

LIZ JONES

Author of *8 1/2 Stone*



THE TORTOISE

A Revenge Thriller



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THE TORTOISE

A Revenge Thriller

The Tortoise:

a little taster

A revenge thriller
by Liz Jones

Christmas, 2013

I open the door. A man is standing there with a pallet.

‘Delivery of 164 Kilner jars,’ he says.

‘No,’ I say. ‘You must have the wrong address, it’s not for me.’

I am closing the door when he adds, ‘Freddie Whitworth?’

‘Oh, yes, but this isn’t his workplace or his home. There must be some mistake. This is my home.’

‘No mistake. This is the delivery address.’

‘Can I just call him? He’s at the gallery. This is my day off...’

‘Can’t wait, Love,’ he says, depositing them on my steps.

Love? Love!? Isn’t it interesting that even a white van man, clearly 14 stone overweight, on a zero-hours contract, thinks he can patronise me, on the steps of my town house, just because I have a vagina and he has a dick the size of a

He interrupts my reverie. ‘Can you initial just here?’

‘Well, can you at least put them in the hallway or, I know, the basement well?’

‘No can do. Too many steps. Health and safety! See ya! Merry Christmas!’

No wonder he’s overweight. I shut the door. I leave the blasted things on the step. Who is going to steal them, seriously? A junkie who has a sideline in making marmalade? I go down to the kitchen. I’m furious. This is a rare day off, and already he is impinging on my space. I text him. ‘Call me.’ That should put the wind up.

I am just grinding my Coffee Plant of Portobello Road Sumatran organic slow-roasted coffee beans along with my teeth when my phone rings. ‘Hello?’

‘Who is this?’ I say, in all seriousness.

‘It’s me. Freddie.’

I realise I have never heard him speak on the phone before. His voice gives me the creeps. Reminds me of him whispering in my ear while he comes. Oh my God. I realise even his voice is unattractive.

‘Oh, hi. Listen, a delivery has just arrived for you. Some empty jam jars.’

‘Oh, great!’

‘So it’s not a mistake?’

‘No! You’re going to love, love, love this. I am making mincemeat! Real artisan stuff. To sell, of course – I know you won’t eat it hahaha!– at a premium!’

I’d rather eat my own arm.

‘But why are they here?’

‘I’m going to make it at home, er, ooh, ah, yours. Give me something to do in the evening, so we can be together, rather than me make it here and you be all sad and alone without me. The kitchen is freezing here anyway, and tiny. Not that clean, to be honest.’ I want to say. In bugging hell’s name you are going to use my modernist high-end kitchen with DeVol taps as some sort of catering van. What about the mess? The electricity? The mess? But instead I say, ‘Oh, good idea. How festive! I’m just worried someone’s going to nick them.’

‘Whaaaa?’

‘They’re too heavy for me to lift. The man left them on the street.’

‘Hang on. I’m on my way. Can you just watch them till I get there, keep an eye.’

What am I? Neighbourhood watch? His jam jars’ nanny? And then I hatch a plan. He really is the gift that keeps on giving.

He gets home – oh Jesus, even I’m doing it now, thinking my £3m, Grade II listed town house is his as well as mine – much earlier than usual. Who knew he had a variable speed setting? He actually has beads of sweat on his forehead and on his upper lip. He rings the doorbell; I haven’t yet given him a key, which he might get at some point, in a decade or so’s time, when I’m good and ready. Neither does he have the code to the Banham’s burglar alarm, which he will never, ever get. Not in a million, trillion years. I will need to feel safe, secure, unimpeachable when the time comes. I climb

the stairs slowly, open the front door. He is straddling the pallets, as though he's a cowboy, about to brand a calf. All we need is a pair of suede chaps, and a hat. Spurs. A cheroot.

'Whose idea was this?' I ask him, stepping aside as he heaves the boxes into my hallway; I'm already worrying about my wallpaper. If he scrapes it, he'll have to do more than sell a few pots of jam to pay for it.

'Mine, well, and Jasmine's, actually.'

His ex-girlfriend is counselling him to make a hot, sticky mess in my pristine marble and steel kitchen? Fucking retarded ginger-permed short-limbed bitch.

'Oh.'

'Now, don't be jealous,' he says, chucking my chin with a filthy, paint-smeared digit.

'You have nothing to worry about.'

