

TO STEAL A MAN'S FREEDOM
ALL IT TAKES IS . . .



CONVICTION

JACK JORDAN

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Dedicated to:

the Dream Team

PART I

1



Five days until the trial

The thought of a murdered family should make me feel repulsed. Enraged, even. And yet, I feel the same giddiness one might feel before a first date; the fervent flap of butterfly wings in my gut.

I sit before the brief for Wade Darling's case, the blood-red ribbon unspooled on the surface of my desk, eyeing the loose pages, well-thumbed from when they belonged to Adrian Whittaker QC. I think of him leaping from the Northern Line platform before the oncoming tube train and wince. A brilliant legal mind, gone. I met him once, and never would have dreamed he would be the type. But then who is, until pushed to their limits?

Just a couple of days ago, I had been green with envy over this case. Any barrister in their right mind would take it: the media coverage, the career progression, the recognition from peers; Queen's Counsel, if they hadn't been appointed already. It is a dream of a trial, when one looks beyond the tragedy of the case. I look to my calendar and mentally mark the day. Wednesday 2 January, 2019: the defining day of my career.

When I was told just yesterday that I had been chosen to defend, I sat and let the news sink in, knowing this would be the case to change my career trajectory forever. If

only I had more time to prepare. If my client had been charged with a petty crime, it would be easy enough; there is a blueprint to those kinds of cases. I could recite my argument for a client like that in my sleep. But to prepare a defence for a client facing three life sentences, in what is said to be the biggest trial of the year, in a matter of days?

I break away from my thoughts and spot my hands white-knuckling the arms of my chair. I unclench them, flexing my fingers until the blood flows back to the tips.

It has been a long time since I had a physical brief to grip onto, with the justice system finally having reached the digital age. However, the older, more experienced barristers like Whittaker are often stuck in the past, plagued by the superstition that changing one's ways will affect their performance. I get it. It feels right like this, in the same way a painter must feel holding their brush.

I trace the cover with my fingers, savouring the moment. I have advocated in murder trials before, but never one of this magnitude, and with my upcoming fifteen-year anniversary as a barrister, the timing couldn't feel more poignant. Winning the Darling trial will be an automatic shoo-in for Queen's Counsel. Better cases. Better pay. Those two simple letters after my name that I have wanted for longer than I care to remember. And despite the little time I have to prepare, thinking of Whittaker's decades of experience and expertise helps calm my nerves. If I had to choose a case to take over at such short notice, it would be one of his.

I glance over today's front pages fanned out on my desk. The Darlings' home is splayed over every cover, flames roaring from the windows of the sprawling country home. The Darling murders have graced the headlines for months, and spread through the public masses like wildfire, with everyone from the Scottish Highlands to Land's End forming their own opinions on the case and my client. The truth has been twisted

and mangled by their wagging tongues so many times that I know I will have my work cut out for me in bringing them back to the facts. Lies are always so much more enticing.

I pull my copy of the *Metro* from the pile and take a look at my client: Wade Darling takes up the front page, snapped as he was led out of the hospital in handcuffs after he was arrested for allegedly murdering his family while they slept. He is a handsome man, from what I can see of him: pale eyes, chiselled cheekbones, a head of thick blond hair – no easy feat for a man beyond the forty mark. He will certainly be able to woo some of the jury with such good looks on his side, if they can look past his alleged crimes. In the photo, he towers above the officers flanking either side of him, and even in cuffs he has an air of authority. I wonder how he appeared to his family behind closed doors.

I take a deep breath and open the brief, fingering through the newspaper cuttings that have been sliced out with an unsteady hand, and scan the headlines.

HOUSE OF HORRORS: MOTHER AND CHILDREN SHOT DEAD IN FIERY BLAZE

FATHER OF TWO CHARGED WITH DARLING MASSACRE

The horror of the photographs is almost hypnotic. I eye the once magnificent country mansion burnt to a shell, its innards crumbled and collapsed within the wreck; then the aerial shots that the press helicopters took from above as the firefighters were still battling the blaze well into the late hours of the following day, and the day after that, as

the thick trail of smoke continued to rise up into the sky for miles. If looked at closely, you can see the corpses of the Darlings' horses, shot between the eyes and left to burn, their remains charred black where they lay in the burnt rubble of their stables. The bodies of the Darling family were found among the mass of destruction. It took almost a week to get them all out; to distinguish their bones from the debris.

I slip the photos of the victims from the brief. Yolanda Darling, forty-two, wife of the defendant; Phoebe, eighteen, daughter of the defendant; and Danny, the youngest and non-binary, just sixteen years of age. All suspected to be victims of an accidental blaze before the signs of arson came to light and the bullets were found in their skulls. They were a striking family, which isn't surprising, what with Yolanda's modelling past. The children shared the same white-blond hair as their mother, the same stark blue eyes.

