

Lynda
La
Plante
VANISHED

ZAFFRE

*Max, my faithful writing companion, you are greatly missed.
Hugo, a new companion and a new chapter begins.*

CHAPTER 1

Avril Jenkins was in her early 70s, but, tucked beneath an old heavy duvet in her king-size four-poster bed, she could easily have been mistaken for a child. Avril's messy grey hair was piled up into a top-knot and held in place with a pink ribbon, then tucked beneath a hairnet. A frilly eye-mask finished her night-time look. She wasn't snoring, but she was breathing loudly as the air escaped through her slightly blocked nose.

The thin hairs on Avril's exposed arm suddenly stood on end, gently stirring in a new breeze – a window, or a door, had been opened. Avril lifted her eye-mask, held her breath and listened. Her eyes involuntarily flicked from left to right, as though it might help her to hear better.

The second she heard a landing floorboard creak, she flung back the duvet and sat bolt upright. Her toes landed in her fur-trimmed slippers. She bent quickly, put one finger behind each heel and pushed her feet home. As she stood, her hand slipped beneath her pillow and by the time she was upright she was armed with a fire poker.

Avril wore cream pyjama bottoms adorned with butterflies, and a pink vest top that was far too baggy for her old cleavage. Rather than being fearful, Avril was furious. She did not leave her bedroom with any degree of caution, rather she raced out, flicking on every light switch as she moved. She bolted along the landing towards a set of billowing curtains and slammed the sash window closed. For a second, Avril's head spun as she tried to visualise her evening routine of checking all the doors and windows. Had she missed this one? Truth was, she couldn't be certain of anything anymore. Floor-to-ceiling rosewood wall panels kept this landing dark, and even with the lights

on, the heavy shadows taunted Avril's imagination with the prospect of her intruder being close . . .

. . . and then the distinctive noise from the sticky door handle linking the hallway to the kitchen told her that he was one floor below. Her left hand grabbed the balustrade whilst her right hand wheeled the poker above her head.

'Get out! Get out! Get out!' she screamed. 'I know it's you!'

Avril tackled the wide imposing staircase as quickly as she could, shouting all the way. Each deep step down made her old knees click with a sharp pain and, by the time she was in the hallway, her right arm had dropped to her side with the weight of the heavy poker. Avril's body could no longer keep up with her brave and fearless spirit, but at the bottom of the stairs, fuelled by rage, Avril summoned a second wind.

She headed along the hallway towards the kitchen, flicking every light switch on as she went. One of the switches lit a series of six antique brass picture lights which illuminated the extensive art collection adorning the hallway walls. Avril shuffled and shouted her way towards the kitchen door, which moved and creaked in the night wind from the open back door that the intruder must have used as their exit just seconds earlier.

As she burst into the kitchen, she could see the first twenty feet of back lawn lit by a semi-circle of light. Beyond that, the remaining five acres of land stretched out into the pitch-black night. By the time Avril reached the back door, she could hear someone running through dried leaves, which she knew were piled up against the east wall because she'd put them there earlier that day. Then she heard the scrabbling of feet on brickwork as he dragged himself up and over the ten-foot-high perimeter wall.

'I'm not scared of you, Adam! You hear! This is my bloody home. MINE!'

Avril scurried back into her kitchen, slammed the back door shut and slid the top and bottom bolts into place. She stood with her back to the heavy wooden door and panted until her breathing returned to normal. All the while she listened in case he had a mind to come back.

Avril moved towards the dining room, leaning heavily on the large island in the centre of the kitchen. She flicked the light on and glanced around to see if there was anything obviously missing. Her display crystal was where it should be, as was her Royal Crown Derby dinner set. Avril looked at the poker in her hand – her cold white knuckles were frozen in place and, as she slowly uncurled her arthritic fingers, her joints felt like they might snap. Now much calmer and certain that she was, once again, the only person in the house, she walked through to the living room, constantly looking and checking for what he'd stolen this time. He'd have taken something. He always did.

Avril opened the large, ornate globe that stood next to the fireplace, to reveal an extensive array of half-full bottles of spirits, wines and those drinks that only came out at Christmas, such as Advocaat, Baileys and Cinzano. As she poured herself a large brandy, Rossetti's Venus Verticordia looked down on her from above the white marble Georgian mantelpiece. It was only when she closed the lid of the globe that she noticed the space on the mantel where a silver-framed picture had once stood. Although her face gave away no trace of emotion, Avril's eyes filled with tears. A precious wedding photo was no longer where it should be. It wasn't the best picture of Avril and her late husband, Frederick, but it was her favourite. It captured one of those moments in time, in between the obligatory posing, when they had glanced into each other's eyes and laughed at how deliriously happy they were. It was an impromptu snapshot of pure, honest, soulful love. And Adam had taken it from her.

It was another twenty minutes before the solo police car arrived, driven by a weary young officer who had drawn the short straw. He diligently took Avril's statement and added it to the other thirteen which all claimed exactly the same thing: that Mrs Avril Jenkins' ex-lodger, Adam Border, was on a mission to slowly drive her insane. And when he finally got bored of doing that, Adam would put an end to her torment by murdering her in her own home.

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Maggie looked at her reflection in the black screen of the monitor. Operating theatre 1 was so high-tech, Maggie thought it could probably fix Mr Thornton's heart all by itself. With its perfect, sterile steel lines, it looked like it had come from the imagination of a sci-fi writer. Four screens, two robot arms, numerous computers and seven people were about to come together to save the life of a 47-year-old man; it was a fabulous and terrifying feeling to be part of something so special. This was the first week of Maggie's surgical rotation, but she knew exactly what she was doing and so really had nothing to be nervous about – except for the fact that the lead surgeon was none other than the great Mr Elliot Wetlock. And he made her blush like a schoolgirl.

