

IONA WHISHAW



IT BEGINS  
IN BETRAYAL

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

## PROLOGUE

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*France, April 1943*

**T**HE CREW LAY PANTING AT the edge of the clearing, watching, glassy-eyed and stunned, as the roiling orange and red flames engulfed the plane and lit up the night. Thick black smoke rising from the toxic, stinking mess of gasoline, oil, and metal surged into the darkness above the inferno.

“Good work, Skip,” Watson managed. “I thought we were done for.” The navigator, shaky and exhausted, pulled off his leather helmet and turned stiffly to look at his commander.

Flight Lieutenant Darling grunted, wrenching his eyes away from the obscene horror of the blaze boiling out of his downed plane. Where are the others? he wondered. Are they all here? He knew they’d have to get a move on before shock settled in and immobilized them.

“Report,” Darling commanded.

“Nothing major,” Watson said. “Trouser leg torn.”

“Arm, sir. A scratch,” reported Salford, trying to steady his voice. “But the radio’s out.”

“Sir, rear gunner is looking peaky,” said Anthony, his anxiety showing. He and Darling had moved him at a run from where he appeared to have fallen near the plane. The engineer had scrambled over to sit by Evans, who was shuddering convulsively. Darling waited a moment, feeling like he could not catch his breath. Had he heard from Belton, the front gunner? At that moment another violent whoosh of flame enveloped the Lancaster, and the men recoiled, throwing their arms across their faces. Darling saw Belton, ducking like the others, and felt a momentary relief.

“It’s going to blow! Move!” Darling yelled. He ran toward Anthony and Evans and then realized with a sickening thud that the enemy was moving in the shadows just behind them. He pulled out his revolver, wanting to shout another warning, but there was no time. He and Anthony hauled the slack-limbed Evans up between them and frantically made for the cover of the woods just as the explosion sucked the air out of them and lit up the forest. In a flash that seemed to hover for an eternity, he spotted a farmhouse at the near end of the field, where a dog leaped and barked as though in a silent movie. The only sound he could hear was the roar of his bomber going up.

Deafened, the men stumbled deeper into the dark. Darling, the blast still pounding in his ears, felt someone tugging on his sleeve. Anthony’s face was near his, his mouth moving. His words finally came through: “Bosch, sir.”

Darling looked out to their rear, trying desperately to hear, to understand where the attack was coming from.

“Go,” he shouted. “Go, go! I’ll hold them off!” He turned and looked at them, immobilized in the darkness,

and caught their hesitation. “Do as I bloody well say!” Why hadn’t he seen Jones?

Gunfire exploded somewhere near them. Darling struggled to see into the maelstrom of forest and fire as he moved forward, keeping low. Dimly aware of a pain in his left leg, he crouched, waiting for further fire from the attackers. A loud crack burst out from somewhere behind him, and then a spray of bullets whipped to his right. Bloody hell, they’d begun to circle! Had his men gotten away? He struggled to see his own way out, but the thundering flames obliterated sounds, obscuring the attackers. If he shot in any direction, they would know his position. He could hear them calling out, moving in a fan, he guessed. He crawled a few feet to the left and looked behind to where he hoped all his men had found at least a tenuous safety and then stood up to go after them. He would sling Evans over his shoulder.

The fire began to abate, and the moving shadows of his men seemed to fade in the direction of the farmhouse. He leaned over, ready to carry Evans, and in a flash of light from the fire finding one more source of fuel, he saw his gunner was dead, sprawled and broken, beyond help, looking in death younger than his eighteen years.

The voices of the attackers were louder, sharper, moving in his direction.

He would have to tell the boy’s parents: “Killed instantly”—the usual comforting message. In this case it was true. He could see that. Something . . . but there was another burst of gunfire. He could see a German soldier, ahead of his mates, using the failing light of the plane to find the airmen who had gotten out.

