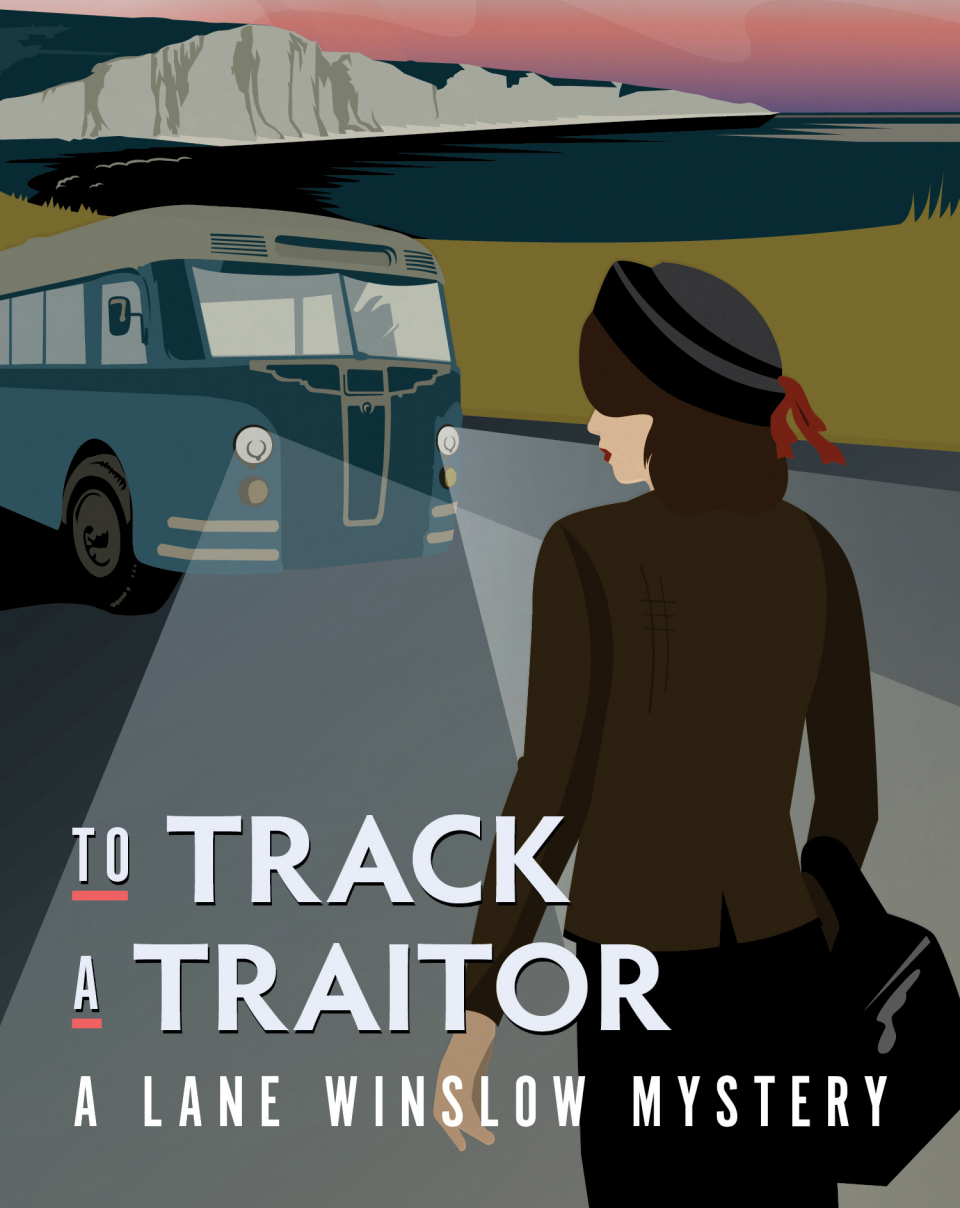


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TO TRACK A TRAITOR

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

PROLOGUE

August 1917

I HAVE KILLED HER. SHE STOOD in the doorway asking me what I was doing there. Me! She was always a mistake, from the very beginning. I only meant to strike her so she could understand what she'd done but then I felt a blackness come over me. I don't think I even thought. When I looked down, she was dead. It was done. I beg your forgiveness. I know I must turn myself in, but it is possible I will not survive the next battle. That would be best, I know. Remember me as I was.