Wetlock's reputation preceded him, and the very mention of his name brought on palpitations in male medical staff as well as female. He wasn't a tall man, possibly the same height as her husband-to-be Jack, and he was slightly overweight, but he had a velvety voice and pale blue eyes framed by a perfect pattern of crow's feet. His beautiful eyes, above a black surgical face mask, was a vision made for a global pandemic! In fact, Maggie thought that he looked better in a face mask, because he also sported a rather outdated goatee, which was the only bit of his appearance that didn't make her go weak at the knees. She imagined that his 60-odd-year-old body probably

left a lot to be desired, too, but it looked magnificent inside a grey waistcoat and a silk shirt with sleeves rolled up high until they were tight around his biceps.

The black monitor blinked into life, and the operating table in front of Maggie appeared on the screen. Soon, the screen would show Mr Thornton's chest cavity being penetrated by numerous needles and tubes, making him look like a cyborg. It never ceased to amaze Maggie what the human body could endure, and still keep going.

Mr Wetlock entered the operating theatre and the male scrub nurse behind Maggie audibly swallowed at the sight of him. 'Good morning, Mr Wetlock. It's an honour to be working alongside you. I'm grateful for the opportunity.' Maggie had been practising speaking out loud in his presence, so she didn't stutter, or run out of breath, or do that inexplicable thing of choking on her own spit. Maggie beamed with childlike pride at her ability to open a conversation with the greatest heart surgeon in London.

Wetlock, however, was not impressed. 'It's 1.30. Morning has been and gone.'

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Surgery took seven hours. Wetlock didn't take a break, so neither did anybody else. By the time they were ready to scrub out, Maggie's pale blue scrubs were patterned with sweat patches around her neck, under her armpits, down her spine and, most embarrassingly, beneath one breast where the material had become trapped. Wetlock's scrubs, being dark blue, didn't look sweaty at all. He still looked angelic.

As they stripped off their PPE and binned it, Wetlock spoke to Maggie for the first time about something other than heart surgery. 'Your husband's a policeman, isn't he?'

Maggie hid her disappointment. She'd just done seven hours in an operating theatre, in the cardiac field, which was not her speciality, and she'd not put a foot wrong . . . and Wetlock was more interested in whether or not Jack was a policeman.

'Can I rely on your discretion, please, Maggie?'

Maggie's attitude shifted from offended to serious. Wetlock sounded troubled. He perched on the large windowsill of the scrub room, folded his arms and considered how to start. 'My daughter has potentially got herself into a little trouble. She's 17 and has her heart set on being a movie star. Not a television actress, you understand, an actual movie star.' Wetlock smiled and his perfect crow's feet appeared. 'There's been this talent scout on the scene for the past few months. He's promised her the world and, because she's so young, she believes he can deliver it.' Wetlock dropped his gaze and rubbed his forehead as he prepared himself to open up further. 'She has her own flat as well as a bedroom in my home. I'm a little closer to town, so she stays over sometimes.' When he looked up again, he had two new lines in between his eyes that Maggie had never noticed before which instantly made him look his age. 'I hardly see or hear from her anymore and, when our paths do cross, we don't speak. Not properly. I feel like I'm losing her. Bit by bit. And I'm concerned that I might be losing her to a man who hasn't got her best interests at heart.'

'If you know the man's name, I can ask Jack to check into him for you.'

As soon as Maggie had spoken, the two deep furrows vanished, and the crow's feet returned.

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During her run home, Maggie felt a mixture of emotions. Wetlock had been embarrassed not to know the name of the so-called talent

scout, so she would not only have to ask Jack to look into something that was currently not a crime, she'd also have to ask him to try and persuade Tania Wetlock to give up the name of a man she clearly cared for and trusted. But Maggie's overriding emotion was one of contentment at the last thing Wetlock had said to her before they parted company: 'Thank you, Maggie. I realise it's an imposition. And well done on your performance in theatre today. I'd like you to consider a six-month rotation onto my surgical team. Let me know by the end of the week.'

Maggie didn't need until the end of the week to decide – it would mean she would be learning from one of the most brilliant cardiac surgeons in the country. It was an easy 'yes'. But she decided to take at least three days to tell Wetlock that. As for persuading Jack to help her new mentor with his wayward daughter, Maggie was certain he'd say 'yes', too.

* * *

'No! Of course, no. What were you thinking?!' Jack wasn't angry. It was worse. He was laughing. 'Every time I log into HOLMES, it's recorded. So, it has to relate to something.' Jack quickly spoke again before Maggie could interrupt and argue her case. 'Something other than your boss not liking his daughter's new boyfriend. And why doesn't he know the bloke's name anyway? I'll make it my business to know everything about everyone Hannah meets.' Maggie tried to be indignant, but Jack was right. And when her look changed to self-pity, he knew exactly what she'd done. 'You've already said "yes", haven't you?'

Jack was in the middle of making a chicken curry with leftover meat from the Sunday roast. He'd thrown in a pack of sausages to bulk it out and was now at the stage of measuring the rice. He did this in silence. Maggie knew she'd annoyed him and so, whilst she

waited for him to be ready to speak again, she opened the most expensive bottle of red wine they had, a San Martino Toscana.

As the rice began to simmer, Jack turned down the flame and refocussed on Maggie. 'How worried is he?'

'I think he's out of his depth. He's a single dad with a teenage girl. Imagine working the hours you do and having no one else to constantly reassure Hannah of how loved she is. I think their relationship is severely damaged and Mr Wetlock's only just seeing it. He's terrified he may have lost her already.'

'I could ask Laura to go and speak to . . . what's her name?' Maggie smiled in relief as she reminded Jack that Wetlock's daughter was called Tania. 'Laura used to work in Juvie and, way back, she also did a stint in Victim Support. It'll have to be logged as something, though, Mags. And of course, when Laura turns up to talk to Tania, she'll immediately know it's her dad who's sent us. There'll be domestic fallout for him.'