Listen, Love. I've seen her photo on Facebook: she's stuck in the Lotus position, stumpy limbs straining with the effort, topped with a mop of beige curls, a bit like Eighties pop star Sonia, except with huge, pendulous breasts and Matt Lucas's face.

'I'm not worried,' I say. 'I know you love me. Who wouldn't, frankly. But what's the plan?'

I deserve an Oscar, truly. A Golden Globe at least.

'Well.' He talks slowly, as if explaining the theory of Quantum mechanics. 'I buy all the dry ingredients – suet, dried fruit, candied peel - - in bulk, wholesale. Doesn't have to be organic. Stir them together, add

cheapish brandy every few days, charge £9.99 a pop.’
‘Here.’ I make a Beyoncé shape. He doesn’t notice. He probably has no idea who Beyoncé is.

‘Yes, here. We can do it together!’

Do I look like I have any spare time? The only thing I’m going to stir is his relationship with Jasmine. He thinks he’s bringing animal fat into my house?! ‘I’ll fix you a drink,’ I say. ‘You look exhausted! Poor, poor little lamb.’

I walk downstairs. I’m in navy schoolgirl knickers, a man’s V-neck sweater, thick socks scrunched down at my ankles. I’ve no make-up on, but I’ve had my lashes and brows tinted, skin airbrushed tanned. This is my off-duty look. Several thousand pounds spent to look as though, frankly, I just don’t give a damn.

While he is humping and thumping around in the hallway, I pick up his iPad, a gift from me, as are all the nice things he owns these days: a Brora sweater. A Rolex, from the year he was born, very rare, obviously, given it was so very, very long ago, with a blue face. I press the iPad’s face, and it asks me to key in his password. Hmm. His date of birth. No. His son’s date of birth? No. My date of birth? Yes! God, he’s so pathetic. I go to his Facebook page, his personal one. This is so easy. I should have done this before. Ages ago. Such fun!

I start to scroll through his timeline, his front page. Nothing interesting, just lots of siren calls asking him to meet the gang in the pub near West Square. Or to a

Hog Roast and Bonfire Night: 'Come on, FW! Only £50 a head! We are all chipping in £25 on top to buy the birthday boy a 50th birthday gift, a painting he really likes!' God, his friends are tight. And demanding. He told me about none of these ghastly, childish, low-rent but nevertheless expensive when he has no money events. Not that I would have gone. His friends despise me. They think I've kidnapped him. That I'm bourgeois: my feeling is, you can't be left wing if you eat meat and snort coke. I go to his personal messages, and there is one from the dreaded Jasmine. The Eighties bubble perm is cascading around very plump, very freckled shoulders. She has unnaturally short limbs. Stumps, really.

'Dear Freddie. You know I will support you whichever way I can. I could always come and help teach or set up for nothing, you know, if you get busy over Christmas, which I am sure you will! And do think about the mincemeat, don't listen to the cadaverous c*** if she gives you any negativity. This will be a success. The Kilner jars are great, really classy! And so cheap! You could get that Royal warrant you're after, get your unique brand in Fortnum & Mason's. I think it's a real winner! Peace + love + gratitude.'

Interfering bitch. What a complete cow. Royal warrant! In his dreams. His cakes taste like sawdust. Nothing is remotely organic!

I slightly wonder if she knew it was me, that time I took her class. What can I say? I know it was a risk, but I wanted to see her up close. Sniff her. Get more

information, ammunition. I stood, imperious, tall as a telegraph pole in the back of her class. A delphinium amongst a herd of, what, ground cover. Moss. Weeds. The amateurishness of it all shocked me. The fact she announced she only took cash at the beginning of the class, and proceeded to take everyone's funds before it started, not at the end, when you could have said, hang on a minute: that was rubbish. You didn't correct my posture. You had none of the requisite equipment. I couldn't help, though, staring at her for the entire 40 minutes. How the man of my dreams had settled for this: huge, pendulous breasts. Short legs, did I already mention that? Slightly rounded, well padded shoulders. Back fat. The sort of striped Lycra outfit that went out of fashion about the time of the Jane Fonda workout. I never went back.

