

CHAPTER ONE

**wallet: one who finances an antiques scam
(trade slang)**

Women and antiques are out there. They mean trouble. The reason is greed, everybody's greed.

A lady visited me in prison.

She eyed me. 'I'm Ellen Jaynor. You're not much to look at.'

'You've got the wrong prisoner, missus.'

Her eyes scored points. 'Do you have trouble with religion?'

Huguenot? No meat on Fridays? Jewish? One lot had prayer shawls, but was it her team?

'Diwali? Ramadan?'

Her lip curled in contempt. It cheered me up. Right bloke after all.

I'm nothing to look at, average everything in a worn jacket. My hair's a thatch. I'd cut the fraying edges of my shirt cuffs, and my shoes are soled courtesy of Kellogg's cardboard.

She was bonny. Thirtyish, dressed in blue with an

antique necklace of tourmalines with one showy diamond. I guessed 2.4 carats. No wedding ring, just a hen's egg of a ruby (Sri Lankan, not that Madagascan muddy red people praise these days). Victorian jewellers were class.

The screws and passing gaolbirds were lusting Force Five. I felt proud of my classy lass, but mistakes don't last. Who exactly was Ellen Jaynor, down among us lowlifes?

'I'm offering you a job and a release permit.'

Two months early? Permit is a filthy word. It always sounds its opposite, like licence. 'Er, job?' I didn't want to do another robbery just yet.

'Speed-dating. Merely speaking to women.'

'I do it all the time.'

'The Anglers Manglers Speed-Datery pays a flat rate.'

She gave me a smile like sleet. Women lack trust, I find. 'Balaclava Street drill hall in an hour.'

The screw smiled and let her out. Back in my cell I collected my stuff. I'm not so daft I can't recognise a scam. It had to be antiques because I'm good at nothing else.

One odd thing happened. I went to write my so-longs on the library blackboard, our tradition. There sat Rocco. He was reading. He saw me, and his giant builder's hands flicked the tome under his chair. Hiding something? Rocco can't read. He said good luck. I forgot the incident. You can't explain what happens in gaol.

The nick faces the old Odeon in Crouch Street. I signed out on police bail – a legal shackle to allow lawyers more golf time. The desk screw grinned.

'I've bet you'll be back in five weeks, son.'

'You've lost, George.'

With a flourish I signed *Lovejoy, 1 Hyde Park Gate, London*, and departed. Wellington's old address would irritate them.

Our town's morning rush was in full flow, two buses, one car, a donkey cart and a crocodile of school children going to the Headgate Theatre. Hepsibah Smith their teacher ignored me.

She carolled, 'Hurry, children! We mustn't be late!'

Elizabeth is seven years old and lives in my lane. 'Miss Smith isn't speaking, Lovejoy,' she announced in a voice of thunder. 'You're in prison.'

Hepsibah's lessons in tact had failed. I said, 'Shut your teeth, you little sod.'

'Lovejoy sleeps on his new auntie,' Elizabeth shrilled, 'with her legs—'

'*Elizabeth!*' Hepsibah said, schoolmistress fashion: *Eliz-a-beth*. 'We are ambassadors for our village!'

'I seen him through his window... ' Elizabeth's bandsaw voice faded.

Guiltily avoiding stares, I eeled through St Mary's churchyard. So much for the sacking I nail across my cottage window for privacy.

Puzzled by Rocco's concealment, I called in the town's naff bookshop. I recognised the olive-green dust jacket – ugh – and gaped. *Ancient Rock Paintings of North Africa*. Jesus. Well, lots of pretence in the nick.

The drill hall in Balaclava Street looked derelict. I knocked and pushed. 'Hello?'

'About time.' Ellen Jaynor was inside.

She lit a fag, pluming cancer-producing pollutants. The

floor was unswept, a flag drooping from a broken pole.

‘Space those tables. Female clients sit against the walls.’

‘Eh?’ A dance seated on chairs?

‘Watch it once round, then join in. Do the tea urn.’

In the anteroom stood a begrimed tea thing, plastic cups and a box of biscuits. Not quite Disney World. I lit the gas burner.

A fat girl came in and sat. Without a word she passed me a tea. Foul, but the best I’d had in weeks.

‘I’m Trina. Are you the thief?’

I went red. ‘Er, yes.’

‘I take the money. Jaynor dongs the bell, stingy old bitch.’

Ellen Jaynor could hear but made no sign. I felt better for an ally.

‘Twenty-four today.’ Trina showed me her list. I gasped at the fee. For a chat? What happened to saying hello at the bus stop? ‘Here. You’re not that mare’s friend, are you?’