Despite not having read the brief from cover to cover, I know the story. It seems everybody does. A husband, father of two, accused of losing his mind and killing his family before setting their country home ablaze. The teens wouldn't have known what happened to them: they were shot dead in their beds as they slept, the entry wounds at the back of their heads. They wouldn't have smelt the smoke or felt the hot lick of flames, nor would they have heard the shots due to the silencer found on the end of the murder weapon at the scene. Yolanda, however, fared worse. She must have seen or heard something, or been awake at the time of the attack, for she was found under the rubble where the staircase used to be, having sustained gunshots to her right knee, her back, and finally her head. The third and final execution. In my mind, I picture her running for the staircase, her eyes bleared with sleep and her hair trailing behind her. I

envisage the first shot to her leg was fired to disable her. The second was to throw her to the ground. The last and final bullet was to take her from this world.

My client was found alive but unconscious from smoke inhalation, lying on the ground floor by the back door in the kitchen where he had crawled to safety. He had suffered second-degree burns to his left hand, and there was gun powder residue on the other, his family's blood on his pyjamas. The rifle was found beside him, covered in his fingerprints and his alone.

It's a good thing I enjoy a challenge.

As I read through the brief, I find it is far messier than I expected. Whittaker was held in high regard on the legal circuit, and to peek into his world and find it in such disarray is disappointing. By the looks of it, there are even some vital documents missing – a copy of the prosecution's psychiatric examination report of my client's medical history by Dr Samantha Heche, and at a glance, the witness statement from Yolanda Darling's mother, Annika Viklund. To have these missing so close to the trial doesn't fit with my picture of Whittaker at all, and to see Wade Darling on the list to give evidence is even more concerning. It usually works in a defendant's favour to remain silent during their trial and to let us do the talking for them, forgoing the chance for the prosecution to question them in cross-examination. Perhaps Whittaker's mental health struggles bled into his work.

I glance at the name of Wade's solicitor. Eddie Chester, from William and Chase. Although it would have been Adrian's job to chase the missing files, it is the job of the client's solicitor to acquire all the evidence the barrister needs. As the barrister, it was Adrian's role, and now mine, to be the mouthpiece for the case and form the client's defence to bring before the jury, but it is up to Eddie to source the materials; the man

who has been with our client since the first day the police suspected him of the crime, and who knows him best. Which means both Adrian and Eddie failed to do their jobs. I jot down the missing statements to mention at today's hearing.

A swift knock at the door breaks me from my thoughts.

Artie stands in the doorway with a smirk, mischief sparkling in his eyes.

'Good morning, Neve Harper. Or should I say, soon-to-be Neve Harper QC.'

'You can wipe that look off your face. You'll have given Niall an aneurysm by passing the job to me.'

I imagine what Niall Richardson's face might look like when he hears the news of my appointment to Mr Darling's defence. It won't be the first time we have stood on opposite sides of the bench in a trial. We had been at the Bar together before going our separate ways to different chambers, but our competitiveness never fails to reappear when our paths cross.

'I don't know what you mean,' he replies, leaning against the doorframe. 'I simply gave the case to my most promising defence barrister. A bit of healthy competition never killed anyone, did it?'

Arthur Mills – Artie for short – senior clerk and head of chambers, the man who makes sure everything runs smoothly, and has been a permanent presence in my career ever since I passed the Bar. He is seven years older than my thirty-eight, but has a young, mischievous air about him, as if he is still at university picking his way through freshers and drinking until dawn, puffing on fags like they aren't more than a tenner a pack these days. It is evidently clear upon meeting him that his family's wealth and privilege has meant he has never had to grow up.

‘You’ll be the most hated clerk in the city this morning. Who’d you have to kill to get your hands on this?’

He taps the side of his nose as he makes his way over to the desk and perches on the corner.

‘You sure you can handle it, then?’ he asks.

My collar seems to notch closer to my neck, pressing against the ridge of my throat.

‘I’m offended you’d ask.’

‘I’d ask the same of anyone. You’ve got less than a week till the trial; no easy feat.’

‘That’s if the judge doesn’t postpone it at the hearing this afternoon.’

‘He won’t. This case has been delayed too many times, and the public are getting arsey. The CPS won’t want people knowing what a complete shambles their judicial system is, will they?’

‘We’ll see.’

He exhales sharply, his breath laced with the harsh scent of cigarettes, and taps his finger on Adrian Whittaker’s case notes.

‘Write down anything good before he jumped?’

I flash him a look, and he raises his hands in mock surrender.

‘You know me,’ he says as he heads for the door. ‘I have a knack for crossing the line.’

‘Well,’ I say pointedly. ‘if that’s all...’

He remains in the doorway with that familiar spark in his eyes; the sort of smarmy stare a man gives a woman from the other end of a bar, mentally undressing her.