Maggie said she was sure it was a risk that Wetlock was willing to take, because the alternative was far worse: the thought that his daughter was being groomed by an older man.

Jack let out a long, heavy sigh. 'I'm dreading Hannah growing up.'

* * *

Jack stood by the overworked, knackered old coffee machine in the corner of the squad room, listening to it make a noise like someone dragging phlegm from the back of their throat. Then he watched it dribble out a flat white as he re-tuned his ears to Laura, who had finally started speaking again. She was on the phone to Wetlock and, for the past five minutes, had been silent apart from the odd 'mmm' and 'I see'.

‘I can promise discretion for now, Mr Wetlock, but if it turns out that your daughter is in any danger, this will escalate beyond me . . . OK . . . yes, sir. You have a good day too.’

DS Laura Wade hung up the phone and looked at Jack, eyes wide, mouth open. ‘He sounds gorgeous!’ Jack handed his partner the flat white and broke the news that Wetlock was, in fact, short, fat and old. Laura grinned. ‘Maggie tell you that, did she? I’ve got his home address. Today, he’s expecting Tania to be there at five, ’cos at six she’s having her hair bleached by a mobile hairdresser friend and she hates her small flat stinking of ammonia. She likes to look like Marilyn Monroe.’ Laura rolled her eyes. ‘The silly kid can’t even know who Monroe is. Anyway, I’ll get there for a quarter past six. Once she’s got the bleach on her hair, she’ll be going nowhere for a good forty-five minutes, so she’ll have to speak to me, won’t she?’ Laura asked Jack what his afternoon looked like.

‘I’m off to see an elderly lady who claims she’s being threatened by her ex-lodger. Kingston nick has had fourteen reports in total, with insufficient evidence to support any of her claims. But she’s just made an official complaint about them, so her case has come to us. They want it closed one way or the other.’

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Jack parked outside the large wood-and-iron gates and pressed the buzzer which was set into the brickwork. Nothing happened. No noise sounded and no light came on. The thick wooden parts of the gate were embossed with studs which made the front of this property look like a prison. Even the main private road that the narrow lane to Mrs Jenkins’ house veered off had a red-and-white striped barrier, clearly telling passers-by that this area was access

only. Jack had had to flash his badge at the private security detail pacing the end of the street looking bored out of his wits.

Through a thin gap in between the heavy wooden gates, Jack could see a wide gravel driveway and a parallel flagstone footpath that cut through a substantial garden of at least two acres. The driveway curved round to the right, so the house itself was obscured from the roadside. After waiting for another minute, Jack pushed the wooden gate to see if it was even locked. It wasn't. He wondered if it had been left unlocked specifically for him because the buzzer didn't work.

The garden to either side of the flagstone footpath was overgrown and untamed, but somehow managed to look as though it was meant to be that way. Jack noted that the main gravel driveway looked like it had been battered by heavy vehicles with wide tyres – goods lorries? Grocery deliveries?

By the time Jack reached the house, the front door was open, and Avril was waiting for him. She wore a knee-length frilly dress with puff sleeves, white buckled shoes and white ankle socks with a double frill around the top. Her hair was in a high bun and adorned with a flowered scrunchy that matched the dress. She had her hands on her hips and, as she looked him up and down, Jack could tell that she was already disappointed. 'I know they told you I'm mad, but I'm not.' She sounded as gruff as a forty-a-day smoker. 'So, are you going to believe them or me?'

Jack walked up the three wide stone steps leading to Avril's front door. 'I thought I'd make up my own mind, Mrs Jenkins. How about you? Are you going to assume that my visit is nothing more than a placatory paperwork exercise, or do you want to tell me about Adam Border?'

The inside of Avril's house made the back of Jack's eyes hurt. There was so much information to take in, with an array of different patterns, textures, styles and colours. Avril led Jack through

the house and out of the back door, into a sprawling wild garden contained by a crumbling, high brick wall.

‘He knows my home is full of antiques and collectables, the best of which are slowly going missing. I made a list. You have it on file. He knows my routine, although he also follows me. You see, he’s playing games and trying to scare me.’ Avril picked up a pair of shears from an old wooden bench with broken slats and randomly snipped at something that looked like a white aster. Avril threw the daisy-like flowers into an already full wheelbarrow, then headed away from the house along a stepping-stone path and disappeared behind a row of fruit trees. ‘Bring that, would you?’ Jack grinned as he obediently followed with the wheelbarrow. He liked Avril already.

As Jack emerged out of the trees, the garden opened up again. To his left, still about twenty yards ahead of him, was an extensive greenhouse with filthy, cracked windows, some of which had been whitewashed on the inside. To the left of that was a solid wooden gate leading God-knows-where, and next to that was a sprawling compost heap which was where Avril waited for him. ‘His intention isn’t purely to rob me, you see, otherwise he’d bring a van and get it over with . . . it’s to torment me. The biggest torment being that sometimes when he breaks in, he walks past a £5,000 painting, and steals a £5 ornament just because he knows it’s full of sentiment. It makes me sound mad when I report that!’

‘Avril . . .’ Jack couldn’t think of a subtle way to ask his next question. ‘How secure is your property? I ask because . . .’

‘I lock up! I have my routine and I stick to it.’ Avril sounded like a petulant child. ‘And, yes, I have changed the locks since he left. But maybe he can pick locks? How do burglars normally get into places?’

In the second it took Avril to inhale ready to continue her rant, Jack spoke. ‘Why is Adam Border trying to scare you, Mrs Jenkins?’ His polite, caring tone stopped her in her tracks. She breathed a heavy sigh and her body visibly relaxed. ‘That’s the first time anyone’s asked

me that. Everyone else said, “Why *would* he try to scare you?” not “Why *is* he?” Them at Kingston station may as well have called me a liar straight to my face.’

