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Looking for Trouble

Written by Cath Staincliffe

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Looking For Trouble

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CHAPTER ONE

I get a kick out of following people. There's a childish excitement in trailing the unwitting suspect, in not being caught doing something shady. It's rarely easy. Fate conspires to fix the traffic lights, spirit up needy strangers seeking directions, wayward dogs and roadworks. Actually, I can't blame fate for the roadworks; that's down to the city council. They'd only just finished digging up the whole of Manchester, to replace the rotting sewers, when they started digging it up all over again to lay the tram lines.

Of course, in between the thrill of the chase there's the stifling boredom of waiting. Waiting for the woman to emerge from having her hair permed, for the couple leaving the hotel, together or separately, or for the bloke to finish his stint at the pub.

But that Friday morning back in June, I was lucky. Vernon Wainwright, supposedly off on a business trip to Amsterdam, left the airport ten minutes after his wife dropped him and took a cab to the Trust House Forte hotel in nearby Northenden. There he was joined in the foyer by a young woman. They booked in and took the lift up to their weekend of bliss. The Trust House Forte hotel would hardly be my idea of the perfect setting for a weekend of forbidden passion (couldn't he at least have taken her to Amsterdam?) but then it's so long since I had any passion, forbidden or otherwise, that I'm hardly au fait with these matters.

With my adrenalin buzz fading, I drove my old Mini back to face the less than pleasant task of telling Mrs Wainwright that her suspicions were well founded.

I've found they usually are. Women know. They spend an inordinate amount of time blaming themselves for being paranoid or insecure, giving hubby the benefit of the doubt just one more time – then, at their wit's end and fearful for their sanity, they approach someone like me. It's my job to prove to them that they're not going loopy.

Mrs Wainwright took the news in her stride. Politely, even. She thanked me for doing the job. I was relieved. I've been on the end of a whole heap of anger and bitterness before now. Don't shoot the messenger.

I sat back and tilted my chair at a dangerous angle. What now? My desk was clear. No work in the pipeline. Should I struggle on as a private eye or launch myself on another career? I'd never actually had a career. I'd had a broad and fairly useless university education, a stint as a desk-potato in a tax office, a baby (now a four year old) and eighteen months as a self-employed investigator. 'Women returners' screamed the ads in the local paper, but what had I got to return to? Being re-educated didn't appeal. And my fantasies of an alternative career ran along the lines of jazz-singer, investigative journalist, film star. None of which featured on the summer school syllabus at what was left of the adult education college.

I sighed, righted my chair and took a turn round my office. It's a cellar room I rent from a family who live round the corner from my house. Well, not my house – I rent that too. From a brain-drain lecturer who's over in Australia.

The office looked decidedly jaded eighteen months in. The leak from upstairs the previous winter had left ugly water stains over most of the ceiling. Two corners

sported an interesting variety of fungus. Random coffee stains and what looked like bits of old food peppered the walls. I've no idea how they got there. I have no recollection of ever throwing food and drink around. Faced with no useful employment and time on my hands, I decided to do something practical. I'd redecorate. There would be paint left over from the kids' room. Pale lilac. It would be an improvement on what I was looking at.

An hour later, clad in dungarees, I was back in the Dobson's cellar with step-ladder, roller and tray, paint and dust sheet. I shoved the furniture into the middle of the room, rolled the edges of the carpet in and covered the lot with the dust sheet.

I paint fast and messy. The ceiling was done in twenty minutes and I was speckled lilac like some rare bird's egg. The phone rang just as I was scraping the excess paint off the roller. I dived under the dust sheet to find it.

'Hello.'

'Is that Sal Kilkenny?' The woman's voice was soft, a glottal Bolton accent.

'Speaking.'

'I got your name from a friend of mine, Audrey Johnson.'

'Yes.' I remembered Audrey Johnson. She'd been less than civil when I'd told her what Mr Johnson was up to.

'Could I come and see you . . . if you're able . . . you see . . . oh . . .' She was floundering.

'Yes, of course.' I tried to put her at her ease, sounding confident and reassuring. 'When would be convenient?'

'Well . . . now. You see, I'm in town, I thought . . .'