The letter fluttered to the floor face up. Though he could still see the words, he stared uncomprehendingly, as if the document itself were an alien presence. He closed his eyes, moving his fingers convulsively as if trying to understand why they stopped working, why they were unable to hold even a slim piece of paper.

CHAPTER ONE

May 5, 1948

EVEN FROM A DEEP DREAM of a phone ringing, Lane knew the call to be for them. Two longs and a short. Pitying the two other households on her party line who had to wake up only to find the call was not for them, she dragged herself awake and looked toward the slightly open window. The chill night air was seeping in, and she saw that it was still dark. What time was it? She cast an accusatory glance at Darling, apparently in the grip of a profound and undisturbed slumber. Who would call at this time of night but someone alerting him to an emergency? Two long rings and a short, repeated the phone in the hall.

She threw the blankets off, not bothering with her dressing gown—she would shortly wake her husband to deal with whatever it was—and went into the hall to pull the earpiece off the hook of her ancient phone.

“KC 431, Lane Winslow speaking.”

“You have a long-distance call. Please hold.”

Shivering and puzzled, she leaned against the wall, looking toward the bedroom where Darling’s bedside lamp had suddenly come on. The floor was freezing. Long distance wouldn’t be for him. Feeling some regret at the lost opportunity to make him get up in the cold, she waited.

“Go ahead please, Scotland,” said an operator, who, for all Lane knew, was somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic.

“Laneke? Is that you? It’s Grandmama.”

Lane felt a surge of worry. What time would it be over there? Why would she be going to the expense of calling? “Grandmama, hello. Yes, it’s me.”

“Did I wake you? I’m so bad at the times.”

“You can wake me any time. It’s almost morning. Is everything all right? How is Ganf?”

“Well, that is the thing, my angel. He’s fine now, but he’s had a little heart attack. They have him in the tiny hospital in the town for a few days. Dr. Mwangi has him well in hand. I didn’t want to worry you, but I thought you should know.”

Lane ignored her grandmother’s wishes altogether. She was worried. “Oh, you should have called! We could have fretted together. When will he be able to go home?”

“The doctor says he can come home on Friday. You really mustn’t worry. I can hear it in your voice. He’ll just have to be a little careful now. Take his pills, not dig in the garden, stop shouting at the wireless, that’s all. I think I’m calling you for moral support, really. He’s going to be a beastly patient and will not do anything he’s told. You know what he’s like.”

“Poor Grandmama! I expect you’re right.” Lane felt her anxiety subsiding a little. Surely plenty of old people lived with dodgy hearts. “But do you have anyone to help you? You can’t manage an obstreperous man like that completely on your own.”

“I’ve got Fiona. She’s a big strapping girl, and she worked in a field hospital. He’ll be no match for her. And...” she hesitated. “Diana is here.”

Frowning at this hesitation, Lane said, “Diana?” Her sister was in South Africa. But, no, after almost ten years she had suddenly turned up in Scotland, apparently. “I had no idea. Will she be staying long?”

“She’s planning to stay at least a couple of months. I hope she won’t be too bored. I’m afraid we haven’t much to entertain her. She’s gone off to Aberdeen to visit friends. She didn’t write to tell you?”

Having no idea anymore what would entertain her sister—but thinking ungenerously that giving a lot of trouble to everyone would be most amusing to her—Lane said, “Not a word, I’m afraid. Listen, Grandmama, hang up and I will call you back. You mustn’t go to this expense. Then you can tell me everything.”

Before she placed the call, Lane went back into the bedroom and got her dressing gown under the puzzled gaze of Darling, who was now fully awake. He was half sitting with his hands folded on the outside of the covers. The clock next to the bed said 4:12.

“What’s happened?”

“It’s Grandmama. Ganf has had some sort of heart attack, but he’s going to be all right, she says. More mysterious

is that Diana is there, after all these years, only she's not, of course. She's no sooner arrived than she's gone haring off to visit friends. It sounds like a long story. I told her I would call her back, so I'm suiting up to do that. You can go back to sleep."

"You're going to call at this time of day?" He glanced at the clock.