‘What do you want, Artie?’

‘Nothing,’ he replies. ‘Just rattling the cage.’

‘And why would you want to do that?’

‘I’ve learnt over the years that it pays to piss you off. You’re best at your job when you’re angry.’

‘You’re a sociopath.’

He laughs heartily, flashing the dark fillings in his molars. When he recovers himself and sets his eyes on me again, his smile slowly fades.

‘All jokes aside – you good?’

He gives me *the look*. The one I always get around this time of year. An offensive amalgamation of curiosity and pity. I feel my guard lock into place.

‘I’m fine.’

‘You doing the vigil again this year?’

‘Like every year,’ I reply coolly. I stare down at the brief and pretend to read. ‘Will that be all?’

He laughs behind closed lips. ‘Yes, miss – I’ll be on my way.’

The words swim on the page before me. I try my hardest to concentrate, but I can still sense him standing there, watching me. I know he is smirking without even needing to look at him.

‘What is it, Artie?’

I shoot him a look; he is smiling wider now. Forever enjoying a good back and forth. He has always been able to find a person’s weak spot, the dagger in a person’s side, and twist it. He’d have made a good barrister, if he had ever wanted out of chambers.

‘Niall better have his wits about him,’ he says. ‘All it’ll take is one of those glares from you and he’ll be shaking like a pissin’ dog.’

I listen to him snigger to himself as he heads off down the corridor towards the clerk’s office, whistling a playful tune.

When the silence finally returns, I place my attention back to the brief, trying to shake the vigil tonight from my mind. But I can't focus on the words; they become meaningless black blobs, taunting me.

I open my desk drawer, take out my wedding ring from inside, and slip it on. The gold band is cool against my skin after being left in the depths of my desk for days, hidden away along with my thoughts of him. I can barely bring myself to look down at it glinting on my finger and quickly slip it off again, placing it inside the drawer once more. I will put it on before I leave, but for now, all I want to do is forget.

I hunch myself over the brief and begin to read.

2



I sit in the back of the coffee shop at the table furthest from the window, reading over the life of a dead woman as I wait for the man charged with killing her to arrive, when an email pops up in the corner of my laptop screen beside me.

Don't read *The Times*.

It's from Sam, a clerk from chambers. I don't need to ask what the email is referring to. If it had been sent by anyone else or for any other reason, this would have riled me, but I know he means well. They need me to be focused on the trial with no distractions. But of course, I will. I usually avoid all press coverage of my husband, but I feel myself drawn to the story, to him. I type his name into Google followed by *The Times*. The article appears beneath the search bar.

Three years on: the strange disappearance of Matthew Harper

I click on the hyperlink for the article and hold my breath. There is a photo of him beneath the headline, a professional shot he had taken for work as managing director of

a charity for domestic violence survivors, the year before he went missing: his hair had started to grey at his sideburns, with fine lines tracing his olive skin, accentuating his eyes as he smiled for the camera. My husband was handsome. Painfully so.

I haven't looked at a photo of him in the longest time. The sight of him brings up too many emotions that I actively keep down. But looking at him now – at the eyes I would stare into endlessly, at the lips I used to kiss – I feel them slowly crawling to the surface.

Edited into the right-hand corner of the photo is a smaller one: the last known photo of my husband, a freeze-frame shot from a neighbour's security camera capturing him during his final run, his white trainers stark in the darkness of the night.

I cast an eye over the byline of the article.

Delving into the infamous missing person's case that inspired the hit true crime podcast series, crime correspondent Melanie Eccleston returns to the mystery on the three-year anniversary of Matthew Harper's disappearance, and follows up on what became of his Darling.

My stomach pitches at the sight of a single word. *Darling*. Capitalised. A prelude to the link that Eccleston will evidently draw to my life after Matthew's disappearance, and my upcoming case. Sam was right to warn me off it, but I can't keep myself from reading on. I hover my shaking hand over the trackpad and scroll.

...Can a man really vanish into thin air? The disappearance of Matthew Harper enraptured the nation in 2016, with all our questions unanswered. But of all

those questions, one dominates: if Matthew Harper is dead, whatever happened to his body?

A man goes for his usual evening run at 8 p.m. on Christmas Eve and never comes home, the last sighting of him caught by grainy CCTV footage captured from a property along Western Road. No witnesses. No trace. All it took for the disappearance to hit the mainstream was a popular podcast to feature it as part of their true crime series; the press picked up on it within days, and soon enough the nation was feverishly gripped, dissecting my life and grief with gleeful entitlement. Why would the managing director of a charity, known for his kind temperament and thoughtfulness, suddenly go missing? Online forums appeared overnight to untangle the mystery, cult-like in their devotion to the case and the missing man they had never met, relaying the story so sensationally that the ins and outs of my own life soon became foreign to me. Newspaper articles chased the public's interest, and in turn, the journalists chased me: the woman known for winning criminal trials who had found herself trapped within an unsolvable case.