With cold, numb efficiency, Darling took aim, heard his own shot as though from a distance, and saw the German crumple to the ground. After one last glance at Rear Gunner Evans, he bolted into the darkness after his men.

## CHAPTER ONE

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**G**OD'S TEETH!" DARLING EXCLAIMED, PUTTING down the receiver. "Ames, get in here!"

Darling's youthful and indomitably cheerful second in command put his head around the door. "Sir?"

"Saddle up, we're off to near Harrop. Local padre has found an old lady dead up behind her cabin in the woods somewhere near there. He said he 'didn't like the look of it.'"

"I don't much like the look of dead people either," Constable Ames commented, turning back toward his office to get the keys of the 1940 four-door maroon Ford they used as a police vehicle, which he treated like a princess.

Darling took his hat and jacket off the stand, straightened up the papers on his desk, and joined his constable where he waited in the hallway. "There goes lunch. Why do people always wait till just before a mealtime to call us?"

"Do I have time to run downstairs to the café for a couple of ham and cheeses? It'd take five minutes."

Darling hesitated. The prospect of spending the whole afternoon in the back of beyond on an empty stomach was daunting. The old lady would not get any deader. “Yeah, go on. Get a couple of bottles of Coke as well. Come get me when you’re done.”

Darling sat back down at his desk and looked at his list. If the truth were known, he was a bit relieved about the distraction because he had a call to one Mr. Dudley on his to-do list, and it was going to be tiresome. Might as well use this lull to get it done and out of the way. Preparing to be shouted at about the incompetence of the police department, which had not yet found Mr. Dudley’s stolen car, and queried about why honest taxpayers should be forking out for his salary, Darling was reaching for the receiver when the phone rang, causing him to jump.

“Darling,” he said.

“Sir, there’s a gentleman here to see you. Name of Jensen.” The desk sergeant was speaking in a peculiarly studied manner.

Darling frowned. “I’m just off to a suspicious death. Can it wait?”

“He’s a government man, sir,” the sergeant whispered. And then loudly, “Very good, sir, I’ll send him right up.”

“What?” said Darling, annoyed, but it was too late. He could hear the click of the phone on the other end. He took off his hat and placed it on the corner of his desk and prepared to receive the government man, whatever that was supposed to be, and wondered if it would take long.

The man who presented himself was short and well fed and encased in a dark suit. He had removed his hat,

which he now held in his left hand with a sizeable briefcase, revealing thinning, slicked-back dark hair. He was offering his hand. Darling stood up and shook it. He was about to introduce himself when the government man said, "Flight Lieutenant Darling?"

Taken aback, Darling said hesitantly, "Yes, as was. Just Inspector Darling now. With whom am I speaking?"

"Yes, how remiss of me. Roderick Jensen, with the Canadian government." He spoke in a posh British accent and smiled in an ingratiating manner that instantly put Darling on alert.

"Please sit down. How can I help?" Darling went back around to sit on his side of the desk, and waited. "I should mention," he added, "that I am just expecting my constable to return. We are going out of town in a few moments to investigate a death."

"Ah," said Jensen. "How very unfortunate for the poor creature. The difficulty is that I am pressed for time. I need to gather information. You will understand I have come out specifically to depose . . . perhaps that is not the right word, but it will have to do for now . . . you with regard to an incident you will be best placed to provide information for."

"I'm very sorry, but I must give priority to my job. Perhaps we can put it off till later in the afternoon?" Darling said, but he already knew that whoever this man was, he likely had the authority to interrupt whatever he liked.

"I'm afraid that I cannot . . ."

At that moment Ames appeared, holding a paper bag, and then seeing Jensen said, "Oh."



Darling considered the situation. The government man was obviously not going to leave. It was a confounded nuisance. Bowing to the inevitable he said, "Ames, you'll have to go on your own. It appears I might be tied up here."

"Sir?" It would be the first time Ames would respond to so serious a call completely on his own.

"You'll be fine. The van boys will be with you to bring the body back. Just the usual palaver, eh? Picture, notes, interviews. We'll go over them when you get back."