'Fine.' I was getting horribly hot under the dust sheet and why not seize the moment? 'The office is in a bit of

a mess,' I apologized, 'but I'm sure we can manage.' I gave her my address and directions from the city centre.

I ran round like a blue-arsed fly, clearing up and replacing furniture. I left the door ajar to let some of the overpowering ammonia fumes escape. I hadn't time to go and change my clothes. I managed to get most of the lilac spots off my face but my hair bore witness. Hopefully, Mrs Forgot-to-ask-her-name would be more concerned with the business in hand than my appearance.

The bell rang. I clattered upstairs. I might have been lucky with Vernon Wainwright but all that was about to change. It was a Friday in June. Given what I know now, it should have been Friday the 13th. It wasn't but it should have been.

CHAPTER TWO

She was a plump woman, middle-aged, average height. Short dark hair streaked with grey. Sallow complexion, broad face, brown eyes. Large eyes. Eyes full of fear. She was dressed conservatively, neat and tidy. Tan skirt and jacket, cream blouse, court shoes. Tiny studs in her ears. No other jewellery, no make-up. We shook hands; hers were clammy. From nerves I guessed.

'Come on in.' I closed the door behind her. 'My office is downstairs. I'm in the middle of re-decorating – that's the awful smell.' She followed me down and sat across from my desk.

'I'm sorry, I didn't get your name.'

'Hobbs, Mrs Hobbs.'

'And how can I help?'

'It's my son, Martin. He's missing. I want you to find him.' I nodded and began to make notes as we talked.

'How old is Martin?'

'Sixteen. It was his birthday at the beginning of June.'

'How long's he been gone?'

'A month now.'

'And he's not been in touch at all?' She shook her head.

'Has he ever done this before?'

'No.'

'Any idea why he's left?'

'No, that's why I'm so worried.' She twisted the straps of her handbag round her fingers. 'He'd just gone one morning.'

'Did he take anything with him? Clothes, money?'

'He'd no money. I think some of his clothes had gone.' She didn't seem very certain. Maybe when kids are that age you lose track of their wardrobe.

'He didn't leave a note or anything?'

'No.'

'Have you been to the police?'

'Yes, the local police, in Bolton, but they didn't seem to take it very seriously, with him being sixteen, you know – it's not like he's a little boy. They put him on file, made a few enquiries, came round to the house to take more details. That was about it. They said if I hadn't heard anything in a couple of months, to go back. I'm sure they thought I was making a fuss about nothing.'

'And you've not heard from them?'

She shook her head. 'I'm sure they've just filed him away. It happens all the time these days, doesn't it, kids running away? How can they possibly look for them all?' She had a point. But surely they could have done a bit more in this case. It wasn't as if Martin had been in the habit of running away. And he hadn't even told his mother he was leaving.

'What about friends, people he spent time with?'

She sighed. 'He were a loner really, he loved his fishing, there was no one close. He liked to be on his own.'

'There must have been someone, a school friend?'

She bit her lip, gave a small shake of her head.

'Which school does he go to?'

'St Matthew's.'

'Tell me about Martin.'

Her account was sketchy though there was no mistaking the love in her voice. Martin was a quiet boy, doing reasonably well at school. His passion was angling. There'd been no rows or unusual events at home. He'd not talked of leaving. He'd not been in trouble. She told it all slowly, in that thick blurry accent.

'What about drugs?'

She shook her head.

'You're married? How did Martin get on with his father?'

She considered her reply.

'Okay. They're both quiet, never that close.'

'Was Martin lonely, Mrs Hobbs? Was he unhappy?'

Maybe it wasn't the most sensitive question to ask. But I was trying to fathom out a reason for Martin's disappearance. He was a loner, not close to anyone except Mum. Adolescence was a terrible time – even when you had close friends; without them it must be intolerable. But why leave home? An attempt to break away from Mum? Had Martin perhaps blamed her for his loneliness?

She covered her mouth with her hands, shook her head from side to side. Tears welled in those brown eyes. 'I don't know,' she sobbed. 'I don't know.' Guilt and grief.

I tried to bring her back to the task in hand. 'Think for a minute. Is there anywhere Martin might have gone – relatives, a place he knew well, friends of the family?'

