

She pushed open the door to the root cellar, propped it with a box of apples, and got to work. She had an old apple basket, which she perched on the shelf below the mess, and began to sweep the dirt, mouldy food, and glass into it. She would decide later whether to rescue the lids or throw the whole lot onto the dump. When she was reasonably sure of there being no glass, she reached into the back for what

looked like a large, unbroken chunk of sod, but when she tried to move it she saw that it was a sizeable rock.

No wonder the jars had broken! With both hands she slid the rock toward her and could see the gaping hollow it had left in the dirt ceiling. She felt in her trouser pockets for her flashlight and shone it into the space between the beams.

Robin could put an extra joist in there. A cascade of soil fell into the beam of light. Gwen, peering closely with her flashlight, felt a sudden wave of horror sweep through her, and she stepped back, her hand flying to her mouth.

Because she could see, soil encrusted and stained the colour of dark tea, some delicate bones, shreds of some decaying cloth clinging to them. It took a moment to hit home, but when it did, she blanched and felt herself stagger uncertainly, clutching the shelves for balance. The bones were most certainly human.

CHAPTER TWO

BY THE TIME THE TEA was on, old Gladys Hughes, the imperious dowager of the family, had woken up and was tottering downstairs to the kitchen. In the solarium at the bottom of the hall she brushed the cat off the blanketed mound that was the bread, rising in its basin under a cloth and some blankets. When she went into the kitchen, she was astonished to see not just her daughters as usual, but Robin Harris as well. He usually drank his tea out of a Thermos as he sat on his bloody noisy tractor.

“The cat’s been sleeping on the bread again. I can’t see that it does it any good,” she said, but these observations seemed unable to penetrate the gloom and bemusement of the group gathered around the untouched tea and plate of cookies on the kitchen table. Robin Harris had pulled a tin from the pocket of his overalls and was in the process of lighting a scruffy, hand-rolled cigarette.

“What’s the matter with everybody? Robin, you look like death warmed over.” It wasn’t a kind comment, considering what he’d been through in the last year, when his devastating experiences as a soldier in the Great War had

rocked the fragile balance of his life and culminated in a death for which he had been arrested. He was older than her “girls,” who were both in their mid-fifties, by a good five years, and he looked it.

“Mother, you’d better sit down,” Gwen said. Mabel sat silently gazing at the floor. She looked ashen.

Gladys thought suddenly that her daughters had gotten old without her noticing it. The head of the family sat, her stomach beginning to knot. Someone must have died. Kenny Armstrong? Eleanor? Those would be catastrophic losses. One of the Americans? There wouldn’t be this atmosphere of gloom, surely? Perhaps Alice Mather had finally succeeded in shooting someone during one of her unhinged cougar hunts. Gladys looked quickly around and was comforted to see both cocker spaniels slumped against the kitchen door, though they too appeared to have caught the sombre mood in the room. “What is it, for God’s sake?”

“We’ve found something in the root cellar,” Gwen said.

“In the root cellar? God, I thought someone had died, the way you lot are carrying on.” The old lady reached for the teapot and strainer and began to pour tea. “I’ll be mother,” she added. This was her unfailing joke at teatime, but it rang more hollow than usual this afternoon.

“The thing is, Mother, I think someone has,” Gwen said.

Gladys Hughes put down the teapot and stared, aghast, at her daughter. “Someone has never gone and died in our cellar? That is really too much. We can’t go on finding bodies in this place. I blame the Yanks.” This was intended for Robin, who had come back from the Great War with shell shock and was often bad-tempered and took against

new people in general. In this case, it was the Bertolli family who had come from New York and brought their three noisy, growing boys into a community that had not seen small children for thirty years.

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to blame them for this,” Robin said, missing the joke.

“You’d better come have a look,” Gwen suggested, and they all rose from the table.

“I don’t need a parade. You two stay here,” Gladys Hughes said to Robin and Mabel, her anxiety making her irritated. Outside, she breathed in a great gust of spring air. Her favourite moment of the year, she thought, that first smell of the warming earth. It was eternal. It transcended life and death. It would be a grand time of year to die, she thought.

“I found it when I was cleaning up some broken jars. A huge stone fell out of the ceiling between the joists and broke them,” Gwen was saying, walking ahead of her. Inside, she shone the flashlight into the corner. The small bones jumped out in the beam of light as if they had been waiting backstage to be discovered. Gladys peered in, flapping her hand at her daughter to move the flashlight so she could see better.

