

***Hello. Anybody in
there?***

W H Hilton

Copyright © W H Hilton 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

W H Hilton has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

I would like to thank my darling wife, Anita.
For all her hard work, endeavours, encouragement and patience,
during the writing of this novel.

Please check out my web site at: -

www.whhilton.co.uk

'Hello. Anybody in there?'

Chapter 1

Monday April 19th 7:14 am.

'When does this 'so called' special delivery arrive, darling?' questioned Nicole curiously, as she daintily slipped a small chunk of pineapple into her mouth, whilst Hartley glanced through the financial pages of the Times.

'Why? It doesn't really make a great deal of difference to you,' his eyes not leaving the newspaper, 'all you have to do is manage the shop for a while, so that I can concentrate on accepting the package, and ensure it's locked away securely in the safe.'

'Why can't Caroline run the shop whilst you're preoccupied,' Nicole questioned, 'after all, she is the manageress, and that's what you pay her for, isn't it.'

'How often do I have to tell you?' he was beginning to get a touch frustrated at the number of times he had to repeat himself.

'She's away on holiday for two weeks.' He took a sip of coffee, more as a way of appearing nonchalant, than to quench his need for caffeine. Nicole clearly didn't appreciate the reasoning or importance of his decisions. 'The girls are fine behind the counter serving,' he continued, 'but if a problem arises, they're not really equipped to deal with it.'

'What about Jim? Surely he knows enough about the business to sort a small difficulty out.'

'He does, but I need him in the back doing the repairs and alterations that have been requested by customers.'

'But...'

'Look sweetheart,' Hartley displaying insistence, 'the bottom line is, I need you in the shop on Thursday. All day if necessary. You're the only one I can rely on, to ensure that business is conducted correctly while Caroline is away. When we relocated here, you were very insistent that you knew all the ins and outs regarding running the shop. You've proved that you're more than capable of doing that, and now's the chance to earn your living.'

His trust and reliance on her appeared to put a smile on her face. The only thing he couldn't understand was why she was being so awkward. There was never usually a problem with her helping out. After all, it was only their jewellery business that kept her well supplied with enough money to do whatever she liked.

Clothes, jewellery, holidays, you name it, she could have it. But for some reason it never seemed to be enough.

'It is exciting though, you must admit.' Nicole continued. 'It's not every jeweller who has the chance to get hold of a diamond as rare and costly as this one. You did say that it came from the same mine as the Cullinan collection, didn't you?'

‘No.’ replied Hartley in a casual manner, trying to keep the conversation as low key as possible.

‘It was accidentally discovered about 30 miles away by a couple of chancers.’ He took another sip of coffee then dabbed his mouth with a napkin.

‘Two business men bought the mine, a Mr Appleton and a bloke by the name of Ford, thinking that there was a slim possibility that another similarly large gem might be found in the same vicinity, and to theirs, and every genuine speculators surprise, actually discovered one.’

‘So, dear, what’s it worth?’

Hartley untrustingly raised his eyebrows and gazed at his wife.

‘That’s not actually been determined yet, it depends on what the buyer is prepared to pay. It was dispatched from the mine in South Africa to Surat in India, to be cut and polished by some of the best lapidary’s in the world, and the carat value is approximately 5.13, which is smaller than the Cullinan 8, but a tad larger than the Cullinan 9.’

‘But it’s still worth millions, isn’t it?’

He raised his eyebrows to see if the greed was being displayed on his wife’s face.

Of course it was there.

After all she’d only married him for his wealth.

And he’d only married her for her physical attraction to attract other money.

Yes. For *Him* money. For *Her* money and men.

Hartley Granger had been a jeweller ever since leaving university, after gaining a 1st in both geology and gemmology.

Yet, even with his qualifications he’d still had to start at the bottom, as a trainee with a small diamond merchant. However, by the time he turned 30 Hartley had accumulated sufficient experience, contacts and funds, to start his own jewellery and diamond business.

By the time he was 35 he had gained a reputation of being one of the best diamond specialists in the country. Having been a regular member of the team responsible for the annual servicing of the Cullinan Diamonds, which form the most precious gem stones in the Crown Jewell’s. As well as working on a number of smaller pieces owned by celebrities.

Hartley’s major problem was, in order to progress to the next level up the high street of supremacy of jewellers, he needed a wife. And if she didn’t fit the bill, then that would be his downfall. He wasn’t going to let that happen. No matter what.

When the two of them tied the knot, Hartley at 39 and Nicole 29, it was common knowledge that it was a marriage of convenience, definitely not ‘*a marriage made in heaven*’.

Nicole was a trophy wife and quite a catch. He did better than he could have dreamt.

She’d been brought up in a middle class home in a small village on the outskirts of Manchester.

Her dad ran the local newsagents, with mum doubling up as housewife and shop assistant, as and when required.

However, she'd got bigger ambitions.

As a young girl she'd look through the fashion magazines on the shelves in her dad's shop, and looked at herself in the mirror thinking, 'I could do that.'

So, once she'd turned 18, Nicole had made her mind up to go for it, and sent portfolios to every magazine she thought might take a second look.

Understandably dad didn't approve, but, '*what the hell*' was Nicole's attitude.

And, when the opportunity arose for her to move to London as an apprentice fashion model, she jumped.

She was just the type of girl that Hartley needed.

No inhibitions. No thoughts of mundane housewifery. Someone that was outgoing, and prepared to make a flashy, yet classy display of what she really was.

A trophy.

Nicole wasn't exactly tall, 5 - 10, but with a cleavage to die for. Which she regularly had out on display. Legs that mini skirts were made for. But would wear the hems not too far above the knee, just to keep the men (and women) guessing about what lay underneath, covering one of her finest assets.

Shoulder length auburn hair, with the bluest eyes you could imagine.

She was the perfect wife for a businessman who had every intention of making even more millions than he'd already accrued.

Apart from being a good looking man, Hartley stood at 6 - 2 with an athletic build; he was also an extremely proficient talker. The kind of salesman that could sell bacon to a pig farmer.

He'd successfully navigated his way up the business ladder, getting wealthier by the year. Having purchased a number of houses which he rented out to private tenants. As well as half a dozen retail properties which he leased to other jewellers, so keeping his hands firmly on the plough of an ever increasing and lucrative industry.

He'd bought a large Victorian detached cottage set in its own grounds, on Great Cambridge Road, Chestnut, a few years before marrying Nicole.

Even though the property was a substantial show piece, Hartley had opened up the attic to house an office and a library. And the basement he'd had converted into a wine and spirit cellar.

This business man, with a jewellers shop, a lovely home, and rental properties, made him the perfect catch for the ambitious woman, who was intent on making her way to the very top of the gravy train.

Even though they'd been rather busy in the bedroom department during the early days and months of their relationship, pound notes had definitely taken precedence. Well --- for Hartley at least.

Nicole on the other hand had two agenda's.

Financial and sexual.

Money and wealth came first, followed '*very closely*' by sex. But the gap between finance and lust was so fine it was indistinguishable. And to be perfectly

honest she wasn't exactly fussy who she indulged with, as long as she got her fill.
Pardon the expression.

On more than one occasion, Hartley had caught her with her knickers round her ankles, leaning over the kitchen sink, and a client lubricating his shaft during a working dinner party. However, he would smile, and say to himself, '*it's good for businesses*', and then turn a blind eye.

Many of his colleges and their wives had said that he could have picked a more suitable, up market lady. But they didn't know anything of Hartley's past. He couldn't keep a girl for more than one date. He was always, money, money, money.

So when Nicole came along it was cash in the bank.

He was Money. She was Sex. Hartley's dreamland.

'So darling, come on, what's it worth?'

Nicole was, as usual, staying true to form.

What the hell, he thought; if I don't tell her she'll only find out from one of her fuck buddies.

'Somewhere between 30 and 40, depending on the purchaser's private valuation.'

'That is millions I presume.'

'Of course,' he frowned arrogantly.

'So,' Nicole wanted to know as much as possible, she wasn't one to be kept in the dark. 'What's your, sorry, *our*, cut?'

'Well, that all depends on what my client can sell the gem for, but I, sorry, *we*, should clear about half a million.'

'I suppose that'll keep the wolf away from the door, for the time being at least.' She chuckled.

'So, when did you say it would arrive?'

'I didn't,' he replied evasively.

'Come on,' Nicole raised her voice slightly to show her disapproval with his lack of information.

'You do want me to watch the shop whilst you conduct the transaction, don't you?'

'Sometime on Thursday. But why the need to know the exact time. Is it that important?'

'Hey. That money will buy a lot of handbags and shoes you know.'

'Don't you mean knickers and condoms?' It was Hartley's chance to throw back some sarcasm.

'Whatever.'

Breakfast continued in periodic silence. Just the occasional quip about a news bulletin that appeared on the TV.

'Approximately what time on Thursday?' Nicole wasn't giving up, but made a pathetic attempt at being casual. It clearly didn't have the desired effect.

'If you're thinking of stealing it,' he grinned, 'I'd think again.'

‘Now why would I want to do that? I’d rather have another half a million in the bank, than even more money and end up being banged up. I don’t fancy being out of circulation for a couple of years.’

There was a slight pause.

‘So. What time is the delivery taking place?’

‘I’m not exactly sure. But the security firm making the delivery is owned by the client who is intending to buy it, as an investment. So one thing for sure, it will be heavily guarded.’

‘So, who actually owns it, and who is this client that has enough money to purchase a diamond worth so many millions?’

‘A Mr Appleton and a Mr Ford still own the gem, but I don’t exactly know who the buyer is.’

‘You don’t know when it’ll arrive, just sometime on Thursday. You’re not sure who’s dropping it off, or who it is that your working for. It sounds a bit dodgy to me.’ Nicole paused. ‘So how do you know you’ve actually got the job of looking after this gem? Couldn’t it just be some practical joke, and there’s a guy out there laughing his bollocks off at your expense?’

‘Oh no it’s real enough.’ he grinned, ‘you don’t get a covering letter. A cheque for fifty thousands pounds as a retainer, just to complete the transfer, if it’s some prankster. And just for the record, the cheque has cleared; the money is already in my account.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t know that.’ Nicole replied sheepishly, realising she’s been a tad hasty. And with not knowing all the facts, changed tack, ‘so how on earth am I going to make my plans?’

‘Look,’ Hartley, also trying to keep the conversation on an even keel, remarked. ‘I’ve already told you that I want you in the shop all day, so just don’t make any other arrangements.’

He glanced down at his watch as he stood up, pushed his chair under the kitchen table and straightening his tie, as some men do, when they’ve nothing better to do with their hands.

‘Look, I’m going to have to get a move on it’s almost 8 o’clock.’

And, with a not exactly endearing peck on Nicole’s cheek, he left for work.

Chapter 2

Monday April 19th. 12:15 pm.

Victoria, one of Hartley's shop assistants was busy in the secure stock room, uploading new stock details onto their on-line catalogue. Whilst Becky, his other assistant, was just finalising an engagement ring sale to a young couple.

'And an excellent choice that is,' remarked Hartley as he sauntered passed, recognising the bridegroom to be. 'Very often couples choose a ring that, to be perfectly honest, is simply costume jewellery. But with a diamond of the quality and size that you've chosen, it can only increase in value.'

The shop buzzer rang out.

Hartley's eyes flicked over in the direction of the security monitor, it was his wife.

Whilst Becky was at the till, continuing to take payment for the ring, Hartley slid his hand under the counter and pressed the security button, which in turn released the lock on the front door.

In walked Nicole.

As she walked down the centre of the sales area, in-between the display counters, Hartley noticed, that the man who was buying his intended the engagement ring, couldn't keep his eyes off her.

And no wonder.

Nicole was dressed to kill, but not in a sluttish way.

Even though her pleated lilac skirt only just made it to the top of her knees, the blouse she wore was a tasteful pale pink.

Along with the matching stilettos and clutch bag, Nicole looked like she could very easily have just stepped of a Parisian cat walk.

'Be with you in a moment *my darling*,' said Hartley. 'I just need to collect some invoices from under the till.'

Nicole continued heading towards the office.

The transaction complete and the customers more than satisfied, Becky escorted them to the front door. 'I wish you both all the best for the future. And don't forget where we are, when you're ready to purchase that most perfect of all wedding rings.'

Hartley made his way into the office, where Nicole had made herself comfortable on his director's chair.

'I don't mind you coming in when customers are being served,' he remarked, 'but do you have to come in dressed like that?' He paused.

'That poor man is about to get engaged, and you of all people, *my wife*, come walking in dressed like, well... drop dead gorgeous. Did you not recognise him when you approached the front door?'

'No, was he someone I should have known?'

'His dad is only Sir Wilson Grace.' Hartley's voice was slightly raised.

'That was Anthony Grace, soon to be heir of *The Capitol Economy*.'

'The Capitol Economy,' she frowned, showing absolute ignorance.

‘What’s that?’

‘What’s that?’ Hartley sighed.

‘It’s only the most influential financial magazine in London. It states who’s who. Which company is booming, and who is losing ground. In fact anybody who is anybody is listed. And you ask *‘is he someone you should know.’*

Nicole wanted to change the subject quickly.

‘I’ve only called in to say that I might be seeing Beth this evening, and may be home late.’

‘Fine. Should I wait up?’ he sounded exasperated.

‘Oh yes,’ she replied, still wanting to keep him sweet. With so much money at stake, Nicole was intent on safeguarding her future wealth, not jeopardising it.

‘I’ll not be that late. We’re only having a couple of drinks and a girly chat.’

‘Right, I’ll see you later then.’ He remarked as the two of them walked through the shop, and headed for the front door.

Just as Hartley opened it, allowing his wife to leave, an elderly couple approached, clearly eager to enter the shop.

‘It’ll be our fiftieth you know.’ said the lady as they passed Nicole.

And, playing the good wife, and understanding that it was soon to be their golden wedding anniversary, said.

‘Fifty years married. Well done. Congratulations.’

As Nicole left, she shivered thoughtfully.

‘The crap I’ve got to dish out, just to keep everything, just the way I want it.’

* * *

Having made his way back to the office, Hartley placed the invoices on his desk, and lifted out some further paperwork that was in need of his attention. Then, just as he was about to look through the documents, the phone rang.

‘Hello, Granger’s how may I help?’ even though he was otherwise occupied with the paperwork, he still kept up the habit of repeating their regular telephone spiel.

‘This is Mr Granger I presume, Mr Hartley Granger?’

The man had a deep purposeful tone, and was definitely not ringing about a watch battery replacement.

‘Yes - Speaking.’ He replied inquisitively.

‘My name is David Chandler. You received a letter and a cheque from me last week, which I’m pleased to see, you’ve already cashed.’

‘Oh yes, thank you...’

Before he could continue, Chandler interrupted.

‘Don’t talk, just listen.’

Hartley’s ears were pricked up, and his mouth kept shut. With such a large amount of cash up front, and a further lucrative remuneration a probability, he wasn’t prepared to do anything other than exactly as instructed.

‘The reason for the secrecy is the value of the gem,’ Chandler wasn’t messing about with pleasantries, ‘we, - I- don’t want any undesirable’s getting wind of the

mode of transportation, and delivery date of the item, otherwise someone could get greedy and sloppy, and that could, which is what I don't want to happen, cost lives.'

'I agree, but...' Hartley was about to speak.

'Quiet ---'

'I've heard a whisper that someone is going to try and relieve me of the gem, and I don't take kindly to being robbed.'

'May I just say something?' Hartley said firmly but cautiously, not wanting to cut across, or upset the caller.

'Go on.' David Chandler's voice sounded reluctant.

'Thanks for the money and all,' Hartley was sounding confused, 'but why are you expecting me to do as you ask, without any explanation whatsoever. I'm an honest man who likes to run my business the same way.'

'Of course you are,' even over the phone, one could imagine the smirk on Chandler's face, 'that's why you married that, err, what should we say, that extremely provocative wife of yours, isn't it.'

'You know Nicole?' Hartley was taken aback.

'Let's just say, I know all about her philandering,' a touch of avoidance was evident, 'but can we move on to more pressing matters.'

Knowing Nicole as he did, her indiscretions were obvious, and of no surprise. So, if this man was prepared to grease Hartley's palm with silver, so to speak, then why the hell should he not go along with whatever? After all, allowing Nicole her sexual pleasures were of no detriment to him, he could have her whenever he wanted. However, her promiscuity could be of a great financial benefit to him.

'What exactly is it that I'm supposed to do?'

'I'm having the Appleford Rock transported from the airport to your shop on Thursday, and considering it's my own personal courier that's doing the delivery; I'm more than confident that it will arrive safely.'

'What time on Thursday?'

'When it lands, you'll know. Just be ready.' He said with a hint of aggravation.

'What do I do when it arrives? Do I just lock it up, or wait for someone to collect it?'

Chandler appeared to take a sharp intake of breath.

'LOCK IT UP YOU FUCKING IDIOT.'

There was a slight pause.

'Sorry.' said Chandler, realising the need for composure.

'Considering the amount of money involved, and the number of interested parties who want to get their filthy hands on it, I've got to be careful. So just put it in your safe. Don't give it to anybody, even if they say I've sent for it, and wait for further instructions. I'm not losing this gem, no matter what. You understand.'

The line went dead.

'Mr Granger.' whispered Becky as she tapped on the door and poked her head round, trying to be careful not to disturb him, but needing to get his attention, 'a man just shoved this through the letter box, and then disappeared.'

She handed him an envelope with, 'FAO MR GRANGER. PERSONAL', typed on the front.

'Thanks.'

Becky left, and Hartley opened the envelope, and started to read.

As I've just told you. Don't give it to anyone. I'll call for it personally. And I won't leave you in any doubt that it's ME when I do come to collect it. Nobody gets their hands on the Appleford Rock.

Hartley sat back in his director's chair, attempting to fathom out what was actually going on.

The phone started to ring again.

'Hello, Granger's how may I...' Hartley had clicked into automatic pilot and started the spiel.

'You've just received my note I presume?'

'Yes.'

'As you can now see, I have everything under control. All you have to do is exactly what I tell you.'

'Sorry, but I'm not used to other people telling me what to do.'

'Mr Granger,' Chandler's voice came across as calm but forceful. 'I don't think that I need remind you, that you've recently cashed a bankers draft for £50,000 which isn't linked to me, or my business, in any way.'

He paused for just a second.

'No paper trails. No internet trails. No bank trails. All covered.'

Hartley quickly started to rummage through his banking documents looking for his most recent paying in book. With such a large amount of money involved, he'd been more interested in getting it banked. Void of caring whether it was a banker's draught or not, and as such wouldn't have a sender's name on it.

'Found it yet?' remarked Chandler.

Papers still shuffling round. Then he discovered what he was looking for.

'Yes, its here.'

'I've worked with business men before, and being one myself, I know how the financial mind works. Cash first, questions later. Am I making sense?'

And without waiting for the obvious reply, Chandler continued.

'Let's move on.'

'The money you've already received is but a drop in the ocean. And as you've probably just realised, it is untraceable. Once we've successfully concluded our current business, there will be more. Yes, much more than the half mill that I've no doubt you've told Nicole about. All the money is untraceable, I'm untraceable. Even my relationship or my association with your wife, *if* there is one. Also your home and your business links with me, everything is untraceable. So if I were you, I'd do exactly as instructed.'

'But surely the bank have a contact or business name linking you to all this.'

'I don't think so.' remarked Chandler confidently. 'All they have is an account number. They have no names, no addresses. Nothing. Do you not think that I'm intelligent enough to cover my tracks? I will soon own this rock, and many more, and I'm not taking any chances.'

‘Why all the secrecy? If you’re buying the diamond and it will soon be legally yours. You are actually going to purchase it legally, I presume?’

‘Oh it will be legally mine alright, you can count on that.’

There was no doubt whatsoever in Chandler’s tone.

‘But there are certain parties that will do anything, and I mean *anything* to get their hands on it.’

‘Having been in the trade for some years,’ replied Hartley, ‘and even though I haven’t as yet seen it, I know that the quality and size of a gem like this is hard to come by, especially as it came from a region close to where the Cullinan collection was discovered. But why are you going to all this trouble. If once you’ve paid for it and it’s yours, then it’s yours.’

‘I’m not in the habit of explaining myself to anyone,’ Chandler’s tone changed, ‘everything is on a need to know basis. All you have to do is what you’re told. So for your own safety, I’d oblige.’

‘But what about...’

The phone went dead.

‘What the hells going on.’ He thought.

He wasn’t sure when on Thursday it would arrive.

He didn’t know who was going to deliver it, or when Chandler was going to collect it.

And where did Nicole fit into all this.

It was clear that Chandler knew about his wife’s promiscuous behaviour, whether from personal experience or not, he had no idea.

Chapter 3

Tuesday April 20th. 9:34 am.

‘Don’t turn round,’ Benny felt the cold steel of a gun barrel pressed firm at the back of his skull. The man continued, ‘or I will put a ventilation shaft fit for the channel tunnel straight through your fuckin’ head.’

Whether out of shock or fear, Benny Coleman tried to push on the door of his Citroen Dispatch, in a futile attempt at making his escape.

It wouldn’t budge.

He caught sight through his wing mirror, of a large dark figure blocking the daylight from illuminating the van.

‘Now you’ve realised there’s no escape, just drive.’

‘But there’s nothing in here worth stealing.’

‘Last chance. It’s in your best interest to cooperate. So drive or die, the choice is yours.’

Nervously and without any further thought of escape, Benny grabbed the steering wheel with one hand, and turned the ignition key with the other.

As he pulled away from the kerb he glanced through his side view mirror, and the obstruction that wouldn’t allow him to get out of the van came into view.

A man. Built like the proverbial brick shit house, sporting a thick dark beard and wearing shades. The dark trousers and jacket weren’t exactly in keeping with early spring. His right hand looked like it was bulging inside his pocket, and Benny dreaded to think what he might be holding out of sight.

‘Is that a fuckin’ dash cam?’ said his captor, as he pointed to the top of the dashboard using his free hand.

‘It’s only a dummy,’ replied an extremely nervous Benny, ‘the boss said that it could work as a deterrent to any would be thieves. With us being in the CCTV business some unscrupulous idiots might think that we keep monitors or cameras in here, but all I carry are a few spares and my tools for effecting repairs.’

‘Are you sure?’ He didn’t sound convinced.

‘Here see.’ Benny stretched out his hand and pulled the small imitation camera off the dashboard. ‘It’s only stuck on with blue tac.’

‘OK, keep going.’

He sped down Hatton Garden with the cold metal of a gun barrel, pressed hard on the back of his head, wondering what had he ever done wrong. He couldn’t remember which of his customers he’d wronged or cheated, especially as he wasn’t that sort of guy.

When he climbed out of bed that morning, he’d been a normal, regular, family man. A wife and three children. A mortgage. No debts to speak of.

Yes they still owed money for the new Astra, but to his knowledge the loan was paid up to date. As far as he knew there was no reason to kidnap him.

He’d got nothing worth stealing, either at home or in his van.

He was just a normal, indiscriminate man, going about his daily life. Working to cater for his families needs, and provide for them the best way he possibly could.

Yet here he was driving away from his last customer call, with a definite threat to his life. A stranger holding him at gunpoint wasn't an everyday occurrence.

'Keep going to the bottom of Hatton. Not too fast mind; we don't want to attract attention. Then turn right onto the A40.'

'Where...Where am I going?' Benny stuttered, 'I don't know what you want, but if I'm not at M & S in the next fifteen minutes, the Police will be notified of my absence, and either you'll get caught or I'll be reported as missing.'

'Now why would the Police be interested?' came a sarcastic reply.

Benny gulped. Knowing that most of his customers were only due for a service to their CCTV systems, and it could be as late as 6 pm before he was actually missed.

'I work with closed circuit TV systems which are linked to the Police Station, and if my service checks aren't logged in, then they'll be on to you.'

'Now what would they be on to? We're only having a friendly chat.'

'Sticking that gun into my head, doesn't exactly look like we're best mates.'

'Oh but we are.' replied the gunman. In such a casual manner, and with so much confidence and surety.

'How old is Janice now, 37, 38, she doesn't half look good, especially after 3 kids.'

'Who are you? And how do you know my wife?'

'Benny, Benny. We're such good friends; I know *all* your family.'

'Just keep driving along here.' instructed the gunman calmly.

Even though in shock, he still needed to keep it together and do as he was told. Especially as the man was threatening him, and had knowledge about his wife and kids.

'Keith's 15 now isn't he,' remarked his captor, sounding nonchalant, 'and do you know, I really think you made the right decision letting him sign for Brentford juniors, instead of Fulham. Sometimes the bigger clubs can incite so much ambition, that it can stifle the youngster's natural ability.'

'How do you know about that, we only put pen to paper the other day, and not even the Fulham management are aware of our final decision yet?'

'No, but the Fulham guys don't have the same agenda and contacts that I do. All their concerned with is football, and all that I'm bothered about is a gem.' The gunman paused reflectively.

'Yes, a gem.' he remarked almost dreamily. 'And it's that *gem* that you're going to help us get our hands on.'

'I've not got a clue what you're on about,' croaked Benny, 'but whatever it...'

'Where will Keith be now?' came the interruption.

'What do you mean? He'll be in class.' He lifted his wrist up checking his watch to make sure of the time.

'Are you sure about that.' said the man holding the gun. This shot a bolt of doubt in Benny's direction.

'Well if he's not in school, where the hell is he?'

Whilst Benny was speaking, his captor lifted out a mobile phone and was making a call.

As soon as the call was answered, the gunman switched it over to speaker.

‘Lazarus?’

‘Yes.’

‘Put the lad on.’

‘Go on Benny, ask your lad why’s he not in school.’

‘Keith, are you there.’

‘Dad, Dad, what’s going on?’

‘You alright. They’ve not hurt you, have they?’

‘No. There’s this big bloke. He’s tied me to a chair, to stop me from running away. But he won’t tell me anything.’

Before he could respond, his captor pressed the end call button.

‘Do we understand each other now?’

‘You touch my son, and I swear, I’ll fuckin’ kill you, you bastard.’ he replied anxiously.

‘Do as you’re told Benny, and I promise you, no harm will come to your lad.’

His captor’s tone changed from nonchalance to aggression.

‘But disobey once, and that ventilation shaft I promised, will be inserted into your lads head, as well as yours - Copy?’

Benny was in a no-brainer of a situation.

He did as instructed, or both he and his son would get blown away.

After a moment of uneasy quiet, he replied.

‘I don’t know what I can do to help you, but please don’t hurt my Keith. I’ll do anything you ask, just don’t hurt my lad.’

‘Hurting you or any member of your family is not what we want,’ came the reply. ‘all you have to do is exactly as you’re told, and in a couple of days you’ll all be together again, as though nothing has ever happened. But cock up and you’re family will be...’ he paused, ‘well, I think you get the point.’

‘What is it that you want from me?’ was his conforming reply.

Chapter 4

Tuesday April 20th. 10:06 am.

Hartley had been thinking all night, about the relationship which may or may not exist between his wife and this man called Chandler, but had this feeling of unease with regard to asking her. Even though he was well aware of her philandering, it was always a subject he would prefer to avoid.

The matter had to be approached. He couldn't just leave it, and hope to discover the truth by chance.

Victoria and Becky were occupied dealing with customers. Nicole had just collected the mail from the post man, and was making her way into the office.

'Close the door.' remarked Hartley as she entered.

Nicole frowned wondering why he'd made such a strange request. Usually it was left open, so that if a problem arose in the shop, either Victoria or Becky could walk straight in and ask Hartley's advice. The only time it was ever closed, was when he was on the phone making a private call.

'Why,' questioned Nicole, 'is there a problem.'

'Just sit down, I'd like a word.'

She perched herself on one of the visitor's chairs, situated on the opposite side of the desk, facing her husband.

'What's wrong?' she enquired.

Before asking her the question which was guaranteed to make him feel uncomfortable, Hartley fixed his eyes on his wife, thinking that he'd be able to tell if she was lying, simply by the look on her face.

'Do you know someone called David Chandler?'

'Who?' she replied, frowning.

'David Chandler.' he repeated. 'He's a wealthy business man.'

'His name doesn't ring any bells.' Her reaction appeared to be genuine. 'Why, should I?'

'Well, he seems to know you.'

'I'm sorry,' Nicole replied, seemingly in the dark where this man Chandler was concerned, 'I don't recollect his name. How should I know him. Is he a client of yours? Has he been to one of your business dinners at our house?'

'He's the man who's going to buy the gem that I'm about to take possession of, and he spoke of you, like you were old friends.'

Hartley was deliberately exaggerating. Thinking that, if he indicated that a more intimate friendship could have existed, she might be more honest about any possible relationship she'd had with the man.

'Like I said, I can't say that I remember his name. Sorry.'

'OK,' he said reluctantly, 'I suppose that, because I don't really know him to well, having only spoken to him on the phone. It would only be fair to give you the benefit of the doubt.'

'Fair enough.' replied Nicole. 'But as far as I'm aware, I don't think I know him.'

Hartley remained quiet and thoughtful.
'Is that everything?' continued Nicole, 'Can I carry on checking the mail now?'
'Yes, that's fine.'

Chapter 5

Tuesday April 20th. 9:55 am.

'Take a left just after these lights.'

'But that's a dead end?'

'Just do it.'

Benny continued as instructed.

