

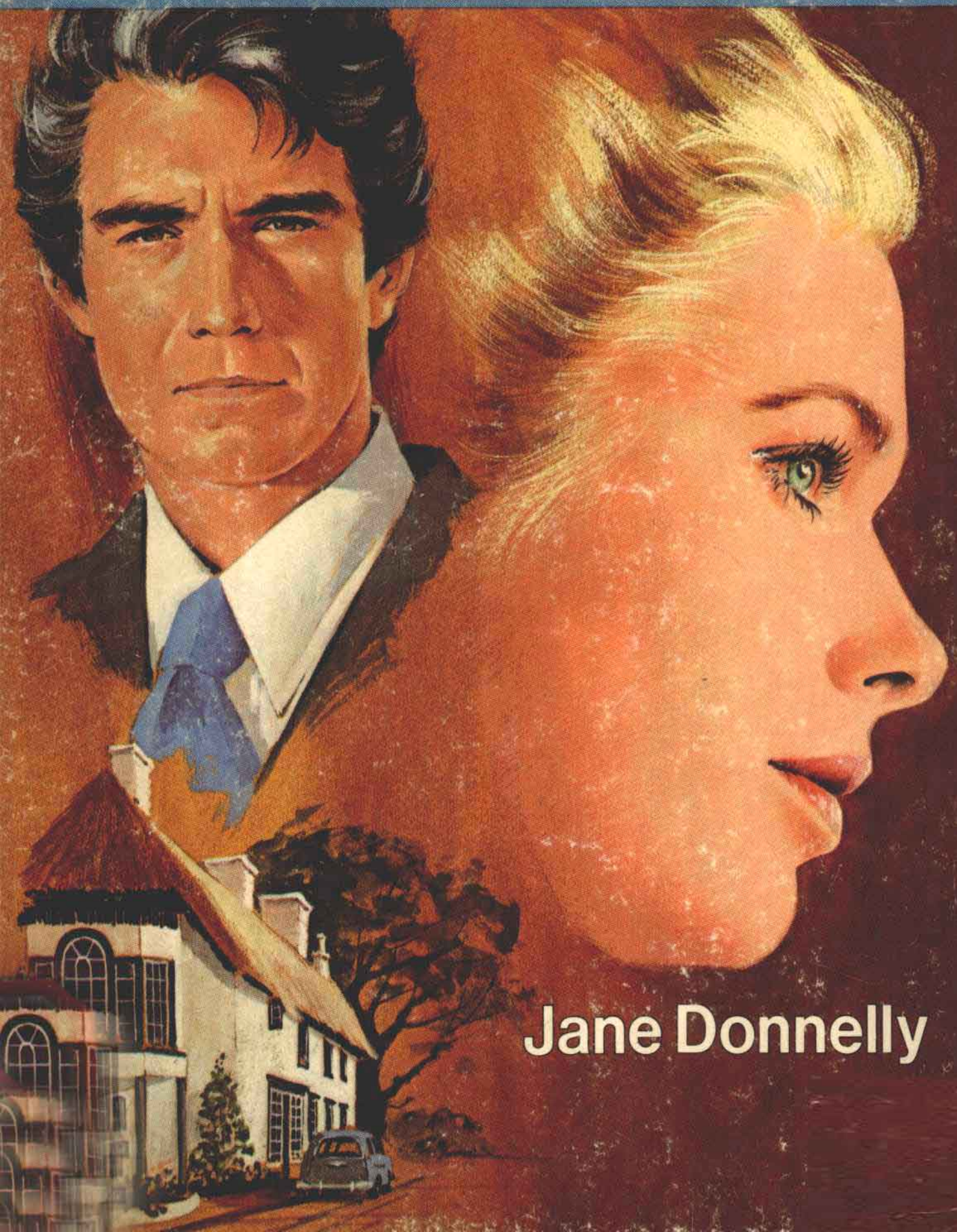


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# COLLISION COURSE

by

JANE DONNELLY



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HARLEQUIN BOOKS

TORONTO  
WINNIPEG

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## CHAPTER ONE

'YOU'LL never guess who's coming to open the British Legion club house,' said the woman sitting next to Rosemary Smith in the hairdresser's.

'Who?' Rosie inquired obligingly.

