

IONA WHISHAW



A DECEPTIVE  
DEVOTION

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

## PROLOGUE

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*September 1947*

THE HUNTER STOPPED AND STARED at the thing in front of him, so familiar, but so out of place. Puzzled, he looked toward the whispering forest and at the meadow, just visible under a golden blanket of sun on the other side of a shadowed gully. He could hear the creek below him. He strained his ears, alert now. His best buddy had operated one of these in Sicily. Why was it here? He scanned the forest in front of him again as if it might yield an answer and then reached for his rifle and dismounted, letting the reins drop. He propped the rifle against the rock and knelt down to see better. He only looked up when his horse whinnied and skittered sideways.

“Don’t turn around.”

The voice, sudden, surprising, utterly unlikely, made him want to laugh.

He felt only shock, not pain, as his head was yanked backwards by his hair. He could hear the slide of the gun

along the rock as it toppled. In an eternity of time, he wondered at how his hat had come off, at why it didn't hurt to have his hair pulled this way. His eyes wide, head held back at an impossible angle, he saw the sudden glimpse of heaven and then pitched forward, surprised by the warm, draining finality of death.

## CHAPTER ONE

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*July 1945*

THE DACHA GARDEN, SLIGHTLY UNKEMPT, was a lush emerald green of grass bordered by the wildflowers that the deputy director liked to grow: yellow buttercups, blue cornflower, nodding chamomile. The air was the very scent of summer, Stanimir Aptekar thought. He was so strongly assailed by a memory of his childhood in his garden at home near Saint Petersburg that he was momentarily in its complete possession. He was running joyfully through the trees to the river, his brother Stepan in full pursuit. He pulled himself back to the present with some effort, drinking the vodka remaining in his glass to anchor himself.

The four men sat in white wicker chairs around a small table under the shade of an ancient and spreading apple tree. Its living branches were filled with tiny green apples; its dead branches untrimmed, provided a suggestion of decay. The men leaned back, all of them smoking. The vodka bottle was depleted to below the halfway mark, the

plate of sausage and loaf of bread nearly spent. Despite the languid comforts suggested by this scene, there was a sense of urgency about the meeting.

“It has been going well,” Ivanov said. “We have people in place in Britain and, as you know, some important defections. It is excellent that we had the foresight to begin this process before the end of the war. We are in a consolidating phase, yes? Koba is pleased that we are finally getting some traction. But the next moves are critical. Our ability to build a nuclear capacity depends on what happens now. If we are exposed, it will mean critical delays. And he will not stomach delays.”

There was a dark obviousness to the implications of Stalin’s impatience. Ivanov, the assistant deputy director of the MGB, the Ministry of State Security, leaned back in his chair, looking at his comrades as if challenging them for their potential failures.

“We could have been saved some of this extra work if we’d been fast enough when the Americans and British were scooping up physicists from Germany.”

Ivanov reached forward to put his cigarette in the ashtray on the table, and then thought better of it and flicked it into the bushes instead. It was his dacha after all.

“Stanimir?”

He had a high-pitched, snivelling voice that irritated Stanimir Aptekar.

Aptekar leaned back. The other three seemed to move imperceptibly forward. He was aware of the deep blue of the sky against the green of the tree that shaded them. So much beauty, he thought.

“In Canada, we are operating out of the embassy in Ottawa. We have people in the very centre. I have their names in my dossier. I have also put in place a failsafe plan. Should something go wrong, it will take little time to assemble a back-up group. This I keep in my head.” Aptekar tapped the side of his head with his long index finger.

“Is that wise? If something should, God forbid, happen to you?”

“With any luck, God is forbidding. Comrades, these are new and delicate times. Here, among ourselves, in this trusted circle, I recommend caution to everyone.”

