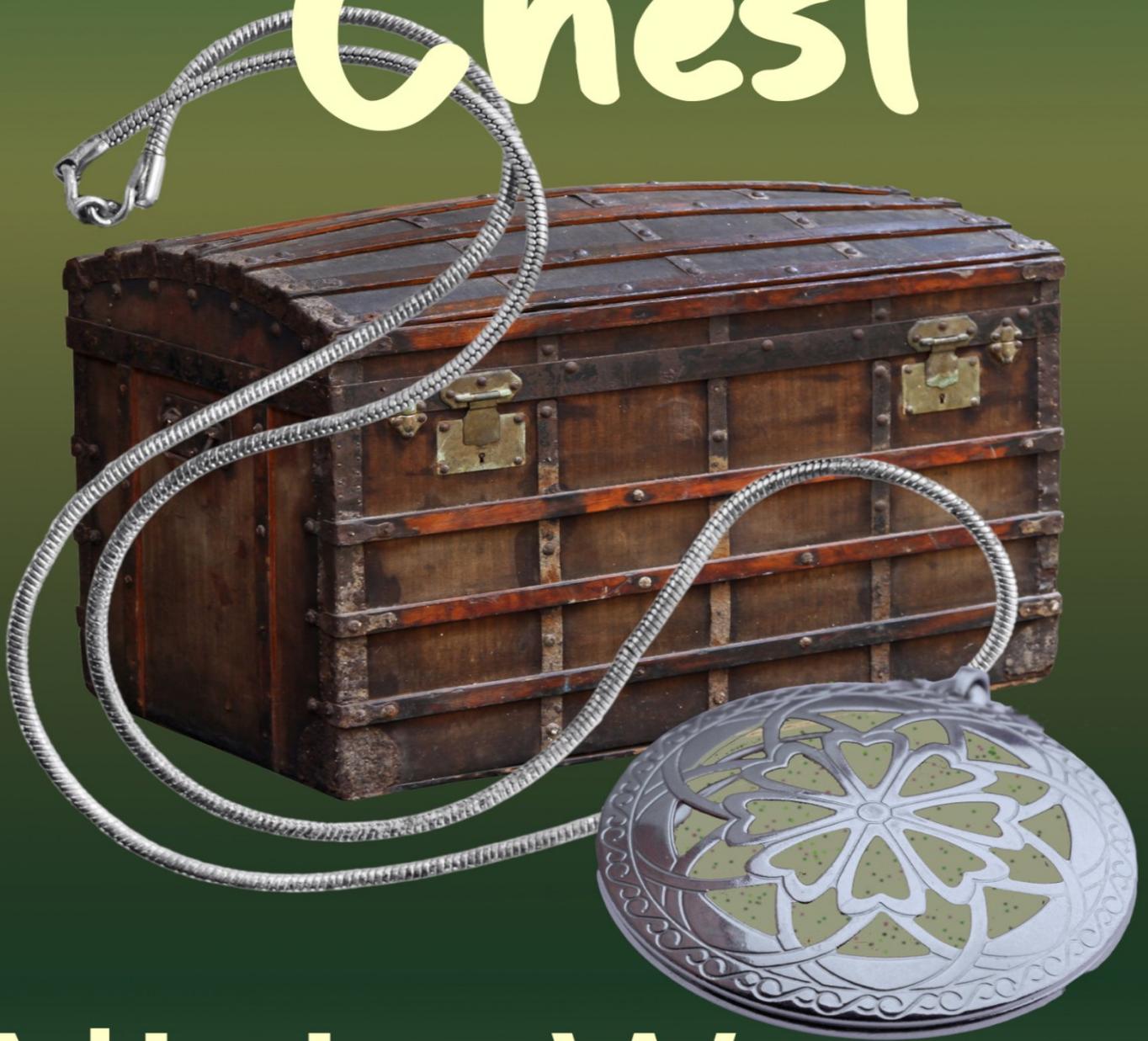


The Locked Chest



Alicia Warne

A JORINDE SCHUITERS MYSTERY

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by

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Alicia Warne Books

AW

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"The bastards!" Viviana announced as she stormed into Jorinde's study and, with a noisy sigh, threw herself into one of the two high-backed chairs by the fireplace.