'Luke Hannay,' said Mrs. Freeman, and Rosie's blood ran cold. Her face under pink tubular curlers, reflected in the oval mirror, looked blank, and Mrs. Freeman who had just emerged dripping from the shampoo bowl repeated, 'Luke Hannay,' adding, 'You *must* have seen him, the TV man.'

'Of course,' said Rosie, while everyone else said, 'Ooooh ...'

It was Wednesday morning, not a busy time. There were three assistants for three clients, but Mrs. Freeman had everyone's attention, except the girl's who was under a dryer and deep in her novel. They had all heard of Luke Hannay, his face was as familiar as their next door neighbour's. But none of the neighbours was that exciting, with such an aura of rugged disturbing masculinity. If he was coming here they would all try to get a glimpse of him, and meet him if possible.

Except for Rosie. The only way she would have gone near was driven at gunpoint. The prospect of seeing Luke Hannay in person again made her feel ill.

'My Andy met him two years ago,' Mrs. Freeman was explaining, 'and when they were wondering who they could get for the opening Andy thought he'd get in touch, just on the offchance. And last night he phoned up, right after that TV programme.' She went on triumphantly, 'And Luke Hannay was in the studios and he accepted the call and said he remembered Andy, and when Andy told him the date he said he'd come. And he doesn't want paying.'

Andrew Freeman had been a sergeant in the Royal Engineers a couple of years ago. It was at one of the world's trouble spots that he had met Hannay. Hannay covered trouble, and the people concerned in it. Wars, revolutions, earthquakes; organized crime, corruption in the corridors of power. Anything or anyone that was dangerous was his line

of country. He must have had a charmed life not to have been killed a score of times. He had gone into front line battlefields, and been gunned for by mobsters. Once he had been missing in a light plane that had crashed in the Amazon jungle, and as time seemed to be running out a lot had been written and said about him being one of the most courageous and brilliant of modern journalists. Some of the eulogies had read like epitaphs, but Rosie hadn't been surprised when he staggered out of the jungle carrying his companion. The devil looked after his own, men like Luke Hannay were indestructible.

She was glad now that Suzette was putting in the last roller and putting on the hair-net, and that she could escape under the dryer that cut off any other sound. The others went on talking about Luke Hannay for a while. She could tell that from their expressions as she huddled back into the warm shelter of the hood.

Pat would certainly want to run round and get a look at him, so Rosie would stay at work keeping the tea room open. 'You go,' she'd say. 'I see him often enough on television. Anyhow, he isn't my sort. He looks a great hulking brute to me.' No, she'd better not say that, it sounded too critical, she didn't want anyone wondering what she could have against Luke Hannay. She'd just shrug and say to Pat, 'You go.'

She didn't have to see him and she wouldn't, but she dreaded the afternoon when he would be in the village as though a plague-carrier was coming. She looked across at Mrs. Freeman, who was smiling smugly at her Andy's resourcefulness, and felt as aggrieved as though the Freemans had deliberately betrayed her hiding place. That was unfair. No one living here knew that the paths of Luke Hannay and Rosie Smith had ever crossed. No one living anywhere knew the limits that Rosie would go to make sure they never crossed again.

By the time Rosie came out from under the dryer the conversation was on holidays. One of the assistants was off to Holland next week and a customer who had been there last year was telling her how marvellous it was. Rosie was combed and brushed out fairly quickly, her style was a simple one. She had brown sun-streaked hair that she wore in a natural wave brushed back from her forehead, swinging

when she tossed her head. She often washed and set it herself, but she enjoyed a visit to the hairdressers. It was restful and relaxing – well, usually it was. Friends met here and swapped gossip, and usually she enjoyed it.

She nodded and smiled as Suzette held the mirror behind her so that she could see the familiar line of the back of her head. ‘Lovely, thanks,’ said Rosie. She paid and called, ‘Good-bye, everyone,’ and Mrs. Freeman ducked from under her dryer to ask,

‘Will you put up a poster for us?’

‘A – poster?’ Rosie gulped.

‘We’ve never had anyone famous coming here before, so we’re going to get some posters out.’

‘You mean put one up in the window?’ Rosie faltered. ‘But they’re latticed windows.’

‘Up on the wall inside.’ Mrs. Freeman thought Rosie was being a bit dense. ‘Where the customers can see it while they’re having their tea.’