He thought with a deep well of sadness of Stepan, a hero of the war, picked up one afternoon from his apartment where he celebrated the birthday of his wife with his daughter and her two small children. No one had seen him again, not until the state presented a red box with a hero’s award from the People to his grieving widow. She had shown it to him, wordlessly, her expression devoid forevermore of the humour and intelligence that had once animated it. What had his brother done? Whom had he offended? There would never be an answer. Aptekar had gazed at the silver medal, a momentary fantasy that his brother and all his life had been physically compressed into this metal disk, the image of Stalin stamped forever on his remains.

He looked at the smiling faces of his comrades. Masha Ivanova came out of the house with *sushki* and tea. No circle could be trusted. Certainly not this one.

*August 1947*

“So, Comrade Aptekar.” Ivanov, now deputy director, interrupted his walk back and forth across the room, his brown boots gleaming in the sunlight that poured in the east window of the Kremlin office Aptekar had been called to. “Tea?”

“Thank you.” Such sinister courtesy, Stanimir Aptekar thought. “Congratulations, Deputy Director Comrade Ivanov, on your promotion.”

That meeting in Ivanov’s sunny garden two years before seemed a lifetime ago.

A samovar stood on a long table pushed against the wall. The commander acknowledged this compliment with a nod and then lifted his hand; a soldier at attention by the door clicked his heels quietly and began to pour tea into two glasses waiting on a tray.

Dismissed, the soldier saluted and withdrew, closing the door quietly. He will be right outside, Aptekar thought wearily.

“You have done great service over a long career, comrade.”

“You are kind to say so,” Aptekar said.

“Your dossier reads like an adventure book for schoolboys. Such exploits! They don’t make spies like you anymore.”

The deputy director lifted a manila folder, which Aptekar did not doubt was a prop, like everything else in the room. He knew this strategy well. He had employed it many times over the past fifty years—goodness, was it fifty years he had worked for intelligence, first for Mother Russia, and now for the Soviet Empire? He inclined his

head, his hand partially on his glass of tea. He would drink when Ivanov did.

“Berlin recently, I think?” Ivanov sat down, smiling benignly at his guest. “Such a messy arrangement! We are delaying the inevitable, I think. The West is delaying the inevitable.”

“It is indeed. East Germany will be the envy of the West, Deputy Director Comrade Ivanov.”

“We should never have conceded any part of Berlin. You agree, I think?”

“Yes, comrade. Certainly.”

Ivanov dropped a lump of sugar into his glass. “I’m glad you agree. Westerners are pouring in and out of there with ever-increasing zeal, as if they suspected that Berlin might become a problem. As if their increased presence in the city was a precaution of some sort. And we are letting them traipse across our sectors unhindered!” Ivanov momentarily lost his composed demeanour.

A cool head was required in this moment. Aptekar focused all his attention on appearing interested, while his mind sorted through two piles: what might be coming next, and what he might be able to do about it. His escape to the West was planned, everything in place. No one knew except the British director, who had arranged to have him met at the border. This ceremony, or whatever it was, here with Ivanov, represented his last feigned look of earnest commitment to the aspirations of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

“What we are wondering, Comrade Aptekar, is why so suddenly? We are hoping, because you had your ear to the



ground in Berlin as recently as June 20, you might be able to provide insight.”

June 20. The day he met with Lane Winslow. He had been assigned to bring her across, but he had seen immediately that she had no appetite for double agency, or indeed, any sort of espionage. The outcome of the fateful evening had been very different from what he had intended, and yet . . . he had made that sudden decision. Now it seemed that history, so out of his or anyone’s control, shone a light on that moment at dinner when he had said, surprising even himself, that he might like to retire in the West. Why had he done it? Was it a sentimental attachment to the past, to the years he had worked with her father when Russia and Britain were on the same side of things?

He reasoned that they had not discovered what he had said specifically, but the increased activity in Berlin made them question why he had failed to bring the British agent over and what he might have said to her about their plans for Berlin. There was something in Ivanov’s voice that made his heart sink. He knew that his autonomy was at an end. Even this handsome talk of his heroism would not protect him now, any more than it had his brother, Stepan.

“I do not believe the West is any more zealous than it was before. When I was there, the traffic on the corridor into Berlin, both by road and rail, was extremely heavy. I can assure you, the West has been suspicious and anxious to keep its presence sturdy from the beginning. They bargained for half of Berlin, and they intend to keep it, no matter what happens.”