“They look human, all right, and they seem to be wrapped in something,” she said. “How did we go and build our cellar under a grave?” She tried to calculate. They must have built the cellar there, between the house and the chicken coops, in 1898. It was much smaller then, until 1910 when they expanded it, but still. Who would have buried someone up here, in the roof of their root cellar, on their

homestead? In the back of her mind she already knew it was never a graveyard, and people were generally buried in wooden caskets, not wrapped in . . . whatever these grim, dark shreds of fabric represented.

Back in the house, everyone sat before the dregs of their tea in a momentary lull in the conversation.

“They looked small enough to be those of a child,” Gwen said, still shaken by the discovery. “It’s horrible! A child! Who could have done such a thing . . . bury a child just anywhere like that. In our cellar. I can’t understand it.”

Gladys asserted her maternal authority with the slight touch of impatience she reserved for what she thought of as her youngest daughter’s overemotional response to things.

“There’s no point in having the vapours. We need to do something. We’ll call Lane Winslow.” This surprised everyone.

“Why not Kenny?” Gwen asked. “He always knows what to do.”

Robin ignored this unintended slight and said reluctantly, “She does seem to have an in with the police.” His attitude to Lane Winslow, who still had three months to complete her one-year anniversary of living at King’s Cove, had mellowed somewhat since her arrival. He still believed she would make a botch-up of her small orchard because she didn’t seem to have any idea what to do, but she didn’t have a dog that came onto his property, and she had been so persistently kind to him when his world had collapsed the previous summer that he now felt a grudging patience with her. Perhaps he’d lost the ability to hang on so tightly

to the bitterness he had nursed since he had returned from the front in 1919.

“How is this a matter for the police?” Gwen asked, still hoping against hope that somehow this must have been a proper grave from some early homesteader, because she could not take in that someone had buried a child in unsanctified ground. What this suggested was too ghastly to contemplate.

“Dead bodies are a police matter. I’m calling her,” Gladys said, striding decisively into the hall.

CHAPTER THREE

LANE WINSLOW HAD THROWN OPEN her French doors and was sitting, bundled in a forest green sweater, at the little French metal table she'd acquired from her short sojourn with her best friend, Yvonne, in France immediately after the war. A cup of tea sent up a comforting curl of steam, and her breakfast of buttered toast and raspberry jam, courtesy of Eleanor Armstrong, the postmistress for their little community of King's Cove, provided a kind of domestic comfort that she felt she had missed much of her life. She was wishing her new American friend, Angela Bertolli, the only other local person near her own age, had not gone off to California on vacation with her musician husband and three energetic little boys. Angela was always good for a glass of wine in the evening and plenty of laughter and chatter. She liked the youthfulness and noise of the Bertolli household. The only thing she didn't miss was her friend's meddling—however good-natured and well-intentioned—in her personal life.

Such an American trait, Lane thought, this idea that you should push romances along for your friends. Her

English flatmate and her friends from the intelligence division, where she had alternately worked the France and Russia desks in London, were obsessively circumspect by comparison. Perhaps the secrecy they had to maintain even from one another contributed to their reluctance to interfere with, or even comment on, their friends' personal lives, unless absolutely necessary. Lane had been dropped into France behind enemy lines multiple times and maintained an affair during most of the years of the war without a single one of her acquaintances knowing . . . she didn't think of herself as someone who had "friends," except Yvonne, now happily breeding horses in the Dordogne. And now, Lane hoped, Angela. She reluctantly admitted, on this nearly spring day, that Angela's constant chiding and teasing made her feel a bit cared for, though now she was coming uncomfortably close to home with her arch insinuations about "the handsome inspector."

The bewildering and intoxicating smells of her first real spring at King's Cove were hitting her with waves of nostalgia for her childhood home by the river in the English community in Latvia when the phone jangled. She waited—two long rings and a short, hers—and then bounded through the kitchen to the hall, where her ridiculously old-fashioned phone hung on the wall, and pulled the earpiece off the cradle.

"King's Cove 431, hello?" she said clearly into the trumpet. She knew she should get a modern telephone, but she could not bear to rid herself of what must have been one of the first instruments in the community.

"Lane, it's Gladys. We have a bit of a situation here."

Lane heard Gladys pull her mouth away from the telephone and say in a loud whisper, "Yes, yes, I'll tell her!" She was back on. "You couldn't come up here could you? You'd better see for yourself, and tell us what you think."

"Gracious, what is it?"

"Just come up here. We're all in a tizzy."

Lane replaced the earpiece into its cradle. It must take a great deal to get Gladys Hughes into a tizzy. She had never seen a more solid, unflappable, industrious, and commanding old lady in her life, and that included her own beloved Scottish grandmother, who had all the same qualities of sturdiness, but with the addition of a great deal of sentimentality that she was sure Gladys lacked.