‘Never saw her before.’

In case you’ve never heard of the Anglers Manglers Speed-Datery, I report that it is degradation. No courtship, no sweet glances in Sunday church. In short, we’re barbaric.

In speed-dating you’re shoved at strangers. It’s gab, grab, run to the fun, for now romance begins in a shoddy drill hall, at wonky card tables. Females – any age, any shape – face males – any age, any shape. On the tocsin the sweating males move to the next bird.

Some daters were nervy, others brash. A swig of tea, a dry biscuit and a three-minute natter didn’t seem much for paying a fortune, but this was progress. Some women were

young, others middle-aged, one frankly old, most in the grip of silent hysteria.

Sessions ended on a double bell. Trina ushered them into the anteroom. Most women clustered, though one or two mingled. Embarrassment always makes my knees itch. I stood there filling cups. Eventually Trina beckoned me in. The bell sounded, and I sat.

‘Wotcher,’ I said, my chat-up line.

‘Maureen,’ the girl said irritably. ‘Got a car?’

‘Where do you want to go?’ Her glance withered me. ‘Er, no.’

‘How much do you get?’ And explained, ‘Money. Your job.’

‘Er, I’m between jobs.’

Her eyebrows were question-marks one hair thick. I tried to smile but my smile often has bad days.

‘Have you got property? Email?’ And when I stuttered she added, ‘Where d’you live?’

‘In a rented cottage.’ I’d stolen it by means of three fraudulent mortgages.

She stared as if I’d mentioned leprosy, and called, ‘I’m wasting my frigging time here.’

The merciful bell rang. I moved on. The lady there was about forty, determined to put a bright face on this brawl.

‘Hello.’ She gripped her handbag. ‘I’m Joanna.’

We spoke in staccato phrases. Joanna worked in a shop, and had been divorced for seven years. She told me this in a don’t-blame-me rush. I liked her. The bell came too soon. She looked back. I was a disappointment again.

The kaleidoscope of faces came and went. Tracy was voluptuous but sneered. Seená had the shakes, craving

doses only a pharmacist would know. The fifth made white-hot demands to prove I wasn't married. Can you disprove a negative? Her final words were, 'I need a fucking drink here.' Romance was in the air, but not in Balaclava Street drill hall.

The sixth was an enemy. I missed the signs.

'Laura,' she said without preamble. 'I'm forty-three. Well?'

Bossy and attractive. Smart suit, with a brooch that caught my eye. 'I only do antiques.' I shrugged.

She cut to the chase. 'What antique is in this bag?'

Laura must be the reason I'd been sprung. When all else fails I go for honesty.

'Show me and I'll have a go.'

Her expression became a snarl. 'I've driven three hundred miles to waste my time. You'll suffer for this, Lovejoy.'

My name? I hadn't told her my name.

'Nice brooch, Laura.'

She was about to sweep out but paused. She peered at her lapel. A rose, four buds, diamonds in silver. 'It's off a street barrow.'

'Lucky you.' I delved into her shopping bag and found a teddy bear, long of snout and hump-naped. 'I thought you said antique.'

'It is a Steiff. It's genuine, unlike you.'

'Worth a lot,' I agreed. 'But 1903 isn't old.'

Uncertainty crept in. 'Made a century ago, and not old?'

'Has to be 150 years before I get the feel.' She went silent. I tried to help. 'Work it out. Its stud is plain, so it's

early. Steiffs had an elephant emblem, then this domed blob. Those eyes are only shoe buttons.' I stood to leave.

The bell double-donged. Clients drifted into the anteroom and the next lot filed in. Laura just looked.

'You said about my brooch?'

'*Pavé*-set. Gems laid like paving, each stone held in place by a dot of metal.' I found myself smiling. 'It's genuine 1795, Belgian or French.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Genuine, without a hallmark?'

'Continental antiques often lack marks. Junk shops mistake genuine jewellery for scrap 1960 lookalikes. So-long, missus.'

'Wait!' Ellen Jaynor grabbed my arm. 'Wait, or I'll not pay you!'

I'd had enough. 'Being bonny doesn't mean you can cheat. Ta-ra.'

Trina fisted the air in silent applause. The Joanna woman was in the foyer. Her expression brightened. 'Oh, Lovejoy. I'm so glad to catch you—'

'Sorry, love.' I pushed past.

The door swung shut. Free! So I thought.

CHAPTER TWO

merk: to face down, disconcert (Lond. slang)

Badly needing to know why I'd been sprung from the nick, I headed for the Sloven Oven, nosh bar and gossip mart. I saw Paltry.