Ivanov shrugged in agreement. "I expect you are right. There are those, however, who take a more sinister view. I do not say I do, but others. They have concluded that there has been a leak, that our intentions with regard to Berlin, and even our plans to build networks in the West, were passed on to a British agent. Of course, the world is full of paranoia. Everyone makes much too much of the smallest things. I expect a careless word, a stolen dossier, something for which our agent would not have been culpable." Ivanov smiled at Aptekar. "But, comrade, I am forgetting myself! This is not why you were invited here! The People, in recognition of your long and storied service to the country, are at last going to allow you to retire! What are you now, nearly seventy? You are legendary, inspirational! You have a home in the countryside near Leningrad, do you not?"

Aptekar smiled as well. "I do, Deputy Director. A nice little place with a small garden." Why had he talked about plans to build a new network in the West? Aptekar searched his mind to remember who should know about these plans. Ivanov had not been included in the final proposal made after that summer meeting, but here he was talking about it as if he were talking about the expansion of the Kremlin parking lot. Perhaps, since his promotion, he'd been brought into the need-to-know circle. Whom had Ivanov knocked out for that promotion? Almost with resignation, Aptekar listened to that high-pitched voice he disliked so much, and knew he would be next.

"Ah! Then you shall garden! How enviable. How little time one has to be close to the earth, and yet such a life is quintessentially Russian, do you not agree?"

“Very much so,” said Aptekar. “I expect it is the reason that we call her our ‘motherland,’ unlike our recent enemies with their ‘fatherland.’ I shall look forward to returning to her bosom.”

“And so, Comrade Aptekar, today has a special significance.” Ivanov stood and went to the sideboard where a red, satin-covered box waited. The door to the room opened, and a man in a dark serge suit and holding a camera came in, as did the soldier who had been waiting outside the room. “Comrade, please.” Ivanov signalled with a little flick of his hand that Aptekar was to stand and approach him.

“Comrade Stanimir Aptekar, it gives me great pleasure to present you with the Red Banner medal for service to the Motherland and the defence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.” Ivanov opened the box, turning it slightly toward the soldier and cameraman, as if they were a large audience, and then removed the medal and pinned it on the lapel of Aptekar’s jacket. He reached for Aptekar’s hand and shook it vigorously, turning them both toward the camera and smiling broadly. The flash emitted only a soft *pfift*, as though downplaying the occasion taking place.

WHEN APTEKAR HAD been escorted out into the hall, Ivanov waited to hear the footsteps recede and then went to the telephone on his desk, tapping his fingers impatiently on the desk’s surface. The man on the other end had been told to pick up on the first ring, but it rang three times before Ivanov heard “Da?”

“Now. Have him followed. He has the name of every potential agent in our outpost in Ottawa in his head. Do

not kill him, and do not let him disappear. We will pick him up soon. Do you understand?"

APTEKAR STOOD ON the embankment of the Moscow River, watching a barge move slowly south. He had removed his medal and slipped it into his pocket. On the whole, he thought, I am alive. My brother had to be executed before he got his hero's medal. There would be no cottage in Sussex, that was certain. It had been something he'd begun to envision for himself, almost as if it had been a real possibility. Someone had found out and was going to make sure it never happened. Lane Winslow would have told her people that she was bringing him over, but how would someone here in Moscow have found it out? He doubted there would even be his own little house outside Leningrad. He heard the car pull up and stop on the street behind him, but he did not turn. It would not be taking him to the western border in Yugoslavia, where he was supposed to be by the end of the week.

## CHAPTER TWO

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*September 1947*

LANE PICKED UP THE EARPIECE of her old-fashioned wall phone and spoke into the trumpet.

“KC 431, Lane Winslow speaking.”

“Ah, Miss Winslow. It’s Al Stevens. How are you?”

“Good morning, Vicar. Very well, thank you. How nice to hear from you. How are you?”