And as he turned into what he thought was a concealed back alley, leading nowhere. The same man who'd earlier prevented him from climbing out of his van, with the thick black beard and shades, stood in the middle of what turned out to be the entrance to a garage. From the main road, the sliding doors weren't visible, as they were set back as an indent, from the rest of the property.

As Benny drove into the dimly lit unit, his captor removed the gun from the back of his head. The garage doors could be heard creaking behind his van, as they were being closed.

Clearly there was no longer a risk of Benny making an escape.

'Out.' said his captor with a defining tone of authority.

He gripped the door release, but this time there was understandably no obstruction.

As he pushed the driver's door open, the brick shithouse was standing at the side of the van, in a typical gangster stance. Arms folded, shoulders pushed back proudly, with his feet about eighteen inches apart. An alpha male pose if ever he'd seen one.

Silently Benny was led into a small office at the back of the warehouse, and told to sit down.

He was left alone for a couple of minutes, as the two men had a mini conference outside.

The only furniture in the room was an old wooden chair that he was sat on. A table, and a couple of small stools.

Apart from the door, the only other possible way of escape, was a small window located at the top of the back wall. And even if he had a ladder, Benny knew full well, that his body wouldn't fit through it.

'Is my lad alright?' was the only thing that kept running through his mind.

'If you hurt him,' he thought as he was starting to get angrier than he'd ever been in his life, *'I swear I'll kill the fuckin' lot of you.'*

The office door screeched along the floor as the gunman pushed it open and walked in.

'So long as you do as your told and don't piss me about,' remarked his captor, *'both you and your Keith will be absolutely fine.'*

'What is it that you want from me?' Benny tried to keep his voice even, so as not to display any signs that he was actually shitting himself, even though inside he was a nervous wreck.

'From what I gather, and yes I always do my homework so there is no point in trying to fuck me about,' he was sounding absolutely confident, *'you're quite an expert in CCTV systems. That right?'*

'Err, well, I wouldn't exactly put it like that, but yes, I do know a thing or two about most systems.'

'Well it's that expertise that I need from you.'

'What use is my knowledge?' Benny sounded none plus, *'I only set the systems up to record footage in shops, bars and nightclubs, so should any incidents occur, the video can be played back to assess the various situations.'*

'Can you set a system so that it appears to be recording as normal, but when it comes to playing it back, it only shows footage that you've deliberately recorded and put on the system earlier?'

'Err, Yes. But to copy a video onto a hard drive, and ensure that it only plays what you want, will take some time. I'd need to be left alone with the computer. That's if you don't want anybody else knowing what's going on. Plus I'd need the pre-recorded DVD or a pen drive with the recording on it.'

Benny's mind was starting to work overtime.

'Why not just disable the system completely?' he suggested, *'it wouldn't record anything, and you could go in and do what the hell you want. That way there wouldn't be any footage at all.'*

'I want some footage recorded though.' his captor replied. *'I need somebody else in the frame for the robbery.'*

'What is this robbery, and how are you going to get someone to appear to steal something, without realising what's going on. They'd have to be stupid.'

'The robbery is of no concern to you, and I'll make sure you've got the video when you need it.'

Clearly this man had most, if not everything under control.

'What about my son,' said Benny *'is he alright?'*

'He's fine. No harm will come to him as long as you play ball.'

Even though he didn't trust these men, he didn't have any choice but to what they wanted, and hope that they would be true to their word.

‘Is there any specific paperwork you need, in order to go and service a particular store’s system?’

‘Most customers have a regular service once a month,’ said Benny, and even though he was being distracted by a work related conversation, he still couldn’t relax, not knowing exactly what was going on with his son, ‘but occasionally, when there’s a blip with the settings, I might need to go and take a look. And more often than not I can rectify the problem.’

‘Like I said,’ his captor sounded a touch frustrated by Benny’s answer, ‘do you need specific paperwork to go and take a look at a specific shops system?’

‘Yes. Usually the client will rewind a video to check on staff or customers, and should he find a problem with the recording, he will give our office a ring. Then they’ll send me or another engineer out to take a look. Our company secretary will make out a worksheet. So that when whatever work is necessary is completed, the client will sign it, and we’ll get paid accordingly.’

‘Can you not call at a client’s premises on speck, without a worksheet?’

‘No way,’ Benny was definite with his answer.

‘Because CCTV is a security measure, all paperwork must be kept in order. Every job logged. So that should anything untoward happen, like say for example a *robbery*.’ putting a great deal of emphasis on his last word. ‘The Police will have a recording, and a paper trail to help with their investigations. And hopefully, if they’re lucky, locate and capture the thieves.’

‘But if a certain outlet requires attention,’ questioned his captor, ‘you would be the person to go over and fix whatever the problem is, if that client is on your usual roster. Yes.’

‘More often than not, yes, unless I’m out on another job.’

Benny’s captor left the room, quickly, and without uttering another word. The door still making that horrible screeching sound, as it was scraping along the floor.

He must have been sat there for some five minutes. During which time he could see the brick shithouse and the gunman talking between themselves. Occasionally the ringleader would appear to be speaking to someone on his mobile.

‘Sorted.’ His captor uttered as he re-entered the room.

Benny glanced over as the thug walked in behind his boss, just like a lapdog doing exactly as his owner told him. The leader had a grin on his face like he’d just come up on the lottery.

‘Lazarus here will go back with you to your next appointment.’ It was clear that he wasn’t worried about using the other guys name for some reason.

‘You will continue your day as though nothing’s happened. It’s up to you how you play this, but sometime tomorrow afternoon Grangers Jewellers system will need to be looked at. You, and make sure it is you, will go and fix it so that it doesn’t record anything. Copy the video, which I’ll make sure you get in plenty of time, onto the hard drive, so that the system will only replay what’s on that disk. And as long as you do that, then your beloved Keith will be released, safe and unharmed.’

‘When will you let him go?’

‘The minute we’ve got what we want, and are clean away. After all, we can’t let him go too soon, or you could inform the authorities about what’s going on, and we don’t want that now, do we.’

Lazarus, the brick shithouse, was a hell of a size. He must have been six five and at least eighteen stone. The beard and shades were clearly his idea of a disguise, and if he had a shave and removed the glasses, Benny wasn’t sure he’d be able to identify him.

‘Van.’ remarked Lazarus. Regarding him, and waving the index finger of his right hand to signal that that’s where he wanted Benny to head for.

After receiving a nod to get into the drivers seat, Benny plonked himself behind the steering wheel.

Lazarus walked round and climbed into the passenger seat.

‘Where should you be right now?’

Benny glanced at his watch.

‘M & S.’

‘Well, what the fuck are you waiting for?’

As Benny started the engine, the garage doors began to slide open, creaking just like before.

It was only about a seven minute drive to his destination. But the fact that his son was still being held captive, played heavily on his mind. Here he was, sat in his works van, with what he thought was a brainless idiot called Lazarus, who did everything just as and when he was instructed to. He had no option but to comply with everything he’d been told to do. Benny was starting to get agitated.

‘What the fuck *is* going on?’

‘Could you not rob the place, without involving anybody else?’

Suddenly Lazarus’ tone changed, revealing a devilishly evil sound.

‘Look. I’ve killed before,’ his accent was bona fide, bow bells, cockney, as he growled and bragged about his wicked achievements, ‘and yes, more than once. According to the Police I’m already dead. They think I’ve been cremated twice. So if I was you, and you want to see your son - alive - again, I’d just do as you are fuckin’ told.’

Benny pulled up outside the M & S store, where he was supposed to be servicing their CCTV system. But before he could switch the ignition off, he was suddenly left in the van on his own. Lazarus had quickly got out, and somehow disappeared. He was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 6

Wednesday, April 21st. 11:14 am.

Nicole's mobile sounded with its usual 'do you think I'm sexy' ring tone, as she'd just purchased two large latte's at their usual coffee bar on Grenville Street.

'What's up now?' she thought, not looking at the caller display, but presuming it was Hartley.

'I'm having coffee with Eve, can't whatever it is wait?' she remarked sounding a tad frustrated.

'It's me.'

'Oh,' she whispered, instantly recognizing Alf's voice, 'Sorry, I thought it was my husband.'

'I gathered that, with the wonderfully endearing tone you answered. We need to talk. When would be convenient. It has to be within the next couple of hours though, otherwise we're fucked.'

'Why, are things not going to plan?'

'Yes, apart from one important factor, but we can't talk on the phone. Where and at what time can we meet? Like I said, it's urgent?'

'Just a minute. Can I ring you back?' she said, with her mobile wedged between shoulder and ear, whilst carrying the tray of drinks to the table, where Eve was waiting patiently.

'No, we've no time for pleasantries; we need to talk - *now*.' He replied with emphasis, slowly elongating his last word.

She had to think quickly but speak quietly, as Eve's ears had pricked up, and was clearly trying to listen in on her conversation, wondering why the look on Nicole's face had changed. When she'd gone to buy their drinks, she was a woman looking forward to going shopping. Now she had the appearance of exasperation.

'One thirty, your place. OK.'

'See you then.'

'Is everything alright?' enquired Eve sounding somewhat concerned.

'Yes, all's good.' replied Nicole wearing a smile. Being an excellent and extremely convincing liar, even her best friend wouldn't think that anything was out of place.

'Where should we start?' remarked Eve sounding cheerful, but inside still wondering what her best friend could be holding back from her. 'Harrods, Selfridges or should we hit the Kings Road?'

Nicole's mind had wondered off again, and it looked like she was now on another planet.

'Wake up Nicole, I'm talking to you.'

Nicole was clearly elsewhere.

What was disrupting their plans?

Why was it so urgent, that she was going to have to interrupt a day's shopping with her best friend?

‘Nicole.’ Eve was now on the point of raising her voice, trying to get her attention.

‘Sorry,’ she answered, ‘I was miles away. What were you saying?’

‘Where do you want to start, Harrods, Self...’

‘Err – no, unfortunately,’ interrupted Nicole, ‘something’s cropped up. I need to be somewhere else once we’ve had coffee.’

‘What’s up with you today?’ Eve was getting more and more suspicious. ‘It’s not like *you* to miss out on a shopping spree. You’re definitely not short of cash, so it must be Hartley. He’s not been hitting you or anything like that has he. I’ll kill him if he’s even laid a finger on you.’

‘Oh Eve,’ Nicole was more concerned with what Alf wanted, than to be bothered about her best friend and a shopping trip. ‘Shut the fuck up. I’ve got more important things to think about, other than walking around designer outlets.’

‘No need to talk to me like that,’ Eve was clearly upset with the way in which she was being spoken to, ‘I thought we’d met up for pleasure, not a slanging match.’

‘We had, but I’m afraid other things take priority.’ Nicole’s demeanour had changed into a rather serious mode.

‘What time is it?’ she said under her breath, as she lifted her wrist to glance at her watch.

‘Ten to twelve.’ She thought, obviously time conscious.

‘What’s more important than your best friend and a shopping trip?’ remarked Eve, trying to rectify the situation.

‘Wealth.’ Answered Nicole unreservedly, ‘and my wealth in particular.’ she added.

‘And have you not got enough of that?’ Eve couldn’t fathom out why Nicole would want more. After all she was married to a millionaire jeweller, and being Hartley’s wife and joint proprietor of the company, was a millionaire in her own right. Had everything any woman could desire. And more than most people could even dream of.

‘One can never have enough.’ Nicole glanced at her watch again.

‘I’m going to have to go. I’ve got things to do. I’ll be in touch.’

Without a bye or leave, Nicole rose from her seat and left. Leaving Eve, sat in the coffee shop alone. Wondering, what on earth her so called best friend, was either up to, or involved in.

* * *

Bang, bang, bang.

Nicole knocked hard on Alf’s front door.

The door was opened almost immediately. He’d understandably been expecting her, and was waiting, not very patiently.

‘No need to bang like that,’ he said sternly, ‘it’s a good job not many people come round the back. All you’re doing is bringing attention to us. Fortunately

there's not many folk around here know who I am, and, hopefully if they do see us together, they'll just think I've got a prosy in to service my shaft.'

Alfred 'shifty' Cunliffe, as he was known to the authorities. Was a relatively handsome man, in some ladies opinions. About five five and around eleven and a half stone. Not very big you might think for a hard nut of a criminal, but he was much more useful as brain, rather than brawn. His hair was light brown and needed to be kept cut to a number two. It had a nasty habit of growing curly. And, as a forty year old criminal who'd spent more than one spell at Her Majesty's Pleasure, it just didn't fit the bill.

Having dark brown eyes, and sporting a goatee beard, his smile was tantalisingly engaging.

'So much for the niceties,' said Nicole, who'd known Alf from her days when she was training on the catwalk. He was working as a set erector as a way of showing some visible means of support, 'what the fuck's going wrong with our plans?'

'We've got Benny the CCTV guy's lad safely locked up; Matt's taking care of him.'

'Don't hurt him,' she remarked angrily, 'he's the only insurance we've got. We need to ensure that the video won't be recording when you rob the shop, and if any harm comes to him, well,' she paused, 'we're more than fucked.'

'That's where the problem lies.' said Alf, 'I know that the hard drive is security locked, so that no-one but Hartley and Instaview Surveillance can gain access to it. That way an intruder couldn't tamper with it. But Benny can't go to the shop and rig the system, without a worksheet being created by their company secretary. I don't know how you are going to do it. But, you have to make sure that there's a problem with the recorder, so that Hartley will contact Instaview, and request an engineer.'

'How am I going to do that? I still don't know how to record from our own Virgin box, and that's supposed to be simple.'

'All you have to do is unplug the output lead which connects the box to the monitor. That should cause enough of a problem.'

'Well, if that's the case, why do we need to involve Benny to do our dirty work, if by unplugging one fucking cable, its done?'

'But I want it to look like its recording, after the engineer's been and done the so called repairs.' said Alf.

'By unplugging that lead, it will be noticeable that images aren't being sent to the monitor, so the system can't be working properly. Hartley will then ring the company; a work sheet will be created. Benny will be sent out to affect a repair and sort it out. Making sure that it appears to be recording, even though its not.'

'And what video are we supposed to be making?'

'You, being shagged like mad, in your own shop.'

'Why?'

'Somebody else needs to be in the frame for the robbery.'

'Who?' questioned Nicole.

'Chandler.'

‘Chandler,’ she repeated slowly. ‘According to Hartley he’s the guy who’s supposed to be buying the gem. Apparently he had claimed that he knew me. I don’t suppose *you* know anything about that?’ she said displaying suspicion.

‘Of course I do,’ Alf replied, ‘he had to be informed about who you are, before he spoke with your husband. Otherwise my plan won’t work.’

‘Why?’

‘In order for him to do exactly what we want,’ said Alf. ‘We had to make him believe that he was the one in charge. I got someone close to him, to drop a couple of hints. Like, wouldn’t it be worth meeting Hartley’s wife, in secret, so that you could take a look at the shop, and look at where the diamond was going to be kept. But it would be best to keep Hartley in the dark, just in case he’s got another agenda.’

‘And he fell for it,’ remarked Nicole, frowning, ‘but why bother. Why don’t we just go in and steel it without him being involved?’

‘If we can get him implicated in the robbery,’ Alf grinned, ‘it takes the heat of us.’

‘But why on earth would he want to steal something he’s about to purchase legally?’ questioned Nicole.

‘Insurance fraud.’

‘If Chandler’s on the video, and then the diamond gets nicked. One phone call to the Police will kick-start an insurance investigation. I’ve already prepared a claim form for £30 million, with an excellently forged signature on it. This will be handed into the insurance company’s office straight after the robbery. That should be enough evidence to prove he’s on the make. And once he’s put away, we can sell the rock on the black market.’

‘Just a couple of major problems with this *so called* plan of yours.’ said Nicole. ‘How are you going to make this video, when, one, I don’t even know this bloke, even though he supposedly knows about me. And two, even if I did know him, where’s the action going to take place.’

‘That’s all been arranged.’ grinned Alf.

‘You are meeting him tonight at the shop, about nine thirty, so that he can do a reccy of the place. Obviously he’s never been there, and he just wants to check that the gem is going to be safely locked away.’

‘In order for that to happen, you must already be in contact with him. But why can’t he just ask Hartley, after all, it is my husband who’s going to be looking after it.’

‘You’re not bloody getting it, are you.’ remarked Alf.

‘Like I said before,’ he was sounding annoyed, ‘*we need Chandler to be implicated*. And the only way to do that, is to have video footage of him being in the shop, before the robbery takes place.’

‘How do you know this Chandler bloke?’ queried Nicole.

‘He’s very well known by the criminal fraternity. Being a wealthy business man who frequently does large transactions, under the legal radar. He very often uses criminals to do his dirty work, moving either goods or cash around. Fortunately, Mr Chandler puts feelers out when a large transaction is about to take place, like

for example this Appleford diamond. And although he doesn't know it, his private courier is brother to one of the cash handlers he confers with, and uses, who regularly confides in his sibling.'

'How's this going to work then?' she asked, still not exactly sure how this was supposed to pan out, or even if it would work at all.

'Like I said, it's all been arranged, but there are still a couple of bits that you need to do in order for it to work.'

'Such as?'

'You'll need to get away from home at about eight o'clock, so you're going to have to make up a believable excuse for Hartley.'

'That's not a problem,' she replied. 'Go on.'

'Make your way to the shop,' he paused as he handed her a video camera.

'Set that up somewhere. Making sure that it will get a good view of you and Chandler having a good time. Put it somewhere he won't see it. Then switch it on to record,' Alf pointed at the relevant button, 'as soon as you hear the front door buzzer.'

'I think I can manage all that,' Nicole replied, 'but I do hope its going to be worth all this trouble.'

'It will, believe you me, it will.'

'So,' she enquired still showing curiosity, 'what's it going to be worth? That's if we get away with it. And who's going to buy it?'

'We've already got a potential buyer. He's a very wealthy man from Hong Kong. Apparently he owns a number of Chinese restaurants in London, and he's prepared to give us £20 million in cash for it. Once it's in our hands.'

'That's a hell of a lot of money,' she remarked greedily, 'so when do I need to unplug the cable to the monitor?'

'Go straight back to the shop when you leave here,' Alf was clear about the series of events that needed to be in place for the theft to be successful.

'And sometime around three o'clock do your thing with that cable. Insist that your dear husband gets Instaview to send out an engineer immediately, and leave the rest to me.'

Nicole frowned.

'Hang on a minute. If I'm only making that video tonight, how the hell can it get copied onto the system?'

'It won't,' replied Alf. 'After I'd told Benny that that's what he was going to do, I had a change of mind. It could have been too time dependent, and we can't risk Hartley walking into the office and catching him doing the copying. So, once you've had your shagging session and Chandler leaves the shop. I'll be waiting outside, take the camera home, and put it onto a DVD. Then when you arrive at work tomorrow morning, I'll make sure that you get the disc, and all you have to do is put it in your handbag. Make sure that it's at the bottom underneath your purse and keys, and oh yes, the proverbial kitchen sink. Deliberately hidden, giving the appearance that you didn't want anybody finding it. Then after me and Lazarus have left, taking you hostage, the police will arrive and start an investigation. Find

that the system hasn't recorded anything, and discover the DVD in your bag. They then play it, and Bob's your uncle. Changers in the shit.'

'But what about me?' Nicole didn't sound too pleased. 'I'll be on the video; doesn't that implicate me as well?'

'Not really. We're going to kidnap you as insurance. Making sure that Hartley doesn't ring the cops before we've made our getaway. Yes you will be a suspect at first, until we release you. Then all you have to explain is the reason you made that video.'

'Which is?' she replied doubtfully.

'To blackmail Chandler.' continued Alf. 'Because he is worth a fortune, you'd intended selling him the disc. Or if he didn't pay up, you'd send a copy to his wife, and then sell it to the highest bidder. His reputation wouldn't be worth shit.'

'And who might the highest bidder be?' Nicole wasn't at all convinced.

'I don't know? One of his competitors or one of his henchmen, it doesn't really matter.' Alf appeared to be getting a tad frustrated. 'By the time we get to that point the cops won't be bothered about what's on the video - *or you*. All they'll be interested in is capturing us, and getting the Appleford back. Oh yes, just make sure you keep your mobile in your pocket, we don't want them getting hold of that.'

Alf paused for a second to give her time to think.

'Don't worry, it'll all work out. Believe me, it will.'

'I bloody hope so.'

Chapter 7

Wednesday, April 21st. 2:30 pm.

The shop was unusually busy for a Wednesday. Unless people had anniversaries or birthday's to buy for, or a repair is required for a watch or some other piece of adornment, Hatton Garden jewellers were usually pretty quiet, midweek.

Nicole rang the buzzer.

Victoria, even though she was preoccupied looking after a customer trying to find the right pair of earring for his wife, saw who it was and excused herself, as the man continued to browse through a selection she'd lifted out. Quickly she made her way to the entrance, and opened the door.

'Sorry to keep you waiting.' Her tone sounding a touch ruffled, 'But I'm sure that every husband in London is looking for a pacifier today, trying to keep their wives happy, so they won't suspect any indiscretions. This is the fourth man I've had in looking at the same thing. Earrings.'

Nicole looked Victoria straight in the eye.

'Pacifiers?' she grinned, 'Sorry,' she said slowly and with sarcasm, 'jewellery doesn't work. Flowers don't work. Perfume doesn't cut it. Even designer clothes do nothing these days. Only pound notes and sex hit the spot. Where is he?'

Victoria didn't know where to look, after Nicole's remarks about pound notes and sex, and could only respond with.

'I think Mr Granger's in the office.'

'Are you and Becky working tomorrow?'

'Yes,' Victoria replied sounding a touch curious. 'Mr Granger says that he wants us both in, and that you're going to be here as well. You'll be in charge, because he's going to be fully occupied with a delivery.'

'That's good,' answered Nicole, 'we want everybody in if possible. Do you know whether or not Jim's going to be working?'

'Oh yes,' said Victoria, 'he seems to be in most days. The only day we don't see him is Sunday, and that's only because we're closed. Being on his own since his wife died, I think he prefers to be here than being all alone at home in his bungalow.'

She paused to take a breath.

'I know this may sound a bit nose,' Victoria was choosing her words carefully, 'but why all the fuss. Mr Granger very often has expensive watches and jewellery delivered. And even if there's only one of us on the counter, he usually deals with it without any problems?'

'This is a bit different,' remarked Nicole.

'This delivery is a very, and I mean a very expensive gem, and Hartley's not taking any chances. He'd prefer to have more bodies around, just in case of trouble.'

'Are you expecting something going wrong then?'

'There are a lot of interested parties wanting to get hold of this particular piece, so I think he's just trying to be extra vigilant.'

Nicole realised that she needed to put Victoria at ease, rather than having her feeling over anxious.

‘Oh, but don’t worry. The minute the delivery is on the premises, it will be locked in the safe. And then if we’re quiet, it wouldn’t surprise me if Hartley lets one of you finish early.’

The phone started to ring.

But before Victoria could get to it, Hartley had picked it up.

After a few minutes, Hartley came into the sales area.

‘Nicole, Victoria. I’ve just had word that the delivery I’m expecting tomorrow will arrive at 9:30. So if everybody starts at their usual time, that should be fine.’

‘Shit.’ thought Nicole. ‘I’m going to have to get a move on.’

She glanced at her watch, it was 2:50.

Quickly she nipped into the office, opened the cupboard where the CCTV hard drive and monitor connections were housed. She yanked out one of the cables connected to the computer, hoping that that would do the trick. And even though nothing looked out of place, Nicole was keeping her fingers crossed that one way or another, she’d managed to dislodge something which would cause a problem.

‘Darling,’ she called, ‘there’s something wrong with the cameras.’

As Hartley was slowly walking round, carefully inspecting the four security cameras located in each corner of the shop, he called out.

‘Nicole.’

‘Yes.’ she replied trying to remain calm. However, inside she was feeling pretty anxious, wondering whether or not her act of sabotage had worked.

‘These cameras look fine.’ Hartley sounded somewhat none plus as to what she’d seen that would cause her to report a problem to him.

‘But I don’t think they’re recording.’

‘What gives you that impression?’ he was beginning to sound curious as he walked towards the office. ‘You’d have to go into the cupboard to see whether the red light indicator was flashing or not. That’s the only way you could tell if there was something wrong.’

‘But that’s what I did.’ she was flying by the seat of her knickers by now.

‘I was looking for the diary. And as it wasn’t on your desk in its usual place, I started to look round for it.’

‘But why the CCTV cupboard? There’s never anything in there apart from the surveillance equipment.’

‘I just thought you may have hid it in there, because it probably contains details of the gem that’s being delivered tomorrow.’

As Nicole was speaking, Hartley had arrived at the cupboard, and swung the doors open.

As soon as he opened it, he spotted that the red record light wasn’t flashing.

‘Well done.’ he was falling for her prank.

‘It’s a good thing you started rummaging round, or we would never have known the system was on the blink. I’ll get them to come out straight away, so that it’s working before tomorrow morning. I can’t take any chances on it not recording as it should.’

‘Thank fuck for that.’ thought Nicole, realising that she’d actually got away with it.

‘I’ll just go and make sure everything’s alright out front.’ she remarked, as Hartley lifted the phone handset and started to dial.

As her husband was waiting for his call to be answered, Nicole left the office but kept the door slightly ajar, so that she could eavesdrop in on his conversation.

‘Yes, this is Mr Granger from Granger’s Jewellers.’

It was clear that whoever had answered his call, had gone through their company spiel, and all Nicole could hear were his responses.

‘Is there any chance of getting someone over here ASAP. The system appears to have developed some sort of problem and isn’t recording.’

There was a silence as the person on the other end of the phone gave him their response.

‘I think his name’s Benny.’

Another silence.

‘Great, that’s much appreciated.’

Hartley sounded satisfied with the result of his call. But Nicole only just made it through into the shop, before getting caught skulking behind the partially opened office door.

‘The engineer’s on his way.’ said Hartley understandably pleased.

‘Is it the usual guy?’

Nicole wanted to be absolutely sure that it was the same man the Alf had blackmailed into fixing the system, by kidnapping his son.

‘Yes.’ Hartley sounded a touch none plus.

‘It almost appeared like he could have been expecting an emergency call.’ he remarked. ‘Because whilst I was put on hold so that the secretary could check whether or not he was available, she was surprised that he was still on the premises. Normally this Benny fellow would have left for home by now. Apparently, he likes to start early and finish early, so that he can get away. Bit of a home bird if you ask me.’

‘I’d call that a bit of good fortune, don’t you? At least it’s the same man who knows our system, and should be able to rectify the problem reasonable quickly.’

‘That’s true.’ he replied, seemingly satisfied that the issue had been resolved.

Chapter 8

Wednesday, April 21st. 4:10 pm.

'Hi, I've come about the CCTV system; I believe you have a problem.' said Benny as he was greeted by Hartley who had been waiting by the front door, obviously expecting him.

'Yes, please come through.'

As Hartley led the engineer through the shop on their way to the office, they passed Nicole who was stood behind the counter, attempting to look busy. With knowing what was going on, she didn't want to make it too obvious that she was keeping an eye on things.

Within a couple of minutes, Hartley was back in the sales area.

'He says it shouldn't take more than half an hour.'

'That's good,' answered Nicole, 'at least we'll be able to close the shop on time.'

Hartley went to the back of the counter, and started to chat with Victoria about their earring and bracelet stock levels.

She waited for a couple of minutes, and then as soon as she spied a chance, Nicole headed for the office.

As she closed the door behind her, Benny glanced over and smiled, not realising what was to come next.

'You'd better do this right,' said Nicole firmly, 'or you'll never see your fuckin' lad again.'

Benny looked at her in sheer astonishment.

'You know what's going on?' said Benny nervously. 'But you work here.'

'I don't work here,' she replied, 'I'm Hartley's wife. I own the place. So if you know what's good for you, you'll do the job right and no harm will come to your son. Understood?'

She didn't wait for a response.

'But, if this doesn't work out right because you've fucked up, you'll never see your boy again. My associate has no scruples, and has no qualms about blowing your lad away. And, just so you know, none of his other victim's bodies have ever been found. He's got an excellent method of disposing of corpses.'

The look on Benny's face was of abject terror.

'Right then,' said Nicole, as though she was speaking to someone that had just come to service a washing machine, 'I'll leave you to it.'

All he could do was make certain that the CCTV system did exactly as his son's kidnappers had instructed. It was the only way that he was going to be able to stop Keith from having his head blown off.

Suddenly, a terrifying thought ran through his mind.

He'd met Mrs Granger. Who was unmistakably in league with the criminals that were going to rob her husband's jewellery store. The problem was. He could identify her.

This not only put his son's life in danger, but also his own.

‘Concentrate man,’ he thought, ‘what the fuckin’ hell can I do?’

He pondered for a few seconds, and then it hit him.

‘USB.’

He knew that he had a couple of 64 gig USB memory sticks, which he’d used to check other company’s systems, when their hard drives had been corrupted or damaged. But they were in the van.

If he could just get hold of one of them. With his knowledge and expertise, he would be able to rig the Granger’s system. Make it appear to operate in the way that the robbers wanted. But set it, so that everything would record onto the USB, but not on the hard drive.

Benny had no choice but to go with his gut feeling.

He made his way back into the sales area, where Hartley, Nicole, and Victoria were busy dealing with customers.

Nicole spotted him out of the corner of her eye.

Excused herself to the customer she was attending to, and approached him.

‘Problem?’ she enquired, frowning suspiciously.