"It's lunchtime in Scotland," Lane pointed out.

Darling took up his bedside book. "I will stay here, alert and potentially helpful. If you faint from dismay, or there is any other sort of emergency, I will be right on hand."

Lane smiled and leaned over to kiss him. "You are a love. I wouldn't dream of being such a nuisance."

"It would be the first time, then," he called after her as she went back to the hall.

Wishing she'd made herself a cup of tea, Lane waited in the hallway for the call to be put through. Finally, there was her grandmother's voice, made slightly hollow and tinny by whatever mechanism made an international call possible.

"Laneke?"

"All right. Now tell me everything. Diana is there, you said. When did she arrive?"

"Yes. Well, I mean she was here. She came a week or so ago, just when your grandfather was taking a turn for the worse. I think she just wanted to stay out of the way, poor dear."

Lane was surprised. She may have held jaundiced views about her sister, but she, like Lane, doted on their grandparents. It surprised her that her sister would dash off to visit friends when Ganf was sick. "How long will she

be away? She could be helpful when he is out of hospital. You sound a bit worried.”

“No, no. I mean, not much. It was such a surprise to suddenly see her. She didn’t even wire us that she was coming.”

“I wonder if she is all right. How did she seem?”

“Oh, you know Diana. Always cheerful and energetic. I almost wonder if all that activity in the house didn’t make things worse for Ganf. Perhaps that’s not fair. He started showing signs of a dicky heart a couple of years ago. Anyway. She is much like her old self. A little older, of course, and perhaps a bit too thin. I’m not surprised she went off to see friends. This place must seem like a morgue to a young girl like her.”

Lane considered. She had not seen her sister since before the war, when she went off to South Africa, but she had certainly been someone who liked to be the life of the party. Nursing an invalid, even a beloved grandfather, might not be her cup of tea.

“Now listen, Grandmama, you have enough to worry about with Ganf coming home. Is there anything you need?”

“No, darling girl. Dr. Mwangi has given us a complete list of instructions, including what he must eat. Broth, lean meat, plenty of vegetables, and no drink, no sweets, not that there’s much else on offer with rationing. And he has to go for sedate walks. He’s not going to like it much, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t let him bully you!”

Her grandmother laughed. “The worst of it is that I suppose I will have to go on his eating regimen as well, for

solidarity. But what about you, my darling. How is your fetching husband?"

"Very fetching. He sends his love. Listen, go get Fiona to make you a slap-up lunch with everything you won't be able to have when Ganf is home. Everything will be fine. You'll see."

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything from your sister."

WHEN SHE'D RUNG off, Lane snuggled next to Darling to recoup the warmth she'd lost standing in the hall.

"So?" he asked.

"My poor grandpapa is doomed to a life of roots and berries. He'll have to be careful. Grandmama feels she has to join him in his suffering. She sounds worried and I think, though she didn't say so, it is the mysterious behaviour of my sister that is troubling her. I must say, I find it puzzling too. Why has she suddenly turned up there after all these years? She is supposed to be staying a couple of months, and the first thing she's done is scarper off to visit friends in Aberdeen."

"Is any of it something that needs to be resolved just this minute?" He pulled the chain on his lamp and then brought her close to him. "Take some deep breaths and let's go back to sleep till it's respectably light outside. No, not the feet, I beg you!"

WHEN DARLING HAD disappeared up the road for his long drive to Nelson, the nearby town where he was the police inspector, Lane sat at the little cast-iron French table on the

porch looking out at the lake. The air was filled with the myriad damp, promising smells portending greener days wafting from the surrounding trees. From somewhere in the forest, she heard the piercingly sweet cascading song of a thrush. She closed her eyes and then opened them again. It was no use; it was impossible not to worry.

Her grandparents were in their late seventies. A weak heart was not a good thing. She tried to cling to the disappearing delusion that everything stayed the same, that they would live forever. And then a much more practical worry made her sit up. What if Ganf died before she had a chance to see him again? Should she go over? Her grandparents had for all intents and purposes been her parents since her mother died when she and her sister were tiny and her father had been either distant toward her or absent on his spying missions. And what the blazes was going on with Diana? She felt a pang of anger. It was patently unfair that they should have to worry about her on top of everything else.