She pulled a lace-trimmed hanky from her bag, wiped her nose and eyes, took a shaky breath. 'No, I've racked my brains. We've no relatives round here, we're a small family. I'm so worried, it's just not like him. Will you look for him?' Her eyes were pleading.

'Mrs Hobbs, there's so little to go on. If Martin wants to stay missing, he will.'

'But you'll try?'

'Look, I can ask around a bit. A lot of youngsters drift into Manchester initially . . . but after a month . . . If I don't get any leads in the first couple of days, I really don't think it would be worth pursuing. You'd be wasting your money.'

'Thank you.' The hanky came out again.

'I need a recent photo.'

'Yes.' She fumbled in her bag. 'I'm afraid I haven't any good ones. We had a fire you see, last year. The lounge got the worst of it, the albums . . .'

She handed me two snapshots and a newspaper clipping. Both photographs were outdoor shots, full-length, taken from a distance. In one, a slight dark-haired boy in school uniform stood by a bus-stop; in the other, the same figure, in a waxed jacket, sat at the edge of some water surrounded by fishing tackle.

'That's up at Lostock. Rumworth Reservoir,' she said. 'He liked it there.' It was a better shot of the reservoir than it was of Martin.

The newspaper cutting showed a smiling Martin holding up an eight-pound carp. It was faded and grainy but it showed his face more clearly than either of the photos. There was an elfin look to him; pointed chin, slight nose, cap of dark hair. His face seemed lit up by that smile.

'I'll get copies done of these, then you can have them back.'

'I brought some money.' She fumbled with the clasp of her purse. Drew out an envelope. Cash. A thousand pounds.

'This is far too much,' I protested.

We wrangled for a while. She insisted I keep the money and, if I did end up resigning after two or three days, I could send her the difference. Oh, well. It'd be a pleasant surprise for the assistant bank manager, with whom I had such a lively exchange of letters.

I made a note of Mrs Hobbs' phone number and told her I'd be in touch early the following week, unless I had any news before then. She thanked me about twenty times on the way to the door. I began to wonder whether she might have been Martin's problem, finding it hard to let him go, not knowing how to give him the space to grow up and away from her. Perhaps. But, for now, my task was to find out where he'd gone, not why he'd left.

I jotted down a few starting points; hostels, his school, the reservoir at Lostock, Manchester. Impressive, eh? I rang my friend Chris, who works in the housing department, and, after the usual exchange of pleasantries, asked her to give me a list of the hostels in the city, particularly any popular with young people. And any other places she knew of where a runaway might end up. She was about to start a meeting and promised to pop round after work with the information I wanted.

I rang St Matthew's High School to check what time lunch was. It might be tricky trying to book appointments with form teachers, trying to establish over the phone what lessons Martin had liked best. I reckoned the best bet would be to just turn up unannounced, ask around the staff room and the playground. People would give more away if they were caught unawares. No time to provide neat cameos of the truth. It'd be Monday before I could get up there but the hostels would be open all weekend.

I looked bleakly at the drying ceiling. The remaining walls were begging to be given the same treatment but I'd lost my momentum. I'd try and find it again some time next week. There'd be no chance over the weekend. Some activities don't go with children and decorating's one of them.

I shut up shop and left a note on the Dobsons'

kitchen table apologising for the appalling smell. The fumes seemed to have risen through the house with a vengeance, strong enough to make my eyes water.

After nipping home for a bite to eat, I swapped my Mini for my pushbike and hurried to deposit the money in the bank. I was certain to be mugged before I got there. Couldn't everyone tell I was carrying a grand in my rucksack? A thousand pounds. When I draw money out, they always trot off to check the computer while I sweat it out, trying not to look worried. This time I expected a little respect and admiration. A smile perhaps, a financial nod and a wink. No such look. Bland indifference. Perhaps they sensed the money wasn't truly all mine – not yet – probably not ever, if the case was as fruitless as I expected.

I needed photocopies of Martin's photographs. There was a photocopier at the library. The library was shut. Industrial action. The council had promised to regrade the staff years before; the staff were still waiting. And fed up to the back teeth. So was I.