‘Yes, I need my soldering iron from the van.’ He was hoping that his acting skills were up to the mark.

‘For?’ she questioned.

‘One of the input cables has been damaged and needs to be soldered back in place. Otherwise the system won’t be able to process all the data necessary to record anything.’

Knowing that she was in full view of both staff and customers alike, and some of them must have overheard part of the conversation, Nicole played along, so as to avoid bringing suspicion upon herself.

‘I’ll open the door for you, so that you can go and get it.’

The two of them headed for the front door. And as Nicole was unlocking it to let him out, she managed to whisper.

‘If you’re fuckin’ us about you’ll regret it. It only takes one phone call, and your dear beloved Janice will be arranging two funerals, not one. Is that clear?’

‘Oh I understand alright.’ Benny was trying to be as calm as possible, but inside it felt like a stampede of raging bulls were stomping all over his guts.

‘I just need my soldering iron to make sure that the system does exactly what you want it to.’ he paused, and then queried. ‘Oh, and by the way, where’s that DVD I’m supposed to record onto the system?’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ she replied, ‘there’s been a slight change of plan. You just do what you’ve been told.’

Then without another word, Nicole opened the door and waited. Constantly watching him. She wasn’t going to let him out of her sight for a single second.

Benny quickly walked over to the van. Started to rummage around in a tool box trying to find his soldering iron. Having located it, he picked it up and managed to grab a USB stick which was lying on the top tier of the box, and slip it inside the iron’s cable, hopefully without being spotted.

‘Got it?’ questioned Nicole as she let him back in.

‘Yes.’ He arrogantly lifted the soldering unit up with his right hand to show her, keeping the cable and USB stick gripped firmly in his left hand.

‘Right then, you might as well go and get the job finished.’

When they got to the office door, Nicole quietly whispered.

‘Don’t forget. Fuck up and you can say goodbye to your son. And you’ll follow him, just as soon as the pain of losing a son has sunk in. Yes, *we will make you suffer.*’

If looks could kill, Nicole would have dropped dead there and then on the spot.

Benny went directly to the computer system, and logged into the settings menu.

It didn’t take long to reset the direction of the recording. Making sure that it didn’t record onto the hard drive, just on the USB.

He had to get this right.

The consequences were too dreadful to even consider.

So to make certain that he’d set it up correctly, Benny started the recording sequence, and after a minute, played it back on the monitor in the office.

Perfect. It worked a treat.

Nothing on the hard drive. But everything on his USB.

4:55 pm

‘All done.’ said Benny as he made his way out of the office.

‘It should work fine now.’

‘What was the problem?’ enquired Hartley.

‘It’d be a bit complicated to explain.’ replied Benny attempting to bluff his way through, without sounding like he was bullshitting.

‘But to put it simply, in layman’s terms, one of the contacts in the hard drive had burned out, that’s what I needed my soldering iron for.’

‘It’s OK now though isn’t it?’ enquired Hartley, ‘It’s not going to cause any problems tomorrow I hope.’

‘No,’ replied Benny, ‘it should be fine. But if you do experience any issues with it, don’t hesitate to give the office a ring, so they can send an engineer out right away.’

The minute Benny had left; Hartley went straight to the office and checked the surveillance monitor. Everything appeared to be in order. The red recording light was flashing, which, as far as his knowledge base went, was a good indication that all was well.

‘Is everything working now?’ enquired Nicole, as Hartley came back into the shop.

‘Yes. It all looks fine. I just don’t want it failing tomorrow, that’s my only concern.’

Chapter 9

Wednesday, April 21st. 6:55 pm.

They arrived home from their day's business at the usual time, and as soon as Nicole had dished up the sausage casserole she'd left simmering away in the slow cooker, they dined.

Even though she was a trophy wife, and not your regular, stay at home kitchen dweller. Hartley still insisted that they ate well when at home. So Nicole tried to make an effort, under slight duress, to cook a reasonably decent meal, at least twice a week, with makeshift salads, ready meals and takeaways for the rest.

Hartley had decided earlier in the day, that he was going to have a relaxing evening. With the delivery of the Appleford Rock the following day, he couldn't be bothered with anything else. So he'd deliberately planned on watching some television which, hopefully, would distract him from getting overly anxious.

Nicole on the other hand, had had her evenings work already prearranged for her.

She had to go and set up the video camera before Chandler arrived at the shop.

Then, Nicole would have to use her powers of sexiness and persuasion, to get him to consent to giving her a good fuck, there and then.

She was constantly watching the clock, knowing that it would take just shy of an hour, to drive back to Hatton Garden.

Since the time she'd spoken with Alf about the plan, she'd been trying to think of an excuse which would appear genuine. She couldn't keep using Eve. That would be far too obvious.

Then it dawned on her.

Her mobile.

Carefully and quietly she lifted her phone out of her handbag, taking great care not to get spotted. Went through into the hall. Fortunately Hartley didn't notice what she was up to; he was too busy watching an episode of 'The Blue Planet,' narrated by David Attenborough.'

Nicole slipped her phone into her coat pocket, which was hanging on the coat stand.

'Hartley,' she shouted whilst making her way back to the lounge, 'have you seen my mobile?'

'No, why,' he replied, 'is it not in your handbag? That's where you usually keep it.'

'That was the first place I looked, and its not there.'

'What about your coat?'

'I've checked there as well.'

'Oh, no.' she said, trying her best to sound disappointed. 'It'll be in the office on your desk.'

'You won't need it tonight, will you,' said Hartley, 'so why don't you leave it until tomorrow morning. It'll still be there. Nobody's going to go into the shop and pinch it.'

'I can't leave it there all night,' she remarked, 'what if Eve, or any of my other friends need to get in touch with me. No. I'll just have to go and get it.'

'Surely they've all got our landline number, haven't they?'

'Oh yes,' she was going to have to bluff through this again, 'but none of them would think to use it, because I've always got my mobile with me. No, like I said, I'll have to nip back and get it.'

'If we must,' he said, as he started to get up from his chair.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'I'll just put my shoes on and come with you.'

'Oh no, you don't need to do that. I'll go on my own. I'll be there and back before you know it.'

The last thing she wanted was her husband going back to the shop with her.

That would be catastrophic.

'Are you sure,' he replied, 'I don't mind.'

'No, it's fine. Like I said, it won't take me long. You just take it easy. Don't forget we've got a big day tomorrow, and you need to be at your best.'

'OK then, you go,' he remarked, 'I'll just get myself a coffee and then carry on watching television.'

After giving him a quick peck on the cheek, more of an appeasement than anything else, Nicole made her way through to the hall and collected her coat.

Hurriedly she exited the house, and the minute she climbed into the drivers seat of her brilliant white, 3 Series BMW, her mobile sounded.

'Thank fuck it didn't ring a minute earlier,' she thought, 'otherwise Hartley would have heard it, and that would be the end of my charade.'

Nicole started the car and got to the end of their driveway before looking at the caller display.

Alf.

'Yes.' she answered whilst taking a left and heading down the A10.

'Where are you?' he questioned.

'On my way to the shop. Why?' she said, not understanding why he should be calling her, when it was him that had made the arrangements for this extramarital shagging session.

'I just wanted to make sure that you'd managed to get away,' he replied. 'We need this recording for everything to work.'

'I know what we want,' asserted Nicole, 'but if I don't get off this bloody phone quickly, I'll probably get pulled up for using it whilst driving.'

'OK, OK, get your point.' Alf sounded a touch exasperated.

'Once you've done the necessary,' he continued, 'and Chandler's left the shop and is out of sight, I'll come and get the camera from you.'

'How long will it take to make the disc?'

'Only about an hour or so. I need to run through it first, just to make sure I only copy the bits we want Hartley and the police to see. I've got every intention of giving them a free porn show. I've no doubt they'll enjoy that.' he laughed, but with a touch of restraint.

‘Got to go, there’s a set of headlights coming up fast, and I can’t afford to get caught with my mobile stuck to my ear.’

Nicole hung up. She wasn’t waiting for a reply, and didn’t want to take the chance that the lights could belong to a police car.

Fortunately it was just an Argos van. Probably on his way home after a late delivery.

She arrived at the shop around five minutes past nine, a little later than she’d planned. But this would still give her plenty of time to set up the video camera.

Nicole had been thinking about the best place to hide it, the right location to catch the best of the action.

There was the floor standing display cabinets, but they would be too low. The camera wouldn’t be high enough to get a good view. There were also three presentation units fixed at eye level, one on each wall.

She stood and contemplated for a few seconds. Then decided that the unit on the left-hand side wall would be perfect. If the camera could be positioned just right, it would be able to capture all the right side of the shop, which would include the store room entrance and the right-hand side floor standing display cabinet, where Nicole wanted Chandler to give it to her.

After setting it up, exercising care, wedging it between two earring showcase trays. All she could do now was wait.

Twenty five past nine came and went.

Nothing.

Half past.

Nothing.

‘He’s not bloody coming.’ she thought.

‘I’ll give him another five minutes. Then I’ve no choice but to ring Alf.’

Twenty five to ten arrived.

Nicole lifted her mobile out of her jacket pocket, and loaded up her phone book.

The second that she pressed the call button, the front door buzzer sounded.

‘Shit.’ she thought, whilst cancelling the call to Alf, ‘the camera.’

With no time to waste, she slid the wall cabinet’s glass door open, and pressed the record button, hoping that she’d not disturbed its positioning.

Quickly she made her way to the door and opened it.

She was surprisingly impressed.

Not quite what Nicole had expected. But then, what *did* she expect?

Maybe a little older than her husband, but not quite as tall, probably 5 – 8.

Well built, but not overweight.

His light brown hair barely reaching the top of his ears.

A well trimmed greying moustache, which gave him an air of distinction.

Blue open neck shirt. Beige trousers and a checked sports jacket, clearly all designer labels.

‘I’m going to fuckin’ enjoy this.’ she thought.

‘Mr Chandler?’ Nicole said optimistically, as she opened the door to welcome him into the shop.

‘I regret having to do this,’ he replied pleasantly. He was so well spoken, that Nicole wondered whether or not he would succumb to her sexual advances, but she still had to give it her best shot, ‘but I didn’t want to give your husband the impression that he wasn’t to be trusted. However, I still need to know that the Appleford is going to be locked up securely.’

‘Don’t give it another thought.’ she replied, smiling ‘I’m just pleased that I can be of assistance. After all, if you can’t guarantee the safe keeping of something so valuable, then you’d be within your rights to have it delivered elsewhere, wouldn’t you.’

‘Shut the fuck up you stupid cow.’ she thought. ‘What would you do if your stupid statement made him change his mind, and caused him to take the rock to another jeweller.’

‘Can we get on,’ he seemed slightly rushed, ‘I’ve got another appointment in twenty minutes.’

‘Of course.’ replied Nicole, wondering how the hell was she going to get inside his pants, given that they had so little time.

She walked towards the stockroom.

‘The door to the secure room that the diamond is to be stored has two locking assemblies.’

Fortunately, even though it wasn’t a procedure she used very often, she had remembered the set up and sequence, from when Hartley had been teaching her all the ins and outs of running the business.

‘The first is a combination pad.’

She turned, smiled, and looked him straight in the eyes.

‘Sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to look away for a second, while I punch in the correct code in.’

‘No problem.’

She pressed the combination numbers.

‘Secondly there’s a key.’

Nicole lifted it out of her pocket and slipped it into the relevant slot.

‘And to make it even more secure,’ she didn’t want to appear like she was rambling, but wanted to make sure that Chandler was going to be more than satisfied with their system, ‘both the combination lock, and the key functions, operate three 3 inch cast iron bars, which slide into the concrete pillar inserted in the doors frame.’

She pulled the door open, and the two of them walked in.

Chandler inspected both the side of the door, and the frame, checking on how rigid and solid the bars were.

‘The diamond couldn’t be safer if it was locked up in Fort Knox.’

His eyebrows lifted slightly, and he tilted his head a touch, giving Nicole the impression that he was more than satisfied with the set up.

‘Yes. This is fine.’ said Chandler. ‘I’m more than happy with were the Appleford will be kept until I come to collect it.’

‘Are you married?’ remarked Nicole as she led him back into the sales area.

She had to make her move, or they wouldn't have any video to throw the police of their scent.

'Excuse me?' he enquired. 'What kind of question is that?'

'I was just wondering if you were married.'

Nicole turned to face him, undoing the top two buttons of her lacy pale green blouse, whilst walking backwards.

She needed him to be in front of the display cabinet.

'I mean,' she all but whispered, promiscuously, 'a good looking, sexy man like you, shouldn't be deprived of his oats.'

'In answer to your question, yes, I am a married man.' Chandler was clearly taken aback by her forwardness. 'And I certainly didn't expect to be seduced by the wife of the man that I'm doing business with. What would your husband have to say.'

By now the rest of her buttons were undone, and her blouse was wide open, giving Chandler a clear view of her full, voluptuous breasts.

Nicole pressed her hands gently on his shoulders, and eased him backwards, until he was leaning on the cabinet.

'Well I won't tell, if you won't.'

She placed the palm of her right hand on the front of his trousers, and slowly started to caress his shaft.

He'd understandably been aroused. There would definitely have had to be something wrong with him if he hadn't been.

Nicole felt his erection through the material, and smiled.

'Alf, you've got competition,' she thought, as she stroked her hand up and down his eager weapon.

Chandler slipped his hand round Nicole's back. Placed his palms on her bum, and squeezed.

She'd obviously got her wish.

The plan had worked.

Firmly, but gently, Chandler turned her round, so that it was Nicole that was leaning over, facing down on the display unit. She heard the sound of his zip being pulled down, and suddenly felt his hard shaft, sliding up and down on outside of her skirt.

Nicole was more than happy to allow him to take control.

She simply stood there. Letting him do whatever he wanted to.

Gently, he lifted the hem of Nicole's skirt until it was resting on her waistband.

Carefully he pulled her knickers down to just below her knees.

Nicole lifted her right leg a touch, so as to allow her pants to fall to the floor.

She'd purposely not worn tights, so as to make access easier. The thought of suspender belt and stockings had crossed her mind, but decided against it. If Hartley had managed to catch sight of them, he would, without doubt, have known that she was up to no good.

Within seconds he was thrusting in and out of her, and he could feel her juices lining the length of his shaft.

It only took another two or three minutes, and then he exploded all over her bum.

Success, thought Nicole.

Chandler took a handkerchief out of his pants pocket, and cleaned himself up.

Nicole pulled her knickers up, and straightened her skirt. Grinning all the time.

'It's time I was leaving,' said Chandler sounding a tad embarrassed. 'I'm going to be late for my next appointment.'

'Was it worth it though?' enquired Nicole, still smiling.

'Oh yes,' he said, 'I wouldn't have missed it for the world.'

'You never know,' she remarked, 'we might be able to do it again some time.'

'I can't say that I'd argue with that.'

Chandler left, undeniably satisfied. Not only with their security set up, but with the additional bonus he'd just received.

'I take it *he got* what *he* wanted,' said Alf, as he approached Nicole, who was stood in the shop doorway. 'And I presume we got what we need.'

'Of course,' replied Nicole, as she handed him the camera, 'I must admit though, I'm bloody good at what I do.'

Chapter 10

Thursday, April 22nd. 8:31am

As Hartley was bent over to unlock the front door of the shop, a young lad, can't have been more than about thirteen or fourteen years old, appeared out of nowhere. He put a finger up to his lips whilst raising his eyebrows and nodding in Hartley's direction, indicating secrecy. He slipped a DVD case into Nicole's hand. She instantly realised that it must have come from Alf.

The lad continued running.

'Who was that?' enquired Hartley as he started to stand upright.

'I haven't a clue,' Nicole replied, 'he just came out of nowhere, and now he's disappeared. He must be late for his bus or something.'

Thursday, April 22nd. 8:45am

'Have you sorted the tills out yet Nicole,' enquired Hartley as he made his way out of the office, after double checking that the CCTV monitors were working. 'The girls will be here any minute.'

Why he always referred to the two assistants as *girls* was anybody's guess. After all, they were both in their mid thirty's. Married, and with kids. To Nicole, the term *girls*, just didn't seem appropriate.

'Yes,' she replied, 'stop panicking. Everything's going to be fine.'

'That's easy for you to say. You're not burdened with the responsibility of taking possession of a multi million pound gem. All you've got to do is spend your share of the half million I'll get.'

Trying to remain as nonchalant as she could, Nicole remarked.

'I know, but that's going to quite a difficult project. I think I'm going to have to engage a bit of help from Eve.'

Hartley shook his head as he opened the front door for Victoria and Becky.

'Morning ladies,' was his greeting, deliberately missing out the word 'good'. He was a bit too nervous for it to be a 'good morning'.

All he could think was, 'I'll be glad when that diamond is locked up in the safe.'

9:10am

The door buzzer rang.

Hartley anxiously glanced up at the security monitor.

A man, that was about to remove a black crash helmet, was stood at the entrance.

'It's here,' he thought. 'A tad early though.'

As soon as he'd opened the door, the courier said.

'I do believe that you're expecting me. I have a delivery that I need a signature for.'

‘Yes, come in. Don’t be standing out there waiting to get mugged. We can’t take any chances with what’s in that package.’

‘Why, what is it? The crown jewels.’ joked the delivery guy as he finished removing his helmet. So revealing a blonde pony tail, and earrings that some of Hartley’s customers would be pretty envious of.

‘I’m only Mr Chandler’s private courier. I never know what I’m delivering.’ He grinned, ‘it could be a box of chocolates for one of his lady friends, or a briefcase full of bank notes for one of his clients. It could even be...’

‘Can we get on; I don’t like the thought of that parcel not being locked away in the safe.’

‘Yes, there you go.’ The courier sounded a bit put out at being cut short, when all he was doing was trying to be friendly.

He handed over an 8 inch cube, which had been wrapped in brown paper. Hartley grabbed it and went straight to the safe, and locked it up.

‘Hey, what about my signature? If I don’t get that, Mr Chandler will go berserk.’

He handed a small receipt book over to Hartley, who signed on the dotted line, after he’d read what it was that he was accepting.

I ACCEPT DELIVERY OF ONE, SIX INCH CUBED PACKAGE WRAPPED IN BROWN PAPER.

That was all that was on the receipt.

Clearly Mr Chandler didn’t want anyone knowing the contents of the parcel, and Hartley was noticeably relieved that the gem was safely locked away.

Nothing could go wrong now. We’ve done the most difficult part.

Nobody could get at the gem, without going through him.

The courier replaced his crash helmet and left.

‘Everything go alright?’ enquired Nicole.

‘Yes. So far so good.’ he replied.

9:26am

The front door buzzer sounded.

Hartley looked up at the monitor.

Two well dressed men stood waiting at the front door, clearly wanting to gain access.

Both were wearing business like blue pinstriped suits, collar and ties. They looked as though they’d just come from their office.

Victoria opened the door and welcomed them.

‘Hi.’ said the first man as he made his entrance.

He was about 5 - 5 and no more than eleven and a half stone, with dark brown eyes, and sporting a goatee beard. He was a good looking man, in a strange kind of way. The other one stood a good six inches taller, and even though he looked smart enough in the suit he was wearing, had a thick black beard, which ruined any kind of attraction he might have possessed.

‘We’re about to propose to our girls. And, as they’re twin sisters we thought it would be a nice gesture to get matching rings for them. Do you think you could help us out?’

‘Of course we can, sir.’ Victoria had switched into saleswoman mode.

She led them over to one of the display counters.

‘Have you seen anything in the window that appeals to the two of you?’

‘Yes,’ replied the bearded man. His accent giving his London heritage away, ‘err, tray eleven I think it was. Could we take a look at that one, please?’

‘Certainly.’

Victoria was about to open the inside window shutters, when the door buzzer sounded again.

She looked over to the door, and this time it was a casually dressed man. But she could tell instantly that his clothes didn’t come from Primark. They had a noticeably expensive look about them.

Victoria raised her hand in recognition, and the man smiled in return.

Quickly she lifted out tray eleven, and placed it on the display cabinet in front of the two gentlemen she was dealing with.

‘Please, take a look through these; I’ll be back in a second.’

After she’d excused herself, Victoria went over and opened the door.

‘May I help?’

‘My name is Chandler. Mr Granger’s expecting me.’

‘Please come in. I’ll get him for you.’

She turned with the intention of going to the office to inform Mr Granger of his visitor, but didn’t need to. He was stood directly in front of them, clearly expecting the caller.

‘I’ll see to Mr Chandler, Victoria. You continue to look after those other two gentlemen.’

‘Would like to come through to my office.’ remarked Hartley as he surveyed Chandler from top to bottom.

He was wearing dark blue trousers and a checked open neck shirt. A loose fitting beige summer jacket and Nike trainers, and carrying a black briefcase.

Hartley led Chandler through into his office and offered him a seat.

‘I think I’d like to see the package first.’ he remarked.

‘And I’d like to see some ID before we go any further.’ replied Hartley.

‘Of course. I wouldn’t expect it any other way.’ said Chandler.

‘There you go. My Passport and driving licence.’

He handed the documents over to Hartley, who firstly examined the photo in the passport, which was clearly the face of the man sitting in front of him. Then he compared it with the image on the driving licence.

‘You’ve covered your address.’

‘Well, what did you expect? I can’t have every Tom, Dick, Harry, and Hartley Granger knowing where I live, can I.’

There were raised eyebrows from both men.

‘I suppose not.’

Even though everything appeared to be in order, Hartley was a touch reluctant to get the diamond out of the safe, but felt that he had no option with the ID this man had provided.

‘I’ve not opened it.’ he remarked as he passed the parcel over to Chandler.

‘Why not? You must have been curious, and probably had a burning desire to see such a wonderful diamond as this. Especially with you being in the trade for so many years.’

Chandler ripped open the brown wrapping paper, without showing any caution. He knew that the gem would be protectively boxed. Once the paper was discarded it revealed a plain cardboard box. And after peeling off the celotape that the top was sealed with, he lifted out a ball of bubble wrap.

Carefully he unwrapped it, revealing a blue coloured cloth which protected the contents from getting scratched or damaged in any way .

Slowly Chandler laid it on the top of the office desk, and uncovered the Appleford.

The two men couldn’t take their eyes off it.

It was a larger and more perfectly cut diamond than either of them had ever seen, with the exception of the Cullinan One.

It really was Crown Jewell worthy.

‘Wow.’ was the only thing Hartley could say. He was dumbstruck.

After a moments silence, Chandler lifted up his briefcase, wrapped the gem back up, and placed it inside. Turning the combination dials to secure it.

Chapter 11

Thursday, April 22nd. 9:50am

Just as Hartley and Chandler were about to leave the office, Nicole walked in, assuming that they must have concluded their business.

‘Everything in order?’ she remarked pleasantly.

‘Of course.’ replied her husband as they continued walking in the direction of the sales area.

Nicole made her way behind the desk. And as the two men went through the door with their backs towards her, she quickly yet quietly opened her handbag which she’d previously placed on top of a filing cabinet, and made sure that the DVD case which Alf had managed to get to her was underneath her purse and keys.

She then followed them back into the shop. No sooner had she got to within two yards of Hartley, when a man’s deep voice bellowed.

‘Don’t move a fuckin’ muscle.’ said one of the men who’d *so called* come in to purchase engagement rings for their twin sister girl friends.

Everyone froze.

They were all both terrified and taken aback, at the sight of these two potential customers standing in front of them holding handguns, and pointing them in their direction.

‘Make one false move and you’re all dead.’

‘You two. Over there.’ The man who was clearly in charge, waved his gun, indicating that Victoria and Becky should move closer to Harley, Chandler and Nicole.

‘Now put that briefcase on that counter, and move away.’

Chandler and Hartley looked at each other in horror.

‘What the fucks going on?’ remarked Chandler

‘I could ask you the same thing.’ replied Hartley. ‘I thought you had everything covered.’

‘You can’t do this.’ said Nicole, her voice raised.

‘And who the fuck are you?’

‘I’m Mrs Granger, and I won’t let you take that diamond.’

‘The proprietor’s wife, no less.’ the gunman redirected his weapon from Hartley and Chandler, and pointed it straight at Nicole, whilst the other one kept his gun aimed at the shop assistants.

‘You keep your eye on them two,’ he said to his accomplice, ‘I’ve got *her* in my sights.’

‘You’ll do for insurance.’ he continued, as he walked towards her with the gun pointing at her abdomen.

Once he was close enough, the gunman grabbed Nicole’s arm and forced her to swing round. That way she would be facing the others, and he could press the gun into the small of her back.

‘Now open that briefcase and put the parcel on the cabinet, otherwise she gets it, - and so do you. The result will be the same; I still end up with the goods. The

only decision you have to make is. Do I end up with the gem with you lot still alive? Or do I get the gem and your all dead. The choice is yours.'

Chandler didn't have any options. He tilted the case in order to dial in the combination. Then he lifted the box out and placed it on the display unit, and remarked angrily.

'I'll get you for this. I'll hunt you down like vermin. And when I find you, I'll make you suffer like no-one's ever suffered before. Nobody robs *me* and gets away with it.'

'It's a bit difficult hunting us down from your coffin, don't you t think?'

'I'm not dead yet.'

The man with the dark beard, turned and pointed his gun directly at him, and then remarked.

'That's easily rectified.'

He squeezed the trigger twice.

Bang Bang.

Everyone appeared to see the bullets leave the gun in slow motion.

The terrifying echo of the shots filled the shop, and appeared to last for ever.

Chandler's body flew backwards with the force of the bullets. He smashed straight through one of the jewellery cabinets. It was like he'd been hit by a double-decker bus. His body weight had made contact with the unit. Rings, bracelets and necklaces went flying everywhere. There were a million shards of shattered glass all over the place.

Blood, jewellery and glass now covered the floor, and his red life fluid, splattered on the walls.

Apart from the reverberating sound from the gun, the room fell silent. The silence was almost as deafening as the gunshots.

'Who's next?' he remarked, 'or, are you all going to do as you're told.'

No one uttered a single word.

'I thought you'd see it my way.'

'Mrs Granger,' continued the gunman who was keeping his eye on her, 'pick up that box and walk towards the door.'

Without hesitation, Nicole grabbed the parcel and made her way towards the front.

'We're leaving now, and taking Mrs Granger with us. If any of you decide to be a hero and try to stop us. Or make contact with the Police within the next half hour. Her blood will be on your head. And believe you me, I would have no qualms whatsoever about putting a bullet straight through that beautiful little skull.'

Becky and Victoria stood shaking in abject fear, not only for their own safety, but Mr and Mrs Granger's as well.

Hartley remained perfectly still. Not quite as intimidated as his assistants.

'Open the door,' came the instruction, as the gunman pressed his weapon firmly into Nicole's back, making her whole body stiffen.

As soon as Hartley saw his wife's back arch and go rigid, he pressed the release button located under the till, which opened the security lock.

With the handgun pressed firmly into her back, Nicole pulled the door open, and the three of them hurriedly rushed out into the street.

Hartley spotted a light blue Ford Focus pull up directly in front of the shop, and straight away the two men, one of them forcing Nicole into the back seat of the car, piled in.

The car did a wheel spin as it left the scene at break-neck speed.

‘Ring the Police.’ Hartley shouted without giving it a second thought.

‘What about Mrs Granger,’ answered Becky, her voice shaky, ‘they’ll kill her if we contact the authorities to soon?’

‘Look,’ he was trying to justify his actions, but thinking about the value of the gem at the same time, ‘we can’t give way to robbers and thieves, in the same way the country can’t give in to terrorists. We have to make a stand.’

‘But they’ll kill her.’ remarked Victoria understandably concerned for Nicole, ‘We all saw what they did to Mr Chandler.’

The three of them glanced over at his blood soaked body. It was a horrific sight. Seeing him lying there covered in his red life fluid, pieces of glass, and jewellery scattered everywhere. Fragments spread all over his corpse.

‘Ring them.’ instructed Hartley arrogantly, ‘the longer we leave it, the further away they’ll get.’

Reluctantly, Becky lifted the handset from its cradle and started to dial 999.

However, even though nobody had heard any sirens, and before the call was answered, two armed uniformed officers came bursting in through the door. Three police cars pulled up at the front of the building with their emergency lights flashing, instantly blocking the road.

‘Freeze.’ shouted one of the officers.

‘You’re a bit fuckin’ late aren’t you,’ remarked Hartley, seemingly more annoyed than upset, ‘they could be in Timbuktu by now.’

‘How many were there?’ questioned the officer, realising that these people were the victims, not the perpetrators.

‘Only two of them,’ answered Becky, who by now was in tears, ‘but they definitely knew what they were doing. Somehow or other, the men were well informed about what they were here to steal, and apart from that parcel and Mrs Granger, they took nothing.’

‘If I... if I didn’t know better,’ sobbed Victoria, ‘I’d say it was an inside job.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Well. Apart from killing Mr Chandler, everything seemed to go like clockwork.’

Just then a plain clothed detective entered, accompanied by two other uniformed officers. The casual leisurely walk of the detective, gave the appearance of someone taking a stroll round the park.

As he glanced round at the carnage, it wasn’t exactly rocket science to determine that Hartley was the proprietor, and Victoria and Becky were his assistants.

‘I’m Detective Stuart Cunningham, and I’m here to oversee the investigation.’

On first impression, you would think that a big burley bank robber, wouldn't have too much of a problem taking him out. But I suppose looks can be deceptive.