Avril paused to lop the head off a sunflower and throw it onto the compost heap. By the time she turned back to Jack, her façade of ballsy old woman had returned, and she set about taking her frustrations out on a bed of perfectly good plants at the base of an ornate pillar. By the time she’d finished, she’d chopped everything into pieces and was left with a big ugly hole in the ground. ‘He’s scaring me because I kicked him out. And I kicked him out because he was scaring me.’

Avril’s large eyes suddenly locked with Jack’s and he got the distinct impression that she was about to say something that meant his report would make her sound just as potty as the previous fourteen.

‘I’m a single woman, DS Warr. I think Adam Border wants to destroy what he can’t have. Have you heard of gerontophilia? It’s when a younger man has a sexual preference for much older women.’

Jack quickly promised Avril that he’d find her list of stolen items, check out Adam Border and discuss home security with her on his next visit. He then left her with his card and retreated before she could accuse him of being sexually attracted to her too.

Back in the safety of his car, Jack read a grammatically perfect text message from DCI Simon Ridley:

Did Kingston station just waste an hour of your time? Or is Avril Jenkins the victim of a targeted terror campaign?

Jack didn’t mention her theory about gerontophilia in his reply. Instead, he said that he’d start by doing his own background check on Adam Border and see where that took him.

Laura stood by the open window of Elliot Wetlock's living room, as the stench of peroxide was making her eyes water. Tania's hairdresser friend had left the room to give them privacy, with the promise of returning in exactly twenty-eight minutes, otherwise Tania's scalp would start to burn.

Tania was a beautiful seventeen-year-old who could easily have passed for mid-twenties, especially in her low-cut white dress. She was petite, very pale-skinned with stunning aqua-blue eyes, and she spoke with a Monroe-esque breathiness. She also had a beauty spot above and to the left of her upper lip, just like her idol. On the mantelpiece, pride of place, Elliot Wetlock had one framed photo of his daughter, aged about fifteen, and she looked like a different girl. Back then, she had a far more natural appeal, with long red hair, no beauty spot and a far healthier weight to her. Laura felt saddened by the fact that this lone photo seemed to represent a daughter long gone. There were no photos of this new version of Tania Wetlock, who was not a daughter to be proud of, it seemed.

Laura had been right to turn up during the bleaching phase of Tania's hair appointment, because if she'd been able to flounce out, slam the door and totter off down the road on her too-high heels, she certainly would have done. Not that talking was getting Laura very far at all. Tania used the word 'fuck' as a verb, adjective and noun whilst flatly refusing to betray the confidence of her beloved talent scout. 'I'm not stupid, Miss Police Lady. I tell you his name, and my dad pays you to scare him away. This is my life, and I can spend time with whoever the hell I like.' She was also convinced that with his help she was on her way to Hollywood. Laura didn't stay the full twenty-eight minutes. She stayed ten, leaving before she lost her temper.

Laura's handover to Jack had been littered with expletives, which he omitted when he reported back to Maggie that night at home. As he spoke, Jack loaded the dishwasher whilst, by his side, Maggie

visually quality controlled his work and, when necessary, took a dish or a plate back out and rinsed it properly.

‘There’s no doubt Tania’s vulnerable,’ Jack clarified, ‘but Laura doesn’t think it’s a police matter. A therapist matter, maybe.’ Jack could see Maggie was disappointed. He knew that the last thing she’d want to do was go back to her new mentor with no solution to his problem. ‘She’s almost eighteen, Mags. We can’t make her cooperate if she doesn’t want to. And she doesn’t appear to be a danger to herself or others, so any therapy would have to be voluntary. And it would have to be suggested by Wetlock. Not us.’

Maggie grabbed a bottle of red from the wine rack, plus three glasses.

‘Please tell Laura I’m grateful.’ She smiled. ‘I think Mr Wetlock’s attempted to persuade Tania into therapy already, but she was having none of it.’ She stepped close to Jack and kissed him. ‘Thank you for trying. Forget about them for tonight. We’ve got a wedding to arrange!’ Jack raised one eyebrow. ‘OK,’ Maggie corrected. ‘Me and your mum have got a wedding to arrange. You just nod in all the right places.’

CHAPTER 2

The following morning, Jack was in and at his desk by 7 a.m. Between lying awake thinking about the price tag of the wedding his mother, Penny, and his fiancée had in mind, and a bad patch in Hannah's teething, he'd had a fairly disturbed night. By 5 a.m., he'd given up trying to sleep and headed downstairs to make himself a cup of tea. As he looked out of the darkened kitchen window, all he could see was the tired reflection of himself . . . until the moment the security light reacted to movement by their small shed. As Jack watched the next-door neighbour's cat dig a hole in Penny's beautifully planted border, he thought about how frightened Avril Jenkins must be if she was actually telling the truth. His gut was still leaning towards it being a waste of time, but what if it wasn't?

Jack had called Kingston station on his way into work so, by the time he arrived, he'd been sent all fourteen of Avril's previous statements, together with the list of alleged stolen items: a twenty-four-piece set of hallmarked silver cutlery, a Rossetti painting, a fur coat, two statues, a set of silver napkin rings, a wedding photo, £500 and a double duvet cover with two matching pillowcases patterned with fairies. The Rossetti had captured the attention of Kingston police but, as it wasn't listed on the latest insurance document, they soon questioned its existence. And the two statues had subsequently been found in the dishwasher, lending further credence to the theory that Avril was nothing more than a confused old eccentric. But that theory was now making no sense to Jack.

