



# **The Weekly Man**

## **Episode 36: Monday - Jack**

And there it was again. Another injury without explanation. Another piece of his life evaporated into...where? It hadn't happened for a long time, at least nothing this serious. It was a big bump and strangely the cut was almost healed. How could he have gone this long without noticing it? A small cut to one of his fingers, a scraped knee or some other minor injury he could understand not noticing but this was over the cliff.

Someone was messing with his head. Someone was somehow controlling his mind, robbing him of his memories and he was sure that he knew who was behind it.

Vine. Valerie Vine. The man had called her Valerie. And he was so obviously government or some sort of agency.

He should have known better. All the signs were there and the PDF confirmed that the covert glances and signals, the repeated attempts to meet and the patience with each failed meeting were all part of something going on under the surface of things. Why would any woman in her right mind put up with all that?

Unless it was a trap. Unless she was luring him into the thing he'd been evading all his adult life. Crosby would have been disappointed with him. He'd played right into her hands, their hands. He'd been a fool. An idiot.

So why the hell did he still love her?

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Valerie Vine was still shaken from her crazy episode at the mall. She'd been so sure that the man at the holographic gallery was Jack. He even had a similar name. But there was nothing of Jack in those eyes. Nothing of Jack in his posture or presence. Even his voice was different. And he genuinely did not recognize her. There was no way he could have feigned that so convincingly. She'd come onto him completely unexpected. There would have been a fraction of an instant in

which something in his eyes would have given him away. But there wasn't. The man she'd seen at the mall was not Jack. He was someone else.

But the resemblance was uncanny.

And then there was that little matter of the day thing. The only contact she'd ever had with Jack was on Monday. He'd long ago said something about that being his only day to have any contact with others. The rest of the days, even weekends, he was absorbed by his comic strip and other things. She'd always passed that off as an eccentric artist thing, which didn't seem so abnormal considering where she worked and the people she worked with.

She'd never actually investigated Jack even though that was her job. She'd started, and then she'd come across his comic strip. There was something in the flow of it, the tight-knit group of kids. There almost seemed to be a sense of warmth in the midst of danger and threat. She'd changed the direction of her investigation into something more personal. She approached him through his email, as a fan. And it had grown over time. The things she wrote about were all real, things she actually felt and thought about, things from her real life. Her job excepted, of course. And she looked forward to his lame excuses for not showing up at each rendezvous almost as much as planning them.

All-in-all, she'd been pretty much hands off with him. But something weird had caught her attention at the mall. According to the schedule of hours at Jacky Carson's gallery, he was there every Thursday to meet with the public. Every Thursday. Just the one day a week.

It was time to look more closely at Jack Morrison on a more professional level. He hadn't sent his usual apology and excuse for missing their meeting. She decided to send him an email asking why, and then begin looking very closely at this man who she thought she knew so intimately but had never met. And yes, she would see what he was up to the other six days of the week.

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About three seconds after he opened his email, her message jumped into his Inbox. He sat for a few moments with his hands on the keyboard as a horde of thoughts galloped through his mind, none of them surviving long enough to make any sense before being trampled by the next. His hand moved slowly to the mouse pad. His finger shook as he opened the email.

Jack...we need to meet. I mean it. We need to talk about a few things. I realize that you don't trust me. LOL. I mean, how many times were we supposed to meet in the past? How many times did you lose heart and leave. Do you know how many times I saw you at our meeting places...and not home with an upset stomach or seeing to a sick relative? Jack, I mean you no harm. Honestly.

Here's the thing, though. We need to meet ASAP to talk about a few things. This is important, Jack. Very important. I think the best place to meet is at your place. I'll be there at 9 tonight.

And you better be there, Jack. :)

Vine

*She knows where I live.*

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Manzer smiled when he read the woman's email. Natalie had told him about the relationship between Jack and the woman who signed her emails Vine. She'd shown him some of the excuses for not showing up. Both he and Natalie agreed that whoever this woman was, she was either infinitely patient or infinitely desperate.