He was reasonably tall, about five ten, and definitely not over weight. In fact he looked a tad on the skinny side. He must have been in his late 30's, yet wore his dark brown hair, in a style that wouldn't have been out of place in the fifty's. Just over the ears, with a side parting. Blue eyes and clean shaven. The suit he was wearing looked like it had just come out of Burton's window. Plain grey. No pinstripe. A white shirt with a pale blue tie, giving a good impression of, *bland*.

However, one defining characteristic that did come across, the fact that he was methodical and calculated. Definitely a career man. He was a man on a mission, intent on making it to the top of his chosen profession.

Detective Cunningham took an initial glance around the room.

'Forensics and paramedics will be here shortly.' he said as he focused his gaze at Hartley.

'You're the manager, I presume.'

Even though he'd initially appeared cold towards his wife's kidnapping, the shock of what had just happened seemed to be starting to sink in.

'Yes,' he replied, 'I'm Hartley Granger, the proprietor.'

'Sorry sir, but can you speak up.'

'What the fuck.' snapped Hartley, 'Are you deaf or just stupid? I've just had a multimillion pound diamond stolen. My wife's been kidnapped. And the client I was working for has been splattered all over my shop. And all you can say is. *Can you speak up?*'

Hartley spoke in a sarcastic and derogatory manner, and was using language which wasn't consistent with his usual vocabulary.

'Is there another room we could use? I need to ask you some questions, and would prefer some privacy.'

Stuart Cunningham wasn't going to allow Hartley's angry demeanour interfere with the investigation.

'In here.' answered Hartley harshly, and pointing towards the office. He was starting to accept that the detective was only doing his job, but didn't appreciate his calmness.

'Let the paramedics take a look at the ladies, and make sure forensics have all the access they need.' instructed Cunningham to the police sergeant. 'But don't let anybody touch anything, or leave, until forensics have done their stuff, and I've had a chance to speak with everyone.'

By this time Hartley had gone into the office and sat down at his desk.

When detective Cunningham walked in, Hartley was sat leaning forward with his head in his hands.

'What I don't understand,' said Hartley. Still angry but slowly starting to come back down to earth, 'is how the hell did they have so much information about what was going on.'

'Why?' questioned Cunningham suspiciously? 'What *was* going on?'

‘Oh, nothing illegal.’ remarked Hartley categorically. ‘Because I’m a jeweller, I was asked to affect the transfer of a gem, from courier to the potential owner. Keeping the said gem in my safe until he arrived to collect it.’

Hartley paused.

‘Carry on.’

‘Well,’ He didn’t want to implicate himself in any wrong doing. But realised that, by accepting the fifty grand, which he’d already cashed, and would show up on his bank statement, could actually make him an accessory.

‘Due to the value of the gem. Mr Chandler, my client, asked me to take possession of it, and keep it safe until he could collect it in person.’

‘So you knew Mr Chandler?’

‘Err, well, no, not exactly.’

‘Pardon,’ Cunningham was not only suspicious, but intrigued. ‘Let me get this straight.’ He had no intention of letting anything pass him by.

‘A man who you don’t know very well, who goes by the name of Chandler. Requests that you take delivery of a diamond, which he will collect in person. Did that not start alarms bells ringing?’

Hartley knew that Cunningham would find out about the money, so there was no point in trying to hide it.

‘No. After all, he’d already paid me for the safe collection and handover.’

‘And how much was that?’

‘Fifty grand.’

‘Fifty thousand pounds?’ queried Cunningham, almost choking in the process, ‘that’s a hell of a lot of money just for looking after a diamond for somebody.’

‘Err, well, it wasn’t just a run of the mill diamond.’

‘Why, what was so special about it?’

‘It was found and mined from a seam, no more than 30 miles away from where the Cullinan Diamonds were discovered.’

‘So. What are these Cullinan Diamonds, why are *they* so special?’

Noticeably Cunningham wasn’t up to speed in the diamond market.

Hartley chuckled.

‘The Cullinan Diamonds, are the most desirable and valuable gems that make up the Crown Jewell’s. They are priceless.’

Cunningham tried his best not to appear ignorant. It didn’t work, but he carried on regardless.

‘Just out of curiosity, what’s this diamond actually worth?’

‘Oh, between 20 and 30.’ answered Hartley, enjoying his superior knowledge of the diamond business.

‘You mean 20 to 30 thousand pounds,’ remarked Cunningham, ‘that’s a great deal lot of money for a single stone.’

‘No.’ Hartley chuckled. ‘Try 20 to 30 million, you numbskull.’ Hartley wasn’t exactly impressed with Cunningham, ‘I did mention earlier, that I’d had a multimillion pound diamond stolen, so why are you talking in tens of thousands?’

‘I was only checking to make sure I’d heard right. But it’s no wonder somebody would want to steal it, if it’s worth that kind of money.’

He paused to give himself a second to think.

‘Your wife.’ Cunningham wanted to delve deeper and get more details.

‘You said that she’s been kidnapped by the thieves.’

‘Yes.’

‘Now why would they do that?’ Cunningham wasn’t convinced that they’d kidnapped Mrs Granger as some kind of insurance policy.

‘They already had the diamond,’ he continued, ‘all they had to do was make their getaway. So why take, pardon my terminology, excess baggage along, which they’d only have to dispose of, at a later date.’

‘What,’ said Hartley once he’d realised the implications, ‘do you think they’ll kill her?’

‘She can identify them, can’t she? These people don’t leave any trails. They don’t take chances. Anything or anybody that could lead us to them will have to be disposed of.’

‘But hang on.’ said Hartley.

‘I can identify them, and so can Victoria and Becky. So are these thugs going to come back and kill all three of us?’

‘Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves Mr Granger,’ answered Cunningham, ‘at this moment you’re all safe. They’re not likely to return to dispose of you any time soon, well, not with us still here, anyway.’

Hartley didn’t look at all comfortable with that reply. His complexion had gone pale, and he was beginning to fidget.

‘Look,’ continued Cunningham, ‘I still need some more information.’

‘What more information do you want? They’ve stole the diamond. They’ve kidnapped my wife. They’ve slaughtered Mr Chandler, and there’s every chance that they’ll come back to kill *us*. What more do you want to know?’ Hartley was started to get agitated again.

‘Let’s not go down the sarcasm route, please, Mr Granger.’ replied Cunningham. ‘I see you have CCTV cameras...’

And before he could finish speaking, Hartley interrupted.

‘Of course. Why the hell didn’t I think of that? The robbery must have been recorded.’

He jumped up out of his director’s chair, and went to open the computer cupboard.

Once there, he grabbed the remote control. Pressed rewind. Then play.

The two of them stood glued to the monitor.

Nothing.

Just a blank screen.

‘What’s wrong with it now,’ remarked Hartley, ‘I only had it checked over yesterday.’

Cunningham leant over Harleys shoulder to take a look.

He glanced at the recording unit.

Everything appeared to be in order.

No wires unplugged. Nothing out of the ordinary.

‘Well there’s something not right, if the unit isn’t recording.’ remarked the inspector. ‘And you say it was only checked yesterday.’

‘Yes.’

Cunningham started to walk slowly round the office as he spoke.

‘Who was it that did the checking? You?’

‘Don’t be daft. I have a company who looks after the CCTV system.’

He’d spotted a handbag on top of a filing cabinet, and knowing that he would need a search warrant to take a look inside, Cunningham, wanting to take a short cut, was deliberately clumsy and accidentally on purpose, knocked it off.

‘Ups. Sorry.’

The contents of Nicole’s bag spued out all over the floor.

Hartley rushed over and started to retrieve Nicole’s possessions.

‘I can’t see her mobile. She usually keeps it in here when she’s in the shop.’

‘Would she not have it on her, just in case she gets a call?’

‘No, not while she’s serving.’

Cunningham was watching as Hartley looked round for the phone, thinking it could have slid further away.

He spotted a DVD case which was poking out from underneath a number of other nick knacks which women keep in their bags.

‘What’s this?’ he queried.

‘I’ve no idea. It looks like a video.’

‘Can we take a look at what’s on it?’ said Cunningham. ‘Is there a DVD player in here?’

‘Yes.’ answered Hartley, ‘There’s one built into the CCTV recording unit.’

He walked over, leant forward a little, and found the button to open the drive.

Pressed it, and the draw slid open.

As soon as he’d inserted the disc, Hartley pressed play.

After a few seconds, the little black and white speckles which appear at the beginning of a DVD stopped, and pictures started to roll.

The first image to appear was a large, slightly blurred view of Nicole’s face, right up in front of the camera lens. It seemed as though she’d just pressed the record button on the machine, and was moving away.

As she turned, it looked like she was heading towards the front door.

Unfortunately, the sound wasn’t completely in sync, and of a very poor quality. It was just a jumble of crackles.

She opened the door, and in walked Chandler.

‘What the hell.’ remarked Hartley, clearly shocked at what they were seeing.

‘That’s Chandler. What’s he doing in the shop. Alone. With my wife.’

‘You mean he’s the man whose body is lying out there. The dead man.’ said Cunningham.

‘Shh.’ Hartley put a finger to his lips. Obviously wanting to discover, exactly what was going on.

They appeared to be speaking to each other, but neither Hartley nor Cunningham could decipher what was being said. All they could hear were crackles, and the occasional undecipherable bit of dialog.

The two men watched with intrigue as Nicole punched in the combination code which formed part of the locking mechanism. It looked like she was explaining how the security system worked.

After inserting and turning the key which completed the procedure, she pulled open the stock room door.

They made their way inside.

For a couple of minutes, Nicole and Chandler were out of sight.

Then they re-entered the main sales area.

Hartley and Cunningham couldn't believe what they saw next.

Nicole was undoing the buttons of her blouse.

Chandler looked like he was saying something; it appeared to be some kind of objection. But he wasn't making a forceful rejection; it was only an 'appearing to save face' protest.

Before Hartley and Cunningham knew what was happening, Nicole and Chandler were having sex, right there in the sales area of Hartley's shop.

'Enough.' shouted Hartley, somewhat horrified, as he pressed the stop button on the remote.

A few seconds elapsed, whilst the video stopped and went through its ejecting sequence.

'Clearly you had no idea about the relationship between your wife and Chandler.' said Cunningham, also a touch bemused himself.

'No.' answered Hartley quietly, as he appeared to be deep in thought, as well as shock.

'Well, not really.' he continued. 'When I spoke with Chandler on the phone, he did mention that he knew about Nicole's indiscretions. I confronted her, but she claimed that she didn't know him. I know she's rather, sorry, extremely promiscuous. I've caught her more than once, with her legs wrapped round another blokes pelvis, whilst he was enjoying himself. But that was the reason I married her; she was a trophy wife, nothing more, nothing less. She was good for business.' Hartley paused.

'What I can't get my head round is, why, during the robbery, Chandler got murdered.' he paused for another second, and then continued, 'Yes he was going to buy it. And obviously with him out of the way, the thieves would have one less problem to deal with. But where does Nicole fit into the equation.'

'Think about it.' Cunningham was starting to think out loud, trying to get an angle on the situation.

'If she was deliberately shagging Chandler knowing that it was being recorded. Could she not have been planning to blackmail him with a copy?'

'I suppose that's a possibility.' Hartley replied.

'But what I *still* don't understand is, why kidnap her.' uttered Cunningham under his breath, 'why not just kill her, the same way they got rid of Chandler. If Nicole's not involved, she just becomes excess baggage.'

'That's stupid,' sniggered Hartley, 'if she *was* involved, she would have known that Chandler was going to get killed, so why bother letting him fuck her in front of the camera. Don't forget it was Nicole who set the camera to record the show. She

would have known that blackmail wasn't going to be an option. It's a bit difficult trying to get money out of a dead man.'

Chapter 12

Thursday, April 22nd. 11:35am.

Hartley's mobile rang.

'Hello'

'Do you ever want to see you wife alive again.'

'Err, yes. Of course I do.' he replied, not really knowing what else he could say.

'Who is it?' mouthed Cunningham.

Hartley shook his head and put a finger up to his lips. 'Shh.'

'Well do as instructed and she'll be released.'

'But... ' Hartley started to speak but was immediately interrupted.

'It's alright; we know what you're wondering about.' remarked the caller. 'Why did we kidnap her when we already had the diamond?'

'Yes. Why did you take her? She's of no use to you now, is she?'

'Oh yes your dear wife is going to be plenty of use to us, in more ways than one.' He paused, and then continued, 'Firstly she's our insurance, making sure neither you nor the police do anything stupid. Because if you do, she's dead. And secondly, err, well, you don't need *me* to tell you the rest, do you.'

'What?' Hartley sounded alarmed as his mind started to work overtime.

Yes he knew of Nicole's indiscretions. Yes he was well aware of her sexual appetite, and some of the kinky ways she wanted to have sex. Of course she would be in her element, fucking more than one bloke at a time. The more the merrier, she would say. He was also well aware of her desire for as much wealth as she could get her hands on. But. To be involved with such a grand scale robbery, involving murder, evaded even Hartley's imagination.

She'd got more money than most of her socialite friends. She never wanted for anything, and that included an open relationship. She could do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. So, why would she be associated with something like this?

'I presume that you've seen the video,' the caller remarked, clearing his throat sarcastically.

'How do you know about that,' questioned Hartley, 'I've only just discovered it in her bag.'

'Your nearest and dearest has just told me about it, thinking it might buy her some time. She say's the only reason she did it, was to blackmail him.'

'So, what... so what do you want from me? You've already got my wife as well as the diamond.' stuttered Hartley.

'That's simple.' Came the reply.

'Let the Police have that disc. I'm presuming that there's at least one of them actually there with you now.'

'Yes there is, and he's already seen it, and all that does, is show my wife's indiscretions.'

'Exactly. And considering there are no other leads for them to follow, she's most likely their prime suspect. But even if they do take her in for questioning,

they'll be wasting their time.' the caller continued. 'The only thing they could try and prosecute her for is attempted blackmail. And considering her intended victim is dead, they'd be laughed out of court.'

'So what is it that you want?'

'I know you won't be able to answer my next question freely, so just cough if the answer is yes. Can that police officer hear our conversation?'

Hartley sighed.

'So he can only hear what you're saying.'

Hartley coughed.

Cunningham glared at him and mouthed, 'What's going on?'

Hartley just shook his head.

'Right then. Just let him have the DVD, and as soon as we're out of the country, we'll let your Nicole go.'

The line went dead.

'Who was that, and what did they want?' questioned Cunningham.

Hartley relayed the bits about Nicole's proposed blackmail, and then said.

'But I still can't understand why the CCTV system didn't record anything. It was only checked over yesterday, and everything seemed alright then. And if it had been in operation, we'd have the culprits bang to rights.'

'Who's the company that services the system, we'll get them back. Maybe their engineer will be able to shed some light on why it isn't working.' Cunningham's suspicion was more than obvious.

Hartley lifted an invoice out of the top draw of his office desk, and handed it over.

At the top of the letter head was their business name. 'Instaview Surveillance.' With the statement 'CCTV & Security Specialists.' Printed underneath. The phone number lay just below the heading.

Detective Cunningham gave the number to one of his officers, and instructed him to get the same engineer, to come and examine the system again.

'What do I do now?' enquired Hartley.

'Wait,' insisted Cunningham, 'just be patient and wait.'

Three quarters of an hour had elapsed, before Benny the CCTV engineer arrived.

He was already in the throws of his son being held prisoner, and knew more than anybody outside the robber's circle about what had actually gone on. So he had to keep his cool. Benny had to be seen as being genuine. His son was his main priority.

'So,' he said as he was led into the office by Cunningham, 'what seems to be the problem. I was only here yesterday, and everything was fine then. I even double checked the cameras and the hard drive, because Mr Granger seemed to be a bit on edge.'

'Could you take another look,' requested Cunningham, 'it looks like the recorder isn't working at all. There are no video's that can be replayed, so, as far as I can tell, it's kaput as a recording device. Its only use is as a DVD player.'

Benny walked over, picked up the remote control and pressed the play button.

Nothing.

He pressed rewind, and then play again.

Still nothing.

All the footage that was being displayed was a black and white speckled screen with no images.

‘Yes,’ he remarked, ‘there’s definitely something amiss. I’ll have to go into settings and see what I can find.’

Benny lifted his small toolbox and placed it at the side of the monitor. He opened the top to reveal his work tools. He manoeuvred it round, so that the mirror that he’d fastened inside the lid, would give him a good view of what was going on behind him.

‘Excuse me Detective Cunningham,’ said one of the uniformed officers, ‘but could you come and take a look at this?’

During the brief interlude where nobody was taking any notice of what he was doing, Benny managed to unplug the pen drive that he’d set up to record everything, and slipped it into his toolbox without being spotted.

‘How’s it going?’ asked Cunningham when he returned about fifteen minutes later.

‘I can understand why it didn’t record,’ remarked Benny shaking his head, ‘because all the setting have been altered. Somebody must have been messing around with the remote, and cancelled the continuous recording feature. Because it’s working now that I’ve reset it.’

Cunningham glanced at Hartley, seemingly confused.

‘Do *you* know who would have wanted the system disabled? And if so why?’

‘I haven’t a clue,’ he replied, ‘the only people that come in here are members of staff. The only others that have used it was us, when we played that video.’

‘You’ve used it to play a DVD?’ interrupted Benny. ‘When?’

‘A couple of hour’s ago.’ remarked Cunningham, ‘Just before we sent for you.’

‘Well that shouldn’t have affected the recording sequence. But if you’ve been messing around with the remote, you could have accidentally erased any data that was on there.’

‘But we checked the playback before watching the DVD.’ remarked Hartley.

‘Sir.’ interrupted one of the uniformed officers.

‘Yes.’

‘Forensics are requesting that the premises be cleared, so they can get all the finger prints that may be present, and further DNA samples.’

‘Right.’ answered Cunningham.

‘Take everyone down to the station for further questioning, and seal the shop off. And when the forensic report is ready, I want it on my desk immediately.’

‘Excuse me,’ asked Benny, ‘but can I go back to work now?’

Without even thinking about his answer, Cunningham replied.

‘Yes, I don’t think I need hold you up any further.’

Benny didn’t hang around.

As casually as he could, he collected his tools and headed for his van.

Jumped in, started the engine, and made as quick a getaway as he could, without appearing like he was in a rush to leave the area.

The shop was cleared, and the usual yellow and black police cordon tape put in place.

Cunningham, whilst still trying to piece things together, without much success, wandered around the shop for a while, not really knowing how he was going to make any headway with the investigation.

All he could hope for was, that forensics would come up with a fingerprint, or a DNA sample that could create a lead.

'Excuse me sir,' said the sergeant, 'are we alright confiscating this desktop unit? We might be able to discover why it didn't record any footage during the robbery. Something that the engineer may have missed.'

'That's fine,' replied Cunningham, 'do what you have to. But keep me informed at all times.'

Benny, however, had no time to lose.

He rang work to say that due to the police call out to Granger's Jewellers, he would be running late, and requested that another engineer fulfil his remaining maintenance calls.

Once work had authorised his absence, he went straight home.

He knew that the house would be empty.

Keith was being held captive. His other two children would be at school, and Caroline would be out doing the shopping.

Made his way straight through to the lounge and picked up his laptop.

Once booted up, he plugged in the USB pen drive that he'd used to redirect the recording.

'Bingo.' he said out loud. 'Gotcha.'

Even though he knew his stuff where CCTV and recorders were concerned, Benny was still made up with the footage that he'd managed to capture.

Not only did he have video evidence of Mrs, Grangers promiscuity, he also had footage showing Chandler's murder and, the theft of the diamond.

The faces and voices of those involved were clearly identifiable, and there was more than enough evidence to convict every single one of them.

He held all the aces.

Chapter 13

Back to 11:15am.

‘We’ve done it.’ said Alf, sounding rather elated as he sat on the couch in his flat, starrng at the diamond on his lap, ‘I do believe that we’ve just got away with robbery and murder in one fell swoop.’

‘That’s great.’ said Nicole, ‘but...’

He didn’t let her finish her statement; being so pleased, he just had to continue.

‘And not only that, we’ve even outdone that bloke they call ‘The King of Diamonds.’

‘Who the hell is he?’ questioned Nicole.

‘In 2007 he masterminded a jewellery heist in Hatton Garden.’ he continued, noticeably feeling full of himself. ‘Took around thirteen million quid’s worth of gems. But *they* had to steal a considerable amount of jewels in their haul, whereas we’ve only nicked one piece. Plus ours is worth twenty million quid. The so called ‘King of Diamonds’ did carry on to do more jobs, but I think based on a one to one robbery, ours is the biggest.’

‘That’s great.’ repeated Nicole, ‘but, what I was trying to say is. What about Hartley and the girls? Don’t you think that I’m going to be their number one suspect, not to mention what the police might be thinking?’

‘I can’t see them being a problem.’ replied Alf. ‘Don’t forget they’ve got that video of you being fucked by Chandler, which proves that all you was after was a means with which to blackmail him. So even if they do have their doubts, I can’t see it coming to anything. Like I said to your husband on the phone, you’ve simply been kidnapped, as a means of insurance whilst we made our getaway.’

‘But each one of them saw your faces, and so, without any doubt whatsoever, they could identify the two of you.’

‘That’s as maybe.’ he remarked, undeterred by that thought. ‘But in order to do that, the Police need to prove that we were at the scene at the time of the robbery. And considering we’ve had the CCTV system doctored, they can’t do that. They also have to catch us and arrest us, before we can be part of an ID parade.’

‘Aren’t you forgetting something?’ queried Nicole.

‘You both have criminal records, so they *will* have your mug shots on file.’

‘And how many other guys fit our description. Two men in their mid to late thirty’s, or even forties. One large, the other not so big. One with dark hair, one blonde.’

‘OK.’ she replied, still not totally convinced, but what the hell, she’d got her own agenda to keep to.

‘Have you still got Benny’s lad locked up?’

‘Oh shit,’ Alf coughed, as if a mouthful of coffee went down the wrong way, ‘I forgot about him.’

‘Lazarus. Give Matt a ring and tell him to let the lad go.’ he said with a sense of urgency. ‘He knows what to do. But for fucks sake, remind him to keep his balaclava on, until the lad’s out of sight.’

‘Consider it done.’

‘So when do you get to meet this buyer, and sort the payment and exchange out?’ questioned Nicole.

‘We have to wait a couple of days until things cool down a bit. And when he thinks its time, he’s going to get in touch.’

‘What do I do now?’ she sounded somewhat concerned about how she was going to return home. Knowing that she would be arrested and treated like a suspect the second she was discovered.

‘You might not like this part, but it’ll work.’

‘Pardon,’ Nicole didn’t like the tone Alf was using, ‘what exactly am I *not* going to like?’

‘I’m going to drive you to within half a mile of the shop, and then Lazarus,’ he coughed, ‘is going to push you out of the car.’

‘I don’t think so.’ she said, not relishing the thought of being thrown out of a moving vehicle. ‘I’ll get covered in cuts and bruises, not to mention getting rather messy. I can’t say that I fancy that one bit.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll pull up first, and let you carefully throw yourself out. You can just roll around on the grass for a bit, so it looks like you’ve been dumped out.’

‘Supposing it does go according to plan, what happens then? You know - once you’ve sold the rock, and collected the cash.’

‘I’ll arrange a meet, and we can divvy up.’ it sounded like he got it all worked out. ‘We’ll disappear for about twelve months or so, and then, I’ve got every intention of coming back and robbing your nearest and dearest again.’ he laughed.

‘And what’s stopping you double crossing me,’ questioned Nicole, ‘you don’t need me anymore. I’m surplus to requirements, now that the jobs done.’

‘Oh no, you’re anything but a surplus.’ Alf grinned, ‘we need you.’

‘What for?’ Nicole wasn’t convinced.

‘Well.’ he said still wearing that silly grin. ‘How are we going to rob Hartley’s shop again, if we don’t have you on board? Plus, I had thought that there was a bit more than just the robbery between us, don’t you.’

Nicole didn’t reply. She simply smiled.

The mention of Alf’s relationship with her seemed to clinch it. He’d somehow, through his sweet talking, managed to persuade her that he wouldn’t do a runner, and leave her stranded.

* * *

Friday, April 23rd. 10:30 am.

As she came out of the loo, Alf said cautiously.

‘Come on then, let’s get it over with.’

The look on Nicole’s face said it all.

And as they made their way down stairs to Alf’s car, she kept muttering, ‘I don’t like this one bit.’

‘It’ll soon be over.’ said Alf trying to console her. ‘I’ve told him to be careful with you, otherwise, well, otherwise he’s in the shit with me, big time.’

Alf climbed into the front. Lazarus and Nicole occupied the back seat.

Conversation was at a minimum. They didn’t have that much to talk about as Alf headed towards Hatton Garden.

‘We’re here.’ remarked Alf as he started to slow down. He then pulled up at the side of the kerb.

‘I’ve picked this spot deliberately because of the grassy verge between the road and the footpath. Lazarus is going to give the impression that he’s pushing you out just in case there’s anybody watching. You fall out onto the grass, and roll over a couple times, and we’ll shoot off.’

Alf was getting a touch anxious; he wanted this part over with ASAP.

Nicole on the other hand, didn’t exactly fancy throwing herself out of the car and rolling over in the grass.

‘Shit Nicole, just get on with it.’ said Alf, a little exasperated at her time wasting.

Reluctantly Nicole grabbed the door handle, pulled it, and before Lazarus could even put his arms out to give the appearance that he was pushing her, she was lying on the grass.

‘Go, Go.’ shouted Lazarus, not wanting to hang around any longer than necessary.

The car did a wheel spin as Alf pulled away, and a number of passers-by glanced in their direction.

Both men kept their faces as concealed as possible, and fortunately, any possible witnesses were more concerned about Nicole, than to be bothered about the fleeing vehicle.

‘Somebody ring the Police.’ shouted a middle aged lady, who was stood in the middle of the by now increasingly curious crowd.

‘Already done.’ said a man who’d only just joined the growing body of on lookers.

After about two minutes a police car arrived. Clearly Alf’s chosen drop off point, only half a mile away from the largest diamond centre in Britain, had been the perfect location for a speedy emergency services response.

Fulfilling his duty as a policeman, the officer walked quickly towards Nicole, trying to assess the situation.

Nicole’s acting skills left a great deal to be desired, but as she grimaced her face to indicate that she was in a lot of pain, the officer frowned, clearly in disbelief. Especially as there weren’t any visible signs of physical injury. It was evident that the lady wasn’t in a life threatening situation.

As he approached her, one of the passers-by, a bit of a busybody who wanted to get noticed, walked alongside and started to tell him what she had seen.

‘The car just pulled up,’ she was sounding rather excitable, ‘and he pushed her out. That poor girl went flying to the ground. It’s lucky she landed on the grass and not the road; otherwise she could have been killed, if another vehicle had been going past.’

‘Thank you.’ remarked the officer, not particularly interested, due to the pushy way she was offering the information. He needed to speak to the injured party first, and get her version of events. Not a load of gobbledegook from someone who just wanted to get herself some attention.

‘Won’t you need me to make a statement; after all, I am an important eyewitness.’

‘Not at this moment, I need to check on the victim.’

‘What actually happened?’ he enquired, as he crouched down to look at Nicole.

The crowd was slowly being dispersed by another group of officers that had turned up.

‘We need to go to the Police Station,’ she replied with a sense of urgency. ‘I don’t want to talk about it out here in the street.’

By this time the ambulance with the paramedics in had arrived.

‘Give me some room.’ said the first one on the scene, carrying a rucksack style medical case. ‘What happened here?’

‘She was pushed out of a moving car,’ said the busybody, ‘it wasn’t half travelling fast. I’m an eye ...’

‘Thank you,’ interrupted the officer, ‘I’ll deal with it.’

As everyone moved away, the paramedic began to examine her.

The officer didn’t say anything straight away, because, as Nicole was being examined for cuts and bruises, broken bones and any signs of head or body damage, the paramedic started to look puzzled.

‘What’s the problem?’ questioned the officer.

‘For somebody who was just been pushed out of a moving car, she’s looking pretty good.’ he shook his head.

‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say that all you’ve had, is a bit of a fall, and fortunately landed on the grass.’ he remarked as he looked her in the eye.

‘I think it’s my spine.’ remarked Nicole realising that she had to say something. Knowing that, because she’d said it was her back, even after an x-ray it would be impossible to assess whether or not there would be any lasting damage.

‘We’ll have to take her to the hospital to get that checked out.’

The officer and the paramedic looked at each other, their facial expressions indicating that neither of them was convinced.

Neither of them believed what Nicole wanted them to.

‘My husbands shops been robbed, and I’ve been kidnapped to stop him phoning for the police before the thieves made their getaway. So can you take me to the hospital to get me properly checked out, and then can I go to the station and make a statement.’

She knew she needed to look as though panic was setting in.

‘Come on then.’ she shouted angrily. ‘The longer you piss about, the further away the robbers will be. By this time they could have fled the country and be sunning themselves in the Costa dam fortune.’

‘Let’s get the lady onto the stretcher and into the ambulance.’ said the paramedic as he glanced towards his colleague, having realised that they were on a loser. If there was some kind of injury to her back and they didn’t follow protocol,

then they'd be in for the high jump. So all they could do was to go along with the correct procedure.

Chapter 14

Friday, April 23rd. 11:30 am.