"Yes, sir," Ames said, not knowing if the feeling he was having was excitement or anxiety. He turned to leave.

"My lunch, Ames."

Ames extracted a bottle of Coke and a waxed paper-wrapped sandwich from his bag and handed them to Darling, who knew already it would be a long time before he got near them.

**FATHER LAHEY AND** Ames, his camera at the ready, stood by the dead woman. Ames glanced around. They were in a dark and deeply wooded area, pines growing close and tangled. Through the trees and to the right of the cabin, a path wound down toward the tiny village of Harrop. The woman was face down about thirty feet into the woods, her arms thrown out as if she'd fallen violently forward and had tried to stop her fall. She seemed to be caught on a tumbling of sharp-edged rocks and torn tree branches that had been blown down in some long-ago windstorm and were now covered with an accumulation of pine needles. She could simply have had a heart attack, Ames thought, which would make it an accident. She looked old enough.

She was wearing street shoes, a blue cardigan, and a brown dress, which had ridden up on one side revealing that her heavy wool stockings were held up with garter snaps. She could have stumbled quite easily in those shoes, so unsuited for rough terrain. The spot was far off the beaten path. Yet, he could see immediately what the priest meant by not liking the look of it. He was no scientist, but if she'd stumbled, her arms might not have been in this position, so violently thrown forward. This looked more like she'd been pushed savagely from behind, with no time to do anything but fling her arms out. He snapped pictures, trying to take in the scene from several angles.

“What is her name?” Ames asked.

“Agatha Browning. A bit of a local character. Comes from the English aristocracy, if you can believe it. At least that's the story everyone seems to believe.” The priest looked down nervously to where the late Agatha Browning had left this earth. “I mean, she could have fallen over. She was getting on, and you'd expect someone that age to be more unsteady on her pins than before. But she was very sure-footed for a woman of her years, I'd have said, and I can't think why she'd be this far away from the cabin, and dressed like that. She must have been planning to go to town or somewhere, so why come up here? I had the idea that the only places she went were down to the village shop for a few things every now and then, or, more rarely now, she'd drive that rattletrap of hers into town. In fact, I remember her telling me that this forest up behind her cabin gave her the heebie-jeebies, even after all these years. It just doesn't make sense.”

The woman's cardigan was pulled off one of her arms, and her face was turned sideways, and Ames could see that her eyes were open, as if caught in the shocking moment of death.

"How well do you know her?" Ames asked Father Lahey, shuddering slightly.

"Probably less well than most of my parishioners. I won't say she kept entirely to herself, but she was, I don't know, independent, I guess you'd say. Made it clear she didn't really need anyone else. Apparently came out here just after the Great War from the old country and set herself up in that cabin. She was already in her forties when she came. I come over every week to provide services, and she rarely came, not even at Christmas. She was Church of England. Her name was on the parish register when I first came here in '22, back when it was an Anglican church. It's the only church around, and some who aren't Catholic come to Christmas Mass, but as I say, I never saw her in church. I did start going to her cabin periodically, oh, eight or ten years ago when I came in from town. I was worried that she was getting on and would need help to get to the village. I needn't have worried. She was as hale as could be. I thought she'd outlive everyone. She was happy to get the few things I'd bring out for her, though, as I don't think she had much money, and I think her trips to town were getting fewer. I've been expecting that jalopy of hers to break down, but she's managed to maintain it. Does all the work herself. Admirable, really, I wouldn't know a bolt from a pipe on the inside of my car."

"If she was forty-something when she came, then that would put her just north of seventy." Ames looked

more closely. Her hair, short and looking permanently unkempt, hovered between fading blond and white. Her clothes were baggy and she looked thin and wiry. He saw what he'd missed before: a stain of blood just near her left shoulder. Opening his bag, he pulled out his camera and took some pictures from where they stood. Then, moving sideways, he carefully negotiated the brush and rocks to where Agatha Browning lay. He stepped into an unsteady tangle of branches and nearly lost his balance. He swore under his breath.