Regardless of her eccentricities and awkward personality, all of her statements were consistent and included personal details that were strangely vivid if the incidents were figments of her imagination. Like the night her fairy duvet set went missing: this was the

set she used to put on Adam Border's bed, and it was stored in the airing cupboard just outside the master bathroom. In her statement, she said she used to tuck the duvet cover and pillowcases behind the central heating pipes so that when she made his bed it was nice and warm. The duvet and pillows were not stolen along with the duvet set; they were left on the floor outside the airing cupboard. Which is exactly how the police found them when they arrived at four in the morning. Jack would admit Avril did seem like the sort of woman who lived with one foot in cloud-cuckoo-land, but she did not seem like the sort of woman who would go to the trouble of actually creating a crime scene.

The thing that troubled Jack the most was the same thing that Kingston was using against her: she'd reported fourteen break-ins, yet only eight items had been reported stolen. Kingston station had asserted that Avril was simply losing track of the lies she'd told, but Jack speculated that it could just as easily mean that the mysterious Adam Border was sometimes breaking in and taking nothing. So maybe his main aim was to frighten her, just as she claimed.

At 7.15 a.m., Ridley arrived with his morning coffee in a tall, reusable cup. 'Don't tell me . . .' Ridley could see the subject heading on the paperwork scattered across Jack's desk. 'You want to keep the case for a while longer because you've seen something that the whole of Kingston station has missed.' Ridley, not needing or wanting a reply, continued into his office. 'Do what you have to today, Jack. By end of play, I'd like you to either know for sure that Avril Jenkins is being stalked by her former lodger and get the case officially transferred, or sign it back to Kingston.'

Ridley had been uncharacteristically detached of late, in terms of how closely he monitored his team. Normally, he'd insist on knowing each case as well as the officer running it but, over the past couple of months, he'd shifted the bulk of the responsibility down

a level. This brought him in line with how most divisional bosses worked, so he wasn't doing less than a normal DCI should; he was just doing less than *he* should. Ridley was no longer an anally retentive, micro-manager; he'd become ordinary.

Anik who, after three years as a detective constable, remained the baby of the squad not due to age but to attitude, presumed that only the love of a good woman could have distracted a man like Ridley from his job, which silently broke Laura's heart. 'The bags under his eyes . . . he's defo getting his end away,' Anik said. 'You'd think he'd finally have a smile on his miserable face as well, though.' Jack wanted Anik to be right. He was concerned that Ridley had decided to put in for retirement: he didn't know how old Ridley was but assumed that he must be close to having done his thirty-year stint on the force. Most officers worked till they secured their full pension, then called it a day. If Ridley was in love, Laura would lose. If Ridley was retiring, everyone would lose.

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When Jack arrived at Avril Jenkins' home, the large wooden gates were already open, so he drove up the gravel driveway to the house and parked in front of the double garage. By the time he was out of the driver's seat, she was on the doorstep. His opening comment was to ask why the gates were open when she so clearly had an issue with security and this immediately got them off on the wrong foot.

'He doesn't drive up to the front door in broad daylight, DS Warr,' she said. 'He creeps in through the back garden in the dead of night like the monster he is.' She then sharply enquired why he'd come back. When Jack said that he'd come for the purchase prices and insurance documents connected to the stolen items, Avril's mood plummeted further and she barked at him about already

having been accused of insurance fraud, so if that was his train of thought, he might as well get back into his car and eff off!

Jack assured Avril that he wasn't accusing her of anything and she stomped back into the house leaving the front door open, which Jack took as an invitation for him to follow.

In the drawing room-cum-office, Avril was rifling through an antique bureau, whilst muttering about the ineptitude of every police officer she'd ever met. 'The stolen items are secondary! He's *stalking* me. You *do* know that stalkers invariably escalate to murder, don't you? That'll no doubt make you happy. When I'm found dead in my bed.' Avril whipped round, with a scrap of paper in her outstretched hand. 'These are the only prices I can remember. And no, I don't have receipts. I'll try again to find the paperwork for the items listed on my insurance, but I'm not good with record-keeping.' Avril then turned back to the bureau and began searching again.

The handwritten list, headed 'The stolen property of Avril Jenkins', stated that the Rossetti painting was the most valuable item taken, at around the £2.2 million mark. And the duvet set was the least expensive, at £32.99. Jack asked if Adam Border would have been aware what the Rossetti was worth. 'I told him,' she said. 'He also knew that it wasn't the most expensive item in the house. He stole it because my dead husband bought it for me thirty years ago. I *told* you this already. He knows how to upset me.'

Avril slammed one drawer shut, forced out a long, whisky-scented sigh and opened up another drawer. In the second drawer, Jack could see several leaflets for the purchase and installation of burglar alarms and security lights. Avril saw him looking. 'I'm updating. Everything's old and temperamental.' A tiny smirk crept across Jack's face. 'Yes, yes,' she said, catching his expression. 'Just like me!'

He offered to help her choose the best security for her size of property and even supervise its installation by the end of the day, which immediately put her on the defensive again. 'I'm more than capable of choosing my own security, thank you. The gate was left open because I have a delivery coming, not because I'm stupid. The downstairs doors and windows are alarmed. And I have security lights outside. And to save you asking, yes, I *do* turn them off when the sodding spring fox cubs start bounding about on the lawn. It's like a bloody disco! Lights flashing on and off.'

'Mrs Jenkins?' Jack said with a sigh. 'I'd like you to imagine that we're starting again. So, please direct me to Adam's bedroom. Then, if you don't mind, I'd love a cup of tea.'

Adam Border's bedroom was at the very top of the house, little more than a white box containing a queen-sized bed and small wardrobe with matching chest of drawers. There were no pictures or personal documents, although a Dior jacket still hung in the wardrobe and a neatly folded Bolongaro Trevor jumper was in the bottom drawer. The way these pricey items had been left behind made Jack think that Avril was right to suggest money was not the primary reason for the numerous alleged thefts. On top of the wardrobe was a leather carry-on flight case and, on the handle, was an old luggage label.