Again, the thought crossed his mind: how did she keep all of this together for so long, keeping seven separate people from finding out that they shared one body, and keeping their secret from the rest of the world? He imagined that there must have been so many times when the whole balancing act came close to tumbling. He was overwhelmed by the enormity of her accomplishment but he was beginning to wonder how much longer she could keep it up. And she'd just had a heart attack. She would need rest. She wouldn't be able to keep up the pace these seven set for her. Plus, it looked like things were getting more complicated than at any time in the past. The outside world was trying to spring into their lives and it was beginning to look like there would be no stopping it. A woman Jacky had had sex with had come knocking on Jackie's door. A woman who'd waited patiently for over a year for Jack to finally meet with him was making an ultimatum. And what were the important things she wanted to talk about? Natalie had tried to find out more about Vine but she was untraceable, almost as though she didn't exist online. Manzer had wondered about that at first. He'd known people in various departments and agencies like that, and none of them were good news. But as time passed and nothing extreme had happened to Jack except weekly failures to actually meet with the woman, he'd assumed that she was just another eccentric like Jack and maybe she was some kind of computer geek who knew how to hide her identity. She'd made the occasional reference in her emails to data work but she'd never been very specific about her job.

And then there was the problem with Natalie. She was going to leave the hospital early, against the advice of her doctor. She'd always been hard-headed but this time there was a lot more at stake. Her health might never return to the pre-heart attack level—just when crises beyond anything that had happened in the past were beginning to develop with the kids.

He stood up and took his empty coffee cup to the kitchen. He wondered what the kids would think if they ever came into Mrs. Gilbert's kitchen and saw so many of the things they grew up with in their childhood house. He put the cup in the sink and decided it was time to pay a visit to Jack.

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*She knows where I live.*

He heard a knock at the door.

*Oh no. Who's that? Who's knocking on my door. What would Crosby do?*

After a couple of minutes, a slightly louder knock.

*Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.*

He heard a voice. "Jack, are you in there? It's me, Uncle Manzer. Can you answer the door?"

*Oh shit.* He rushed to the door and opened it.

"Uncle Manzer! I didn't expect to see you. Come in." He stood aside to let Manzer in.

As he made his way to the couch, he said, "I'm not sure if you've heard about Mrs. Gilbert."

"I saw an ambulance take her away. Mr. Joyce was there but I didn't get a chance to speak to him, and no one has been around since.

"Mr. Joyce is on vacation. And Mrs. Gilbert is doing very well. They got her there in time and now she's making a swift recovery. She's a very strong woman."

“I’m glad to hear that. And you’re right, she is a very strong woman. She’s always been there for me whenever I’ve needed her for anything, her and Mr. Joyce.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Jack.” He shifted his weight to the right to lean on his elbow. “She’s going to be home soon but, in the meantime, I’ll be dropping in to take care of things. If there’s anything you need, let me know.”

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Back in Natalie’s apartment, Manzer wondered about Jack. He’d seen Natalie being put into the ambulance but hadn’t come down, hadn’t made any inquiries, hadn’t gone to the hospital. But then, Jack was someone who had likely seen the whole incident as part of a scheme from whatever secret forces to undermine him and do whatever evil it was they did.

*How does she manage to deal with all this?*

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As soon as Manzer was out the door, Jack rushed back to his email.

*She knows about me backing away from the meetings. But how could she not? How could I have been so stupid to think that she would believe all those lame excuses?*

*She knows where I live. She’s coming here. At nine. She’s coming here. She knows where I live. And what are these important things she wants to talk about? Who’s she working for? Who was that man in the restaurant? And what does she mean by “you better be there”? That sounds like an “or else.” Or else what? But she followed it with a smile. Like she meant it playfully. Think, Jack. This has been going on for so long now. Nothing bad has ever happened to you because of her. All those long emails, all the stories and personal stuff. All of that had to be real. But she never mentioned anything about her work, what she did for a living with..data. She always kept that from you. And you never wondered why. You never stopped to think that this is how she feels about this and this is what she thinks about that, this is her story about the fish stand on Charlotte Street when she was a kid and this is her story about the time she broke her leg when she was a cheerleader. But what does she do? Who does she work for? How does she know where I live?*

*She’s going to be here at nine.*

He stared at the computer screen for about twenty minutes with his brain paralyzed with panic. It was like he’d known all along that it would come to something like this. He’d blanked many things out of his mind but he realized that was something he’d been doing all his life. There had been so many things that he couldn’t explain, so he’d just shrugged his shoulders and let them slide away into some faraway graveyard of unanswered questions.