After suffering an extremely disturbed night, not knowing what had happened to his wife. Hartley, even though they basically lived as free agents, still wouldn't have wanted any harm to come to her. So he rang the Police station to enquire of any developments.

'She's safe and sound.' answered the desk sergeant, after he'd kept him on hold for about five minutes, whilst he made the relevant enquiries.

'Your wife's at St Bartholomew's Hospital, but it might be wise to ring them up to see if its convenient for you to go and visit, because at this moment I don't have any further details.'

'Thanks.'

He pressed the disconnect button on the cradle to free up the line, and the second the dial tone sounded he rang the hospital.

After explaining who he was and the nature of his call, the receptionist informed him that Nicole had been examined, and that there weren't any serious injuries. Also that she had appeared to be more in shock, than anything.

'Oh, just a minute.' continued the receptionist, as she was reading further details on the computers monitor. 'It looks like your wife has now been taken to Snow Hill Police Station, so you will have to contact them for any further information.'

'At least she's still alive.' he thought.

He'd had his doubts as to whether or not he'd ever see her again, especially the way they'd all seen Chandler get blown away.

Without wasting any time, Hartley jumped in the car and headed straight to Snow Hill.

As he was driving to the Police station, he couldn't stop trying to work out, what the hell had actually happened for him to be landed in this situation.

Originally, all he was commissioned to do was accept the delivery of a diamond. Wait for it to be collected by the prospective owner, a Mr Chandler, who would provide him with concrete ID. And, after receiving full payment for this particular job, would receive further monetary gain for other possible gem transfers.

It was clear that Chandler must have known that there was going to be complications; otherwise he wouldn't have been so careful and secretive.

It was more than apparent that the thieves were, either in contact with some unscrupulous person on the inside of Chandlers operations, or it had to be an inside job.

But who? Thought Hartley.

Nicole? No. She was already onto a good thing. She had everything she could wish for. Nice home. More money than she'd ever had in her life. Freedom to come and go as she pleased. Freedom to get shafted whenever she got the urge, and with whosoever she wanted. Everything he'd thought when Cunningham was questioning him. No, in Hartley's opinion, Nicole wasn't even in the frame.

Lorraine or Angie?

No way. He thought.

They were good at jewellery sales. But to organise and pull off a heist like this was way beyond their capabilities.

So who?

Hartley arrived at the station, and once he'd explained who he was and the reason for his visit, he was shown into a small informal waiting room.

After about ten minutes the door opened, and in walked Nicole, followed by a plain clothed officer.

'Darling,' said Hartley, attempting to sound distraught, 'it must have been awful for you. Are you alright?'

'I'm OK.' she replied unconvincingly.

Hartley knew how inadequate her acting skills were. Even when trying to get her own way, and persuade others how 'absolutely innocent' she was, there would always be a feeling of insincerity.

'Are we allowed to leave?' Hartley enquired.

'Yes. Your wife has been very cooperative. She's managed to give us a vague description of the perpetrators, and even though not very precise, at least it gives us something to go on. Even a little, is better than nothing at all.'

'So, we can go now?' He repeated impatiently.

'Yes, of course.'

The two of them made their way to his car, and the second the doors were closed, Hartley laid into her.

'What the hell's going on?'

'What do you mean?' she replied still sounding suspiciously dubious. 'You've been robbed. I've been kidnapped. At one point I thought I was going to get raped or even killed. And all you can say is, 'what the hell's going on'.'

'Come on Nicole. I'm not some green-behind-the-ears cop, who can be swayed by your pure and guiltless act. You seem to forget, that I've seen you perform your sweet and innocent, before. So I'll say it again. What the hell is going on?'

'I'm afraid this time you are sadly mistaken.' replied Nicole in a whisper, and with the best sympathetic look she could muster.

'I've done nothing wrong,' she pleaded, 'unless you're saying that getting kidnapped was my fault.'

She was starting to come across a bit more convincingly.

'I even tried to get out of coming into the shop today, so that I could go for coffee with Eve, if you remember. If I'd any idea what was going on, or was part of it, don't you think I'd want to be there to witness it?'

Hartley was stumped.

What Nicole was coming out with, was either a very cleverly devised lie, or the truth, and to be honest, he didn't really know which to believe. But he didn't have any choice but to give her the benefit of the doubt.

'Look, I'm sorry,' he said apologetically, 'the times I've caught you being – well, you know what I'm talking about - by one of my clients. Is it no wonder I question everything you do?'

‘Apology accepted.’ she replied, knowing that she’d already won the day, but still needing to carry on the pretence. With not knowing how the diamond exchange and the divvy up were going to pan out, it was necessary that she kept her options open.

Silence seemed to be the order of the day after that, and when Hartley pulled up in their drive Nicole said.

‘I think I’m going to get a shower, and then make myself a drink.’

‘That’s fine.’ Hartley replied, ‘I think I need a bloody drink too.’

‘What about the shop?’ questioned Nicole, attempting to appear interested.

‘It’s fine,’ he replied, ‘Victoria and Becky are taking care of business. And because I didn’t know how long I’d be at the hospital, their going to lock up, if I don’t get back in time.’

Hartley made his way into the lounge, as Nicole headed up to the bedroom.

He thought about switching on the radio, or putting a CD on. But under the circumstances he decided that peace and quiet would be the best option.

He poured himself a large whisky and a large vodka for Nicole, ready for when she came back downstairs.

After about forty-five minutes she walked into the lounge, wearing nothing but a flimsy dressing gown.

Hartley didn’t even give her a second look.

‘There’s a drink over there for you.’

Nicole ambled over. Picked up the vodka which Hartley had prepared earlier. Swigged it down in one, and went to get another.

‘That’s better.’ she muttered.

‘What’s next?’ remarked Hartley. ‘Do you think the Police will have any luck in finding the thieves, or is the Appleford gone forever?’

‘How am I supposed to know,’ replied Nicole, ‘I’m still shaking from my ordeal.’

Neither of them really knew what else to say, or how to continue with any constructive conversation, so silence returned.

Hartley was busy wondering whether or not he would ever see the Appleford Rock again.

Nicole on the other hand was mulling over her next move. How long should she wait before giving Alf a call? Was now too soon? Or should she just bite the bullet and take a chance.

After about half an hour Hartley’s eyes started to get heavy, and then started to droop. And it didn’t take long before he was snoring away.

‘Go for it.’ thought Nicole, and made her way into the kitchen to avoid being overheard.

It seemed to take forever for Alf to answer.

‘Yes.’

Even though he would have known who the caller was, for whatever reason, he didn’t give his name.

‘Alf, its me,’ she said, ‘what’s wrong, you sound a bit quiet. I thought you’d have been dancing around by now, having that diamond in your grasp.’

‘It’s that CCTV bloke.’ he replied nervously.

‘Oh no, you didn’t harm his lad did you?’

‘No,’ his voice appeared a tad shaky, ‘but I had to give him my mobile number, so that we could keep in touch. That was the only way I could make sure he would do as he was told.’

‘So.’ Nicole thought that a situation like this was a no-brainer, and replied. ‘Just get another phone.’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘Why?’

‘We let the lad go, and everything seemed to go without a hitch. But about an hour later I got a call from that Benny bloke, who said that he’d rigged the video system, and he said that we needed to meet up. That he had something that I needed to see.’

Nicole frowned.

‘What could he have that’s causing you to be so worried? You let his lad go unharmed. He should feel relieved that you didn’t blow *his* fuckin’ brains out, as well as his sons.’

‘He said that he’d fixed it so that it wouldn’t record on the system, but it would on a pen drive that he’d plugged into the back of the system.’

‘Shit.’ replied Nicole. ‘So what’s on this pen drive?’ she paused. ‘Don’t tell me. He’s got footage of everything that went on.’

‘That’s what he’s claiming.’

The line went quiet for a few seconds.

‘Nicole, are you still there?’

‘Just thinking.’ came her reply.

‘That’s easily remedied. Make arrangements to meet, and simply buy the pen drive off him. He can’t be exactly loaded, working as a CCTV engineer. Give him ten grand; he’ll think his bloody ships come in.’

‘That ran through my mind. Then he said that he wanted at least half a million, or the pen drive goes straight to the Police.’

‘And have you got that sort of money?’

‘Don’t be daft. Who the fuckin’ hell do you think I am, Rothschild. We’ll be alright when we’ve sold the gem, and the buyer coughs up the cash.’

‘Let me think, I might be able to come up with something. I’ll get...’ she suddenly went quiet. ‘Got to go.’

‘Nicole.’ shouted Hartley as he walked into the kitchen, having had a doze. He’d woken up with a start, and wondered where she’d disappeared to.

‘I’ll ring you later Eve. See you soon.’

By being referred to as Eve, Alf realised that Hartley must have interrupted their call, and all he could do was wait. However, the last thing he wanted now was Benny to get in touch, before Nicole had told him of her idea.

Chapter 15

Friday, April 23rd. 6:17 pm.

‘Would you like a bite to eat?’ said Hartley.

‘Not really.’ Nicole sighed. ‘After the day I’ve had, I think alcohol will suffice.’

All she really wanted to do was ring Alf back in order to put her thoughts into actions.

‘OK, I’ll just get a snack, and watch some TV before bed.’ he remarked, ‘But I think an early night is in order, after what we’ve both been through today.’

‘Thank fuck for that.’ she thought,

Nicole poured herself another large vodka, and sat down, patiently waiting for him to go upstairs.

Hartley must have eaten all that he’d wanted whilst in the kitchen, and came through and switched on the TV.

After watching an hour long documentary about wildlife in the Amazon forest, Hartley started to feel rather tired. He was fidgeting around in the chair, as though he couldn’t get comfortable.

‘I think I’m off up now,’ he remarked, slowly starting to stand up, ‘I’m shattered. But you enjoy your drink, and try to relax. I’ll probably be asleep by the time you come to bed. Goodnight.’

Nicole gave him fifteen minutes, and then went to the foot of the stairs. Where, usually she would be able to hear his snoring, it was always loud.

‘Great.’ she thought.

True to form, it hadn’t taken Hartley more than a few minutes to drop off, and he was well away, snoring like a trouper.

No sooner had she dialled Alf’s number, than he must have pressed *accept* at the first ring.

‘Alf,’ she sounded quietly confident. ‘Ring that CCTV guy up and arrange a meeting for tomorrow morning.’

‘Hang on.’ he didn’t seem to like the thought of that.

‘You want me to let him know where I live. Don’t you think that if he *has* got what he claims, then that leaves me in an even more precarious position than I am already?’

‘No.’ she paused to think.

‘No. Arrange to meet at the warehouse where you kept his lad. I want you, the diamond, Matt, Lazarus and Benny, plus his son if possible. Although the son isn’t a necessity.’

‘And then what?’ Alf was sounding a touch dubious.

‘What the fuck is she up to?’ he thought.

‘Don’t worry,’ she was flying by the seat of her pants. ‘I’ve got enough cash to pay him off. Then, once he’s out of the picture, we can carry on, sell the gem and then we can all get paid.’

To Alf, it sounded like she thought she'd got it all mapped out. However, he still had a great deal of doubt. He'd been part of the criminal fraternity for far too long, to just accept what other people said. He'd learned never to trust anybody.

But at this moment he had to go along with Nicole, and play it by ear.

'OK. I'll give you a call the minute I've spoken to him.'

'Good.' she wanted to give him some false reassurance and blind hope.

'It'll all work out, you'll see. And then you can get into my pants and fuck me like you've never fucked anyone before. I just hope that you're up for the challenge, because I take some satisfying, as you bloody well know.' she laughed.

'I'll ring Benny now, and make the arrangements.'

The line went dead.

Nicole had her agenda, but was also aware, that Alf was no mug. Even if at times he tried to throw people off track by appearing that way.

He'd got away with armed robbery and murder too many times, for him to have come in with the last tide.

She had to keep her wits about her, and be well prepared to follow through with her plan. If she wasn't true to herself, and believed that she could pull this off, then she would be right up shit creek with the paddle nowhere to be found.

Nicole made herself a coffee to help her keep a reasonably clear head, as she thought about her next move.

Even though she had everything worked out, she wasn't one for complacency, and liked to think things through, step by step.

Friday, April 23rd. 11:04 pm.

Her mobile rang. She looked at the caller display, it was Alf.

'Yes.' she answered.

'All sorted. Benny and his lad will be at the unit at 10 tomorrow morning. Is that what you wanted?'

'Yes, that's perfect.' she was half way through her plan.

'So, let me get this straight.' Nicole wasn't taking anything for granted.

'You, Matt and Lazarus will be there, along with the diamond.'

'Yes.'

'Benny, his son, and obviously me.'

'Yes,' replied Alf, 'where are you going with this, you already know who'll be there.'

'I'm just making sure that everything's in place. I don't want any cockups. All I want is for us to get Benny off our backs and the gem sold, so that we can all get our money.'

'That sounds good to me.' answered Alf.

'See you in the morning then.'

They both hung up at the same time, neither one of them trusting the other.

Saturday, April 24th. 5:48 am.

After spending a rather sleepless night, Nicole rose early, she had things to do. Without disturbing Hartley, and without him knowing what she was up to.

She needed the SIG Sauer P226 handgun that he'd been given by an ex army friend. Who'd thought, that because of the business he was in, he needed some kind of protection. The SIG had a magazine that held 15 rounds of ammo, which was more than enough for her to complete the task.

Carefully and quietly she slipped out from under the duvet, and, after slipping on a flimsy dressing gown, made her way to the office, or Library as Hartley would refer to it, when trying to impress a client.

Just because he'd got a bookcase with around a hundred or so novels on the shelves. Not that he'd read more than half a dozen of them. Plus a couple of dictionary's and a thesaurus, he thought that qualified it to be called *a library*. When in fact. It was a small box room with this bookcase and a desk for his tower computer system. This is where he would do any work at home, which hadn't been completed during the day.

Having previously chosen her handbag. Big enough to hold the gun, without bulging too much. She didn't want to cause the others to be suspicious. Nicole made her way straight to where the gun was kept.

Hartley always hid it at the back of a draw filled with old invoices. 'No one will look in there,' he'd thought.

She lifted it out, made sure that the clip was full, and placed it in her handbag, attempting to cover it with her purse, and a couple of handkerchiefs.

'One task completed.' she thought, as she attempted to get back into bed, without her nearest and dearest realising that she'd been anywhere.

'Where've you been?' remarked Hartley sleepily, as she slipped back under the duvet.

'Just to the bathroom.'

'What's up with the ensuite? You don't need your dressing gown for that.'

'I wanted a drink of milk as well, so I nipped down stairs, and then headed for the bathroom. That way I wouldn't disturb you.'

'That was thoughtful, thanks.' he remarked as he turned over, and, slowly but surely went back to sleep.

With Hartley snoring away, Nicole lay there at his side, mulling over her plan of action.

She had to get this right. No mistakes. No fuckups. Or else.

Somehow, she had to excuse herself from duties at the shop. Being Saturday, the one day she would normally work, it wasn't going to be easy.

Saturday, April 24th. 6:45 am.

The alarm clock sounded and Hartley was, as usual, up straight away.

He'd always been the same.

The second the buzzer started sounding, he would jump up, as though he'd been lying awake all the time, just waiting for it to go off.

As was the norm, the two of them climbed out of bed.

Nicole headed for the bathroom, and Hartley would commandeer the ensuite. Once showered and dressed, they would both sit down to breakfast.

Hartley with his muesli, and Nicole with her strawberries, blueberries and yoghurt.

This was exactly what she wanted. Everything had to appear normal. Hartley preoccupied with the gold, silver, and diamond exchange rates, especially the exchange rates between the £, the euro, and the \$.

The minute breakfast was over, which was always carried out with long periods of silence, just the occasionally comment when one of them had something to say. They made their way to the shop.

And even though she'd got her plan all worked out, she was beginning to get a little apprehensive.

Was she going to have the guts to pull this off?

Yes.

She had no choice.

It had gone too far for her to pull out now.

Hopefully, she thought, if it all works out, she wouldn't only be a millionaire, but she'd have enough money to live a life of luxury for the rest of her natural.

Yes, she was going to have to do something she never thought she could. And, somehow, even though it was more out of a sense of decency, whatever that may be, Nicole would have to release Benny and his son. After all, it wasn't *their* greed, or their fault that they'd been dragged into this situation; it was all hers and Alf's doing.

Chapter 16

Saturday, April 24th. 9:48 am.

'I'm just nipping to the newsagents for a magazine,' she said with a slightly raised voice, ensuring that her husband would be able to hear, 'shan't be long' she glanced in the direction of the two shop assistants.

Without waiting for a reply she was out the front door and gone.

She didn't have any time to lose.

Having travelled to work with Hartley in his car, she'd had the foresight to order a taxi, which was waiting for her at the bottom of Hatton Garden.

Nicole got the driver to drop her off about two hundred yards from the warehouse; she couldn't take any chances on him knowing exactly where she was headed.

She got to within about fifty yards of the building, and Nicole spotted Benny walking in.

Alone.

She waited about three minutes and then boldly, but exercising caution, made her entrance.

'Morning all.'

What an entrance *that* was.

If you didn't know better, you would think that that was the opening for a company staff meeting. Not the start of what could turn out to be a deadly and bloody confrontation.

Nicole glanced around the open space.

Alf, Lazarus, Matt and Benny.

No conversation taking place, they were all stood in silence.

The four of them turned and looked at her.

She appeared calm, cool and collected, and then said.

'Where's your son, Benny?'

'At home,' was his self-assured reply, 'I didn't think he needed to be here.'

Nicole couldn't think of an immediate response, so looked over at Alf.

'Where's the rock?'

'Why, what do you want that for,' he remarked, clearly suspicious of Nicole's underlying intentions, 'we're only here to get Benny off our backs.'

'I specifically told you to bring it,' she didn't seem too pleased with Alf's apparent lack of obedience, 'so, have you got it?'

Alf had a wry grin, believing that he'd clearly made the right decision.

'Oh yes I've got it,' he replied, 'but it's not here, and there are only two people who know where it is. Me and Lazarus.'

This was not how it was supposed to happen.

She had to quickly rethink her plan.

'You told Alf that you had something that he needed to see,' she said as she turned and applied her gaze directly at Benny.

'So - what is it?'

He slipped his hand into his jacket pocket, and lifted out a small black pen drive.

Benny held it upright for everyone to see.

‘There’s enough footage on here, to put all of you in prison for a very long time.’

There was an air of cockiness with his attitude.

‘I think I’ll take it then.’ answered Nicole as she lifted the SIG Sauer out of her handbag. ‘Just put it on that table, and step away. Don’t try anything stupid or else I’ll use this.’

Everyone could see that she wasn’t messing about, and was more than prepared to use the gun, in order to get what she wanted.

Benny did as instructed.

He placed the pen drive on the table, and stepped back. He fixed his gaze straight at Nicole who was pointing the weapon in his direction.

‘Before you pull that trigger,’ said Benny arrogantly, ‘there’s something else you should know.’

‘And what might that be?’ replied Nicole sniggering.

‘That’s not the only copy, there are others.’

‘What.’ she remarked.

Things were definitely *not* going according to plan.

‘How many copies are there, and where are they?’

‘Safe.’ answered Benny, still full of confidence.

‘There’s a copy on my laptop which I keep at work. Another on my tower system at home.’ Benny had definitely covered his back.

‘Two of my friends have copies which I’ve put in sealed, stamped addressed envelopes. I have given them instructions that, if anything happens to me, or any member of my family, they are to post them immediately.’

‘Shit.’ Nicole said under her breath.

‘This puts a totally different angle on proceedings, doesn’t it?’ she remarked.

She was in an extremely precarious position.

Only Alf and Lazarus knew the whereabouts of the diamond, and she’d no way of finding out where it was, apart from the possibility of blackmail. But with the amount of money that could be gained from the sale of the gem, even money wouldn’t persuade either of them to divulge its location.

Benny had this so called footage of the robbery.

‘But wait,’ she said turning her gaze back to Alf, ‘is there any way of us watching what’s on that pen drive, here and now?’

‘I’ve got a laptop,’ remarked Matt, who’d been pretty quite up till now, ‘but it’s at home.’

‘How long will it take for you to go and get it?’ she enquired.

‘About twenty minutes.’

‘Then go. We’ll all just have to sit here and wait.’

Matt hurriedly made his exit, as Nicole motioned with the SIG, and told everyone to take a seat on the old school benches that had been left here by the

previous occupant. The warehouse had been used as a store room by the local junior school, and the benches were the type you find in a gym.

‘What *are* you up to?’ said Alf after about ten minutes of total silence, ‘I’ve got the gem, and Benny here has all the evidence he needs to get us *all* banged up. And if we can’t come to some sort of agreement, then we’re all in deep sh...’

‘I don’t think so.’ interrupted Nicole, with a slightly renewed air of confidence. ‘I’ve no doubt that the footage on that pen drive will show you and Lazarus committing the robbery, and kidnapping me. Which, I do believe puts me very much in the clear.’

‘That still doesn’t get you what you want.’ remarked Alf. ‘Considering I’m the only one who knows the buyer, so I think you might have a bigger problem than just saving your own neck.’

‘What would it take to get you off our backs?’ Nicole stared directly at Benny.

But before he could answer, Lazarus, looking rather agitated and frustrated, interrupted.

‘Look, this is getting us nowhere. He’s more than likely bluffing where those copies are concerned, so why don’t we just get rid of him. Let’s just blow his fuckin’ head off, and take our chance. We sell the rock as soon as we can, and then disappear.’

‘Sounds good to me Nicole.’ replied Alf.

‘No. I’ve got a better idea.’

She turned and fixed her gaze directly on Lazarus.

‘I’ll kill you instead.’ she grinned. ‘That way, only Alf will know where the gem is, plus we’ve got one less person in the equation. And let’s be honest, I can’t get done for killing a man that the Police believe is already dead.’

‘Don’t do that Nicole,’ said Alf, his voice raised and a tad shaky, ‘Lazarus and me go back a long way. We’ve done so many jobs together; he’s more like a brother than a partner in crime.’

Suddenly they all heard the warehouse door screeching as it was being forced open.

Matt had returned sooner than expected, and having overheard bits of the conversation, had put his laptop down, and was starting to charge towards Nicole.

Without giving it a second thought, and whilst having the SIG still pointing at Lazarus, she pulled the trigger, twice.

He flew backwards as the force of the bullets hit him, and as the blood came spurting out of his torso, he landed on the warehouse floor like a ton of bricks.

‘No.’ screamed Matt as he continued running in Nicole’s direction.

He got to within six feet of her. She swung round and pulled the trigger, but only managed to wing him in his left upper arm.

As the bullet entered the limb, it slowed him down a little, but his momentum continued to carry him forward. With the impact of the projectile, Matt’s body twisted to the left as he continued to fall. And just as he hit the floor, he managed to swing his right leg round and caught Nicole’s ankle.

She squirmed as she landed awkwardly on her elbow, and lost her grip on the SIG. It went sliding along the concrete floor for about ten yards, before slowly grinding to a halt.

Although wounded and in pain, Matt started to lift himself up. He placed his uninjured right hand on the floor, pushed hard and managed to get to his knees. The speed of his action came to his aid, and in no time at all he was upright. It was a matter of, suffer the pain and make a play for the gun. Or let Nicole get there first, and have his head blown off.

It was a no-brainer.

Nicole scrambled across the floor on all fours, also feeling the pain and discomfort from her injured elbow, but knowing that if Matt was able to get to the weapon before her, she'd be the one lying on the floor with her life's blood spilling out.

Benny froze. He looked like a mannequin. He didn't know what to do, and stood there rooted to the spot with fear.

Matt and Nicole both lunged in the direction of the SIG. The weapon lying about the same distance from each of them. Their hands collided, and the weapon was pushed even further away.

Alf went to join in the action, but Nicole managed to swing round and made contact with his most intimate parts, which disabled him.

Nicole realised that she was within touching distance of Matt's injured arm, and made a grab for it. He screamed agonisingly as her thumb squeezed the spot where the bullet had penetrated.

He had no choice but to roll over onto his side, and kick out with his right leg. As his foot made contact with her chest, Nicole was forced to relinquish her grip.

The pain was excruciating. But his retaliation had moved him further away from the SIG.

Nicole straggled over on her hands and knees, puffing and panting as she crawled. Somehow or other, she could just about manage to stretch out her arm and grab the gun.

She got a grip of the handle, and as she swivelled over onto her back, locked both arms out straight, and pointed the SIG straight at Matt. He'd clambered to his feet, and was only a matter of feet away, when Nicole squeezed the trigger three times in quick succession.

This time there was no mistake.

The bullets were a direct hit. Straight in the middle of his chest. As the force hit him, it pushed him back, and he fell to his knees.

'You Bitch.' he shouted, as he was keeling over. 'You bitch.' This time the words came out rather faintly, as he fell flat on his face.

Nicole was still panting away, as she lay on her back.

Matt and Lazarus were sprawled out on the warehouse floor, their life's blood creating puddles as it oozed slowly out of their motionless figures.

Benny remained speechless. Alf was still nursing his balls.

Nicole had quite a kick.

They were amazed at the callous way that Nicole had dispatched Lazarus, and the determination and anger she'd displayed when tussling with Matt.

'Why Nicole,' said Alf, as soon as he'd managed to pull himself together. 'Why.'

'I think they call it 'collateral damage'. she remarked without any sense of regret, remorse or guilt. 'But come on, aren't we better off without them. The fewer people involved, the less chance of a cock up, and the more money for each of us.'

'And where do I fit into all this,' queried Benny, 'I've not committed any crime whatsoever, but you seem to think you can buy me off.'

'Well, can't I?' answered Nicole. 'Everybody has their price; the only issue to be dealt with now, is how much.'

'Oh, come on Nicole,' said Alf, sounding disgusted at her suggestion, 'he was in the process of handing both me and Lazarus over to the police, and now you're about to give him a share of our haul.'

'Well, which would you prefer,' she answered sarcastically, 'to get banged up and lose everything, or include him in our plans, and get away with a share of 20 million quid.'

'How much?' gulped Benny, his voice went up at least a semitone. 'I didn't realise that you were talking about that sort of money. That puts an entirely different aspect on things.'

'See, what did I tell you. Everyone has their price.' Nicole grinned.

'So Alf,' questioned Benny, who was suddenly showing an interest, 'how much have you agreed to sell it for?'

'We've provisionally come to a figure of £20 million, but that depends on what his own valuer says he can get for the diamond when he comes to part with it.'

'So Benny,' said Nicole smiling, 'I take it you're in?'

'With that amount of cash, I'll be set for life.' he answered. 'My family will be short of nothing.'

Alf and Nicole could all but see the pound note signs rolling round in his eyes.

'When are you meeting this buyer? Do you know who he is, or what else he does, besides buying stolen diamonds?' queried Nicole.

'On Tuesday afternoon.' confirmed Alf. 'He's a restaurateur, which gives him the ideal cover for his illegal activities.'

'What time and where?'

'Euston Station. 2:30.'

'Good location.' confirmed Nicole. 'Busy thoroughfare. Not much chance of a showdown there.'

'Who is he, and where are you supposed to meet?' asked Benny.

'The buyer's name is a Mr Chan Lee, and I'm to go to the photo booth located at the side of the Left Luggage and Lost Property facility, where he'll be waiting.'

'And how's he going to pay you?'

'That's what the meeting's about.' replied Alf. 'I'd asked for cash. But he said that that would be impossible due to the bulkiness of twenty million in fifty pound notes.'

‘That’s true.’ remarked Benny. ‘I saw a film not long ago where some bloke was handing half a million quid over to somebody, and even that amount of cash filled two briefcases cram jam packed.’

‘So,’ interrupted Nicole, ‘what are the alternatives? A cheque would be out of the question. Even a bankers draft for that amount would create quite a stir.’

‘I don’t know.’ answered Alf. ‘The best thing to do is, I’ll go and meet him as planned, and see what he suggests.’

‘Let’s not forget though,’ interrupted Benny, ‘this guy is guaranteed to be used to these kinds of dealings, so he’s not going to come alone. He’ll have his cronies somewhere in the vicinity, keeping an eye on proceedings.’

‘So we’ll have to be there as well.’ answered Nicole. ‘Just to watch for any foul play.’

‘Aren’t you both forgetting something?’ remarked Alf.

Nicole and Benny frowned as they looked at him.

‘What?’ queried Nicole?

‘I’ll not be taking the Appleford with me. So he’s not likely to cause us any agro until he’s got the gem firmly in his hands.’

‘But these guy’s don’t play by the rules.’ said Nicole, shaking her head. ‘They don’t take chances, and they most certainly don’t take prisoners. Anything or anybody that could put them in any kind of jeopardy will be disposed of without a second thought.’

‘So what do we do?’ asked Benny. ‘If Alf doesn’t show up *with* the diamond, the bloke’s not going to be best pleased, and he’ll probably put a contract out on him.’

‘No.’ jumped in Nicole. ‘He wants this gem, so I can’t see him doing anything that could prevent him from getting it. No, I think he’ll keep the meeting and make some kind of arrangement for an exchange.’

There was a slight pause before Nicole continued.

‘I’ve just had a thought. See what Chan Lee comes up with first, but I’ve got an offshore bank account in the Cayman Islands. And if he can’t suggest anything better, then he can wire the money there.’

Silence.

‘But doesn’t that leave Alf and me at a rather uncomfortable disadvantage?’ remarked Benny.

‘Why?’ said Nicole.