As Jack jotted down the flight details, he could hear shouting from outside.

A bald man wearing a blue uniform and a paper face mask was standing with his hands in his pockets, looking despondently at his feet, whilst Avril rifled through the box of groceries on her front doorstep, shouting about broken celery stems, out-of-date avocados, and various missing items. 'You think old people will accept any old shit, well, we won't . . . what's this? A bloody replacement item that's nothing like the thing I ordered. Take it back. And the

bruised fruit. I'll pay you when you come back with everything that's missing.' The bald man didn't bother to reply. Her outburst was clearly nothing new to him.

'Don't worry, mate,' Jack said. 'You can go.' The delivery man didn't need telling twice, quickly heading back to his van. Jack picked up the box of groceries and took it into Avril's kitchen before she could say anything to the contrary.

To Jack's surprise, on the kitchen island, a pot of tea was brewing beneath a knitted tea cosy, sitting next to two mismatched cups and saucers. He placed the box of groceries on the island and poured two cups of tea. The second Avril entered the kitchen, Jack started talking so that she couldn't have a go at him for sending the delivery man away. 'Tell me how you met Adam Border. I know he was your odd-job man, but where did you find him?'

Whilst she replied, Avril put her groceries away – even the items she claimed not to want. 'I heard about him from someone. Can't recall who. I started him in the garden, which he did a good enough job of, so I moved him inside the house, fixing door handles and doing bits of tiling. He came one day to fix an outside tap and, my God, he stank! I told him as much. He apologised and that's when he told me that for the past two weeks he'd been homeless and washing in the sink of the public toilet on the high street. So, I offered him the attic room.' Avril glanced at Jack, pre-empting what he was about to say. 'I'd known him long enough by then. I figure people quickly, DS Warr.' Avril sipped her tea to indicate that she had nothing more to say on the subject. Clearly, she had been very wrong about Adam Border.

* * *

Jack drove the thirty minutes from Avril Jenkins' house in Kingston to a potential wedding venue in Fulham. Maggie and Penny had

whittled the list of possibilities down from around twenty to just three, so he was now being brought into the final part of the selection process. He had Laura on hands-free and she'd just told him that the details off the luggage tag belonged to a 10-year-old flight. British Airways couldn't tell her much, other than the destination was Colombia and the address of the person who booked it, which she'd just texted to him. Jack asked if she'd mind checking it out.

'When I get back, I'm probably going to request the Jenkins case is officially transferred from Kingston to us but, right now – and don't tell Ridley – I've really got to go and see this wedding venue. Mags and Mum have done everything so far. If I'm a no show, there'll both leave me!'

For a good ten seconds, Laura said nothing. For some reason, old feelings she once had for Jack were suddenly rekindled at the thought of Maggie actually leaving him. The feelings vanished just as quickly but, for a moment, Laura felt her skin heat and the hairs on her arms stand up, just as they used to each time Jack was close. When she did speak, she agreed to go and visit Adam Border's old address.

'Take Anik with you, Laura. Let's play it safe until we know who we're dealing with.'

Laura made a wry comment about being safer if she took Sheila from the canteen as backup, then put the phone down.

The venue in Fulham was a large pub with an extensive top floor, which could be hired out in part or in full. Location wise, it was perfectly situated in relation to the Chelsea Register Office. However, the manager, Mrs Kasabian, was really already getting on Jack's nerves, directing her entire pitch, mostly aimed at guiding them towards the five-course rather than the three-course menu, at Maggie. After half an hour of rehearsed waffle, she finally looked at Jack and said, 'I haven't forgotten you, Mr Warr. You're going to make the most important decision of all . . . to free-bar or

not to free-bar? I know that's all you grooms care about!' To stop Jack from walking out, Maggie quickly asked Mrs Kasabian to give them ten minutes to explore on their own.

Maggie led Jack by the hand back through the rooms they could be hiring. Finally, she sat down at one of the dining tables in order to get a feel for the space.

'I like the place,' Jack said. 'I don't like her, but I like the venue.' When Maggie asked if he thought it might be a bit small, he sat down opposite her, and laid his hands on her thighs. 'We only need three seats and a highchair, Mags.' As he watched the tears well up, he knew that with nine perfect words, he'd convinced her that this was the wedding venue for them.

* * *

Laura and Anik had parked one street away from Tetcott Street in Chelsea and were now walking back towards the address connected to the 10-year-old luggage label found on Adam Border's suitcase.

The beautiful four-storey terraced house was currently owned by Mrs Flora Garner and, with no landline listed, they'd had no option but to attend the property in person. Anik was dragging his feet, whinging about being sent on an out-of-date wild goose chase, whilst Laura, pleasantly immune to his usual moaning, was fantasy house hunting.

Mrs Garner was an attractive forty-something with two teenage sons, as evidenced by the gallery of professional-looking framed family photos lining the hallway walls. There was also a man in all of the pictures, who Anik quietly pointed out was definitely punching above his weight. Mrs Garner explained that she'd bought the property eighteen years ago from a lady called Hester Mancroft who'd rented the top two floors out as student flats. On

moving in, they'd immediately converted the property back into one big family home. Mrs Garner remembered that Hester had joked about being able to buy the house after fleecing her husband in their divorce. She'd lived with her son, Julian, who had attended Harrow, but he'd turned out to be rather useless and certainly not the businessman Hester had hoped he would be. The name of Adam Border meant nothing to Mrs Garner at all.

* * *

Back at the station, Laura set about trying to trace Hester Man-croft, whilst Jack was at his desk contacting antique dealers to see if he could trace any of the alleged stolen items from Avril Jenkins' house. This rather arduous job had been attempted a couple of times before with no success because Avril hadn't noticed some of the thefts straightaway, didn't immediately report the ones she had noticed and had no photos of some items as they weren't insured.