‘Oh well, all right,’ said Rosie reluctantly. She couldn’t refuse, she would have to think what to do later. Like Mary Tudor with ‘Calais’ written on her heart Rosie sometimes felt that ‘Luke Hannay’ had been burned into her with the hurt of a corrosive acid. She had learned to live with that, but she could not have his name in great letters on the wall of her home. If she did it would leap out at her at every turn, following her around like the eyes of a good portrait, the name Luke Hannay that she hated.

She walked back through the village, past the church that had stood for a thousand years, past the inn where they said Shakespeare had roistered with friends when he was young and more poacher than poet, past old cottages and new houses. Usually she enjoyed this stroll, it was peaceful and pleasant, and she knew almost everyone she met and everyone had a smile for her. But this morning her peace of mind had been shattered.

She walked past the lane called Wednesday Street. The new club house was down there, built on the proceeds of countless fêtes and jumble sales, and that was where Luke Hannay would come, in just over a month’s time. She quickened her stride as though he was there already, although if he had been she would have run.

‘Morning, Rosie,’ carolled the post-lady, cycling past in

the sunshine on a red bicycle. 'Lovely morning.'

'Lovely,' Rosie echoed hollowly, because it was not a lovely morning for her, there were dark clouds on her horizon. She didn't look like a girl with secrets. She had a candid face, wide-spaced green eyes that met life with a steady gaze. Her mouth was soft and sweet, but there was a firmness about it that made those who knew her feel they could trust her. They could. Loyalty was an integral part of Rosie's character.

She walked now, slim and tall, with the sun catching the sun streaks in her hair and the gold dust of freckles across the bridge of her nose. At twenty-two she was old enough to have her memories, but no one seeing her now would have guessed how black and bitter some of those memories were.

Rose cottage was aptly named. Roses grew around the door and filled the flower beds on the lawn at the side of the house. Not that that made the cottage unique, they grew in practically every garden in the village, it was good rose growing soil, but this was called Rose Cottage, which had seemed a good omen to Rosie three years ago when she had been looking for somewhere that could combine a home and a livelihood. Her grandmother had just died, leaving her a little capital. She had invested it in what was then a run-down café and a gloomy little house, and never stopped marvelling at her luck.

She wasn't going to make a fortune, but 'Morning coffee and Cream Teas, all home baking,' brought in a steady stream of customers during the summer months. She opened from Easter till the end of September, and worked during the winter in one of the nearby towns, travelling in and out of town daily.

Now it was July, and there were a couple of cars in the little parking lot through the white five-barred gate. Afternoon teas were brisker business than morning coffee. More customers came and they were hungrier, mornings Rosie usually managed alone. In the afternoon Pat Newbury, a young married with a couple of children at the infants' school up the road, helped with the waiting at table.

In the kitchen Mrs. Froggard baked and did some of the washing up and dispensed gloom. Unlike the born optimist who always expects something will turn up Mrs. Froggard

always expected something would fall down. She was a big-boned woman with heavy unsmiling features, and she thrived on the prospect of disaster. Although she had the lightest hand with pastry and was a wizard with cakes she was astounded every day when her cooking came out of the oven looking superb; and when Pat and Rosie joked together she would shake her head at them. 'I don't know what there is to laugh at,' she'd say, 'I reckon the woodworm's active again in that far beam.'

It wasn't that Mrs. Froggard was dissatisfied with her lot. She had a good husband and a comfortable home, and two married sons with nice families living near. She just preferred looking on the black side and waiting for something catastrophic to happen.

While Rosie had slipped out to the hairdressers this morning Mrs. Froggard had been serving, and if any customers had expected a smile with their coffee they would have been disappointed. Mrs. Froggard would have brought them freshly made coffee, with cream and melt-in-the-mouth pastries, with a grave aloofness that could put a real damper on the party.

On the occasions when she was left alone with the public Rosie always made a point of going into the tea-rooms herself as soon as she got back, and being warmly welcoming, because if you didn't know her Mrs. Froggard could be depressing. Rosie had once returned to find all her customers talking in whispers because they were convinced the gaunt-faced lady who had served them must have suffered a recent bereavement.