I cycled over to the newsagent's that had a photocopier and got five of each of the photos and ten enlargements of the newspaper cutting. It was time to go and collect Maddie from nursery school. My working day was over. Paid work, that is. The second shift was just beginning.

CHAPTER THREE

Home is a large, slightly shabby Victorian semi in Withington, south Manchester. Solid red brick with crumbling stained glass, high ceilings, big rooms and a wonderful garden. Withington houses a mix of people; families, students, workers from Christie's hospital. The area has an old-fashioned swimming pool, a library, a health-food shop and its very own fleapit-style cinema.

Maddie and I share the house with Ray and his little boy, Tom. It's a strictly platonic arrangement. We rent the attic flat out to a lodger.

Tom's a year younger than Maddie, a fact he's never allowed to forget. He's developed the resilience of a second child. The four of us get along pretty well, though Ray and I have our moments, a bit like the kids. Just like the kids. Resentment and squabbling, usually over the chores. Ray sulks, I bully, he flies off the handle and flounces off to do whatever hasn't been done (it's always a one-way nag) and peace is restored. Life is humdrum, domestic. We take turns babysitting but neither of us paints the town red when unleashed. We just shuffle along to the local for a couple of pints with old friends. Every few months Ray meets a new woman and takes to wearing aftershave and trimming his moustache. But it never seems to amount to much and he appears more or less content with his lot. He

potters around, building furniture in the cellar, which is a labour of love rather than an economic proposition, and spends hours hunched over his computer. Ray's doing a part-time computing course at Salford Tech. He hopes it'll help him earn a decent income. To date, all it's generated is a lot of indecent language.

I made tea for Tom and Maddie and let them eat it picnic-style in the garden, then slung some vegetables into a pan with half a jar of Nazir's Vindaloo Sauce for Ray and me to eat later. Chris arrived in the gap before bedtime. We sat in the kitchen, tea in hand.

'How's the new lodger?' she asked, raising her eyes heavenwards.

'Don't ask.'

'That bad?'

'I think so. No sign of improvement. He's away till Thursday. But then . . . we're going to have to do something. We can't go on like this. It's getting so I dread coming into the kitchen in case he's brewing up. It's your fault,' I rounded on Chris, 'if you hadn't moved out, we wouldn't have ended up with him.'

Chris giggled. 'I've got the stuff you wanted.' She foraged in a battered briefcase and drew out a large manila envelope. Inside were lists of hostels.

'These are the two direct access ones: the Direct Access Centre and Peterloo. I've marked them with an asterisk. They take people straight off the street, always keep a few beds free, sort people out with Welfare Advice the next day, try and get them into a B & B. The rest are the general hostels, men's and women's; some are church-run. Most of them expect payment, unlike the direct access ones. What do you want them for?'

'I'm on a case, missing person. He left home with no money, nowhere to go, as far as his mother knows. It's possible he came to Manchester, stayed in a hostel. I can check these . . .'

'No chance,' Chris interrupted. 'They won't tell you anything. It's confidential.'

'But if I explain . . .'

Chris shook her head. 'It doesn't matter, they have to protect people. No one's given that information.'

'But all I need to know is whether he's stayed in any of the hostels, nothing else.'

'They can't tell you that, Sal. They won't even tell family. It's a strict rule. It has to be.'

'Shit!'

'C'mon,' Chris remonstrated, 'if they start giving out that sort of information, no one would trust the hostels . . .'

'I know, I know . . . I didn't think. It's just, how am I supposed to start looking? I don't even know if he came to Manchester.' I cleared away the mugs. 'What about kids who don't use the hostels? Are there any places they regularly sleep out?'

'Well, we haven't got a cardboard city or anything like that. There used to be quite a lot of people under the arches, round Ardwick and down Whitworth Street in town. The council have got heavier on people sleeping rough; they don't like to admit it still goes on. There's still a bit of squatting, too, mainly in the old buildings in town – warehouses, places that are waiting demolition or redevelopment.'

'I suppose I'll just have to ask around. Thanks anyway. At least I didn't go making a fool of myself trying to get blood out of a stone.'

'Be careful. Visitors aren't exactly welcome. A lot of those kids have good reason for leaving home, but there's no provision for them. They're constantly hassled by the police; after all, a lot of them have to thieve or beg to get by. They might not take kindly to anyone snooping around.'