A September sun shone through her living room window and shot a band of light down the hall where she stood.

“Fine. Yes, thank you. But I’m wondering if you can help me. You see, through a rather peculiar series of circumstances I have an elderly Russian lady . . . in my charge, I suppose you might say, and if I’m honest, I’m not quite sure I know what to do. She doesn’t speak a word of English.” The vicar sounded harried and seemed to be talking quietly in case his guest might turn out to speak English after all.

“Goodness! How did you come to be in possession of an elderly Russian lady?”

“She was dropped off here by a taxi. Our parish has a little charity for Russian refugees that has practically ceased operation since its heyday in the thirties, and the taxi driver thought the best thing would be to bring her to me. I gather she must have come in on a train and managed to find the taxi outside the station. And there you are, you see. She’s sitting primly in my sitting room dressed from head to foot in black and looking expectant. It was the taxi driver who remembered you might be able to help.”

Lane looked at her watch, and then longingly out the door at the end of the hall, which was open and letting in warm September air. It was just ten, and she had planned to spend the morning in the garden, starting with running the mower over the unkempt grass.

“I can be there in about an hour, Vicar. Can you keep her entertained until then?”

“She seems determined to entertain me. She’s been talking very slowly and patiently in Russian and showing me a photo of a man and saying something like ‘mert.’ Can that be the fellow’s name?”

“Mert?” said Lane. “Unlikely his name.”

“It’s more like ‘mertf.’ Well. Never mind. You’ll solve the mystery when you get here. I’ll ply her with cake until then. She seems very partial to cake.”

Lane was just taking her car keys off the hook by the door—and wondering why a Nelson cab driver would know about her and her ability to speak Russian—when it came to her. Whoever was in that woman’s photo was not called mertf. He was *mrtvý*. Dead.

INSPECTOR DARLING OF the Nelson Police was relieved that, for the last week at least, crime in Nelson and environs appeared to be taking a well-earned rest. His usual partner, Constable Ames, was away in Vancouver on a sergeants' course and would not be back for a fortnight, and if he examined his own conscience honestly, he would admit he missed him. They worked well together, and Ames was willing to put up with a good deal from Darling, something Darling knew would not last forever. Ames would grow into his own, but they might, he reflected, find a new balance as equals. Well, equal-ish.

The paperwork Darling had intended to tackle lay untouched on his desk, and he himself was standing in front of his open window with his hands in his pockets, looking down on Baker Street, where people were moving briskly about their business, still in their summer clothes. The air was soft and warm. It will be another one of those glorious Septembers, he thought, when we all live suspended for one last delicious moment above the coming fall and winter. He smiled benignly upon the street below. And anyway, he was getting married in just a few short weeks. The thought made his heart flutter in a way completely unfamiliar to him up until the time, over a year before, when he had met Lane Winslow.

His happy rumination was interrupted by the jangling of the phone on his desk.

"Darling."

"Darling indeed. It's me. I'm sorry to interrupt your progress on your paperwork."

"You interrupted it long before you called. I was thinking happy thoughts of being married to you."

Darling could see her, standing in her hallway speaking into that ridiculous ancient trumpet telephone, her chin tilted up to reach the horn, her auburn hair falling back behind her ear, the light from her front door catching her beautiful cheekbones, and her green eyes full of light and humour. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever encountered, and he was going to marry her.

"Ah. You'll get over that when we are married, and the sober reality of it hits home," Lane said. "As it happens, I'm not calling idly. At least I think I'm not. I've just had a call from Mr. Stevens, our padre."

"He's found a reason why we two may not be joined in holy matrimony?"

"You do have a one-track mind. No. He's found an old Russian lady and doesn't know what to do with her. She doesn't speak a word of English, and she keeps showing him a picture of a man and saying he's dead. I mean, I think that's what she's saying. When the vicar told me the word she keeps using, I realized it must be that."

"Miss Winslow, if it is your intention to clutter up our wedding with dead bodies, I would like to register my protest now."