"Who?" Jorinde asked mildly, glancing up from the ledger she was reviewing but keeping a finger on her place. She'd heard the street door being answered a moment ago, but Viviana almost never waited to be announced. She was Jorinde's best friend and civilities were for other people.

Then, as she looked back down at the next set of neatly inked figures in front of her, the expression on Viviana's face finally registered. This wasn't just Viviana's usual exaggeration; she really did seem genuinely upset. Jorinde knew she wouldn't be able to concentrate on her work until she'd soothed her friend's temper and fixed whatever was troubling her. And so, with only a slight inward roll of her eyes, she marked her place, got up from her desk and crossed over to sit in the other chair.

"Whichever thieving Godsdamned bastards stole my pomander!" Viviana was saying. She threw up her hands in a flutter of fashionable sleeves and jangling bracelets. "The silver one I keep in my lockbox."

She meant the secure chest at the lodgings she used when she was staying in Loperpoort. She was a weatherworker — one skilled in using wind and water magic — and spent most of her time on one of Jorinde's fleet of river barges. Her job was to provide a following wind to fill the barge's sail as it plied its way between Loperpoort and Cantria, no matter what the world's wind was doing. When she wasn't working, she stayed at a lodge in the centre of the city run by the

Weatherworkers Guild. When she was away working, she could leave any possessions she didn't take with her in her lockbox. To keep everything smelling sweet, she always tucked a pomander filled with a paste of herbs and spices between her linens.

"It's gone missing?" Jorinde asked. "Out of your lockbox?"

"Yes." Viviana crossed her arms and pouted. "And before you ask, no, the padlock wasn't broken. And I still have my key." She pulled out a small iron key that hung from a chain around her neck. "And Orso swears blind his keys have been where they should be the whole time." Orso was the Lodge's steward.

"You think Orso stole the pomander?" Jorinde reached for the decanter sitting on the side table next to her chair and poured a measure of wine for each of them.

"Either him or that boy of his." Viviana accepted the offered goblet and threw back half the contents. "Or maybe it was some thieving bastard I'm supposed to call Guild-brother. More than a few of them'd be ready enough to use their wind-skill to pick a lock, I reckon."

Jorinde sipped her own wine. She didn't want to think about the ructions that would result if Viviana accused another Guild member of theft without any proof. "Are you absolutely sure you put the pomander in the lockbox?" she asked.

"Yes." Viviana gave Jorinde a contemptuous look. "I made sure it was right in the middle of my clothes, because they always come out a little musty if I don't do that. And I put my hand on the top to feel for it and make sure it hadn't shifted right before I closed the lid and locked it. So yes, I'm absolutely sure it was there when I locked up and absolutely sure it wasn't there when I came back." She gestured impatiently in the rough direction of the Guild Lodge with her goblet and then took another drink.

Jorinde regarded Viviana thoughtfully. Her friend could be impetuous and whimsical and sometimes over-dramatic, but she

wasn't ever stupid or irrational or prone to lying. Jorinde set down her wine. "Well, why don't I take a look?" she suggested. "Maybe I can figure out what's happened."



It was less than a mile from Jorinde's house to the road, just off the Great Market, where the Weatherworkers Guild Lodge stood. As Jorinde and Viviana passed through the Lodge's gate and into its central courtyard, Orso emerged from the cubbyhole that served as his office.

His expression had turned wary when he saw Viviana but it brightened a little when he caught sight of Jorinde following half a step behind.

"Mistress Jorinde," he exclaimed. "It's good to see you. And Mistress Viviana." He turned back to her with a slight bow. "I can only express again my very sincere regrets and repeat what I said before. I have no idea how anything could have been taken from your lockbox while you were away."

"That's what I'm here to help with," Jorinde said quickly, recognising that Viviana, bristling with suppressed anger, was about to launch into a fresh tirade. "Would you please show me the lockbox, Master Orso."

Orso led them down a passage at the side of his office to a long, narrow storeroom. It was lit by a lantern hanging from a hook in the ceiling. Tools were ranged along one side of the room, while a set of the shelves on the opposite wall were stacked high with an assortment of sundries: a couple of spare chamberpots, several lamps, a crate of candles, a dozen large flasks of lamp oil and more than a score of boxes and sacks whose contents were a mystery. On the floor below the shelves sat a long, iron-banded chest with eight

separate lids. One lid at the far end was flung open and the rest were padlocked shut.