He crossed over. 'You got out, then?'

Paltry wants to change his sex, and hopes gambling will pay for the surgery. Local dealers run a charity so Miami surgeons will make him female. He wears high heels and a flowered skirt, his face a crazy mosaic of cosmetics.

'Look, Paltry, who's been asking about me?'

His painted features went shifty. 'Any chance of a loan? Three-thirty at Doncaster.'

'I'm skint, Palt.'

He teetered on. If you don't contribute, Paltry ignores you. The Sloven Oven Caff is where Woody, a symphony of cellulite, sells cups of outfall and congealing cholesterol fried in gunge. I sat hoping for somebody to buy me some grub, my belly rumbling.

'Lovejoy?' Chloe lodged her white stick on my chair. I think she identifies me by scent. 'Starving?' She signalled to Woody to bring me a special, and half a lentil for her.

She's always on diets. 'Did she find you?'

'Mrs Jaynor? She hired me as a speed-dater.'

Chloe laughed. A star-spangled witch in a vermilion cape covered with zodiac signs, she wears enough bangles to sink a ship. She also has King Lear for a spirit guide. She asked a vacant chair if it wanted anything.

'Does he?' Woody called.

Who believes in this psychic malarkey? Lear, incidentally, was an ancient British king before the Romans landed. You see my difficulty. Ancient kings shouldn't be having tea in Woody's.

Chloe said, 'Lear'll have chips with his usual, please.'

How come King Lear liked spuds, which hadn't reached ancient Britain from America back then?

'Lear says they're an acquired taste,' Chloe told me.

Quickly I stopped thinking. Her pre-emptive rejoinders are weird. I like people to hear what I say before expecting a reply.

'That Laura's a funny woman, Lovejoy,' she said. Other dealers leant to overhear. 'She bribed Paltry. Lear hated her. All fur coat and no knickers.'

Woody brought plates of decent grub – chips, pasties, beans, peas, bread, and tea thick enough to plough. We dined. From politeness, I tried not to watch Lear's plate, but hunger makes things difficult. Chloe says he only eats the essence.

'Chlo,' I said, 'how come you're kind? I'm broke.'

'You sympathised over Cordelia.'

After a séance with Sandy and Mel, exotic partners in the Antiques Arcade, Chloe became an antiques dealer, refugee from some marital uproar. Sandy and Mel thought

it 'perfectly sweet'. Local dealers guessed Chloe was off her trolley. I just like her.

'Did I?'

Finishing my repast, I eyed Lear's grub. It seemed a waste of good, wholesome saturated fat.

'She wants you for an antiques hunt.'

That shook me. 'Cordelia?'

'No. That Laura.'

My headaches start at my right temple. I felt the first twinge and thought, Here we go.

An antiques hunt needs a team. I labour alone in my bare-flagged thatched cottage, aka Lovejoy Antiques, Inc., except for a drunken bum called Tinker. My barker is a dossier of low repute who sleeps in St Peter's churchyard.

'Here, Lovejoy.' Paltry would have slid into Lear's chair but I shoved him away. 'Oh, sorry, Chlo, Lear. Didn't think.' He dragged a chair over.

'What?' Paltry had betrayed me.

'Sorry, mate. Not mad, are you? Darrow said her teddy and pin were worth big money.'

I stood to go, when Gentry and Lois, two dealers, came across.

'Settle this argument, Lovejoy.'

Minutes later I was embroiled in a familiar row. Name the greatest ever silver thief.

Lois was giving it, 'The greatest ever is Noddo.'

'Balderdash,' said Gentry, who hated America. 'He's a Yank.'

'Noddo can't help being born in Wisconsin.'

Talk shifted to where Wisconsin actually was. Some dealers guessed it was near Las Vegas.

‘Noddo,’ I said. ‘No question.’ Lois applauded.

‘Why?’ Gentry demanded, moustache quivering.

At that moment I suspected Gentry had engineered the argument. I should have heard warning bells.

Gentry was a real gentleman, gold-headed cane, leather shoes from London’s Jermyn Street. He does nothing for a year, then spends a neap tide of money buying up old colonial artefacts from Africa or India.

‘Noddo’s a loner.’ I ticked points off. ‘Obsessively tidy, stacks window beading when breaking in. Expert on antique silver. Shuns drugs, drink, smoking.’

Gentry shrugged. ‘So he’s a pro.’

‘Gent, he’s formulated his own burglary rules. Sound as a bell.’

‘A *silver* bell.’ Lois laughed. ‘Get it?’