'Point taken. I'll be careful.'

* * *

Later, when Ray had put the kids to bed and we'd eaten, I wandered into the garden to clear up the toys. It was still light, though the cloudy sky threatened rain. I spent an hour staking up straggling carnations and gathering up mammoth brown slugs that had been munching their way through my bedding plants. I dropped them in the beer traps. The traps had been fairly successful but had begun to smell appalling. I'd have to clean them out and replenish them. Tomorrow. By the time I'd finished, a light rain had begun to fall along with darkness.

I climbed into a hot bath and soaked the lilac paint from my hair. The weekend stretched ahead with its pattern of chores and outings. Martin Hobbs was on hold till Monday. I wondered where he was sleeping tonight. Somewhere safe and dry, or out there in the warm wet rain?

CHAPTER FOUR

St Matthew's was a red-brick Victorian school which had been added to, over the years, with an assortment of prefabs and a single-storey extension. Boys and girls in maroon and grey uniforms swarmed over every available inch of playground. Parking the car took some manoeuvring. Adolescents seem to move at two speeds; manic or catatonic. I made liberal use of my horn but half of them seemed to have some sort of death wish. I managed not to fulfil it.

I asked a huddle of boys on the entrance steps the way to the staff room. One of them offered to show me the way. We walked through endless corridors strewn with pupils and adorned with displays of work. En route, I let slip that I wanted to talk to Martin Hobbs' form teacher. He shrugged his shoulders.

At the staffroom door, I knocked and entered. The room was cramped. Low PVC chairs surrounded coffee tables. At the far end of the room, the smokers sat. Open shelving lined all four walls and papers spilt from every nook and cranny. Piles covered the coffee tables too. I approached the nearest group. Half-a-dozen women eating Pot Noodles, sandwiches and fruit. A couple were marking exercise books at the same time.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for Martin Hobbs' form teacher.'

'What year's he in?' one of the Pot Noodles asked.

'Fifth, I think. He's sixteen.'

'Five Delta – Russ O'Brien – the one with the beard, in the corner.'

'Thanks.'

Russ O'Brien was a smoker. Pipe. Eyes closed, feet on the table. Stout, hairy. Looked a bit like a mountain climber.

'Mr O'Brien?'

He opened one eye, realized I wasn't a pupil and opened the other. Slid his feet from the table and sat up in his chair.

'Yes?'

'Hello.' I sat down on the chair next to him. 'I wanted a word about Martin Hobbs.'

'Yes?' He loaded the word with caution, sizing me up.

'Martin's been reported missing. His family have asked me to make a few enquiries on their behalf.'

'I see.' His eyes narrowed slightly and he relit his pipe.

'How long is it since Martin was in school?'

'Have you any identification? After all,' he spread his hands, 'I've only your say-so.' I blushed and fished in my jacket for one of the cards I always carry. I brushed off the fluff and crumbs and handed it over.

'Mmmm.' He wasn't impressed. I know it's only a simple photocopy job, no colours, no trendy graphics, but it states my name, number and business. He sighed and turned over the card, sighed again. I felt like I'd handed in the wrong homework.

'You can ring Mrs Hobbs if you want to confirm my identity.'

I was getting rattled by his attitude.

'It's okay,' he smiled. It wasn't much of an improvement. 'Just testing. Well, Martin's not been in for a month or so. I asked the secretary to ring home after a couple of weeks. Family said he'd left. End of story.'

'Did Martin ever say anything to you, give you any idea?'

He laughed. 'Martin wouldn't say boo to a goose. Chronically shy.'

'Friends?'

He grimaced and sucked on his pipe. 'Not really. Bit of an odd bod, really. Tended to get left with the other spare parts, you know. Could try Barry Dixon or Max Ainsworth. He usually had to sit next to one or the other of them in his classes.'

'Where can I find 'em?'

'Barry'll be in the library – back of main building, then ask. Bright as they come and twice as loopy. No social skills, you'll see what I mean. Don't know where you'll find young Ainsworth. Hiding, no doubt. Still, that shouldn't bother you, eh? Elementary, my dear.' He gave a wheezy laugh. I smiled but I wasn't amused.