“Oh dear, do be careful. I just can't believe this!” said Lahey anxiously. After a few more shots, Ames lifted her stiff left shoulder and turned her over awkwardly, and then stood up, looking away. He took a deep breath, feeling the beginnings of nausea. Imagining the impression he'd make with this priest and the van boys if he were to vomit on his first solo outing to a crime scene, he willed his stomach to behave. Father Lahey had turned away, his hand to his mouth. She was still stiff, but the blood had dried completely and was caked on like black scabs. Flies were having a field day. He had the idea she had been killed the afternoon before.

“Someone's stabbed her,” he said to the back of Father Lahey's head. He knew that was right, but it hardly seemed to cover the gaping wound that started just above her breast and angled downward toward the middle of her chest. The bodice of her dress was slashed and soaked with blood that had dried and hardened with the dry heat of the summer day. She wasn't stabbed here, he thought. He struggled back over to where the priest stood and began to look at

the ground. Ames could see that the undergrowth had been disturbed, and cursed that they had disturbed it further. He had followed the priest to where the body lay and now was worried that he'd ruined any evidence. Then he saw a second trampled path coming into the forest a few feet away. Moving slowly, he leaned low and searched the scuffed bed of pine needles, which had been disturbed during Agatha's journey to her final resting place. It came out of the forest not directly behind the cabin itself but from the path at the side of the cabin that she must have used every time she went down to the settlement. The path seemed at one time to have run up through the edge of the forest, but it had evidently fallen into disuse. Had she thought of running down the path to where people might be found and then thought she would be safer running uphill and sought refuge by hiding in the woods? There they were. Stains of blood, smeared along the crushed grasses between the path and the wood. Hard to see, but there. More pictures.

Ames stood up and looked toward the forest. "She wasn't attacked there. Is that her cabin?"

Lahey nodded. "Yes, but why was she up here?"

"I'm going to hazard that she was trying to get away from whoever did this and was perhaps chased and pushed." He frowned. "Why were you up here, come to that?" He asked.

"You know, Constable Ames, I cannot tell you why. I have one or two parishioners I visit during the week in the various towns: Kaslo, Proctor, here. I was here visiting one of my old fellows, and when I was done I had an urge to follow this old path up toward a clearing. There used to be a working mill down along the water in the last century,

and they cleared the forest farther up. There's a rumour someone wants to build a new mill, farther up this way, and I wanted to try to imagine what it might be like to have all that commotion in this tiny peaceful place. It's mostly a few old timers and a couple of holiday homes now. Well, I thought it was peaceful, anyway. I actually was trying to think of ways to discourage a new mill. I wandered a little into the forest to see if the lumber was even worth harvesting. Do you ever have a feeling that you are guided to something? When I found her, like that," he pointed to where she lay, "I felt as if I must have been called here by God."

Ames took out his notebook and began to make notes. Was the priest telling the whole truth? Ames had little experience of God or being guided, except by hunger. Would the priest have called the police if he himself had done this? It seemed unlikely and, having spent the last hour with the priest, Ames was convinced the man was sincerely distraught. Still.

"Do you know why she first came out here?"

"Believe it or not, she was prospecting originally. She ran into a spot of bother with a mill owner in the early days, but she kept herself to herself and staked claims well out in the bush. I don't know that they ever amounted to much. To be honest, I think it was her way of pretending she was working. She seemed to have family money to live on, though she lived pretty simply. Usually wore denim overalls and rubber boots, though she dressed up sometimes to go to town." The priest looked at her and shook his head. "I don't know of any next of kin, before you ask."

Ames now hesitated. Mentally he was running over the list of what he ought to do, fearful that he might leave something out and have Darling's wrath to deal with. Was there anything he'd missed? He'd taken pictures, including of the path she'd made in her flight, made notes. He would investigate the cabin, interview people. No doubt their pathologist, Ashford Gillingham, whom no one had called anything but "Gilly" for as long as Ames could remember, would be able to estimate when she'd died, but in spite of the dried blood he could see that she'd not been dead long enough for rigor mortis to have passed.