Ridley was just about to step from his office and comment on how much time was being put into this probable non-case, when Jack got a phone call from Avril. Her voice was whispered and panicked. 'He's following me. Right now! I'm in Borough Market, the Green Market section. I have to keep moving or he'll catch me.' She sounded more and more out of breath with every word. 'Please come quickly, DS Warr. I'm not making it up!'

Ridley quickly drove with Jack to Borough Market, where they split up and entered through opposite entrances. They did a loop of the market, before meeting back by the drinking fountain just inside the Borough High Street entrance. Avril was nowhere to be found. After a second, more urgent loop of Green Market, they quickly moved into Borough Market Kitchen to see if Avril had been forced further afield. Jack was constantly calling Avril's

mobile but there was no answer. They were getting worried. If this turned out to be the decisive moment when Avril's stalker upped the ante and actually made physical contact, the result could be life-threatening for her and the fallout would be disastrous for Ridley's team.

As they raced around Borough Market Kitchen down parallel aisles, it was Ridley who spotted Avril Jenkins first from Jack's description. She was perched on a stool outside Mei Mei's Singaporean Street Food stall. Within seconds, Jack was by his side.

'Take her home.' Ridley pushed the words out through gritted teeth. 'Sign the case back to Kingston. I don't want to hear the name Avril Jenkins in my station again.' Then he walked away. In their desperation to save her from potential harm, they'd both jumped into Ridley's car, meaning that Jack would have to take Avril home in a taxi, but that was a problem he thought it wise not to share with Ridley right now.

Jack walked slowly to Avril's side, hoping to have calmed his temper by the time he reached her. Avril gave him no more than a fleeting glance as she tucked into an ox cheek rendang curry. 'Too slow.' She spat rice as she spoke. 'You missed him.'

From the street, Jack watched Avril walk up her driveway, her huge home looming ahead of her. He couldn't tell whether she was deluded, ill, actually being stalked or, possibly, and worst of all, whether she was just a lonely old woman who wanted his attention.

* * *

In the garden next door, a man was up a tall ladder trimming his boundary hedge into a wave pattern. Jack introduced himself and the man returned the favour – Bernard Warton was a retired banker in his mid-seventies and was only too happy to tell Jack what a

pain in the arse Avril Jenkins was. Noisy, rude and cantankerous were the words he kept coming back to. He said she complained about everything: his hedge was too high, so he trimmed it down only to be told that his trimmers were too noisy. His fountain was too noisy. His cherry blossom blew onto her gravel. His driveway wasn't weeded to her liking. His bird feeders attracted squirrels.

When asked, Mr Warton said that he did recall seeing a young man in Avril's garden, on and off, over the years. He knew the man was called Adam because they'd spoken on a couple of occasions. He was mid-thirties, pleasant, well-spoken and drove a silver Porsche. Once, he'd even given Mr Warton some petrol from Avril's shed, to refill his lawn mower – this had been their secret as both men feared Avril's wrath if she ever found out.

'I sometimes didn't see him for weeks, even months at a time. He could have come and gone, I suppose, or he could simply have been working in the rear garden or the west section over the other side. Her property's huge, as I'm sure you know. Often, I don't even see Avril for months! She can be quite the hermit. As time went by and the silver Porsche was a more regular sight driving up and down our private street, speculation then became rife about him becoming her toy boy! Her husband had passed a couple of years after I saw Adam for the first time, so no one was judging her: it had just been amusing gossip for a while.'

Mr Warton couldn't recall the last time he'd seen Adam, but several months ago the small section of Avril's front garden that he could see from his property had started to look neglected, so perhaps Adam had gone by then. 'I can only see ten or fifteen yards into the east side of her front garden, from mine. Her driveway is too far away for me to see who comes and goes, and her house is set too far back to be visible from my comparatively modest bungalow. There's a public footpath running between her and the golf

course, round the back somewhere. I can't see that from my garden at all, so I couldn't tell you about any comings and goings there.'

Jack ended by enquiring whether Mr Warton had any CCTV.

'I've got a Ring doorbell. That any good to you?'

The two most interesting things Jack learnt from his chat with Mr Warton were that when her husband was alive Avril used to be charming. Her eccentricities came on slowly over the subsequent years. She turned into a woman who no longer cared how she behaved or cared what people thought of her. And the second was that no one had seen Adam Border, or his distinctive silver Porsche, for months. There was no physical evidence that Avril was being stalked at all – but there was evidence that she had declined, physically and mentally, since her husband died. Jack was coming to the same conclusions as Kingston station – that Avril was perhaps lonely, perhaps a fantasist, perhaps unwell. But probably not in danger. He thanked Mr Warton for his time and retraced his footsteps back towards Avril's house. Taking another look at the proximity of Warton's bungalow, Jack was certain that very little of Avril's property could be seen from his home. Neighbours in this street were so far apart, that they made for very bad witnesses.

As Jack headed back down the winding driveway towards the waiting taxi that had brought them from Borough Market, his mobile rang. He turned to see Avril standing on her doorstep, mobile in one hand and a red notebook in the other. 'Have you spoken to Adam's girlfriend?' Jack's weary sigh could be heard at the other end of the phone. 'Rude bitch. She used to call and, if I answered, she'd hang up. I dialled 1471 and got her number. Do you want it? I don't know her name, but she stole from me as well, so that's another crime for you to look into.'

Jack was considering how to reply when she added, 'Jewellery. She stole jewellery.' When Jack pointed out that there was no jewellery

on the list of stolen items given to the police, Avril insisted that she wasn't sure exactly what had been taken, but something definitely had because her jewellery box wasn't as full as it used to be. Then she said, 'I'll make a pot.'

With no option but to follow this potential new lead, Jack reluctantly went and paid the taxi and walked back up the driveway.