Jorinde turned to Orso. "Mistress Viviana tells me you have a second set of keys to the padlocks." That would avoid having to break a padlock in the rare event a weatherworker died and their things needed to be returned to their next of kin. "Where do you keep those?"

Orso lifted the jangling ring of keys hanging from his belt. "On me during the day. At night, on a hook on the far side of my bed."

He jerked his head towards a half-open door at the end of the passage and Jorinde saw the dark bulk of a wooden box bed. Little chance, then, that someone could get hold of the keys without Orso knowing. And Jorinde really couldn't imagine Orso risking his job or the reputation of the Lodge — not to mention the wrath of the Weatherworkers Guild — for a silver pomander.

She turned back to Orso. "And your boy? Does he have a set of keys?"

Orso shrugged. "Only to the guest rooms. So as he can empty the chamberpots and so on."

"Is he here? May I speak to him?"

"Should be in the servery washing dishes this time of day." Orso made his way to the end of the passage and yelled across the courtyard, "Jip! Need you in the storeroom."

Viviana crossed her arms and harrumphed. "Bet he's the light-fingered little...."

Jorinde touched her arm to shush her and turned back to Orso. "Jip's only worked for you for a few months, hasn't he?" She remembered Viviana telling her a while back that Orso had got a new boy. "What do you know about him?"

Orso gave her a surprised look. "Jip? He's a good lad. Family's poor, but respectable, you know? Father works as a stablehand at the

Falcon." Orso named one of the two best inns in Loperpoort, a stone's throw away on the Great Market. "Mother used to be a scullery maid there."

Jip was now crossing the courtyard. He must have turned twelve at some point in the last year, or Orso wouldn't have hired him, but he was still so small he looked much younger. Give him another couple of years, Jorinde thought, and he'd likely shoot up and fill out. His round face was scrunched up with anxiety as he reached Orso. "Sir?"

"This is Mistress Schuiters." Orso waved at Jorinde as she stepped up next to him. "She owns the barge that Mistress Viviana works on. She wants to ask you a few questions."

Jip turned towards Jorinde and bowed awkwardly. "Mistress?" He now looked confused as well as anxious.

"Jip, isn't it?" Jorinde gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm just trying to find out what's happened to something that was in Mistress Viviana's lockbox. Do you have keys to the lockboxes?"

Jip's eyes opened wide in alarm. "No, Mistress. I didn't—. I don't—." He put his hand almost protectively on the small bunch of keys that hung from his belt. "I just have keys to the rooms."

"And you didn't borrow Master Orso's keys at any point? He didn't lend them to you?"

Jip shook his head mutely.

"Even if you needed something that was locked away...?" Jorinde gently probed. There would be valuable stores — wine and brandy, tea and sugar, salt and other spices — somewhere near the common room on the other side of the courtyard.

Again, Jip shook his head. "I always ask Master Orso and he fetches it for me. Or he opens up and waits for me to get what I need and then locks it again soon as I'm done."

"And you haven't ever opened any of the lockboxes?"

"No, Mistress." Jip sounded shocked she'd even suggest the idea. "Them's for the Masters and Mistresses. I don't have nothing to do with them."

Jip's face had been so transparent and he'd looked so steadily at Jorinde as she questioned him that she had no reason to think he was lying. She gave him a nod. "Thank you, Jip. That's all I needed to know."

Jip looked across at Orso. "May I go, sir? Only the dishes...."

"Yes, run along, lad." Orso turned back to Jorinde as Jip scurried away. "What now?"

"You don't have any other servants?"

Orso shook his head. "Just me and the boy. I cook breakfasts and the rest of the food comes from an eating-house along the road. The *Golden Vine*."

Jorinde crossed her arms, tapping her fingers as she considered the options. "Have you had any other thefts recently?"

Orso shrugged. "None reported. Just Mistress Viviana." He cocked an eyebrow in Viviana's direction. "You made any enemies among the other Weatherworkers, Mistress? Turned one of them down when he asked for a tumble and he didn't like it?" He added the last part with a smirk.