She crossed the little wooden plank bridge over the gully, through the stand of birch trees that stood guard on this perimeter of her property, still in their gaunt and skeletal winter form, and walked to the post office, which was in fact the cottage occupied by Eleanor and Kenny Armstrong. From there she would cut up the hill along the path behind their garden that led to the Hughes'. Kenny was emptying the ashes from the stove onto a pile by the path as she approached. He would be shovelling it into the soil of his garden soon. He sighed when he saw her. She was a vision. All dark auburn hair and warm green eyes. It did the soul good to have someone young and lovely about the place.

"What's the hurry?" he asked as she approached him.

"Gladys called. I'm to come up there, only she won't tell me what for. She says, and I find this hard to imagine, that she is in a tizzy."

“Something must be wrong. I’ll come with.” He pounded his metal bucket to get out the last of the ash and then called out for Eleanor, his wife. The screen door squeaked as she pushed it open.

“Hello, dear,” she said to Lane. “What’s going on?”

“Something’s happening at the Hughes’. I’m going along to make sure they’re all right.”

“Robin’s already up there. I heard that tractor of his go up an hour ago, and it hasn’t come down,” Eleanor reasoned.

“Yeah, he’ll be a lot of use in an emergency,” Kenny said, and then he said to Lane, “Come on.”

“Emergency, is it? You get up there. I’ll follow in a second,” Eleanor said, disappearing back into the house.

“Oh, wonderful,” Gladys remarked, seeing Lane at her door with Kenny in tow. She could see Eleanor coming up the path, a little behind them. “That’s just what this situation requires, a mob scene. Someone call Mad Mather and that useless bump, Reginald, and let’s get the Bertolli children up here for good measure. Gwen, you take Lane, by herself, to the root cellar, and I’ll try to cope with the gawkers.”

Kenny looked longingly toward the root cellar as Lane and Gwen descended, but then thought hopefully that “coping with the gawkers” meant that Gladys would put the kettle on.

As they descended underground, the first impression the root cellar made on Lane was that it was like a wartime bunker. The light bulb swung gently back and forth when Gwen pulled the chain, illuminating one side then the

other. “And to think I buy my vegetables canned from the shops in Nelson! All of this from your garden?”

“Yes. I can’t abide that canned muck from the store. It’s just back here, see?”

Lane took the flashlight and leaned in to look closely. The smell of earth, combined with the acidic lingering smell of what Gwen had cleaned up assailed her. There it was—the bones of the four fingers of a small hand protruding from the hollow where the rock had dislodged; feathery scraps of dark cloth lay among the bones.

“Mother thinks it’s a child,” Gwen said. “It’s too awful if it is.”

“Could be, or a slight woman. I can’t get over how anyone could be buried here, adult or child.” Lane shone the flashlight around the ceiling of the root cellar. “How thick is this ceiling?”

“Probably four, maybe five feet. The hill it makes backs on to the chicken run. It’s completely overgrown.”

Back out in the sunlight, Lane walked around the low hill and looked along the top. A tangle of gooseberry bushes covered the top of the structure, and long grass that had grown up the rise of the sides now lay browning and decomposing after the heavy snows that had billowed over everything that winter. She longed to go up and see, but she knew already from the growth that this was no recent burial. Better leave it to the police. Lord knows, she thought primly, Inspector Darling had told her this often enough in their short acquaintance.

“Well?” asked Gladys when they came back into the house. The gawkers now sat around the scrubbed pine

table with cups of tea in hand. Mabel had brought out some remnants of a tin of Christmas fruitcake to augment the cookies.

“I think you’d better get whatever provisions you think you’re going to need for the next couple of weeks out of there,” Lane suggested. “Don’t disturb anything too much if you can avoid it.” She hadn’t been party to the exhumation of a body, but she could imagine the place crawling with police, and the disruption that was going to be caused by the cellar roof being dug up. “In fact, I’m wondering if you should just empty the whole thing. Have you someplace else to store things?”

“We could put them in the garage, I suppose,” Mabel said crossly. “The car will have to be moved out.”

“We better get cracking!” Kenny said, getting up and rubbing his hands. “Mabel, move the motor, and Robin and I will look at what we can do about some sort of shelving to hold things.”

“I’ll phone through to the police, then, shall I?” Lane asked.

“I don’t understand. Who would bury someone on top of our bloody root cellar?” Gladys said.

“Language, Mother,” Mabel said. “Gwen, where are the bloody car keys?”