That was the debit side of Mrs. Froggard. The credit side was that she was a fantastic cook and very kind, and when you did know her well she didn't depress you. That was Mrs. Froggard's way and you grinned and bore it.

But this morning Rosie didn't feel capable of cheering up the customers. She went round to the back of the house and into the kitchen which smelled deliciously of baking, and where Mrs. Froggard in a white apron and with her sleeves rolled up was cutting out spiced biscuits in star shapes. 'Everything all right?' asked Rosie.

Mrs. Froggard hesitated. Everything had gone smoothly, for a moment she almost admitted it, then she remembered, 'There are some bills in the post. Electricity for one.'

Rosie grimaced. Her letters were waiting on top of the bureau in the sitting room and she opened them and glanced through them, set aside two personal ones for later, dealt with the business ones or filed them in order of importance.

She was recovering by now. It would be silly to let her thoughts dwell on Luke Hannay, because he wouldn't come anywhere near her. His car might pass by. Rosie's café was on the outskirts of the village, anyone going to Wednesday Street passed here. But she wouldn't look, because even the briefest glimpse of him might rip the scar from the wound.

She might go away for the day, or plead a headache, pretend to fall sick. There was nothing to upset herself about. Through the window of her little sitting room she saw another car stopping, meaning more customers, and she went into the big room with its inglenook fireplace and black-beamed ceiling and bright glinting copper and brassware. She had ten tables in here, each seating four, and during the summer months, especially at week-ends, she had a brisk little business going.

She had been fortunate in finding Mrs. Froggard, and Pat Newbury was a good friend as well as an attractive and competent waitress. The two girls had taken to each other as soon as they met, when Rosie first came to live here. Pat believed she knew almost all there was to know about Rosie, but she didn't.

She arrived that afternoon with the news about Luke Hannay's visit. As she slipped her arms into her rosebud-patterned Victorian-style apron she said, 'Luke Hannay's coming here next month.'

'I know,' said Rosie. 'Elsie Freeman was in the hairdressers. It was Andy who asked him to open the club house.'

'Him I've got to see!' breathed Pat ecstatically. 'It's on a Saturday afternoon, but Mrs. Froggard could hold the fort for a few minutes, couldn't she? I suppose they'll feed him? He isn't likely to call in here for a cuppa?'

She was joking and Rosie forced an answering smile. 'I shouldn't think cream teas would tempt him. By the way, I had a letter from Gordon this morning.'

That changed the subject, although there was nothing un-



usual about it. Most weeks an airmail arrived at Rose Café signed 'Love, Gordon.' They were not strictly speaking love letters, but when he had told her that his firm was sending him out to Canada to take up a permanent post there Gordon Martin had watched Rosie for her reaction. They had been dating for some time and he wondered if a parting might jolt her into admitting that she didn't want him to go away. She had asked, 'Is it a promotion?'

'Yes,' he had said, and Rosie's smile had been quick and genuine. She was glad for him. Of course she would miss him, and look forward to seeing him when he got leave and came back to see his folk, and if he wrote to her she promised to answer. But she was promising nothing more, and he knew there was no chance of her waiting or following. That was a pity, because Rosie was an enchanting girl, and it was she who had kept the relationship casual.

'I'm going to miss you,' Gordon had whispered as they said good-bye.

'I should hope so!' Rosie had held up her face for a final kiss. 'And good luck with everything, and don't forget to write, and don't forget us all.'

That was four months ago and the friendly newsy letters had winged regularly to and fro.

'And how's Gordon?' Pat asked.

'Doing fine,' said Rosie. 'Here, read the letter.'

Pat read it, and smiled and nodded and said, 'I liked old Gordon.'

Rosie agreed, 'So do I.'

'But you're still not serious about him?'

They had had this conversation several times before, and Pat was always relieved when Rosie handed over Gordon's letters and it obvious that distance had not made the heart grow fonder. She had no desire at all for Rosie to leave the village and fly off to Canada, and anyhow Rosie had boy-friends much closer home.

Rosie was popular and in no hurry to change her bachelor girl status. She enjoyed her freedom, but she was a romantic at heart although she was a practical business woman too. She had a misty marvellous dream of the kind of man she was waiting for, and the waiting was no hardship when she had so many friends and life was busy and rewarding.

A tabby cat sauntered into the kitchen and made for