Viviana didn't rise to the bait. Weatherworkers didn't have to be as careful about their reputations as most other women and Viviana knew she had a well-deserved name for being free with her affections — when she chose to be. She simply shook her head and said, "Not since Arturo tried it on with me last year." She shuddered at the memory. "I suppose he *could* hold a grudge that long...."

"Let's take a proper look at the lockbox," Jorinde suggested quickly, before Viviana could impugn Arturo further.



Jorinde got Orso to lift down the lantern in the storeroom so they could see all the way to the bottom of the lockbox. Viviana's section was the second along from the door. Taking the key from her, Jorinde knelt down, opened the padlock and lifted the lid. A sharp, musty smell floated up at her. "I can see why you need the pomander," she muttered.

Behind her, Orso shifted, making the light from the lantern in his hand waver. "I do try to keep the empty boxes aired out, Mistress, but...."

Jorinde began removing the garments from the chest one at a time: not unfolding them, but turning them between her hands to be sure nothing was caught up between the layers before she set them aside. When she was a third of the way down the box, she realised a slim mahogany case had been tucked against one side, standing upright on one of its shorter edges. She pulled it out and turned it over. The light from the lantern glittered off mother-of-pearl: a twining design of vines and leaves around a central motif of two turtledoves inlaid into the wooden lid. Finding the case's clasp, she slid it open and peered inside: half a dozen pieces of jewellery that Viviana wore from time to time.

Snapping the case shut, she passed it up to Viviana. "Nothing missing?"

"No!" Viviana was sounding annoyed again. "I checked. The only thing that's not where it's supposed to be is the pomander. I realised it was gone as I opened the lid and everything smelled awful."

Which was odd. Why rummage through the garments for the pomander when you could simply pull out the case without disturbing anything else? Why not grab case *and* pomander?

Jorinde carried on working her way down the clothes until she reached the layer where Viviana must have put the pomander. There was a deep dent in the middle of the linen and the edges were all rucked up and creased on one side. Perhaps the thief had slid a hand down one side of the box and felt around for the pomander before pulling it out. But, no, that couldn't be right: only the layer immediately above the pomander had been at all rumped, while the edges of several of the layers *underneath* were the ones that had been pushed inwards. All the evidence pointed to the pomander falling down the side of the box — but Jorinde couldn't imagine how something so heavy had become dislodged enough from its spot in the centre of the soft material for that to happen. Not without someone lifting the end of the chest — a very large and very heavy chest — by at least a foot.

Feeling increasingly puzzled, Jorinde worked her way on down the box, each time hoping to find the pomander under the next layer or the next. And then the box was empty and there was still no sign of a gleam of silver against the dark oak of the chest's insides.

But the light from the lamp didn't reach to the very bottom of the chest. Jorinde ran her fingers over the smooth base and poked into the corners and prodded at the joins between the base and sides and found nothing. Until—.

A scatter of splinters near one corner and, just above it, a ragged hole with rough, splintery edges, maybe two fingers high and three fingers wide. Jorinde carefully poked one finger through the hole and came up against something soft and a little damp. A moment later, she got a sudden, much stronger, whiff of the bitter, musty smell she'd noticed when she'd first opened the box, this time mixed with a

hint of something sweeter. Lemon balm or hops and a hint of rose, perhaps.

Jorinde sat back on her heels, beginning to get an inkling of what might have happened. She looked up at Orso. "Who does that belong to?" She pointed to the lockbox next to Viviana's."

Orso frowned. "Master Gerlof. He's away on the *Petrel*." That was one of the deep-water ships that counted Loperpoort as its home. "Been gone three months, near enough, and I'm not expecting him back for another month or more."

"Can you open it?"

Orso looked doubtful. "Well, I could...."

"Please." Jorinde shifted sideways. "I think we're going to find Mistress Viviana's pomander *and* the reason it went for a walk. "

Orso, muttering under his breath, hung the lantern back in its hook and sorted through the keys on his belt before bending down and unlocking the padlock on the box next to Viviana's. He threw back the lid, before hastily recoiling with an exclamation.

A reek of urine and faeces and animal rose up from the box. From somewhere at the bottom there came a sudden scrabbling of claws against wood.