Closing her eyes, she let the warmth of the morning permeate her. She knew she was being unfair to her sister. It was unseemly to let these childhood hostilities and jealousies continue to affect her even in adulthood. She knew absolutely nothing about her sister—what Diana had endured during the war, what her life circumstances were. They had never been close, and almost never corresponded. The last time she'd seen her was when Diana had been sixteen years old, and they'd spent the entirety of the war in completely different worlds, Lane working for the Special Operations Executive in intelligence in Europe and Diana,

presumably, living happily with her friend in South Africa. Lane assumed Diana was reasonably well off; they had both received a modest legacy from their father. But for all she knew, Diana could have married and her husband could have perished in the fighting. It stung her now to think Diana wouldn't have told her if she'd married, but then to be fair, she'd never written to tell her sister when she and Darling had married. She had meant to, but somehow the long years of silence between them had set the course for their relationship, she supposed. But now, here Diana was, back in Scotland. Perhaps Diana had dreamed of taking refuge in the love and comfort of their grandparents, as Lane herself had often thought of doing in the aftermath of the war. Maybe something of the sort had driven her sister there now. She really had no business making any sort of assumption about her sister, she knew that. And anyway, the one thing she was sure of is that they were both equally fond of their grandparents, and that was something. With this exercise in being a better person, Lane got up and stretched. She hadn't gone back to sleep, in spite of Darling's best efforts, and she did feel a little unrested.

Kenny and Eleanor Armstrong, who ran the post office in King's Cove, the tiny hamlet where Lane and Darling lived, might offer some perspective. It promised to be a warm day, early in May as it was. She could hear the coughing of Robin Harris's tractor grumbling to life down the hill from her. It was the comforting noise of King's Cove starting up its morning.

She tucked her moss-green wool shirt into her trousers, slipped her feet into her plimsolls, and made for the two

mossy planks that served as a bridge over the little treed gully between her house and the post office.

DARLING ENJOYED THE drive into town. He had never imagined how lovely all the seasons could be out in the country. Since he had been in Nelson, apart from his years overseas during the war, he had only lived in his little house up the hill from the police station. Of course, a beautiful morning in May was plenty nice everywhere, but out in the lush quiet of King's Cove, it was expansive, full of birdsong and the lovely turning of deciduous trees from a pale yellowy green to the full-dress colour of their summer garb.

He was brought back to reality with a thud as he arrived at the ferry and saw that it was just setting off to the other side of the lake. He turned off the engine and listened to the boat churning away toward town. The thought he'd been staving off came into full focus: Lane would want to dash off to Scotland. He knew this as certainly as he knew it would be the right thing to do.

He tried to imagine spending their first summer as a married couple alone. In truth, he had not visualized what the summer would be. He was the head of the Nelson Police Station. He'd hardly be spending his summer like a school kid, swimming about and building fires on the beach, but still, he might at the weekends, if swimmers and boaters could keep themselves from drowning. Should he move back into town? He'd kept the house to use as a *pied-à-terre* when he had to work late.

Deciding to cross that bridge when he came to it, Darling settled in to wait patiently for the ferry to wend its way back

for him. He'd come to quite like this little interlude just before he arrived in town. The cable ferry went back and forth all day and all night, as people were coming into and leaving town at all hours, but somehow it always seemed to be heading away when he arrived. Waiting the fifteen minutes for it to come back gave him time to gather his thoughts, though, in truth, he didn't much like the thoughts he was gathering this particular morning.

ALEXANDRA, THE ARMSTRONGS' Westie, rushed toward Lane and greeted her as if she had been absent for a year, and was rewarded with an affectionate scratching behind the ears. There were several people enjoying the mild morning and waiting for the post office to open. Alice Mather was talking earnestly to Gwen Hughes outside the post office door.

"It'll be a bad one this year, you mark my words. Hot weather brings them out like fleas on a dog," Alice warned in her strident voice. She was dressed as she always was when she made an appearance, in a pair of faded blue overalls with a worn wide leather belt cinched around her small waist. Her thin grey hair was rolled into a messy bun at the nape of her neck.

Gwen said, "Hmm," in a noncommittal manner and then smiled when she caught sight of Lane approaching.

"Good morning. Mabel is expecting you at eleven. You haven't forgotten?"