*She’s going to be here at nine.*

He put his hand on his head and felt the bump. It was smaller, healing. The scab on the cut was almost gone. Healing.

*How could I have missed the healing?*

He re-read her email. Twice.

*She’s going to be here at nine?*

He didn’t have a choice this time. It wasn’t a matter of her inviting him to meet at a coffee shop, bar or restaurant. She wasn’t inviting. She wasn’t suggesting. She was telling him that she was going to come to his place at nine that evening and there was no way out. He had to be there.

He had nowhere to run. After all his years of paranoia, he'd never actually devised an escape route. He'd never worked out the details of what to do if he were cornered. Where would he go? What would he do? Who would help him? He had no friends. There was Mrs. Gilbert and Mr. Joyce but, even after all the years he'd known them, he didn't really know them. And Mrs. Gilbert was in the hospital. Mr. Joyce was on vacation. He'd never met any of the other tenants in the building. He was alone.

*She's coming here at nine.*

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It was starting to get dark out. Jack looked at his computer screen, at the reply he'd sent to her.

Vine, or should I say Valerie,

I don't know who you are or who you work for or how you found out where I live. I can only make a few assumptions, none of which is all that good.

I'm going to make a leap of faith because I have a feeling that you mean me no harm and I will see you at 9 tonight.

Jack

*She knows where I live.*

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Just as Valerie was about to knock on the door, she felt a hand on her shoulder. It wasn't threatening or tight, but it was firm and it was a large hand. She turned in its direction and looked up. The man was huge, and Valerie would have felt threatened except for his eyes. There was a warmth in them that drew her eyes immediately. He removed his hand from her shoulder and put a finger to his lips. He signaled her to follow him.

He led her downstairs to a flat facing the front of the building and extended right to the back. The interior was rustic, as though the place was lifted right out of a rural area at the turn of the nineteenth century. The man motioned toward the couch with his hand as he sat in a chair across from it. "Have a seat Ms Vine. I have an interesting story to tell you about Jack. And his siblings."

Valerie listened without saying a word.

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Jack waited for the knock at the door. He knew it was coming. Nothing could stop it from coming. She knew where he lived. She knew everything. And she was one of them. But she meant him no harm. They were finally going to meet.

And what then?

*Guess we'll just have to work through that.*

He felt a distant sense of relief. The charade was over. The excuses were no longer necessary. He would actually be with her, looking into her eyes as she told him the stories she'd written

about. And he could tell his stories, into her eyes. He was starting to look forward to this. He looked at the time on his laptop. Nine thirty.

*Traffic. She's probably caught in traffic, or her cab was late. Cab caught in traffic.*

Another ten minutes passed. And another ten minutes. It dawned on him slowly. At first, it didn't make sense. It was the last thing that he expected. He would never have dreamed that this could happen. He opened his email.

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For the first time in ages, Valerie Vine was having a glass of wine at home. It was something she'd stopped doing when she started working for the agency, thinking that she would need to keep a clear mind at all times in her current employment. Lately, she'd begun to doubt that and, after her conversation with Manzer Doyle, she needed a glass of wine and she needed to drink it alone.

It was a far-fetched story, but it answered so many questions. And she would be checking things out, just to assure herself that it was true. She looked at the screen on her laptop. She felt like she should write something to him but she had no idea what. She sipped her wine. A notice jumped up on her email.

"Well, I've got mail."

It was from Jack. She opened it.

Vine (aka Valerie)

You stood me up.

Jack

She laughed out loud, sipped some more wine and closed the laptop. She would get back to him tomorrow, even though he wouldn't see her reply until next Monday.