Jorinde carefully emptied the lockbox, picking each item up with the tips of her fingers. Two books; a bundle of letters; a small wooden chest; a purse that clinked a little as she moved it; two robes. Under the second robe, right at the bottom of the box, she found a squirrel-fur mantle, with five or six tiny pink hairless bodies squirming around in a hollow in the centre. A silver pomander, its fretwork dented with tiny bite marks, was wedged against one side of the box, the fur around it matted with smears of fat from the herb-infused paste inside.

"A *mouse* stole it?" Viviana squeaked in disbelief, peering over Jorinde's shoulder with her hand over her nose.

Jorinde nodded. "Wanted to eat the paste, by the looks of it." She gestured towards Viviana's box. "Gnawed a hole in the divider between the two boxes and dragged the pomander through. I'm betting there's also a hole in the back or bottom of Master Gerlof's box, where the mouse got in. Probably a hole in the wall behind the lockboxes, too."

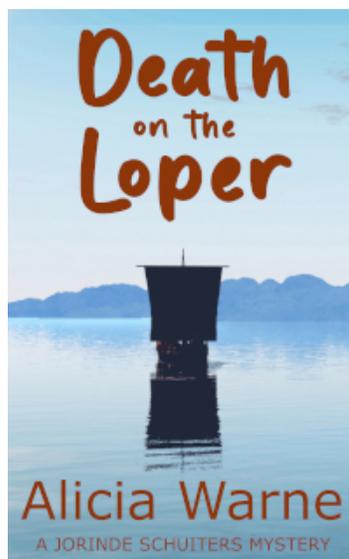
Orso muttered a curse. "I guess I need to find that hole. And have a new set of lockboxes made. And burn Master Gerlof's mantle. And clean your pomander, Mistress Viviana. If you want it back...."

Jorinde, getting to her feet, could almost hear the wheels turning in Orso's head as he contemplated the cost of a new pomander on top of the cost of a new lockbox and replacing a fur mantle and making whatever repairs were needed to the storeroom wall. She patted him on the shoulder.

"Look at this way," she pointed out. "You know who the thief is now and you don't have to find a new assistant — or cause a fuss with the Guild by prosecuting one of their members. But as I have some experience of dealing with mice in my warehouse and on the barges, may I make a suggestion? When you commission your new lockbox... don't put it directly on the floor again!"

More in the Jorinde Schuiters Mysteries series

Death on the Loper



All Jorinde wants is to make a success of the business her father left to her.

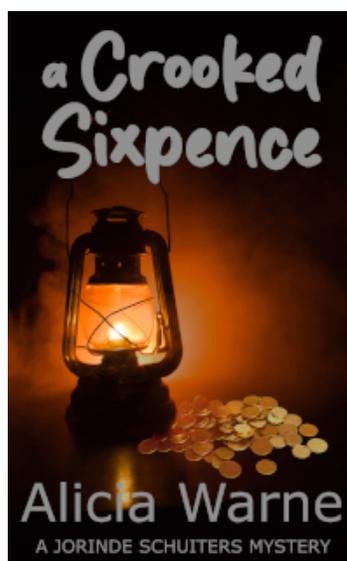
Then the weatherworker hired to fill the sails of her barge as it travels upriver is found dead.

Almost everyone on the barge, passengers and crew, seems to have had a reason to be angry with the dead man. Can Jorinde discover which of them is a murderer, prevent them from killing again to hide their crime and get everyone else safely to their final port on time?

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But the fee was paid in counterfeit coin. Now Jorinde stands accused of knowingly passing bad money – and perhaps being the counterfeiter, too.

Can she prove her innocence, when the agent who paid her has vanished and it seems the private party may never even have existed? And can she work out who's really behind the scheme – and why they want to destroy not only Jorinde but the three other merchants who've been drawn into the scam?

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About the author

Alicia can't remember a time before she could read – and she's been making up stories of her own for almost as long.

After spending 30 years working as a technology journalist and marketing copywriter, Alicia decided to pursue a long-term goal of writing a series of engaging and entertaining cozy mysteries.

She currently lives in Gloucestershire in the UK. When she isn't writing, she enjoys gardening, walking and travelling.

To find out more about Alicia, her books and the world she's created, visit www.aliciawarne.com