He hasn't replied on Facebook yet, so I guess he saw her, or texted her. Maybe she gave him an update while he was banging her from behind. Who knows, and who cares, frankly? Whatever, I have to assume he has agreed that the jars of lard are a goer. I begin to type:

'Dear Jasmine [it's not her real name, of that I'm certain. I suspect she's a Karen]. I think I have to make it clear that I'm not comfortable with you calling Anne a cadaverous anything. I've moved in with her – sort of, you know, did I tell you my flat got flooded? Her house is absolutely amazing! So tasteful and expensive, on four floors, with floor to ceiling windows, original shutters, marble bathrooms, Matthew Hilton,

the lot! – so if you continue to disrespect her, then I won't be able to contact you, or consider you as my friend. Which is all you are and all you have ever been. Please only contact me if you have anything positive to say. Isn't that what you have always preached? Positivity?'

I press send. And I wait. I can still hear him stomping around. It's like a herd of elephants has moved in. And not in a good way.

Ooh. She has replied. She's obviously not busy. At all.

'Um, hello! We both used to call her that, when you first spotted her name in the paper, thought you recognised her photo. But okay, I won't call her a cadaver, but I do think she's bad news. You've really changed since you re-met her. You never used to care about marble or Matthew Whatshisname or possessions at all! Peace + love + gratitude. Jx'

Yeah, he's changed! He's started washing! I go to reply. Not too fast, Anne. You know how slow he is on the keyboard, putting on his glasses, peering, fetching another endless cup of sugary tea, pressing the keys with one cautious forefinger. Jab jab jab.

'Anne might come across as just rich and successful and intelligent and really well dressed, in a subtle way, but she has a good heart. She does loads of pro bono work. I'm completely and utterly in love with her. I think I always have been. She was a pinnacle that no other woman has been able to reach. So, please, unless you can be civil and have something

nice to say, do not contact me again.'

She replies. What a bitch.

'I helped you out for months, for no wages! Hang on. Who is this? It doesn't sound like you. You have never been that cruel. It's that Anne woman, isn't it? Pinnacle! Why are you pretending to be Freddie?'

'Yes, it is Anne. Why are you still mithering my boyfriend?'

'I am trying to help him. Protect him. We used to laugh about you and your ridiculous crush. Freddie suggested we send you some photos of him naked, let you know what you didn't get. I am happy for him, really. You know why? At least he's found someone his own age at last.'

I am so angry that I almost throw his iPad to the limestone floor.

'His own age? He's over a decade older than me! Get a life, Grandma. Don't you realise each child adds 10 years?'

At that, I delete the conversation. I go to the fridge, pull out a bottle of champagne, pour myself a glass. Too much more of this and I will become an alcoholic.

Freddie at last appears in the kitchen, like an apparition. I'm beginning to doubt he's even solid; more like an annoying gas.

'Where did you put the jars, Hon?'

'Oh, in the lounge. Sitting room!'

I keep the anger from my eyes, pad to the fridge so he can glimpse my tight little arse. I yawn. 'Fancy an

early night?’

He looks like a small child, told he can have a strawberry Mivvi if he’s really, really good. ‘God, yeah, but I’m knackered now. Phew. Sweating.’ He actually pulls the rag he is wearing away from his armpits, and sniffs.

I tell him I will do all the work, don’t you worry. ‘You go up. I will get you a drink, and follow you.’

I do have a plan.

I go to my iPad, and click on pharmacies. I’m a scientist. I should know how to do this. How to lace the mincemeat invisibly with something that will give his customers a nasty bout of V&D. Invisible, but easily traced back to him. Not every jar, but about 20. I figure if only half get sick, that will be enough to garner some very negative reviews, a few dislikes on his stupid web site, make any thought of ‘Jazz’ equally rancid. I’ll encourage him to use the mixture in his mince pies, too: spread the luuuurrrve. So, I need something that won’t be killed by cooking. That cannot be traced back to me. Something to do with the suet. That’s it. Let the fat infect the greedy, ignorant, gullible sort of people who buy this stuff, thinking it somehow makes them appear cool, hip, worthy, in the know just because the wretched stuff came from a ramshackle stall in Camden market.

Job done, I delete my history, switch off the lights, and go upstairs. I place my Litalla glass of Pellegrino water by the bed and force myself to look at him. He is fast asleep, his spectacles still on. Thank all the

seraphims for that. After a quick shower, a clean of my teeth, and a face mask I can now, hallelujah!, wear overnight without him licking it off like a Labrador, I get into bed. I replay what I have planned for him in my head, and for the first time in ages I get a really good sleep.