I always do this – describe it like I would the breakdown of a case. Factual, devoid of emotion. It's easier this way. But something is different this time; perhaps it was the photo of him, looking into his eyes lined with his smile, staring back into my soul from the page, or perhaps it is due to the vigil this evening.

I reach the clincher of the article and wince.

Neve Harper, a staple figure in the capital's courtrooms, failed to slow down.

While avoiding all press enquiries and media interest surrounding her

husband's disappearance, she has never shied away from making sure her clients take centre stage, with her stoic face featured just a step behind, seemingly conscious of her better angles so to appear in the best, yet supposedly coincidental, light. One might argue that Ms Harper made a name for herself off the back of her husband's demise, while conveniently refusing to play the victim so not to affect her fierce reputation in the courts. One could even go so far to say that her quiet fame led to her success in acquiring the infamous Darling trial, scheduled to appear before the jury on—'

I slam my laptop shut.

Eccleston has never held back, but to cut this deep is a new low. She chased me for months after Matthew's disappearance, desperate to be the journalist to crack me open. But once the gleam on the story waned, she seemed to as well, but not without making it her mission to smear my character instead. The anniversary never fails to reignite her grudge.

I look down at my hand, shaking violently where it rests on the laptop.

Now is not the time. I can think of him later, at the vigil. Not be fore.

I drum my fingers against the surface of the table. It has been six months since I had my last cigarette, but at times like these, I long for my filthy habit.

The bell above the door chimes. The café is a favourite of mine, small and inconspicuous, hidden down a back street near to the courthouse. No one would expect to find Wade Darling here. It is practically empty but for an elderly woman sat alone at a table by the window, and two solicitors from Murrell and Bergmann sat in a

bay to themselves, whom I've known and worked with for almost a decade. When Wade and his solicitor walk through the door, it is impossible to miss them.

Wade enters with his head down and his hands hidden deep within his jacket pockets, his eyes shielded by sunglasses and his shoulders hunched inwards, giving him a sheepish, almost hostile front. His once dashing good looks that have been splashed over the front pages have given way to a man who seems hell-bent on making himself appear invisible. But even with his head down, he towers over everyone in the room.

His solicitor, however, is exactly how I pictured him. Eddie Chester is short, bald, and stocky of build; I can practically see the arrogance rippling off him. The sort of bravado a man adopts to make up for a few inches, either in height or elsewhere. He barks a coffee order at the barista behind the counter and boulders over, grabbing the back of the chair opposite mine and dragging it out with a harsh squeak against the hardwood floor. Wade slips silently into the chair beside him.

'Good morning,' I say.

'Mrs Harper,' Chester says. 'I've heard a lot about you.'

I notice he doesn't mention if what he has heard has been good or bad. He reaches out to shake my hand, and crushes it.

'It's Ms,' I reply, as I take my hand back. My pulse throbs at the tips of my fingers. I turn my attention to my client.

'Mr Darling, it's good to meet you. I'm Neve Harper, and I have been asked to represent you in your upcoming trial, in the wake of Mr Whittaker's passing.'

I hold out my hand. His own is cold and quivering, and his nails have been bitten to the quick. His other hand was burnt in the fire; the skin warped, healed in odd, fleshy waves. He slips it under the table when he catches me looking, and takes off his

sunglasses. We meet each other's gaze for only a second. The whites of his eyes are bloodshot, looking almost gruesome against the stark blue of his irises.

'I'm sure Mr Whittaker's passing came as a shock, but please rest assured that you are in very capable hands.'

He nods silently. I clear my throat.

'Thank you both for meeting me here. With the press interest around you, Wade, I thought it best we met somewhere discreet.'

He turns to his solicitor, barely registering my words.

'Do we really have to go through all this again? I went through it all with the last guy.'

'I'm afraid so,' I interject, conscious that Chester has seemingly got Wade's confidence firmly in his grasp. Something I need to change, and fast. 'I have all of Mr Whittaker's notes and have caught up on the hearings you've had to date, but it is important that I hear your version of events from you directly, so I can represent you in court to the best of my ability. I understand you've been waiting a long time.'

'A long time?' he scoffs. 'I've practically been on house arrest for a year. I finally get a court date that isn't pushed back and then my barrister jumps in front of the bloody eleven o'clock train.'

Despite his tactless delivery, I understand his annoyance. These days, trying to get a case to court is almost as likely as winning the lottery. Decades of underfunding. An impossible backlog of cases waiting to be tried; not to mention the barrister shortages due to inhuman hours and insufficient pay, and the legal aid sector virtually at breaking point. If a case is lucky enough to get a date, a defendant and their advocate may arrive