‘He depends on lucky breaks.’ Gentry loved condemning Americans.

‘Like what? Napoleon promoted Marshal Ney *because he was a lucky general.*’ I became interested in winning. ‘OK, Noddo’s only five feet four inches. He’s a real cat burglar. He doesn’t sweat, eels past any guard dog. He’s even burgled mansions staked out by police. He keeps fit, diets.’

‘Like you, Lovejoy?’ Gentry smiled.

The place erupted. Even the caff cat laughed.

‘He’s nicked umpteen millions,’ I said over the riot.

The assembled dealers moaned in envy, sounding like the onshore winds at Goldhanger.

Gentry played his trump card. ‘Then why is he always in gaol?’

‘Because neurotic detectives wouldn’t give up.’

Amusement died. I'm not taking sides here, just telling how it is.

'Or he wants to be caught.'

'Don't be daft, Lois. Nobody wants to get caught.'

'You're wrong, Lovejoy,' she said seriously.

'Well, I don't.'

Gentry said quietly, 'Then do a job for a friend of mine, eh, Lovejoy? She'll pay well.'

Best offer I'd had all day. He rose and left, touching his hat twice, meaning in two days. I could manage that, unless I died of starvation in the meantime.

The cowbell over the door clonked. Laura no less. 'You can go,' she told Paltry with distaste.

This narked me. We keep Woody's caff secret from punters. Paltry's treachery was a dead liberty. Now even the Sloven Oven was unsafe. She made to sit in Lear's chair. I stopped her.

'That's for friends.'

She appraised Chloe. 'What are you staring at?'

'Nothing.' Chloe has superb logic. 'I'm blind.'

Laura didn't even blink. 'Tough.' She turned to me, suddenly a hell of a lot harder. 'Well, Lovejoy? Prison or money?'

The Sloven Oven's clientele held its collective breath at the world's most sacred word, money.

'You must do a test first.'

'Headache, Lovejoy?' Chloe said, rummaging in her handbag. 'Lear said you've a zinger coming on. Paracetamol?'

'I'll be OK, love.' I stood and told Chloe and Lear so-long and ta for the nosh. Laura looked puzzled at my

double farewell but followed me out.

‘My limo will be along in a moment, Lovejoy.’

‘Cars can’t come down this alley.’ It was no-entry.

‘Rules do not apply to money.’

A saloon motor the size of an Alp glided up and parked, Ellen Jaynor at the wheel. A smirking traffic warden touched his cap.

Laura saw my hesitation. ‘In, Lovejoy. You’ve no choice.’

I got in, leant back and closed my eyes. Julius Caesar, no less, invented the world’s first off-street parking laws, but not for the moneyed, I supposed.

CHAPTER THREE

honest: genuine (of an antique, trade slang)

Sitting on a newspaper stops travel sickness, but no luck in the limo.

‘Do a successful test, we’ll pay you well.’

‘And if I fail?’

She smiled. Ellen smiled. I distrust smiles. A university recently tested women’s intuition. Men spotted false smiles better by a whopping seventy-two per cent.

‘Then it’s back to prison, Lovejoy.’ They laughed. Laughs can’t be trusted either.

We floated to the Donkey & Buskin, a quiet tavern near the estuary. We went to an upstairs room. Old Mr Smethirst was there.

‘Wotcher, Lovejoy,’ he said. ‘I guessed it might be you.’ He gestured to the table. ‘Best I could get, son. Will they do?’

‘Dunno yet, Smethie.’

‘Seven items, as you instructed, lady.’ Smethie was all anxious.

‘Get out,’ Laura commanded. He obeyed.

So Laura must be new money. People who get a massive windfall cloak uncertainty with bullying. The most obvious

giveaway, though, is they are deliberately rude.

Remember a certain prime minister? His millionairess wife was 'a true socialist', her phrase, who sat down before the Queen at a banquet. The PM was worse, and plonked himself into the Queen's place. Her Maj smilingly showed no umbrage, and the festival went swimmingly. Except the entire nation squirmed. My knees itched. For the first time, suspicions surfaced that the 'golden couple' might actually be prats. I'm not being political here, just felt the same when Smethie got the heave-ho. As old as my dad, so why treat him like dirt?

Laura inspected the antiques. I seriously didn't like her. Two wrongs don't make a right, three wrongs make a blight, four make a fright. And it wasn't even teatime.

She told me to get started. A kulak from the bar below brought tea and biscuits. The two women poured for themselves. I felt I'd seen them before. I'm good with faces.

'They are from Gimbert's auction, Lovejoy. Identify each one.'