‘Well.’ Benny continued, ‘Once the money is in your own personal account, how the hell do we get hold of our share. You could very easily cut us out, and keep the money for yourself.’

‘Sorry and all that,’ replied Nicole, ‘but I’m afraid that at this point you’re simply going to have to trust me. But don’t worry, I’ll not double-cross you. You’ll both get your share.’

Benny and Alf stared at each other.

‘We don’t have much choice.’ said Alf.

‘So what next?’ asked Nicole.

'I'll give him a ring.' replied Alf. 'Explain the situation. And see if he has any suggestions.'

'Right then.' stated Nicole. 'Let's get on with it.'

Chapter 17

Saturday, April 24th. 12:34 pm.

‘And were the hell have you been?’ questioned a rather angry looking Hartley, as Nicole walked into the shop after being let in by Becky.

‘Sorry I got a bit waylaid.’

‘You got a *bit* waylaid,’ he repeated, ‘I thought you’d been kidnapped again.’

‘Oh no, you’re not that lucky.’ she responded trying to make light of the situation.

‘Right ladies,’ Hartley turned to face Becky and Victoria, ‘sorry it’s late, but you two go and get your lunch. We’ll look after the shop for an hour.’

They didn’t need telling twice.

The two of them grabbed their coats from the back room, and left the shop as quickly as they could, whilst trying not to appear to be in too much of a rush.

‘Well, come on then,’ repeated Hartley once the two assistants had left, ‘were have you been? You left just before ten, and it’s now gone half twelve. You were only going out to collect a magazine, or at least that’s what you said.’

‘I’m sorry darling,’ she replied a touch nonchalantly, ‘but I got delayed.’

‘And who did you meet that caused you to take so long.’ Hartley was now starting to get even more annoyed.

‘What was his name? Did you end up going to his place to fuck, or did you rent a room for a couple of hours.’

‘No,’ she was beginning to look a bit annoyed, ‘it was nothing like that; you just don’t trust me, do you.’

Nicole thought that she’d better somehow try and calm the situation down, and lowered her voice. ‘I simply bumped into an old friend and we went for a drink. We got chatting. Ended up reminiscing, and when I realised the time, it had already gone twelve.’

To her relief the door buzzer sounded; a young couple were stood trying to gain entry into the shop.

‘We’ll continue this later.’ remarked Hartley.

‘I don’t think so,’ she responded, not in the habit of being intimidated, ‘I’m your wife, not your daughter. And if you think that I’m going to explain myself every time I go out and bump into a friend, then you are sadly mistaken. I’ll do what I want, when I want. And if I decide to have coffee with somebody. Then that’s what I’ll do.’

Hartley knew he couldn’t win, so change his demeanour in order to greet the customers.

‘Good afternoon.’ he said, wearing his usual customer friendly smile, and appearing calm, even though inside he was still furious.

‘How may I help you today?’

As he maintained his composure and well polished sales techniques, he still had nagging doubts about his wife. He knew full well of her infidelities, and to be honest, she knew that her indiscretions were common knowledge, so no need for

secrecy. But for some reason he was beginning to think that there was something else she was hiding. Some other little secret, that Nicole wasn't letting on about.

'It's my girlfriends 21st next weekend,' said the young man, as he gazed starry-eyed at her, 'so I promised that I'd buy her a nice pair of earrings or a bracelet.'

'Congratulations,' replied Hartley, 'come through, and I'll show you what we have to offer.'

'You come highly recommended,' the young lady remarked cheerily.

'Oh yes, who by?' enquired Hartley inquisitively.

'The man who rents the flat over the top of my mum's clothes shop, over in Potters Bar.'

'That's a coincidence,' said Hartley, 'I'm a member of the golf club over there. What's his name; does he play golf, or is he a customer of mine?'

'I don't know about the golf, but he must be a customer. His name's Alf and he seemed to know your shop pretty well. He only mentioned the other day that he'd been in here quite recently.'

Nicole caught her breath as she stopped dead in her tracks.

'Shit, what's that bastard up to now? I'll fuckin' kill him,' she thought.

'Do you know his surname,' enquired Hartley, 'I should have his name on our computer system if he's purchased any jewellery from us.'

'Sorry,' replied the young lady, 'I only know him as Alf. He's not been in the flat that long, only a couple of months or so. But I'm sure my mum will know it. Do you want me to give her a ring, and ask?'

'Oh no,' continued Hartley, 'that won't be necessary, I'm sure he'll make himself known to us, the next time he calls in.'

'Thank fuck for that,' thought Nicole. 'He should know better than tempt fate. Especially as Hartley's actually seen him face to face.'

As her husband continued showing the young couple a selection of earrings and other jewellery, Nicole made her way through into the office, and out of earshot.

She lifted her mobile out of her handbag, and quickly loaded up Alf's number.

After the fifth ring he answered, laughing as he did so, having seen Nicole's number on the caller display.

'What do you think you're playing at,' she said quietly, not giving him time to speak, 'are you trying to give me a fuckin' heart attack.'

'No, why,' he replied.

'There's a young couple in the shop who say that you recommended us, if they were ever in the market to purchase jewellery.'

'Just keeping you on your toes. Anyway, how was I to know that you'd be in the shop when they called? For all I knew you could have been out shopping, or out having coffee with your best mate Eve.'

'Nicole,' shouted Hartley, 'could you come through, there's another customer at the door.'

'Got to go,' she remarked, 'but don't do anything like that again, or else.'

'Or else what,' Alf chuckled, 'there's not a lot you can do, if I want to play a practical joke on you, is there.'

'See you Tuesday,' she answered, 'and don't you dare be late.'

Nicole hung up, and quickly walked through to the shop, and made her way promptly to the front door.

As she approached Nicole could see a dark haired man waiting patiently outside. He appeared to be about five eleven. Clean shaven. Well dressed. Probably in his mid twenty's.

'Mmm,' she thought, 'not bad.'

'Good afternoon.' she went into auto pilot. 'And what can we do for you today.' she kept eyeing him up and down whilst speaking, so keeping her promiscuous reputation in tact.

'Well,' he replied.

Then, to Nicole's disappointment, his voice was extremely effeminate and rather wimpy.

'I've been a naughty boy,' he remarked. As he spoke Nicole shivered, thinking, 'oh fuck, what a waste.'

'I've upset my boyfriend, so I want to get him a peace offering, and hope somehow he'll find it in his heart to forgive me.'

'And what kind of kiss and make up gift were you thinking of.' she said. Understandably, wanting to know what was so terrible that he needed to buy his *boyfriend* a gift to get him off the hook, but not having the audacity or cheek to ask.

'Err, well,' he appeared slightly embarrassed and reluctant to answer, and even though Nicole hadn't asked, and he didn't have to go into any details, he chose to elaborate. 'I've only gone and slept with a woman, and that didn't go down too well at all with my Tracy. So it will have to look expensive, or he'll think that I'm not truly sorry.'

'Things are starting to look up.' thought Nicole, 'at least it was a woman he slept with, not another bloke.'

But then, on reflection, decided *no thank you*. The last thing she needed was to get involved with a bisexual bloke.

'What about a nice watch?'

'Yes, that might just about do it,' he replied, his voice sounding more and more sickly every time he opened his mouth.

As they made their way over to the appropriate display cabinet, the door buzzer sounded.

Nicole glanced over, but before she could press the security button to let Becky and Victoria back in, Hartley had done the honours.

'There's good timing for you,' remarked Nicole, 'our shop assistants are back from lunch. You have a look through this collection, whilst I'll get one of them to come and attend to you. They have a much greater knowledge of what would be suitable than I have.'

No sooner had Victoria come to take over from Nicole, than Hartley was showing the young couple out.

'See you again, I hope,' remarked Hartley, 'and tell your friend, Alf was it,' the two of them nodded, 'thanks for the recommendation.'

Nicole started to feel somewhat uncomfortable again.

‘Hartley, did they mention that bloke again,’ she queried once they’d left, ‘you know, the one that rents the flat over her mum’s shop?’

‘No,’ replied Hartley, ‘I was only being polite.’

‘Phew,’ she thought.

She didn’t want that topic brought up ever again, it was just that bit too close for comfort.

Chapter 18

Saturday, April 24th. 6:15 pm.

‘Fancy dinning out tonight?’ enquired Hartley.

Even though they hadn’t seen eye to eye with each other since Nicole’s mysterious absence earlier in the day, he still wanted to try and keep their home life amicable.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied, ‘I don’t feel that hungry to be honest.’

After a moments thought, Nicole suggested.

‘Why don’t you go to the golf club? They have an excellent menu, and you’ll be able to have a drink with your mates.’

‘No, I know it’s not that far, but I can’t say that I feel much like driving after the day we’ve had.’

As her husband was speaking, Nicole suddenly had an idea of something she wanted to do, if she could just get rid of him for a couple of hours.

‘Look,’ she said cheerily, ‘what about if I drive you there. You could have a few beers after you’ve eaten, and then get a cab home?’

Hartley said nothing for a couple of moments, giving himself time to consider the proposition.

‘OK then.’ he replied, almost as pleasantly as Nicole’s offer had been. ‘But are you sure you’re up to it, after all you’ve been through lately.’

‘Oh yes, I’m fine,’ she wasn’t letting the grass grow under her feet, ‘now you go and get ready, whilst I put my shoes back on.’

It only took about twenty minutes to drive to the golf club, and no sooner had they said their goodbyes, than Nicole headed straight over to Alf’s place.

Within six minutes she was knocking on his door, and it was answered in a matter of seconds.

‘Are you going crazy, or what?’ she said angrily, ‘if that young couple could have given an accurate description of you, we’d have all been in the shit.’

‘Don’t get your knickers in a twist,’ he said wearing a grin, ‘I didn’t actually expect them to take my advice and come to your shop. Anyway, nothing came of it did it?’

‘No, but it could have.’

Alf placed his hands on her shoulders, and started to gently pull Nicole towards him.

‘But it didn’t, did it?’ he replied, as he started to move his lips close to hers.

‘What are you up to, you randy bastard.’

‘Just showing you who’s in charge.’

‘We need to talk.’ she started to push him away by putting her hands on his chest, but not too forcefully. ‘Have you been in touch with Chan Lee yet?’ Nicole continued, wanting information on how things were progressing.

‘Not yet,’ replied Alf, more interested in his sexual appetite. ‘But never mind about that for the time being.’

He gently lowered her arms from his chest, and started to undo the buttons on her blouse. And true to form, Nicole caved in to his advances and put-up no further resistance. In fact, if anything she started to help him by slipping the double fold cuffs over her hands.

It didn't take long before her bra and skirt followed the top onto the floor.

And within seconds, Alf had lowered her onto the carpet and penetrated her love tunnel. They weren't wasting valuable playtime by going through to his bedroom.

As he thrust his shaft in and out of her, he remarked in-between panting.

'Now do you know who the boss is?'

'Of course I know. But I've still got to let you think its you.' she replied gasping out of sheer pleasure.

After a further five minutes of pounding, Nicole rolled Alf off her naked body, and climbed on top of him.

'My turn now.' she remarked, as she ran her tongue from his lips, right down to his average sized cock.

Having sucked Alf's shaft on a number of occasions previously, she was well used to it, and always enjoyed herself.

'You might not have the biggest dick in the world,' she laughed, 'but by the fuck, you sure know how to use it.'

Alf was just about to shoot his load all over her face, when 'do you think I'm sexy' started sounding from Nicole's mobile. It was lying in her handbag, just out of arms reach.

'Shit.' she said as she stretched over and lifted it out to see who was ringing at this inopportune moment.

'Fuck. It's Hartley.'

'What does he want,' said Alf a tad surprised. 'Did you not make some kind of excuse up, so you could come over here?'

'Didn't need to.' she replied, wondering what could cause her husband to ring, when she'd not that long since dropped him off.

'I took him to the golf club. I thought he'd have been there till at least midnight.'

'But until you answer it,' commented Alf sarcastically, 'you'll not know where he is. He could still be there.'

'That's true.'

Having pressed the accept button, she remarked.

'Hi darling, everything alright?'

'No, not really.'

'Why, what's the problem?'

'Where the hell are you? I've been ringing the landline for the last ten minutes.'

She had to think quickly and outside the box.

'I was taking a shower and couldn't hear the phone; I've only just climbed out, or I wouldn't have even heard my mobile.'

'Oh, right.' he sounded appeased.

'It's fine, so, what's the problem. Why are you ringing?'

'I'm in the club house, and I've been speaking to Cliff Seymour. You know, the detective inspector from Tottenham Court Road Police Station.'

'Yes, I think I remember him. Didn't we meet him at that security conference, which all the jewellers from Hatton Garden attended?'

Alf, clearly not knowing what the conversation was about, mouthed to Nicole.

'What does he want? Does he not realise that you've got your hands full.' he pointed in between his legs.

She lifted her free hand up and placed her index finger across her lips. Shh, she mouthed.

'Yes that's him. Well he's been talking to the guy who's in charge of the case regarding the robbery at our shop, Stuart Cunningham. And he recons that they've got a couple of mug shots on file, of two blokes who were caught on Hatton Garden's CCTV cameras, just before the time of the theft. And these guy's both have records as long as your arm.'

'Are these shots clear enough images to identify them? Sufficient to satisfy a judge and jury?'

Alf was beginning to get nervous with what he was hearing, even though he couldn't hear the full conversation.

'What's going on?' he mouthed.

To which Nicole simply put her finger back across her lips.

'Obviously I haven't seen them,' continued Hartley, 'but Cliff did mention that Detective Cunningham sounded rather exited at the prospect of a decent collar. With it being a high profile case, he stands a good chance of gaining a promotion.'

'Keep me informed,' replied an increasingly uneasy Nicole, 'but I'm going to have to go, I'm starting to shiver. Like I said, I've only just got out of the show, and the water is starting to get cold as its drying on me.'

'Sorry,' was his reply, 'but I'll let you know if I hear anything else, when I get home.'

'What time will that be, any idea?'

'I've booked a taxi for eleven thirty, so it shouldn't be much later than twelve.'

'Right, see you then.'

They hung up.

Nicole and Alf just looked at each other.

'What was that all about?' enquired an apprehensive Alf.

'The police have got mugs shots of you and Lazarus, which seem to match CCTV footage taken on Hatton Garden cameras, just before you came into the shop.'

'I did hear you ask about them being clear enough to satisfy a judge. What did he say to that?'

'He mentioned that the detective in charge of the case appeared confident. So much so, he's almost banking on getting promoted.'

'That doesn't sound good,' remarked Alf thoughtfully. 'But it makes it imperative that we get shut of the rock ASAP, and go to ground.'

'What about me.' Nicole had her own position to think about. 'What am I going to do? Don't forget I could still be considered a suspect.'

‘I doubt it. If that was the case, you’d only be out on bail, not released without charge. They wouldn’t take the chance of you doing a runner, if they still thought that you had anything to do with it.’

‘I hope your right.’ she sighed. ‘Anyway its time I was off.’

‘Aren’t you going to finish me off,’ Alf sounded a touch disappointed, ‘I was about to shoot my load when your mobile rang.’

‘That’ll have to wait,’ replied Nicole shaking her head, ‘why don’t you just jerk yourself off. Because that’s the only way you’ll get any kind of satisfaction in that department tonight.’

Chapter 19

Saturday, April 24th. 10:48 pm.

Having left Alf's flat as quickly as she could, Nicole drove the twenty five minute journey back home as fast as possible. Making sure she didn't break any limits. The last thing she wanted was to get pulled up for speeding, especially as her husband still believed that she was actually already at home.

No sooner had she closed the front door, than the landline started to ring.

Nicole glanced at the caller display.

It was Hartley again.

'Hello, is everything alright?'

'Where the hell have you been,' he didn't sound too happy, 'I've been trying to ring you, *again*.' Placing extra emphasis on his last word. 'In fact, I've actually rung four times in the last fifteen minutes.'

'What's the problem with you tonight,' she went straight on the defensive, 'just because I can't hear the phone from the bathroom, you jump down my throat. Plus, I've just had to go out to my car; I couldn't find my purse, it'd dropped out of my bag.'

'Could you just come and pick me up?' he asked. His voice suddenly changed and he was sounding angry.

'I thought you'd booked a cab?'

'I've cancelled it.'

'Why, what's wrong?'

'I've had a bit more than I should to drink, and didn't want to show myself up.'

'But the taxi company know who you are, don't they.' Nicole didn't really fancy driving over to Potters Bar again. Especially as she'd only just arrived back home from Alf's flat, which was only minutes away from where her husband was phoning from. 'They'll not think anything ill of you; they pick up drunks every night of the week.'

'It's not just that,' he didn't sound like his usual self, 'I've just had a bust up with one of the other members, and I've got a couple of graze marks on my face. So could you *please* just come and get me. I'll tell you all about it when you get here.'

'I'm on my way. It'll take me about twenty - twenty five minutes. You be outside when I get there. Because if you've been fighting, like you say you have, then I'm not venturing inside, just in case something kicks off again.'

Nicole hung up, and headed straight for her car.

As she pulled up in the golf club car park, she could see her husband stood on the front porch holding his left cheek.

'What the fuckin' hell have you been up to?' she said unsympathetically, as he plonked himself onto the passenger seat. 'You look like a ruffian who's just been released from a jail cell, having been banged up for being drunk and disorderly.'

'Just bloody drive, will you.'

For the first five minutes, total quiet filled the car. Then Nicole broke the silence.

‘Go on then, what was the scuffle about?’

‘One of the other members overheard me and Cliff talking about the robbery, and must have read the report in the paper.’

‘So what,’ remarked Nicole, ‘everybody in London will have seen that?’

‘He must have realised that it was you, *my wife*, who the police had taken into custody on suspicion, and even though you were released without charge, he just wanted to have some fun at my expense.’

‘What did he say that caused you to flip?’

‘He was talking to another bloke at the bar, not directly to me, but deliberately loud enough so that I could hear every word. He said that it must be a total embarrassment for a man to be married to a common criminal, and even though she had been released. There’s never any smoke without fire.’

‘So you clonked him one I presume.’

‘Worse than that, I picked his drink up and poured it over his head.’

Nicole couldn’t refrain from laughing.

‘Good on you.’

‘Then he smacked me in the face, and what a bloody good right hook he has.’

‘I plummeted down like a tree that’s just had the chainsaw treatment. On my way to the floor I banged my face of one of the tables. Hence the graze marks.’

‘What then?’ questioned Nicole whilst still trying not to laugh too loud?

‘I jumped up, gave him one straight in the guts, and as he doubled over with the force, I brought my knee up and made full contact with his face. And if I must say so myself I also pack a good punch. I can handle myself when I have to.’

‘Then.’ questioned Nicole.

‘The club steward intervened. He came and stood in-between us.’ Hartley was stroking his cheek, and moving his jaw around as he was speaking. ‘He ordered us both to leave, and said that we were suspended for a month. He also said that if anything like this happened again, even if it involved different club members, then we would be barred for life.’

‘I’ll get some cream for that scrape when we get in,’ remarked Nicole, not really knowing what else she could say, without cracking off laughing again, ‘and then I think it’d be best if we went straight to bed. Fortunately its Sunday tomorrow so we can have a lie in.’

‘Yes, thank goodness for that.’ replied Hartley not exactly filled with enthusiasm.

‘Hopefully by the time Monday comes round, these marks might have faded somewhat.’

‘I think it’ll take more than a couple of days for *them* to clear up,’ confirmed Nicole, ‘but at least you can stay in the office, and let Becky and Victoria deal with the customers.’

Chapter 20

Sunday, April 25th. 8:47 am.

'Breakfast in bed is in order, don't you think.' said Nicole as she placed a tray on the bedside table, giving Hartley time to come round and sit himself up.

'To what do I owe this honour?' a tad surprised.

'With what you've been through lately, and after having that bust up last night in the golf club, I just thought you might be in need of a bit of TLC.'

Hartley gently rubbed his eyes with his left hand, as he manoeuvred up into a more upright position, using his right.

'How's that.' said Nicole as she placed the tray across his lap.

'Two rashers of bacon, two eggs, two sausages, fried bread and a cup of coffee.'

'What. No black pudding?'

'Don't start. Just be grateful you've got that.' she remarked, wearing a grin.

'I didn't mean anything by that. I suppose I'm just a bit taken aback that you've gone to all this trouble. What are you after? Not *more* money is it.'

'No need for that,' she replied, 'I was only trying to make you feel a bit better. After all, it's not been easy for either of us.'

Realising he may have been a touch out of order, Hartley made his apologies, and got stuck into his breakfast.

Nicole left him to enjoy his treat, and made her way down to the kitchen.

She was just about to start doing the dishes and tidying round, when her mobile sounded.

She glanced over at it lying on the dining table, 'Shit,' muttered Nicole quietly as she looked at the caller display, 'what's he doing, ringing at this time.'

Having grabbed the phone, she slipped through the patio doors and into the garden, so as not to be overheard by her husband.

'What do you want?' she whispered, 'don't you realise it's only ten past nine on a Sunday morning, and my husband's at home.'

'I needed to speak to you rather urgently.'

'What can be so important that you take the chance of Hartley answering my phone?'

'But he doesn't walk round carrying your mobile, does he?'

'No, but if I'm somewhere else in the house, or outside in the garden, and it's just lying around, he'll answer it.'

'Oops,' he replied, sarcastically, 'I didn't realise you were that stupid. Especially as you're up to your neck in this fuckin' robbery. I do hope you've not forgot that *we*, yes *we*, stole that diamond from your nearest and dearest.'

'Ok, ok,' she was feeling a little tetchy with his comments, which made her look like she'd been reprimanded, 'what is it that you want, anyway.'

'I managed to get hold of Chan Lee last night, and he's come up with a possible solution to our problem.'

'Go on.'

‘He recons that he can get hold of twenty million quid’s worth of smaller diamonds, which would easily fit into a briefcase. Then all we have to do is sort out an exchange.’

‘Fuck that?’ rebuffed Nicole.

‘Why?’ Alf replied. ‘All we’d have to do is sell the diamonds. And lets be honest, there’s nobody on the planet, in a better position to do that than you.’

‘Hang on a minute.’ Nicole didn’t sound at all happy.

‘What’s stopping him filling the briefcase with fake gemstones? You know – paste made to look like diamonds. He clears off with the Appleford and we’re lumbered with a case full of crap.’

‘Just a minute.’ Alf needed a moment to think. ‘You’re in the diamond trade. Surely you can tell the difference between real ones and fake. Can’t you?’

‘Oh yes,’ she replied, ‘I *can* tell the difference. But I’m not an appraiser. I can’t determine the value of the individual gems. It takes someone with Harley’s experience to do that.’

‘Shit.’ answered Alf. ‘Is there no one you can think of who could help us out.’ He paused, then continued. ‘What about one of Hartley’s colleagues. Surely with your usual persuasive methods, you could get one of his mates to do us a favour.’

‘To risky.’ she answered. ‘No you’ll have to try and persuade him to do a bank transfer. That’s the safest way.’

‘So you want me to ring him back then?’ said Alf.

‘Did you not mention the offshore possibility when you rang him the first time?’

‘No. He sounded that confident that the smaller diamond switch would work, I didn’t bother.’

‘Well yes, ring him back and make the suggestion. Then let me know what he says.’

They ended the call.

Nicole scurried back into the kitchen and started to do the dishes, and only just in time. No sooner had she washed up, which only consisted of a couple of side plates, two glasses, two cups and a few spoons. She was about to start drying, when Hartley walked in carrying his breakfast tray.

‘Thanks, that was great.’ he sounded pleasantly gratified. ‘I might let you do me breakfast in bed every Sunday morning, I could get used to it.’

‘I don’t think so,’ she replied, ‘that was a one off treat because of everything you’ve been through. But you never know. You could always do the same for me, next weekend.’

The rest of the day seemed to drag. Fortunately Hartley decided that as it was a pleasant sunny day, he might as well give the car a clean. He would usually take it to the car wash and pay them to do it, but whilst the weather was fine, he thought he’d give it a go; at least he’d be out in the fresh air.

However, Nicole’s thoughts were so preoccupied with how Chan Lee would take to the suggestion of a bank transfer.

Was the offer of smaller gems, simply a ploy to get hold of the Appleford without paying full price for it? With men like him anything and everything is

possible. They had to be extremely careful. He couldn't be trusted. Chan Lee would know every trick in the book, and plenty others that weren't.

Sunday, April 25th. 7:15 pm.

Nicole's mobile rang as she was sat in the lounge glancing through a copy of *Cosmopolitan*, and Hartley was watching some wildlife documentary. And almost without looking, she had a fair idea who the caller might be.

She looked at the caller display, and immediately knew that she was right in her assumptions. This meant she'd have to blagg her way through it, and surreptitiously make it sound that it was somebody else.

'Hello Eve, how's it going.'

Straight away Alf knew that there was somebody else with her, and it was going to be difficult for them to talk freely. So he cut straight to the chase, and didn't mince his words.

As quietly as he could, he said.

'I gave Chan Lee a ring, and he says that he'd be happy doing a bank transfer. But he was a bit suspicious, as to how a bloke like me could have an offshore account. Clearly I don't come across as being a secret eccentric millionaire.'

As Alf was speaking, Nicole started walking out of the lounge and mouthed to Hartley that it was Eve. He just shook his head and carried on watching the television.

'So what did you tell him.'

'I said that it was an accomplice of mine who held the account.'

'Did you tell him who I am?'

'No way.' Alf replied. 'If he knew that you were a jeweller's wife, it could cause all sorts of crap. He'd probably want to drop the price. No. The less he knows the better.'

'So, when and where do we do the transfer? It'll have to be in a public place, so that he doesn't try and do a runner with the gem, before the money goes through.'

'Just a thought,' said Alf, 'do you think he'll twig who you are when he sees your name on the account. After all, I would imagine he'd know all the names of the jewellers in London, being in the game *he's* in.'

'Not a chance.' she laughed. 'Chan Lee might know about Grangers Jewellers, but he won't have heard of Nicole Woodcock.'

'Who's she?'

'It's me you pillock. I use my married name on some accounts, and my maiden name on others. I don't want my nearest and dearest knowing about *all* my ill-gotten gains, now do I?'

'Right. Well I told him that I'd give him a ring tomorrow morning, once I'd spoken with you, and we can make all the arrangements then. So I'll let you know all about it once its sorted.'

They ended the call.

Chapter 21

Monday, April 26th. 7:15 am.

Hartley's alarm clock went off.

'It's not that time already is it?' he said whilst stretching his arms out and yawning.

'I'm afraid so.' replied Nicole.

'And unfortunately for you, there's no breakfast in bed today.'

He just sighed. He didn't think that a reply was necessary.

The usual tea and toast was consumed in relative silence, downstairs at the kitchen table, while Hartley scoured the financial pages of the Times, as was the case every working day.

Nicole was flicking through a copy of Vogue which she'd had for a week or so. Seemingly trying to find a particular dress that had taken her fancy when the magazine had first arrived. But with everything that was going on, she couldn't really concentrate.

As they were both finishing their coffees, Hartley asked.

'Will you be coming into the shop this morning, or have you got something else planned.'

'Apart from meeting Eve at twelve, for coffee, I've nothing else in mind.' she replied. 'So, yes I'll be coming into town with you. I'll leave my car here, there's no point in taking two of them. I can always come back home with you.'

Monday, April 26th. 9:15 am.

Victoria and Becky were busying themselves rearranging the jewellery in the front window, and the display cabinets. This was a regular Monday morning ritual. Hartley had always insisted that, if the display looks different every week, customers naturally think that new stock could have arrived, and so take an even longer look at the redesigned window.

Nicole was busy going through the mail, while Hartley was double checking the banking from the previous week.

The security buzzer sounded.

With being preoccupied in the office, neither Hartley nor Nicole bothered to glance at the security monitor.

But the second Becky glanced at the door she said, with her voice raised somewhat.

'It's the police.'

Without any hesitation, both Hartley and Nicole quickly made their way into the front of the shop. As soon as the two of them entered the sales area, they recognised that it was Inspector Cunningham, the officer in charge of investigating the robbery.

'Good morning. Have there been any developments?' enquired Hartley.

‘Just the CCTV footage and mug shots,’ replied the inspector, ‘I’d like you all to take a look at them, and see if you recognise any of the men.’

‘Do you not have a DVD with the footage on, I could play it back on the system in the office?’ confirmed Hartley.

‘Not necessary,’ remarked Cunningham. ‘I’ve had the relevant images enlarged and printed out. All you have to do is take a look at these hard copies.’

Cunningham spread the CCTV printouts and the mug shots side by side on top of one of the display cabinets, and the four of them started glancing over at them.

Nicole started feeling extremely uncomfortable.

Even though the photos from the street cameras were a touch on the blurred side, the mug shots were very clear.

It ran through her head, that if they did manage somehow or other to get hold of the memory stick that Benny had, there would be no doubt whatsoever who the perpetrators were. This would in turn, guarantee a stretch in prison for Alf. Obviously with Lazarus and Matt both dead, Nicole didn’t think it would take long, before he would open his mouth and implicate her. This meant that she would have to make sure that Benny was kept sweet.

Nicole also had to do her best to try and confuse the issue.

‘They do look a bit like the thieves who stole the Appleford, but I don’t think that I could swear in a court of law that they were *definitely* the same men.’ she said, getting her two pennyworths in first.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ chirped in Victoria, ‘I think they *do* look like they could be the robbers.’