"Very funny, Inspector. No. I am coming up to town to visit the vicarage to help the vicar and the old lady understand one another. I'm merely telephoning you to let you know I'm coming up, and to warn you in the off-chance that there's something fishy about the man in the photograph being dead. If that's what he is."

"Well, let me remind you that many people are, perfectly legitimately, dead. And now I intend to get back to my



paperwork and not spend another moment thinking of you. Anyway, why are you wasting time talking to me? The poor vicar must be beside himself trying to communicate with her.”

“Oh, that’s all right. He’s plying her with cake. I’ll come by and see you in any case?”

“Yes, you will.”

“AH, AT LAST!” the vicar said when Lane appeared at the door. “Please do come in.” There was an imploring quality to the “please” that suggested the last hour had been a strain.

Lane followed him into the sitting room where a small, neat, and aristocratic-looking woman, easily, Lane thought, in her late sixties, sat very upright on the edge of the two-seater sofa, as if she could not let her guard down. She had her hands in her lap, and she looked up with an almost supercilious air when Lane appeared, as if Lane had better explain herself. There was a depth and alertness to the Russian woman’s eyes that belied her age. Lane smiled at her, in part out of courtesy, but in part because she was genuinely delighted to meet a type of person she never thought she’d meet again: a Russian aristocrat.

“Madam, my name is Lane Winslow. I am most pleased to meet you,” she said in Russian.

At this the woman looked at Lane with surprise and relief.

“Countess Orlova,” the woman said, offering a gloved hand. “I am pleased you have come. I cannot make this gentleman understand me.”

“I will do what I can. My friend, the Vicar Stevens, called me, but I live an hour away. I’m sorry it has taken so long. How may I help?”

There was an almost happy familiarity to speaking Russian again, a language she had spoken equally with English as a child.

“I have come in search of my brother.”

She reached into a small black handbag and pulled out a photo. Lane took it. The man in the picture was standing next to a car that would have been an absolute luxury in the twenties. Long, sleek, a pale colour with a black convertible roof. She did not recognize it but thought it might be German. The man, dressed in hunting clothes, appeared to be in his mid-forties and was looking directly at the camera. He was handsome, with perhaps sandy hair parted in the middle, and he had, Lane thought, a wary expression. The car appeared to be on a gravel driveway with a bank of trees behind it.

“Where was this taken?” Lane asked.

“In Shanghai, in 1922. We fled there and found some refuge in an émigré community.”

“But you have come here?”

“The curse of Communism is coming to China as well. One has to go somewhere.” Here Countess Orlova looked toward the window as if this was one more inadequate refuge she was forced to endure. “My brother disappeared about ten months ago, and I managed to trace him to Vancouver.”

“But you think now he has come here?”

“This is what I learned from the Russians there. Many are White Russians, still supporting tsarist pretenders who are waiting for the return of the empire. They collect money for this purpose. They are fools.” The countess said this

bitterly. “They are throwing twigs at a fortress wall. I am afraid that my brother has become involved with them and that, as a result, he is dead.” She glanced at Lane and then looked down again.

Why? Lane wondered. It is as if she doesn’t think I’ll believe her. She has been a refugee. It must have been very hard for her. Refugees are so much flotsam and jetsam scattered on the perilous shores of political changes. Hard up and considered a nuisance wherever they go.

“What makes you think he might be dead, Countess?” Lane asked.

Orlova turned away at this question and was silent. Finally, she said, “Just call me ‘madam,’ please. ‘Countess’ is so formal. In Vancouver they lost track of him. He disappeared. Someone suggested he might have come here. That he was running. They said he was being pursued by Soviet agents.”

Lane had a momentary thought that this was ridiculous, but a Soviet agent had engineered the killing of a Russian dissident right in the local hot springs the previous year. Canada, which had seemed to her such a refuge, so far away from the torments of European upheavals, now felt much too close to the world.

Seeing the vicar shift impatiently on the chair by his desk where he had been watching this exchange, Lane said, in English, “Madam Orlova is in search of her brother. She seems not to be sure if he is dead or has managed to come here. I’m not really sure how we can help her. I can take her to the inspector so that he can look at her picture and perhaps broadcast it around the area. Oh, gosh. And I wonder if she has someplace to stay?”