The collection needed only a glance before I hopped it, downstairs and out. Once there, I didn't know what to do. Old Smethie had gone. I sat on the wall. Feet sounded on the gravel. Ellen and Laura appeared, spitting feathers.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'Laura. I can stand anything except bad manners and dirty forks. And you.'

'I'll have you in gaol.'

'Then get on with it, missus. I'm sick of the sight of you.'

Silence for a second. Ellen Jaynor asked, 'Do you want a drink, Lovejoy?'

‘Sod off, missus. I’m well narked.’

A motor arrived and students raced shouting into the pub.

‘Are the antiques worthless, then?’

I said, ‘The poster’s not worth much, say a week’s holiday.’

It had been an old music-hall bill. You still see some on forgotten hoardings. It showed a stout Victorian lady entertainer.

‘Is that all?’

‘A tip, missus: fame isn’t value. It’s public whim.’ Or was whim the same as fame? I felt so tired. ‘The poster lady. She was a fat, drunken tart. All London laughed at her. She is the most talked-about corpse on earth.’

They were all attention. ‘Dr Crippen is the most visited effigy in Madame Tussaud’s Waxworks. Cora Crippen’s posters aren’t worth much.’

‘Would you have bid for it?’ Ellen asked.

‘I’m broke,’ I said with bitterness. ‘A six-sheet sized poster of Jane Russell’s 1943 film *The Outlaw* would be worth something. Christie’s sold the only surviving one for the price of a house.’

They glanced at each other, Laura making notes.

‘Look, missus. Those priceless antiques were dross.’ I wanted to go. I had a life to lead.

‘And the wall mask?’

‘It isn’t antique. And any forger can do Clarice Cliff.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’ Laura asked quietly. She was learning.

‘The orange colour’s too thin, and Clarice Cliff’s glaze is honey-coloured, not grey. She painted with a loaded brush. Some idiot will still buy it.’

‘Examine the rest, Lovejoy.’

‘No.’ Not one had made me feel strange, so they were all modern or forgeries. ‘I’d rather have gaol than you.’

I started walking. Laura spoke loudly after me. ‘Would you marry again, Lovejoy?’

A couple at one of the trestles had been bored. Now they focused.

‘I have a proposal.’

Did she mean a proposition? ‘Are you going to kneel?’

Laura linked her arm through mine and walked me to an arbour overhung with Lancelot floribundas. Out of earshot of the couple, I noticed. I watched the two women warily, like I concentrate on stage magicians when I try to spot dwarves and mirrors.

‘What if marriage was necessary for you to carry out the perfect antiques scam?’ Laura was polite now. Money makes saints of us all.

Wearily I shook my headache. ‘You’ve had your laugh, missus. I’m going home.’

‘Don’t you want to own millions, Lovejoy?’ Women are cunning. They use logic just when you think you’ve got them. ‘Whatever we make on the antiques, you keep.’

‘Marriage?’ I wondered if I’d heard wrong. ‘Me?’

‘Once the robbery is done, the marriage will be dissolved instantly.’

Marriage *and* robbery? ‘It’s against the law.’

‘Lawyers can do anything.’

A man has only one marriage in him, but a woman can use marriages as stepping-stones across life’s river.

‘Who to?’

Laura’s colour heightened. ‘Me. Divorce follows the very next day.’

‘There’s no such thing as a false wedding.’

‘Never heard of a marriage of convenience, Lovejoy? There is no risk.’

‘Who says?’

‘Money does.’ Laura was all confidence. ‘It will bring my ex out from hiding. He’s gone to ground, but will emerge if he learns I’m to marry a divvy. That means you.’

Ellen chipped in. ‘Still unsure? Railways use the law to ban innocent trainspotters. Parliament legally arrested a poet for reading a few names. People are suing the TV weather girl for predicting rain last Good Friday. Law,’ said this paragon of social order, ‘does what money tells it.’

Money was a big plus. I know I’m pathetic. I still couldn’t see honesty in those smiles.

I found myself being walked to the car past the staring couple. Life was safer in gaol than outside. I’ve often found that.

A point here: I live for antiques. The world to me has only three groups. First – and most hated – are auctioneers. They are rich because they charge us Value Added Tax, and commission which *they* decide. Second – and poorest – are dealers, who scrape a living hunting old tat and dream of finding a Gainsborough for ten pence. Every year, half of us go bankrupt or get gaoled. But all dealers know, or know of, each other. Third come the millions known as the ‘honest old public’, though there’s no such thing. Money and greed banish truth and trust.

I’m one of the second lot – broke, a scrounger, but always full of dazzling dreams.