‘Shit.’ thought Nicole. ‘I hope that Hartley and Becky have their doubts, or else.’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Becky, ‘like Nicole, I don’t think that I could swear that they are the same. The photos are so blurred. And I wouldn’t like to get innocent men convicted of something they didn’t do.’

‘Thank fuck for that.’ ran through Nicole’s mind.

Then Hartley threw his hat into the ring.

‘Do you know, I don’t think I would be confident enough to say that they are the same men? Like Becky, I wouldn’t like to say they were the same, and consign innocent people to prison. Nobody deserves to get convicted of a crime they didn’t commit.’

‘I personally thought that it was pretty clear that they were the same men, in both the mug shots and the camera photos. Plus they’ve both served time for similar offences.’ commented Cunningham, ‘but if you’d not be prepared to swear to it in court, then I’m back to square one.’

He was just about to leave the shop, when his mobile rang.

‘Cunningham.’ was all he said after pressing the accept button.

He listened for about a minute or so, and although he had his head turned away slightly, to prevent anyone else overhearing what was being said, Nicole thought that she’d seen a glimmer of a smile.

‘Well that’s something.’ he remarked.

‘What’s that,’ questioned Nicole, ‘another breakthrough?’

‘Maybe.’ Cunningham replied.

‘I’m going to have to interview that CCTV engineer again.’ he continued. ‘The forensic guys have found evidence that a USB pen drive may have been plugged into the CCTV recorder, and subsequently removed sometime within the last few days.’

‘Oh bugger.’ thought Nicole, ‘I hope Benny’s got a good explanation for using that slot.’

‘And what would that prove?’ queried Hartley. Nicole felt relief that the question hadn’t come from her. ‘Isn’t it possible that the slot could have been caught somehow during its transit from here to the station?’

‘I suppose so,’ answered Cunningham, ‘but forensics are normal extremely careful and vigilant when dealing with potential criminal evidence.’

‘Yes, but,’ Nicole had to chirp in, ‘accidents can happen even in the most observant and attentive situations.’

‘Like I said,’ continued Cunningham, ‘I’ll have to interview that engineer again, and see what forensics have to say about what they’ve discovered, when I get back there.’

Monday, April 26th. 10:12 am.

No sooner had the inspector left the premises, than Hartley and his assistants continued where they’d left off. Nicole made an excuse to nip out for some milk.

‘But I brought a bottle in with me this morning.’ mentioned Becky.

‘Sorry, I know,’ said Nicole apologetically, in the knowledge that she’d deliberately poured it down the sink, ‘I knocked it over and spilt it all, but it won’t take me more than a couple of minutes to go and get some.’

She quickly left the shop, and immediately rang Benny to inform him about his impending visitor.

‘What excuse are you going to give,’ she asked, ‘because the police are going to want to hear something feasible?’

‘It’s not a problem,’ replied Benny confidently, ‘I’ll just say that I’d put a memory stick in to see if it would record and play back. Then once I could see that it was working, I deleted the footage which had been recorded.’

‘Has Alf been in touch, and told you that Chan Lee is prepared to do a bank transfer?’

‘Yes. So I’m just waiting for another call to let me know what’s next.’

They both hung up.

Nicole quickly made her way back to the shop once she’d purchased a fresh bottle of milk, and straight away made everyone a cuppa, so giving the appearance of normality.

During the short time that she’d been away from the shop, a number of customers had arrived and were being dealt with. Monday morning was never usually very busy, but custom at any time was always welcome.

Nicole was hoping that once eleven forty-five arrived, that things would start to quiet down a bit. Otherwise Hartley would no doubt ask her to cancel her coffee

date with Eve. And she felt the need for a bit of R and R with so much going on. Fortunately, normal service was resumed, and Monday morning returned to its normally slow pace.

At five to eleven Nicole grabbed her coat and handbag, and the second the clock struck 12, she said her goodbye's and headed off down Hatton Garden.

Monday, April 26th. 12:12 pm.

Eve hadn't arrived when Nicole got to their usual coffee shop. So she went straight in and ordered two large latte's and two jam and cream scones, it was their regular order.

She sat there pondering over the situation.

Was it really conceivable that Chan Lee would stick to his word and do the transfer? After all, twenty million pounds is a hell of a lot of money to part with. She was well aware that he couldn't actually cancel the transaction once it had gone through. But they weren't dealing with the average criminal. He would without doubt have some computer geeks or financial wizards at his disposal, who may know of a way to scupper things.

Her mind was awash with so many different scenarios.

'Hello. Anybody in there?' said Eve as she sat down opposite Nicole.

This made her jump, and as she looked over she suddenly remembered where she was.

'Fuckin' hell. You didn't half put the shits up me.' remarked Nicole. 'I was miles away.'

'More like a couple of thousands miles away.' replied Eve. 'I've said Hello three times.'

'Sorry, I've got a lot going on at the moment.'

'You must be joking,' Eve replied, 'the only thing you've got to occupy your mind with, is when and where you want to spend all that money, or who you're going to jump into bed with next.'

'If only you knew.' thought Nicole.

They sat enjoying their coffee and cakes, having a good old fashioned chat about fashion and holidays for the next forty-five minutes. And then parted company.

Chapter 22

Monday, April 26th. 2: 55 pm.

Even though Nicole had forewarned Benny that Inspector Cunningham wanted to have another word with him, she still needed to speak to Alf, and find out whether or not he'd managed to get hold of Chan Lee again.

There were a couple of customers having a leisurely browse round the store. And even though Becky had left early, apparently her eldest son had an asthma review appointment with their local nurse. This still left Victoria and Hartley in the shop, and as they weren't exactly rushed off their feet, would be able to cope quite comfortably.

'Am I alright just nipping out for a while,' Nicole asked, 'I just want to go to the newsagents to see if the latest Cosmopolitan is out yet. There was an advert in last months that mentioned a new Stella McCartney line in skirts would be coming out, and I can't wait to see them.'

'Won't it wait till later in the week?' suggested Hartley. Clearly not very happy, considering she's already had some time away from the shop earlier. 'You never know, we might get busy. Monday can be very unpredictable.'

'I'll be quick.' She didn't want to appear desperate even though she did want to talk to Alf. 'It's only round the corner so I shouldn't be more than fifteen, twenty minutes.'

Knowing that he couldn't really do much to stop her, Hartley just nodded.

Nicole made a quick exit, and as soon as she'd got about twenty yards away, lifted her phone out and dialled Alf's number.

'Hi, I was expecting you.'

'Have you spoken to Chan Lee?'

'Yes.'

'And.'

'He still wants the meeting to be at Euston station because it's a very public place. It sounds like he distrusts us as much as we do him.' remarked Alf.

'Can you blame him?' Nicole laughed. 'Go on.'

'There's a small AMT Coffee shop located in-between Boots and the Left Luggage facility,' Alf continued, 'and if we can get a table somewhere near the back; preferably in a corner so we won't be overlooked, it should be fine. There's very often yuppies and business men with their laptops, working away whilst drinking coffee. If you take yours and he has his, you'll both be able to see the transfer going through. And you will know the second the twenty million quid is in your account. How does that grab you?'

'It sounds OK,' Nicole sounded a touch apprehensive. 'But I can't help thinking that he's bound to have something up his sleeve. What happens if he has his cronies with him, and they take the Appleford off you before the money is transferred?'

‘I’ve thought of that,’ said Alf, ‘I’ll give the gem to Benny. He’ll be hanging around somewhere else in the station, out of sight. And as soon as the transfer has been completed, I’ll give him a ring and he can bring it to the café.’

‘Yes that sounds a bit better.’

There was a momentary silence, and then Nicole continued.

‘I still don’t trust him. Do we have anything to fall back on if things go up shit creek?’

‘How can it Nicole?’ Alf was coming across like he was sure nothing could spoil the exchange. ‘The money will already be in your account before he gets hold of the gem. You’ll actually see the zero’s mounting up. Plus, once the money has left his Bank, there’s no way he can stop it. The only way he could get it back, is if you sent it to him. And somehow or other I can’t see that happening.’

‘I suppose we’ll just have to take our chance.’ said a suspicious Nicole. ‘There’s not a great deal we can do about it, if we want the rock off our hands.’

‘So should I ring him and tell him it’s on.’

‘Yes. And the minute you find out when it’s going down, let me know immediately.’

‘No problem.’

As soon as the call was ended Nicole made her way straight back to the shop, forgetting all about the magazine she’d so called gone out to look for.

The second she pressed the buzzer Nicole could see through the window that Inspector Cunningham and turned up again.

‘Oh fuck. What’s he doing here?’ she thought.

Victoria opened the door.

‘There’s been a development.’ she said, not looking exactly happy.

‘What?’ replied Nicole?

‘I’ll let the Inspector explain.’

As they walked over towards Inspector Cunningham and Hartley. The Inspector was looking rather smug, but her husband was frowning, and looking confused.

‘What’s happened?’ asked Nicole.

‘It’s one of the blokes from the CCTV footage and the mug shots.’ Hartley replied.

‘I’ll take it from here if you don’t mind.’ interrupted the Inspector, before anybody else could say anything.

‘I did tell you. That in my opinion, the photos and CCTV shots were a good likeness of the men who I believe robbed you. Well I’m now sure that I was right.’

He paused for a second to see if there was any reaction from Nicole.

There wasn’t so he continued.

‘Because, one of them, a criminal by the name of Lazarus, was found shot dead late last night.’

‘What about the other one,’ questioned Nicole, ‘do you know who he is, and if he’s still around?’

‘As far as we know there haven’t been any sightings of him,’ Cunningham replied, ‘not officially anyway. But I’ve come back to see if any of you have remembered anything else.’

There was a moment's silence.

'Would you please take a closer look at these mug shots?' The Inspector continued. 'The man circled is the one we found murdered.'

'Murdered?' said Nicole, raising her voice a semi tone. 'That sounds rather sinister.'

She needed to somehow or other distance herself from any thought of involvement.

'It is,' stated Cunningham. 'Robbery and murder are very serious crimes. And we need to find this other man as soon as possible.'

'Do you know his name?' queried Hartley.

'Alfred Cunliffe, also know as *shifty* to his colleagues.'

Nicole squirmed.

With the Police knowing Alf's name, it would be just a matter of time before his photograph would be splattered all over the media.

Something has to be done.

But what?

'So I take it,' said Nicole, 'that he's well known to the Police.'

'Oh yes, he's been in custody a number of times,' replied Cunningham, 'and not just at Police stations, he's also done quite a bit of prison time.'

'Is he classed as dangerous?' asked Hartley.

'Definitely,' confirmed the Inspector. 'We don't know as yet whether he was responsible for the shooting of his mate Lazarus, but we can't take any chances. His mug shot and a description have been circulated through all the usual channels first thing this morning, and he is classified as 'armed and dangerous'. So if any of you come across him, you notify the authorities immediately, but don't try and approach him. If he did murder his associate, then he won't think twice about killing a stranger.'

'Do you think he'll come here, to the shop?' questioned Victoria. 'After all, he knows that we've all seen his face, and could recognise him in ... what's it called ...an identity parade?'

'We can't be certain,' replied the Inspector, 'but I'd be surprised. If he's any sense he'll be keeping a low profile, and probably looking to get out of the area, maybe even out of the country.'

'Is there anything we should do?' asked Hartley.

'Just remain vigilant. And don't take any chances. Like I said, I can't see him trying to get himself in more trouble than he's already in, by harming any of you. He'll be more interested in saving his own neck. But for the sake of it I will repeat myself and say, just remain vigilant.'

Nicole needed to get hold of Alf ASAP to inform him of these developments, but she would have to wait until later in the evening. Otherwise, if she got overheard by Hartley, she'd drop herself right in the proverbial shit.

Chapter 23

Monday, April 26th. 3:11 pm.

Alf had been trying to get through to Chan Lee for at least an hour without any success, so decided to leave it for a while. With the man having a number of business interests he was more than likely preoccupied with those.

Having made his way over to the kitchenette, the flat didn't run to anything like a decent size kitchen. It could only accommodate a row of three wall cupboards and three base units underneath, a small two ring cooker and a fridge. He'd put the kettle on to make a coffee but soon discovered that there was no milk. Not being a fan of black coffee Alf slipped his coat on and headed for the corner shop.

It was a pleasant enough afternoon. A few light clouds, with the occasional glimpses of sunlight slicing in-between the gaps.

As he sauntered along the High Street clearly not in a particular rush, he almost felt like he was enjoying the walk.

That was soon to change.

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks.

He was stood directly in front of the main Post Office, and as he looked at the large display window, which as usual was filled with private adverts. Electrician for hire. Need a gardener, no job too small. 9 foot foldaway table tennis table for sale, £50, buyer collects. That kind of thing. But the only thing he could focus on was a photograph of himself.

His mug shot. As clear and identifiable as the day the picture was taken.

It even displayed his prison number emboldened underneath his face.

Alf quickly lifted up the collar on his coat. Pulling it over his chin, covering his mouth as much as it would stretch. He started to head back to the flat as fast as he could. Walking quickly but not running, he didn't want to attract any attention.

Every step forward felt like he'd took a step backwards.

He glanced up a couple of times, and got an uncanny feeling that every person he saw, knew that *he* was this wanted man who's photo was up on display.

Alf had to make himself scarce.

When he arrived back to relative safety, he was puffing and panting. More out of fear than exhaustion.

'What the hell do I do now?' he thought. 'I daren't go out without some sort of disguise. If I'm spotted I'll be banged up faster than hot shit flies off a shovel.'

If his details were up in the Post Office for all of Potters Bar to see, then they would probably be in every city, town and village in the country. And as his was the only mug shot on view, Alf was more than likely on England's most wanted list.

'Nicole.' he said out loud.

'I need to get hold of Nicole. And quickly.'

Even before he took his coat off, Alf pulled his phone out of his pocket and rang Nicole's number.

He let it ring more than a dozen times before hanging up.

‘Where the fuck is she?’ he thought, ‘She should have answered as soon as her ‘do you think I’m sexy’ sounded, especially with the situation we’re all in, and everything that’s going on.’

He walked over towards the window, and whilst keeping his head partially shaded by the curtain, Alf looked out over the street below.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

People going about their daily business, unconcerned about what anybody else was up to.

Nobody looking curiously up in the direction of his flat.

No Police cars hanging around as though the property was under surveillance.

Yet still he didn’t feel safe.

He tried Nicole again.

Still no answer.

He was getting agitated.

Alf slipped off his coat and headed for the armchair.

‘I need to think.’

Slumping down in the chair, he closed his eyes and started to ponder about what his best options would be.

With everything that was going on, Alf’s mind seemed to be a blank. Unable to focus, he started to drop off.

Suddenly he heard a bang, and jumped up thinking that someone was at the door of his flat. Quickly he made his way down the stairs, panicking with every step, but before opening the door Alf put his ear to it to see if he could hear if there was somebody outside. He wasn’t taking any chances. It could be the Police.

No noise was apparent, so carefully he opened it a couple of inches.

There were no signs of any activity so he eased it open further.

After looking all round, he was satisfied that no one was around so headed back upstairs.

Carefully, making sure he couldn’t be seen, he glanced out of the window, only to see a car with its bonnet up and a man seemingly fiddling around in the engine compartment. He realised that the noise he’d heard was probably that car back firing.

After returning to his armchair, he perceived that it was imperative that he had to get out of there.

The landlady knew his name. And if she had seen that notice in the Post Office or the Police came knocking, she’d most definitely recognise him and inform them. There was no way she would allow a wanted man to live over her shop and on her property.

Even though he didn’t have anywhere to go, he thought that it would be safer moving around the streets than staying put.

Fortunately there wasn’t a great deal of packing to do. Everything he had in the flat would fit into his large rucksack. Ensuring that the Appleford Rock was in the middle of his clothes, well wrapped up, he packed everything in.

Before leaving the flat, Alf gave Nicole another try.

Still no answer.

But at this moment in time, retaining his freedom was more important than contacting her. After all, he had the diamond. So she would want him, more than he needed her.

With his jacket collar pulled up as high as it would go, and wearing a bob cap to cover as much of his head as possible, without looking stupid, he set off. Being careful not to be spotted by his landlady, who might still be working in the shop and could possibly be looking out of the window.

Monday, April 26th. 6:37 pm.

Time was ticking on.

Alf's sense of direction left a bit, sorry, a lot to be desired, and he still had no idea as to where he could spend the night.

After leaving the flat, London had seemed like the best place to hide. He could move around unnoticed in the bustling crowds. Plus, there were so many homeless people in the capital; he could blend in quite easily.

He started to head in the direction he thought would lead him to his chosen destination.

Alf's stomach started to ache; he hadn't eaten since lunch time, and had been walking for miles.

As he was glancing round, looking for any signs which would let him know the name of the town centre he was walking through, Alf spotted a large Tesco. He also noticed a solicitor's office on the opposite side of the roundabout, which had the name 'Chalenor and Chalenor's Solicitors', on a plaque at the side of the door. With 'Borehamwood Branch', noted underneath.

The only reason he needed this information was so that he could inform Nicole of his whereabouts, if and when she made contact.

Even though there were reservations about him trying to get something to eat from the supermarket, the last thing he wanted was to get noticed. But his stomach was rather insistent.

Alf had to chance it.

Still making himself as inconspicuous as possible, he made his way into the entrance of the store.

Directly in front of him stood a sandwich stand. His stomach ached at the sight of the selection. The other half of the cabinet was full of bottles and cans of juice.

He grabbed a pack consisting of two ham & cheese, and a can of Tango.

Fortunately, as he was paying for his goods, the cashier was more interested in speaking to a colleague, about when her next break was, than to be bothered about this somewhat indiscriminate customer.

As Alf was making his way out, he spotted his mug shot again. It was displayed on the Post Office window which was located immediately inside the front doors of the supermarket.

He glanced round, and noticed a young girl. Couldn't have been more than ten years old. Looking at the photograph and then staring at him. She appeared to be adding two and two up and getting the right answer.

He had to get out of there. And quickly, before she told her mum who was busy chatting to an assistant behind the counter.

He started to walk as fast as he could. No sooner was he outside than he clocked a large van about twenty yards away, at the back of the car park, but looked like it was surrounded by quite a few other vehicles.

Alf made a bee line for it.

On managing to get himself tucked up behind it, he carefully poked his head round the side of the van, and saw the little girl and her mum come walking quickly out of the store and motioning with their hands.

They were clearly scouring the car park, trying to see where Alf had disappeared to. But luckily they hadn't got out of the shop quick enough to see him slip in behind the van.

'Can I help you?'

He turned round. He was suddenly confronted by a young man, probably in his early twenty's. Well built and looked like he could have been a regular visitor to the local gym.

'You're not trying to break into my van are you?' he gave a sarcastic laugh, knowing that he would be well capable of sorting this short guy out. 'Not advisable.'

'No, err, no,' stuttered Alf, 'I was trying to avoid someone.'

'Well I think you'd better start avoiding them somewhere else.' the man growled.

Alf backed away, turned and started to walk away as quickly as he could. Glancing round, trying to keep the cover of the van between his pursuers and himself.

At the end of the car park there was a row of privet hedges standing about six feet tall. He managed to get behind them, and tried to look round to see if the young girl and her mum were still searching for him.

'Thank fuck for that.' he thought when he couldn't see any sign of them. 'That was too bloody close for comfort.'

His mobile sounded. He glanced at the caller display.

Nicole.

'Where the hell have you been?' he remarked abruptly, 'Do you realise the shit I'm in. The cops are onto me.'

'I know,' replied Nicole, 'I couldn't contact you any earlier, or I'd have been in the wires as well, and we can't afford for both of us to be on the news bulletins.'

'Shit, am I on the television as well.'

'Yes, so just keep out of sight.' she began to whisper.

'Where are you?'

'Borehamwood. Do you know where it is?'

'Of course.' came the reply. 'Whereabouts?'

'At the moment I'm just outside the Tesco car park, but I can't stay here for long. Some little girl saw both me and my mug shot, and told her mum. So I'm expecting the place to be swarming with cops any minute.'

‘Right,’ remarked Nicole, ‘just make yourself scarce. I’ll make my excuses to Hartley, and come and get you.’

‘How long will it take to get here?’

‘Depends on how quick I can get away from here. But I’ll be there as quick as I can. I’ll ring when I’m getting close.’

They hung up.

Alf cautiously turned away from the privet hedge, looking in the direction of the solicitors he’s spotted earlier. And after checking that the way across the road was cop-less, managed to scurry over, and hide behind the row of shops. Hoping to be able to maintain his freedom and anonymity, long enough for Nicole to get to him.

Chapter 24

Monday, April 26th. 8:43 pm.

Time wasn't half dragging along, and Alf was getting more and more nervous by the second.

A number of shopkeepers had come through their respective back gates and rear entrances, to dispose of their daily accumulation of rubbish. But he'd managed to keep out of sight.

His phone rang.

Nicole.

'Where are you?' she said. Her voice full of panic. 'I'm just outside Tesco and the place is awash with Police cars. There are cops everywhere.'

As her eyes surveyed the locality, all she could see were police cars with their roof lights flashing away. Occasionally Nicole could hear more sirens heading in their direction.

'You must be the most wanted man in England, looking at the number of policemen trying to find you.' she continued. 'So go on, where are you?'

'Do you know the little island just outside the Tesco entrance?'

'Yes.'

'I'm just across the road, in the backs behind the first row of shops.'

'Bloody hell.' she whispered. 'That's a bit too close for comfort. But at least you've not been found - yet. I'm on my way.'

It took about fifteen minutes before she arrived. And the second Nicole pulled up at the end of the backs, Alf ran over and jumped in the back seat and lay down on the floor.'

'What took you so fucking long?' he growled, 'I could easily have been discovered by either shopkeepers, passers by or even the Police.'

'Shut up,' she replied, 'you're lucky I'm here now.'

'Why?'

'I've just been pulled up by the cops, and they've opened every door, as well as the boot to see if I'd got a wanted man hiding inside. They're stopping everybody.'

'Shit,' said Alf, 'do you think we're going to be able to get away from here without getting pulled again?'

'I don't know. But we're going to have to give it a go. The longer we're in Borehamwood, the more chance there is of both of us ending up getting arrested.'

'There's a blanket on the back seat, cover yourself up, and we'll give it a try. Fortunately it's dark now which hopefully will give us a bit more cover.'

Alf did as instructed, and Nicole started to drive.

Slowly at first. Then gradually increased her speed to blend in with the general flow of traffic.

The second they'd got passed the Tesco Island, she did her best to get as much distance between them and Borehamwood.

Luckily they didn't get pulled up for a second time, as they drove away.

The silence was deafening.

But until they were far enough away, quiet was the order of the day.

Monday, April 26th. 10:16 pm.

Nicole's mobile sounded with her usual 'do you think I'm sexy' ring tone.

Harley.

'Hello.'

'Where are you?' he enquired. 'You said you'd only be half an hour and it's now twenty past ten.'

'I got a bit waylaid.' And, knowing it was going to take her at least another hour to sort Alf out, she had to improvise.

'Look. You go to bed. I'm not sure how long it'll take. I might be another hour or so.'

'Why Nicole?' he was starting to get annoyed. 'What's going on? What are you up to?'

'Nothing for you to worry about. I'll explain when I get home.'

She hung up before he could ask any more awkward questions.

'Don't ask.' she said, before Alf could enquire what that was all about.

'Where are we headed?' asked Alf.

'I've got the keys to one of our houses that we usually rent out. It's empty at the moment, and because I'm the one who looks after that side of the business, Hartley won't know a thing.'

'How long will I be able to stay there?' he replied sounding rather negative.

'Because don't forget, you're more than likely still under suspicion, and if the cops start to dig deeper, they might start looking into your properties.'

'Let me worry about that.' she replied. 'First let's get you there, and then take things as they come.'

Monday, April 26th. 11:44 pm.

Having got Alf into the house, she left him to sort himself out, and rushed home, not really knowing what she was going to tell Hartley.

Nicole crept in through the front door.

Everywhere was quiet.

Obviously Hartley had done as she'd suggested, and got himself straight off to bed.

As quietly as she could, Nicole got undressed and slipped under the covers, hoping that her husband would be sound asleep, but was soon to be disappointed.

'And where the hell have you been?'

Clearly he'd intended staying awake until she'd climbed into bed.

'Beth had a few issues that she wanted my advice about,' she claimed, 'and I couldn't let her down. I wouldn't be much of a friend if I was to leave her in the lurch now, would I.'

'If it's not Eve, it's Beth.' Hartley replied as he turned over. 'Where do you find these so called friends of yours, the local drop out centre?'

Nicole didn't think any reply would be appropriate, as it would only cause an argument, and with everything else that was going on, that was the last thing she wanted.

Chapter 25

Tuesday, April 27th. 9:14 am.

After a not very restful night, they got up and breakfasted as usual. Mostly in silence.

Then, after travelling to the shop in separate cars, Nicole knowing she would need to go and see Alf as soon as it was convenient. There was no way she could afford to be limited to using Hartley's BMW.

Tuesday was always an unpredictable day.

One week they could be rushed off their feet, and the next dead.

Today was a bit more on the steady side.

And because of the unpredictability Hartley had only got Becky working, he'd given Victoria the day off. He'd no intention of paying two wages, if they were having a quiet day.

As well as taking every Sunday off, they each had another day off during the week, one of their own choosing. Both being married with children, they would sometimes prefer a different days off each week, depending on what was going on with their families. It seemed to work well for everyone. So, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Nicole had deliberately set her mobile to silent vibrate. The last thing she wanted was for Hartley to hear it going off when Alf decided to ring. Which was going to happen sooner or later.

It had just turned 11:30 when she felt her phone start to vibrate. It wasn't constant which indicated that she'd received a text message rather than a phone call.

'I'm just nipping to the loo.' she whispered to Hartley, who was busy going through some invoices.

As soon as she'd locked herself in the cubicle Nicole glanced at the message.

'Ring me.'

Knowing that it wasn't a good idea to make a call where she was, just in case Becky needed to use the bathroom whilst she was in conversation, she decided to return a text.

'A bit inconvenient at the moment, but I'll ring as soon as I get the chance.'

After flushing the toilet to make it sound like it had been used, then, as she was about to leave, her phone pinged again.

'Chan Lee's been in touch, and he needs to get the deal sorted quickly. He says that he's had an offer for the gem that he can't refuse, but the deal has to be done before Friday, otherwise the offer will be withdrawn. This means he has to have the Appleford in his hand on Thursday at the latest. So we need to get a move on.'

'I'll get back to you soon.' she text back.

Tuesday, April 27th. 12:45pm.

'What time is Becky going for lunch?' Nicole asked.

‘Probably at one. Why?’ Hartley replied.

‘I need to go out later. If that’s OK.’ She was attempting to seem accommodating, but he wasn’t buying into her deceptions.

‘Who is it today? Eve, Beth, or is it somebody I’ve never even heard of yet?’

‘No need for sarcasm. I just want to nip out for a couple of hours. Is there a problem with that?’ She wasn’t in the mood for a confrontation. She needed to go and see Alf. And that was that.

‘Just wait until Becky comes back,’ Hartley replied, ‘and then you can shoot of.’

‘Will you be coming back here?’ he continued. ‘Or will you be going straight back home, once you’re done with whoever?’

‘Not sure.’ said Nicole. ‘It all depends on whether or not Beth’s managed to sort her problems out. They’re serious issues, and rather personal, that’s why I can’t tell you what they are.’

‘At least I know who it is. Thanks for that.’ Hartley grinned. ‘But I’m not really interested in other people’s troubles; I’ve got enough of my own.’

‘Why, what troubles have you got?’ she said defensively, ‘you’ve got everything you want, and more besides.’

‘No,’ he replied flippantly, ‘what I’ve got is a wife who disappears on a regular basis, and I’ve no idea from one hour to the next, when I’ll see her again.’

‘I’m off for lunch.’ said Becky as she popped her head through the opening in the office door.

‘Thanks,’ said Hartley, ‘see you later.’

‘You alright taking care of the shop for an hour?’ he glanced over at Nicole.

‘Of course I am.’ she replied as she headed through into the sales area, without any further comment.

During Becky’s absence Hartley stayed in the office with his paperwork. It was probably his best option. If they were in the same room together, there could well be another confrontation. And neither of them was in the mood for that.

Tuesday, April 27th. 2:10pm.

On Becky’s return Nicole couldn’t wait to get away. All she wanted was to discover how and when they were going to get this deal sorted.

After letting her husband know that she was leaving, Nicole headed straight to the house where Alf was hiding out. But not before calling at the off-licence and picking up a four pack of Fosters. With the way things were developing she thought that Alf might benefit from a few cans of lager.

She let herself in.

‘Alf?’ Nicole shouted.

‘In here.’ his voice clearly coming from the kitchen.

Alf was sitting at the table nursing what looked like a cold cup of coffee.

‘Here, I think these might be a bit tastier.’

‘Bloody hell, not half.’

He unclipped a can from the plastic ring binder, and without even offering Nicole one, walked over and put the rest in the fridge.

‘Have you heard anything more from Chan Lee?’ she queried.

‘Have I just.’ he replied as he gulped his first mouthful down, and carried on slurping. It didn’t touch the sides.

‘That sounds ominous.’

It was like he’d never had a can of lager for years. He’d drunk at least two thirds of the can before answering.