"I'll need to see the parish registry, and maybe you could make a list of any people in the village I should speak to. When I've got the boys to carry her out to the van, maybe you could show me to the cabin?" Was that all? He looked back at the two van drivers, who had followed them up and were sitting on a log in a clearing, smoking; the unseasonably hot June weather had already made the forest floor tinder dry.

"Bill, Andy. Go get the stretcher, and put those out, you'll set the whole place on fire."

The two men got up slowly and ground their cigarettes into the log. "Who died and made you boss?" one of them muttered.

"I heard that," Ames said. He turned back to the task at hand.

He walked into the forest and stared at the body, trying to see it as his boss might, looking at details. He suddenly saw that it was a miracle they had a body at all. If she'd gotten farther up the hill into this tangle of trees, she might

never have been found. The dark lines of trees climbing the mountain behind them were vast and indifferent. She could quite easily have become just another missing person.

When the body had been removed from its awkward position, Andy and Bill put the stretcher down to rest before they made their way back to the van. Ames took the opportunity to look more closely at the victim. Now that he could see her face, he thought she had the deep lines of someone perpetually in a disagreeable temper. Her skin was rough, as if she gave no care to herself. Under her half-closed lids, the old woman had pale rheumy eyes. How well would she have been able to see? He leaned down and looked at her hands and became aware of what he had not initially noticed: the woman smelled as if she had not washed for some time. Her fingernails were thick and chipped. Aha. Blood. Not a lot. Possibly not even from the fingers themselves, but traces of darkening red, as if she'd scratched someone very badly.

**“SO, FLIGHT LIEUTENANT,** or Inspector, if you prefer it. I’m going to take you through anything you can remember about April 20, 1943. Is this date familiar to you?” Jensen had a notebook open and, with slowness that aggravated Darling’s already growing misgivings, was affixing the cap of his fountain pen at the top. “Now then.” He looked at Darling, his eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Of course it’s familiar to me. One is not likely to forget the loss of a couple of bright young airmen and a plane.” He frowned. It was jarring to be suddenly precipitated back into the war. “What’s this about?”



“No need for concern, Inspector. I will just want you to take me through the events of that date. I may stop you from time to time to ask questions, or make notes.”

“Yes, but why?”

“I, I am afraid, am only the messenger, or the scribe, if you will. It is my understanding that we have had a request from the British government to gather a few facts so that the business can be closed up. Now then, can we start with the mission? What was the object of that day’s flight?” He prepared to write.

“What do you mean, ‘closed up’? It was closed up when I made my report and spoke with the parents of that unfortunate boy.” Darling still woke some nights, jolted into heart-stopping panic by the sound of the explosion and the blinding eruption of flames. It was seared into his brain, he often thought, and he might never move past it, or the cry of Rear Gunner Evans’s mother at the news of her son’s death. The war office had taken care of notifying Jones’s next of kin, since he did not have living parents.

“I’m sure there’s no need to be concerned, Inspector. Now, if we could get on. I am scheduled to take the morning train back to the coast for my flight home.”

Darling got up and went to stand by the window with his hands in his pockets. He could see the ferry halfway along its little route that linked Nelson with the other side of the lake. He wondered what Lane, across the ferry and thirty miles down that road—which he had come to love for her being at the end of—was doing. At the beach with Angela and the Bertolli boys, he wouldn’t wonder. June had been fine and warm. And then with a slight frisson of

guilt he wondered how Ames was getting on.

“Inspector?”

It was remarkable how this government man kept any impatience out of his voice. He was like a lizard, Darling thought. Persistent, cold-blooded, patient. He turned and began.

“The morning of April 20, 1943, we prepared for a bombing raid over suspected arms warehouses in Germany . . .”