CHAPTER 3

Avril Jenkins was growing on Jack. The couple of hours he spent with her was very revealing – not particularly in regard to the case, but certainly in regard to why she was this odd mix of old and young, past and present, strong and vulnerable.

He got the sense that Avril had willingly taken on quite a traditional role in the marriage which, after the death of her husband ten years ago, became redundant. She went from being ‘looked after’, to being solely responsible for an enormous property. She regressed, so as not to feel weighed down by the responsibility of adulthood. She hoarded, in order to keep hold of everything that made her feel safe, and she developed masculine traits, so as not to come across as a pushover to anyone who might be out to take advantage of an old widow. The result was this mishmash of contradictory characteristics, wrapped up in a woman who dressed like a child. But he could tell that at one time she must have been a very attractive and seductive woman.

* * *

Maggie listened as Jack described Avril, then quickly came to her own conclusions. ‘She reminds me of that woman you went to see on the Isle of Wight that time. Less dominatrixy, but just as eccentric in her own way. It’s a defence mechanism to be odd. Keeps people on their toes.’ Jack loved talking to Maggie about the strange people he came across in his job. She had a wonderfully generous way of assessing a person’s quirks and she understood that there was almost always a valid reason behind them.

‘She’s still a non-case,’ Jack said, as he toiled over fixing a small toy fire engine that Hannah had become particularly attached to. It was a pull-back-and-go vehicle, but something had broken inside, so now it just reversed without the satisfaction of then whizzing off forwards. ‘Sometimes, Mags, this job is one step forwards, two back. I mean, it wasn’t that long ago I was in the Cotswolds chasing down a gang of international mercenaries. And today? Today I drank tea with a seventy-something-year-old woman dressed like a teenager, who’s being stalked by the invisible man.’

Jack fell silent. Maggie could see that he had more to say, so she waited. Like a therapist waiting for their patient to reveal a deep-seated fear.

‘I think Ridley might be retiring,’ he said finally. Maggie was openly shocked. Not just because she genuinely liked Ridley, but because she knew how much Jack respected him. That mattered. Jack didn’t respect people easily and her fear was that, without Ridley, Jack might regress to being the apathetic policeman he was when they first moved from Totnes to London. Jack pulled the toy fire engine back across the coffee table and let go. It didn’t move. ‘Fuck it,’ Jack muttered and went to the kitchen to get two beers.

When he came back into the lounge, Maggie changed the subject. ‘Mr Wetlock’s daughter is taking drugs. He’s very worried about—’

‘You know what, Mags,’ Jack interrupted. ‘She’s chosen a dodgy path because she’s lacking something from him. Security, guidance, I don’t know. But he’s in the privileged position of being able to sort this himself. She’s a young adult. A troubled one, sure, but still. He doesn’t need the police to get her back onto the right path – *he* needs to do it.’ Jack gulped at his beer and gathered his thoughts. ‘I’m sorry. But it’s not a police matter.’ Jack leant forwards and kissed Maggie firmly on the lips. ‘I love you. You know I’m not just being an arsehole, right?’ The gentle kiss that Maggie

returned, told Jack that she knew he was right. ‘How’s your wedding dress coming along?’

A childlike smile crept over Maggie’s face. Her excitement was getting harder to contain as their wedding day got closer. Tomorrow evening, she was going to the home of the seamstress sister of Barbara – who worked in the hospital pharmacy – to do the first fitting. Penny was her wingman, the champagne was on ice, and Jack was babysitting.

‘Maggie Warr.’ Her words brimmed with pride. ‘I’m going to be Maggie Warr.’

* * *

By eleven the next morning, Laura was sitting on a bench looking out across a long stretch of sandy beach, polishing off a large portion of fish and chips. She wiped her greasy fingers on her jeans, so that her mobile screen would respond to her touch, and called Jack, back in the squad room.

Her interview with Hester Mancroft had filled in some of the blanks from Adam’s past – when he lodged with her and her son, Julian: Adam was an eighteen-year-old student at Chelsea Art College. He’d rented one of the rooms in her B&B for about six months but, once her business began to fail, she’d had to ask him to leave. Hester described Adam as a very handsome, clever and articulate young man. He and Julian were close friends and, although she wasn’t certain, she thought they’d lived together for a short time in London.

‘I asked her for Julian’s contact details, but he died of a heroin OD five years ago. “Oops” moment or what!’ Laura tucked her mobile between her ear and shoulder, so she could screw up her chip paper. ‘He had a record for possession and supplying, but it

wasn't big-time. Three prison sentences for distribution. Cocaine, cannabis and heroin. Last conviction was seven years ago, after which he travelled to the US to attend an elite drug rehab course. Then back to the UK, to pick up where he left off. Rented a few places, did a bit of sofa-surfing and was found dead in a disused warehouse in early 2017. Anyway, her description of Adam is the same as the neighbour's – he's a nice, normal man.'

Jack decided they were probably at a dead end. The elusive Adam Border remained elusive; but seeing as there was no evidence that he'd done anything wrong, they had no justification for continuing to try and track him down.

Whilst Jack had been liaising with Laura, he'd finished his final report, which concluded that the Avril Jenkins case should be referred back to Kingston as 'no further action'. 'I've got one more thing to do, and that's try a phone number, which I don't expect actually belongs to anyone. Then I'm going to sign this off. Cheers for your help, Laura.'

Jack dialled the phone number belonging to Adam Border's girlfriend. As expected, no one answered, and no answerphone service kicked in. Jack signed the back page of the report and Avril Jenkins was officially back to being the responsibility of Kingston.

'Hello?' The tiny voice on the other end of the phone made Jack stop dead. He formally introduced himself and asked the name of the person he was speaking to. 'Jessica Chi . . .' Her voice began to tremble. 'Have you found him? Have you found Adam?'

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