'Did Martin have any favourite subjects? Any other teachers he might have confided in?'

'Nope. He scraped through a couple of his mocks, GCSEs. Didn't shine at anything. Kept his head down. Could ask Julia over there,' he waved his pipe. 'The skinny one. Religious studies, encourages the wall flowers, stands up for the underdog. Bit of a social worker.'

Julia wasn't much help. She confirmed Martin's shyness, described him as a loner and rued the fact that he'd never confided in her in or out of the classroom.

I made my way back to the school library. It was pretty full. Exams, I suppose. I was directed to the small cubicles at the back of the room. There I discovered Barry Dixon. When he began to talk, I realized what Russ O'Brien had been getting at. The boy's speech was spattered with asides, tangents, classical and philosophical references and quotations. He also spoke incredibly fast, like Patrick Moore on speed.

He only ever broke eye contact to blink and he broke all the rules about personal space, so I felt as though he was hemming me up against the wall of the tiny cubicle. I asked Barry if he knew where Martin had gone, if he knew why he was unhappy and if he'd ever talked of a place or people he'd like to visit. I drew three blanks in amongst the barrage of chatter.

Max Ainsworth had everything to attract the bullies. His face was raw with acne, he wore thick glasses and a brace, he was lanky and round-shouldered. He sat alone on a bench in a quieter area of the playground.

I explained why I was there and began my questions. Max thought before replying and seemed to know a great deal more about Martin than Barry Dixon had. It struck me that Barry was oblivious to other people, locked in his academic world. Max had the more common ability to hold a conversation where you take turns speaking.

'Do you know why he left home?'

'He was fed up with it. He never said much, just used to say he'd leave home soon as he was sixteen.'

'Where would he go?'

'Dunno. Try and get a job, I suppose. Not easy.'

'No. Did he ever mention other friends, places he might stay?'

'No, he was very quiet. Fishing. That was his big thing. He'd talk about that. I went with him a few times, Dean Clough, Rumworth. It was all right but I didn't have all the gear. Bit boring really. He were good at it. Won competitions and that.'

'Why was he fed up at home? What were his parents like?'

'Dunno, never went round. He came to mine a few times.'

I reckon Max was the nearest thing to a friend Martin had. I gave him one of my cards and asked him

to get in touch if he thought of anything else, or if he heard from Martin.

'Like telly,' he flashed a smile. Then his voice filled with concern. 'Do you think he's all right?'

'Yes.' Reassurance came automatically. I hadn't really considered whether Martin could be in trouble, he'd not shown any leaning towards crime before . . . and teenage suicides don't usually leave home to escape. 'Do you?'

Max shifted on the bench. 'S'pose so, it's just . . .' he paused. 'There was this one time . . . he was getting really riled . . . they were giving him a hard time,' he nodded towards the kids in the playground, 'and he just went mad, lost it completely. He nearly killed this guy. Had his head, banging it against the floor, there was blood everywhere. We had to drag him off. He was in a daze, like he didn't know what he'd done. They laid off him after that. Passed it round he was a bit of a nutter.'

'Do you think he was?'

'No. It was just that once. Rest of the time he was just quiet. Scared the shit out of me, I can tell you, seeing him like that.'

'Wasn't he disciplined?'

Max shook his head. 'No one reported it. Gibson went to hospital, his mates took him, said he'd fallen off a wall or summat like that. Martin was back the next day like it had never happened.'

I got caught in heavy traffic driving back to Manchester. I always come in through Salford, our neighbouring city, and there was only one lane open due to repair work.

The sun shone and it was hot in the car. I wound the window down and mentally crossed off my list as we

edged slowly forward. It wasn't a long list. I could ask around up at Martin's old fishing haunt, though I suspected that anglers were a solitary breed. And I could wander the streets of Manchester, in search of other young runaways. See if anyone recognized Martin's photo. It was a long shot but I didn't have much option. I didn't exactly relish the prospect of trawling round town for the young homeless, so I decided to get it over and done with as soon as possible. I hadn't time to fit it in before picking the kids up but I'd do it first thing the following morning. And on Wednesday I'd go fishing . . .