“I could, of course, canvass around the area, but it might take some time . . .”

Making a few mental adjustments, Lane decided there was nothing for it.

“She can stay with me until something turns up.” She turned back to the countess and spoke again in Russian.

“I have a friend who is in charge of the police here. He can help find your brother if he is anywhere nearby. I propose that we stop by and see him, and then you must come and be my guest. I’m afraid I live very far out of town, but it is beautiful and quiet.”

“Why must I see the police? I don’t wish to.” Madam Orlova seemed to recoil and delivered this in an aggrieved tone.

“He is a very good man. The police here are not like those in the old country. You need not fear them,” Lane said, knowing that that was not always necessarily true, but confident, in any case, of her policeman.

Suspicious, Countess Orlova indicated reluctant consent to the plan by turning her mouth down at the corners and standing up and waiting by the door while the vicar took up her two small, battered valises. Lane opened the car door for her and then turned to look at the vicar.

“Thank you so much. I suppose the inspector can help to find her brother if he’s even around here, and then we’ll have to see what she’s intending to do. If you do hear of any place, please let me know. And I guess we’ll see you next week.”

Lane and Darling were scheduled to meet the vicar to discuss their wedding plans, and no doubt take some religious instruction, on the following Wednesday afternoon.

“Yes. Well, good luck. Very nice to meet you, Countess Orlova.” The vicar leaned down to address Lane’s passenger with a slightly forced smile that suggested Lane would need all the luck he had wished her.

Orlova turned her head slightly and inclined it toward the vicar.

“Be good enough to thank him for the cake,” she said, unsmiling. “He is most kind.”

“The countess liked the cake and thanks you for your kindness,” said Lane, getting into the car.

“YOU’VE DONE WHAT?” Darling asked through pinched lips, looking past Lane with a fixed smile at the countess. “Are you mad?”

“A little, yes, I’m afraid,” Lane allowed. “But it shouldn’t be for long. The vicar is hard at work looking for a suitable place for a gentlewoman down on her luck. In the meantime, she has to be somewhere. Now, for the business at hand. She has a photograph of her brother, whom she is seeking. She has followed his tracks all the way from Shanghai and believes he might be here.”

Lane moved to Madam Orlova. “I have explained to Inspector Darling about your brother, as far as I know it. May I have his photograph to show him?”

The countess clamped her hands tightly on the top of her handbag, as if she meant to deny the request, and then slowly opened it and pulled out the picture.

“It is an old picture, tell him. It is almost twenty-five years old, but he does not look so terribly different. He is called Vassily Mikhailov.”

“Can you spell that?” Darling asked. He wrote the name down and then took the picture and studied it. Expensive car, expensive suit. The air of a confident man. Where his jacket was open, a heavy watch chain hung from inside his vest to his waistcoat pocket. “May I keep this picture for a couple of days? I need to make copies to share with my colleagues at the Mounted Police.”

The older woman frowned at this request. “Why is this necessary? He has seen it. What more does he need? It is the only artefact I have of my brother. Can he not just show it to these other policemen here?”

“I understand, Countess. But he will bring it back to us, or I will come myself and get it. This is a very big country, as you know. Like Russia. The police that operate outside this town will need to have his picture.”

“How do I know he is not just collecting evidence to arrest me?”

This distrust of the police was genuinely earned, Lane thought. They had been relentless in their pursuit of the aristocracy and eliminating White Russians or any other resistance to the revolution.

“He would have no cause to arrest you, madam. Even if you managed to come here illegally, I am sure that you could be granted status as a refugee. His prison cells are very tiny. He has plenty of local criminals to fill them with.”

This remark elicited a slight smile, and Orlova inclined her head in a little nod.

The business concluded, Lane said, “We’d better be off. I’ll have to stop and get some proper food if I’m to have a guest, and I’m sure the journey has been tiring.”