"Good morning, Gwen, Alice. Of course not. A lesson on how to make a proper chocolate cake is hardly something one is likely to forget!"

"I was just saying," Alice said, turning to her, "cougars bound to be bad this year. Heard on the wireless just this morning that a pup was snatched up in Revelstoke. Too late for householder to rescue it. Dreadful business." Alice always spoke as if she were dictating a telegram. She was, everyone knew, prone to "turns."

"How awful!" Lane exclaimed, casting a nervous eye for Alexandra, who was now sniffing suspiciously around the edge of the root cellar. Realizing she had not seen Alice for some time, Lane added, "It's nice to see you, Alice. I imagine your garden is coming along nicely." Usually Alice's swaggering husband, Reginald, made the trip to the post office because his wife was refusing to leave the house, and it was a relief not to have him to cope with this morning. Alice had periods of brightness, and this must be one of them.

"Deer ate what tulips we had coming up. That brings them around too."

"Tulips?" asked Gwen, who was only half listening.

"Deer!" said Alice, as if Gwen were soft in the head. "Cougars."

The screen door of the cottage opened, and Kenny Armstrong put his head out. "She's ready for you."

Lane waited outside, basking in the sunshine and watching Alexandra, thinking again how lovely it might be to have a dog, but in the next instant, the thought that she might have to go to Scotland intruded. She couldn't leave poor Darling to deal with a dog on top of abandoning him.

Alice came out of the post office first, holding some letters, a couple of newspapers, and a little greaseproof paper

packet of, no doubt, some of Eleanor's magical cookies. She had her walking cane over her wrist by the crook, and strode off without using it, leaving Lane to wonder if she didn't just carry it for show. Or to fend off cougars. Or to bludgeon Reginald, she thought uncharitably.

Gwen followed, similarly laden with letters, newspapers, and cookies. She stopped and held up the packet, smiling. "Mummy always asks why Eleanor bothers, but then secretly devours most of them. These are the treacle and ginger. I'm hiding them so she doesn't get at them. See you at eleven!"

Inside the addition to the cottage that comprised King's Cove's tiny post office, Lane saw Eleanor through the window organizing something in the mailboxes. Kenny drove his bright red truck down to the wharf every morning to meet the paddle steamer sternwheeler that carried goods and people up and down the lake. He collected the canvas bag of mail and any orders coming in from town. The mare, whose office it used to be to pull a small wagon down to the wharf, was at the fence looking with hopeful interest at the people gathered in front of the post office. Someone usually brought her an apple. Kenny, as was his custom in the mornings, left the socializing to Eleanor, and went about the work of the garden and keeping the stove supplied with wood.

Smiling at the poster for the Calgary Stampede from 1946 that still decorated the dark wood of the walls, Lane called, "Good morning!"

"Ah," said Eleanor, with her magnificent toothy grin. "You have an interesting letter today, my dear. Have you time for tea?"

“I have.”

“Go around, I’ll close up for the time being. I’m not expecting Angela or Robin till later.” Eleanor slid the wooden window down with a clunk, and Lane went back outside and around to the cottage door, where Alexandra again greeted her like a long-lost friend.

Inside, Lane settled down at her place on a rattan chair full of squashed-down pillows and looked through the mail Eleanor had handed her. She saw immediately what Eleanor meant about an interesting letter. Looking somewhat worse for its travels was an airmail letter with a stamp from Suid-Afrika, with her name, Mrs. Frederick Darling, written in a most familiar hand.

“You’d think they’d put a zebra or something on their stamps, instead of the same old royal family,” Lane said, putting the letter firmly down on top of her copy of the *Nelson Daily News*. She would read it later. It had better have an explanation for her sister’s peculiar and irritating behaviour. Of course, Eleanor was quite partial to the royal family, Lane knew. George VI occupied a prominent place on the wall of their kitchen.

“It is a nice picture of the princesses, though,” Eleanor said. “Don’t you have family there?”

Instead of answering, Lane peered at the frank. It had started its journey a full month before, on April 5. “It’s been a good while getting here,” she commented. “It’s from my sister, and she’s not in South Africa, she is in Scotland, supposedly visiting my grandparents, but she no sooner got there than she’s gone off to visit friends.”