‘He rang again not long after we’d been texting, and he says that if the diamond is not in his hands by tomorrow night, he’s coming for it.’

‘How can he do that when he doesn’t know where you are?’

‘That’s what I said, and he replied that he has ways and means that we know nothing about.’

‘He’s bluffing.’ Nicole replied with a very unconvincing half laugh.

‘I very much doubt that.’ said Alf. ‘He’s seen the wanted poster in the Post Office, and said that if I didn’t do exactly as he says, then I’d be better off giving myself up to the Police. Because if he gets hold of me first, he’ll make me suffer. And my life won’t be worth living. A life sentence would be a much better option. Less painful.’

‘We don’t have any option but comply with his request,’ said Nicole, ‘and sell him the Appleford as soon as possible. But come on, that’s exactly what we want anyway.’

‘I’m glad you see it that way.’ Alf sighed.

‘I’ll get in touch with Benny.’ she continued, ‘Because the way I see it, you are as good as dead or banged up if you show your face outside and things start to go tits up. So it’s going to have to be me and Benny that meet up with Chan Lee and complete the transaction.’

Alf wasn’t exactly overjoyed with the way that Nicole was looking at the situation. ‘I hope you don’t think that you two are going to get hold of the Appleford. Sell it. And then make of with my share. Do you?’

‘Don’t be a daft bastard all your life,’ remarked Nicole sarcastically, ‘at least take one day off. Even if you *were* there, I could still do that. Which, just for the record, I won’t. You seem to be forgetting that the cash is being transferred into my account on Grand Cayman. So if I had a mind to, I could cut both you *and* Benny out, and keep it all to myself.’

‘If you try...’ Alf started to respond angrily, but Nicole interrupted.

‘Oh Alf, shut the fuck up. I’ve just told you that I won’t be doing anything like that. All I want to do is exactly the same as you. We need to get this deal done. So how are we going to do it?’

Alf’s face changed from anger to a reluctant acceptance of the situation. He either went along with what Chan Lee, Nicole and Benny decided, or he would definitely be up shit creek without the proverbial paddle.

‘Right then.’ he said. ‘I suppose using Benny is our only option.’

There was a moments silence as the two of them thought things through.

‘You and Benny have to go the AMT coffee shop in Euston Station tomorrow morning, and meet Chan Lee. Take your laptop. He will transfer the twenty million pounds into your account. Once it’s cleared you give him the gem.’

‘So you’re going to trust me with the Appleford then?’ she smiled.

‘I don’t have any fuckin’ choice. Do I?’

‘Come on. You don’t seriously think I’d double-cross you, do you? Especially the way we are with each other, and after the number of times you’ve shagged me, and the way I keep asking for more. Don’t forget, I’m married to Hartley, and he doesn’t do it for me, the way that you do.’

‘OK. Maybe not.’

‘Right then,’ said a thoughtful Nicole, ‘I’ll get in touch with Benny and explain the situation. You get hold of Chan Lee and make the arrangements for sometime tomorrow morning. And as soon as were done, I think it would be best for all of us if you disappeared for a while.’

‘And where the fuck am I supposed to go?’ Alf replied. ‘My face is more than likely plastered in every Post Office in the country by now.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘we’ll sort something out. Let’s just get Chan Lee off your back first, and get hold of the cash. Then we’ll see about getting you to a safe house.’

Alf understandably wasn’t a very happy man, when Nicole remarked.

‘Have you got the Appleford? So that I can let Chan Lee have it, the minute the cash has been transferred?’

‘I don’t like this.’ he replied. ‘I give you the gem. The money gets put into your offshore account. You and Benny do a runner. I’m fucked.’

‘I told you earlier, stop being a daft bastard.’ remarked Nicole. ‘Do you really think that Benny will leave his wife and kids and run off with me? *I - don't - think - so.* And do you think that I’m going to leave Hartley and the life I’ve already got, just for the sake of a few more millions. *No - way.*’

After a moments silence, Alf said.

‘That’s something which has always puzzled me. Why are you doing this, when you’re already a multimillionaire?’

‘Fun.’ she replied, ‘Just for the buzz.’

Alf sat there shaking his head and frowning.

‘Here I am doing it because there’s nothing else I can do to make both ends meet, and you’re doing it just for fun. There’s no justice.’

‘There will be if you get a tug,’ she laughed, ‘or Chan Lee doesn’t get that rock and he sends his thugs after you. Will that be enough justice for you?’ Nicole paused. ‘Oh yes, and don’t forget. It was you that roped *me* into this robbery in the first place, so you’ve only yourself to blame.’

A disgruntled Alf stood up and walked over to the kitchen cupboards. Opened one of the base unit doors, and lifted out a biscuit tin. Flipped the lid, and tipped out the Appleford rock, wrapped up in a protective cloth.

‘You’ve got a twenty million pound gem hidden in a fuckin’ biscuit tin. Is that where you kept it in that flat of yours?’

‘Why not. Would you look in there for a diamond worth millions?’

‘Probably not.’ she grinned at his audacity.

Chapter 26

Tuesday, April 27th. 11:18 pm.

As soon as Nicole had left, Alf made his way upstairs. And after paying a visit to the bathroom, he headed for the bedroom which he'd chosen to occupy for the duration of his stay.

He sat on top of the bed with another can of Fosters, wondering what the fuckin' hell he'd gotten himself into.

Yes, he was a criminal. Yes he was a thief. A burglar. A fraudster.

But NO. I'm no killer. That was Lazarus' line of work.

'If I'm not careful,' he thought, 'it's going to be me rather than the shit, which hits the fan. And I don't like the thought of that.'

Even after everything that Nicole had said about not double-crossing him, Alf still didn't feel one hundred percent confident.

He took another slurp from the can, as his mind started to work overtime.

Would Nicole and Benny do a runner with all the cash?

Was it even conceivable that Nicole would leave Benny out in the cold as well as him, and keep the lot for herself?

It was a remote possibility that she could even be in cahoots with Chan Lee, and neither he nor Benny had any inkling about it whatsoever.

'Get a grip.' he said out loud.

'Nicole wouldn't do anything like that.' he thought. 'She wouldn't leave him in the lurch. If she had of been thinking along those lines, there was no way she'd let him stay in one of their rental properties. That would be far too close to home.'

'I still need to have some kind of a plan, a plan A. There's no way I can leave things to chance.'

Alf picked up his mobile that was lying on top of the bedside table.

Opened the contact app and pressed Harry's number, and even though it was late, he'd a good idea that Harry would still be up.

'Yip.'

'That you Harry?'

'Who wants to know?'

'It's only me. Alf.'

'Alf? Alf who?'

'Come on you crazy cunt, stop messing about. You know exactly who it is.'

'Like I said. Alf who?'

'It's shifty Cunliffe, who'd ya think.'

'Hi Alf.' Harry coughed. 'Just being careful. You never know who might be trying to catch me out. How you doing then? Or is it more like, what do you want?'

'Need a gun.' remarked Alf. 'Are you in a position to help me out?'

'I thought Lazarus was your gunslinger, have you parted company?'

'You could say that. He's probably shooting up in the next world by now, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Fuck. Lazarus bit the bullet then. How?'

‘Long story and I haven’t really got the time right now. Have you not seen my mug shot in the Post Office?’

‘Don’t get out much these days. Got others doing the running around these days. Old age and poverty, you know.’

Alf laughed.

‘Old age maybe. Poverty. Never. With the action you’ve been involved in over the years, I’ll bet you’ve got a big fuckin’ hell of a stash, tucked away.’

‘No comment. So you want a weapon. Any particular reason, or should I not ask?’

‘Best not. What you don’t know can’t hurt.’

‘How big. Hand or shot.’

‘Small hand. Something that’ll fit in a jacket pocket, and with a silencer.’

‘Is a Glock 17 any use?’

‘Perfect, as long as it has a full clip. I’m not sure how many shots I’m going to need, and I can’t take any chances.’

‘No problem. When do you want to collect it?’

‘A bit difficult. Any chance of a delivery?’

‘Could be arranged considering its you. What’s the address?’

Even though Alf was hold up in the house, he’d no idea of the actual address.

‘Shit. I don’t know. Hang on a minute.’

Harry could hear footsteps, then a door creaking open. A few seconds later what sounded like draws being opened and closed.

‘Alf.’ he shouted down the phone. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Just a sec.’

‘Here we are.’ Alf gave a sigh of relief. ‘I’ve found the address.’

‘What the hell’s going down over there? You don’t even know where you are.’

‘Like I said. Long story.’

Alf rhymed the address of for him.

‘How soon do you want it?’

‘As early as you can in the morning.’

‘It’s morning already if you hadn’t noticed. What time?’

‘Would ten be too soon?’

‘Consider it done.’

‘Cheers pal. I owe you one.’

‘You owe me more than one. Just give me a shout when you’re done with it, and I’ll get shut of it for you.’

‘Thanks Harry.’

As they ended the call Alf thought of something else that was imperative.

He needed to get hold of Chan Lee to arrange the time. But after looking at his watch he thought it would be wise to leave it until first thing in the morning. The last thing he wanted to do was upset the Hong Kong mafia.

Chapter 27

Wednesday, April 28th. 7:54 am.

Alf was woken up by the sound of his mobile.

Still feeling the effects of the lager, he slowly stretched out across the bed for the phone.

It wasn't like four cans of Fosters had been a bit too much for him. Usually he could hold his drink. But it had been quite a while since he'd had anything like that amount, and it must have gone straight to his head.

He squinted at the screen.

Nicole.

'Hello.'

'Have you spoken to Chan Lee yet?'

'No, I'm just about to do it. What time is it?'

'You still in bed you lazy bugger?'

'Your fault. Shouldn't have brought those cans.'

'Just get you're arse in gear. We don't have a lot of time.'

'You spoke to Benny?'

'Yes. We're both waiting for you. So get a move on.'

The line went dead.

Alf glanced at the time on his mobile, it was just after eight.

'Chan Lee should be up by now,' he thought, 'so here goes.'

He loaded up his contact list and hit Chan Lee's name.

After about five rings it was answered.

'Hello.' was the response in his usual Chinese dialect.

'Alf here. Just rang to arrange a time and place for the exchange.'

'About time.' he didn't sound to put out, just annoyed. 'You name it and I'll be there.'

'Can you make it to the AMT coffee shop in Euston Station for ten o'clock?'

'Of course.'

'Nicole will meet you there with another colleague. She'll have her laptop so that you can transfer the cash into her offshore account. Then as soon as it's cleared and she can see it in the bank, you'll get the diamond.'

'Will this other colleague be carrying the gem?'

'Don't be daft.' Alf replied. 'If he had it, what's stopping you from pulling a gun and taking it, without handing over the money? No, there will be somebody else somewhere in the vicinity holding it, and once the financial transaction has been completed, our friend will go outside and collect it. Don't worry. Nicole will still be there with you as insurance.'

'Will you be with them?'

'I think you know the answer to that. If I show my face in public I've had it. I'd be in custody quicker than you could order your next cup of coffee.'

'I'll be there. Just make sure you keep your side of the deal, or I'll be coming after you. And you'd better believe it. I will get you. You can run, but...'

‘I get the gist.’
The line went dead.

Wednesday, April 28th. 8:33 am.

‘You and Benny need to be at the AMT coffee shop at ten o’clock precisely.’ Alf was entering text to Nicole; it was safer than a call. ‘Chan Lee will be there, probably with one of his cronies. I’ve told him that you’ll have your laptop to sort out the cash, and then Benny will go and get the gem, once the money has landed in your account. He doesn’t know that Benny will already have the diamond, but as soon as the finance has been sorted, you can hand it over. All clear.’

He pressed *send*.

He didn’t have to wait more than a couple of minutes before he got his reply.

‘Short notice, but we’ll have to get it done. Where will you be?’

‘I daren’t show my face so I’ll stay here. You let me know as soon as everything is over. Good luck.’

‘I’m hoping we won’t need any of that luck stuff. But don’t contact me again. Hartley and I have just landed at the shop, and it’s taking me all my efforts texting without him getting too inquisitive.’

Wednesday, April 28th. 8:47 am.

‘Pick me up at the corner of Grenville Street at nine fifteen.’ Nicole was texting Benny. ‘We’ll use your works van, seeing your company services some of the CCTV’s in Euston; it won’t appear strange if it’s parked near there.’

‘Bit soon, but I’ll be there.’

‘Who are you chatting to at this time in a morning?’ said Hartley.

‘Eve. She’s got a problem, and wants some help.’

‘What. Again. Can’t she sort her own life out without encroaching on other peoples?’

Nicole didn’t respond straight away, but then said.

‘Who’s in today?’

‘Victoria. And hopefully she’ll be here any minute,’ Hartley sounded somewhat suspicious, ‘because by the sound of it, you won’t still be here within the next five minutes.’

‘Sorry,’ replied Nicole keeping her voice steady, ‘but if I can’t help out a friend, what kind of person would I be?’

Hartley didn’t reply.

‘She’s here.’ remarked Nicole as she went to the door and let Victoria in.

‘Good morning.’ Victoria greeted.

‘Glad you’re early. I have to go out.’

Nicole left the shop. Leaving Victoria to close the door, looking rather none plus.

‘What was all that about?’ she asked Hartley.

‘Don’t ask.’ was his reply.

Chapter 28

Wednesday, April 28th. 9:11 am.

Nicole thought she’d have time for a quick coffee before Benny showed up. But as she was approaching the corner of Grenville Street, she could see that he was already there, waiting.

‘Your early.’ said Nicole as she climbed into the van.

‘Can’t afford to be late. Boss thinks I’m taking the dog to the vets. I just hope he doesn’t ring up and ask my missus how it’s gone.’

‘Why?’

‘We don’t have a dog.’

Benny laughed as he started to drive. Nicole just grinned and shook her head.

With it being midweek and the rush hour over, the traffic wasn’t too bad. They arrived at Euston station at twenty to ten. Plenty of time to get to the coffee shop, and find the best table for their mission to be accomplished.

There were a few customers in having drinks and snacks, but it wasn't over crowded.

Nicole spotted a table for four, right in the corner.

'That'll be perfect.' she said to Benny. 'Nobody will be able to see what we're doing there. You go and sit down. I'll get some coffees.'

Benny didn't waste any time.

He sat on a chair with his back to the wall. That way he had a good view of everyone who came in, or went out.

'I hope you like latte.' said Nicole as she placed the tray on the table.

'No problem.' he replied, picking up a couple of sachets of sugar. Ripping them open and pouring the contents into his glass latte cup.

'Once Chan Lee gets here,' mentioned Nicole, 'I think it would be wise if we let him sit with his back to the wall. That way he can't get out of here before the transfer has gone through.'

'I'm not sure he'll agree to that,' commented Benny, 'but you can always try.'

As they waited, not very patiently, a number of customers came and went with takeaways, and three, what looked like teenage lads wearing hoodies, came and occupied a table about two yards away.

'I hope they'll not be any trouble,' said Benny, 'they don't look very savoury.'

'Don't worry about them,' replied Nicole, 'let's just concentrate on the job in hand. If they do start to interfere, I'm sure Chan Lee or his buddy will...'

Before she could finish what she was saying, Benny kicked her ankle under the table.

'They're here.'

'So I see.' she replied.

They started to stand, but the man who was presumably Chan Lee, using his hands in a pushing down motion, said.

'Don't get up. It would be better if you stayed where you are.'

'I'd rather you sit with your back to the wall,' stated Nicole looking at straight at the Chinese man, 'that way nobody can see what you're doing on my laptop. We don't want any prying eyes. *Do we?*'

'Then I'll sit at the side of you,' Chan Lee replied, 'and your friend can sit opposite us, with my associate.'

Nervously Benny stood up and made his way round the table and took the seat directly opposite Nicole.

Chan Lee's colleague sat at the side of Benny, facing his boss.

Nicole lifted out her laptop. Booted it up. And loaded her account onto the monitor.

'There you go,' she instructed, 'you put your details in there,' she pointed to the relevant sections on the screen, 'and then the amount goes there.'

She glanced over at Chan Lee.

'Is that OK?'

He looked at her almost in disgust.

'I do know what to do you know.'

He started to input the details, and when he'd finished, before he pressed SEND, he looked across at Nicole.

'Is that alright?'

She nodded.

He hit enter.

Nicole's eyes were transfixed on the monitor, and after about thirty seconds she saw the amount of £20,000,000 come up in the credit box. The cash had been successfully transferred.

She smiled at Benny.

'You can give the box to Mr Lee now.'

He bent down and lifted a square box out of the sports bag that he'd brought it in, and placed it on the table in front of Chan Lee.

'There you go.'

Suddenly, before Chan Lee could pick up the gem, a commotion started to erupt just outside of the café.

It appeared as though some young lads were starting to fight, between themselves, and a bit of a crowd was quickly gathering.

The four of them were looking outside, but when Nicole turned back to face the table, Chan Lee and his colleague were slumped forward. Their heads face down on the table.

'Move it.' said a voice just behind Nicole. 'Let's get the fuck out of here before it's too late.'

It was Alf.

As Nicole and Benny turned their heads they spotted Alf, slipping a handgun with a silencer into his hoodies inside pocket.

'What the fuck are you doing?' said Benny. His voice no more than a whisper.

'Never mind that,' replied Alf, 'lets get out of here before anyone notices that there's two dead bodies slouching over the table.'

Alf had his head bent forward with the hood covering it; preventing anybody spotting who he was. Nicole and Benny followed him quickly, close behind, as he was scurrying out into the public thoroughfare, with the intention of getting lost in the crowd.

Benny had a quick glance behind them to see if anyone had noticed the bodies they'd just left, but fortunately most people were too busy watching the kerfuffle created by the youngsters.

As the three of them headed towards the exit with their heads bowed as low as possible, Alf said.

'Where you parked?'

'I'll lead.' responded Benny, as he sped up and took the lead.

'Slow down,' remarked Nicole, 'before we start to look suspicious.'

Benny slowed to a brisk walk, and Alf followed suit.

It didn't take more than a couple of minutes and they arrived at Benny's works van.

He unlocked it and they all jumped in.

Nicole occupying the front passenger seat, Alf slouching in the back, keeping his head down.

‘Move it Benny.’ said Alf with his voice raised.

He keyed the ignition and started to drive. Not too fast, that would also cause heads to turn.

‘Bloody hell,’ commented Alf, ‘we’ve only gone and done it. Got the money as well as the Appleford.’

‘How the hell did you manage to be in the café with that gun, ready to shoot Chan Lee and his mate?’ questioned Nicole. ‘Where did you get it, and was it you that arranged for those youngsters to start fighting, directly outside the coffee shop?’

‘It took a bit of sorting,’ said Alf, ‘but when you’ve got contacts, it’s easy.’

He’d already slipped the hood down, and was sat up with a smirk on his face.

‘Where to?’ queried Benny.

‘Head to the house where Alf’s been staying.’ replied Nicole.

‘And where’s that?’

Nicole told him the address.

‘And where the hell is that?’

‘Just keep going up here, and I’ll direct you.’

As they were travelling, Alf couldn’t stop bragging about his exploits.

‘I rang an old friend and he supplied me with the gun and silencer.’ he boasted.

‘Then I got in touch with another mate who arranged for the two guys wearing hoodies that were with me in the café, and the teenagers who started the distraction.’

‘You should have told us what you were up to, don’t you think.’ said Nicole.

‘Why?’ replied Alf. ‘Would it have made any difference? It was better you didn’t know what I was doing; otherwise it could have all gone tits up. You’d have been too busy wondering when I was going to make my move, than concentrating on getting Chan Lee to transfer the twenty million quid.’

‘Well at least it worked,’ commented Benny, ‘and so far so good, we’ve not had our collars felt.’

‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.’ Nicole remarked. ‘We’re not in the clear just yet.’

‘Why?’ said Alf. ‘What can go wrong now? We’ve got the money safely tucked away in your offshore account. We’ve got the diamond, which we can sell again. It’s a win win situation if you ask me.’

‘We’re here.’ remarked Nicole. ‘Pull into the drive of number fifty three.’

As he drove in he mentioned.

‘Look, I’m going to have to get back to work before the boss starts to get on my back.’

‘No problem.’ answered Nicole. ‘It might be best if you give me a ring when it’s convenient, rather than me phoning you. I’ve a bit of juggling to do with my accounts. But as soon as I can, I’ll sort you both out with your share. So keep in touch.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ replied Benny, ‘I’ll definitely be keeping in touch. I’m going nowhere without my money, have no fear of that.’

Nicole and Alf quickly climbed out of the van, and headed inside the house, as Benny drove away.

Chapter 29

Wednesday, April 28th. 2:18pm.

‘And where the hell have you been?’ said George, one of his work colleagues as Benny walked into the office. ‘Woodbridge is on the warpath. So much so he’s headed over to your house, to try and find out what you’ve been up to on works time.’

‘I took the dog to the vets,’ replied a nervous Benny, ‘but I’ll give him a quick ring.’

‘Shit,’ he thought, ‘I hope he’s not landed at our house yet, otherwise I’m for the high jump.’

He shook his head whilst chuckling inside, thinking.

‘What the fuck am I bothered about. I’ll be a millionaire in the next few days. So it doesn’t really matter whether I’ve still got my job, or whether we have a bloody dog or not. I’ll still ring him anyway, even if it’s just for the sake of my missus.’

He lifted his mobile out and rang.

It was answered almost immediately.

‘Hello, Clive?’ said Benny.

‘Oh yes its me.’ replied his boss. ‘And you’ve got a hell of a lot of explaining to do. Where are you?’

‘In your office. George just told me that you’re on my case.’

‘I’m on more than your case, as you say.’

‘Have you spoken to my wife yet?’

‘No. I’ve only just landed at your house. But now that you’re back in circulation, I’ll come straight back. I’ll see you very, very soon.’

Benny didn’t like the sound of Clive Woodbridge’s tone.

Glad that he’d not spoken to Caroline though.

But, even so, it didn’t have the ring of a fuming boss who was about to bullock his employee for absenteeism. It had the air of a boss who had something on his mind.

But what?

Wednesday, April 28th. Still 2:18pm.

‘I’m going to get back to the shop.’ said Nicole. ‘I’ll still have to keep Hartley appeased, or else if he starts to get too nose, we could be in a spot of bother.’

‘Before you go,’ queried Alf, ‘when do you propose to come back?’

‘Not sure. Why?’

‘Don’t forget, I still can’t go out anywhere. So how am I supposed to pick up any shopping? There’s only a bit of food in the cupboards. But there’s no alcohol at all, and I couldn’t half do with a drink.’

‘What do you want, and I’ll nip to the off-licence. Have you got enough food for today? If so I’ll pick something up tomorrow once Hartley’s sorted.’

‘Can you get me some cans, but more than a four pack? And a bottle of whiskey wouldn’t go amiss.’

Nicole was smiling as she shook her head.

‘The shit that we’re in if we get caught, and all your bothered about is booze.’

‘Well, there’s not much else I *can do* is there?’
She left without another word.

Wednesday, April 28th. 3:26pm.

George had mentioned that Andy had covered all Benny’s service calls, so he’d been glancing at his rota for tomorrow. Thinking that, it would be in his best interest to appear like his usual self, and not somebody who was about to come into a hell of a lot of money. He’d just returned from a visit to the bathroom. During which time, Clive Woodbridge had arrived, and was sat in his office.

They’d clocked each other through the boss’s office window, before Benny had a chance to sit down at his desk.

Clive lifted his hand, and with his finger and a grim look, indicated for Benny to come and see him.

‘So come on,’ said the boss not sounding exactly pleased, ‘where have you been all morning.’

‘I told you that I had to take the dog to the vets.’

‘And what’s your dog’s name?’

That wasn’t the question he would have expected in this kind of inquisition.

‘What?’

‘What’s its name? And can you remember what breed it is?’

‘A corgi, called,’ he paused. He had to think quickly. Corgis are usually golden in colour, ‘Goldie.’

‘Now why does that surprise me.’ replied Clive.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well dogs that come to the rescue of their owners are usually called Lassie, and are always collies.’

‘I don’t know what you’re on about.’ Even though he knew full well where his boss was going, he couldn’t let him go down there. It wouldn’t half make him look a fool. Even more of a fool than he was making himself look already. Benny was aware that Clive realised that there wasn’t a dog, but as far as Benny was concerned, that was fine. The main thing was that the boss didn’t seem to have a clue what he’d been up to.

‘This is getting us nowhere,’ remarked Clive with a resigning tone, ‘you carry on. I’m going out and writing down the mileage on all the vans. That’s the only way I can keep a check on how far you’re all travelling.’

As the boss made his way to the car park, Benny went back to his desk.

‘What’s he up to now?’ questioned George.

‘He’s making a note of the mileage on all the vans.’

‘So because you absconded for the morning, we’re all being monitored. Thanks for nothing.’

Wednesday, April 28th. Still 3:26pm.

‘Oh, so you’ve decided to pay us a visit then.’ remarked Hartley as Nicole made an appearance.

‘I told you where I was going.’ she replied. ‘Eve needed help, and I just had to be there for her.’

‘Oh its Eve now is it?’ said Hartley doubtfully, ‘it was Beth this morning.’

‘Sorry did I say Eve. I meant to say Beth.’ she had to think quickly. ‘I see them both so often, sometimes I call Eve Beth, and vice versa.’

Hartley didn’t see the need for any further response; he simply walked over to the stockroom and continued checking through the various quantities of watches, earrings and bracelets.

Chapter 30

Wednesday, April 28th. 5:28 pm.

'You're a bit late tonight love,' said Caroline, as Benny walked into the kitchen looking a tad preoccupied. 'Is everything alright?'

'Yes,' he replied, but thought he'd better make us some excuse, just in case Clive Woodbridge called and landed him in the shit.

'I wasn't feeling too well this morning, I felt a bit fuzzy. So I had a bit of a drive round to try and clear my head. I ended up over near Hyde Park. I pulled over in a parking spot and closed my eyes, and I must have dozed off. This made me rather late for work, and I've had a bit of a bollocking of Clive.'

'He's alright though isn't he,' queried Caroline, 'it's not going to land you in too much trouble or cost you your job I hope.'

'Don't worry about it. It'll probably just blow over. So, what's for tea?'

During their evening meal, Benny's three kids were chattering away. Speaking to dad, but dad wasn't listening. Dad's mind was twenty million and one miles away.

'Benny,' said his wife, her voice raised.

He shook his head to bring himself round.

'Sorry, I was miles away. What did you say?'

'They've all three been telling about their days,' Caroline was understandably annoyed with her husband, 'and you appeared to be ignoring them. Janice gave up after three times of asking, if you'd fix her bike for her. The chain's come off - again.'

'I'm sorry kids,' he realised that any excuse he made wasn't going to be acceptable, but he had to try. 'I've not had a good day. My heads thumping and I don't feel too well.'

'Look,' remarked Caroline, 'why don't you go and have a lie down. You might feel better after a bit of a doze.'

'I think I will.'

As Benny got to his feet, Jack, his youngest son, said, 'Don't worry dad, you'll be alright in a bit. We'll look after you.'

He felt so ashamed of himself for not being more attentive, but thought.

'Everything will be great once I've got my share of the cash. All my ignorance will be forgiven and forgotten.'

As he settled down on the couch in the living room he started to fall asleep.

Suddenly he was woken up by his eldest son, Alan.

'Dad, your phones ringing.'

Benny sat up and glanced at the caller display. Number not recognised.

He hunched his shoulders, and pressed the answer symbol.

'Hello.'

'Hi Benny,' said the muffled voice.

‘You don’t know me. But I know what you and your friends have been up to, and I want in.’

Benny’s wife and three kids had been watching television when his phone had started to ring, but by now they were more interested in dad’s call.

‘Who is this?’ he shook his head and pulled a face, indicating that he didn’t know who the caller was.

‘It doesn’t matter who I am,’ came the reply, ‘I know you’ve got twenty million quid and a diamond called the Appleford, which is worth the same again. So, I won’t be greedy. You let me have, say, five million pounds and I won’t go to the Police.’

‘I don’t know where you’re getting your information from,’ replied Benny, ‘but I’m afraid your sources are not very well informed. Don’t ring this number again, or I’ll call the Police.’

Benny was getting extremely nervous, so he hung up before any response was possible.

‘Who was that?’ enquired Caroline curiously.

‘I haven’t a clue.’ said Benny. ‘But I think he got the message.’

Janice scurried off in the direction of the stairs, with the probable intention of going up to her room.

Jack and Alan perched themselves in front of the television and started to watch some sci-fi film. While Caroline picked up ‘No Time for Goodbye’ the Lynwood Barclay thriller she was enjoying.

Knowing that his anonymous caller was fully aware of what they’d managed to steal, he quickly put his mobile on mute. That way none of his family would hear if he rang again.

Which he did. Not more than ten minutes later.

Benny promptly made his way to the bathroom making the excuse that he was feeling sick.

As he was leaving the lounge he spotted his wife putting her book down.

‘No you don’t need to come,’ he had to stop her overhearing whatever conversation he was about to undergo, ‘I’ll be fine. I just need a minute.’

The second he got the bathroom door closed and locked, he answered the call.

‘Who the hell are you, and where did you get your information from?’

‘I’m the man who you are going to give five million quid to,’ the voice was still muffled as though the caller was holding something over the mouthpiece, ‘or I will very happily give my information, and proof of what I’m saying, over to the Police.’

Benny was stumped.

He needed to let Nicole know about the call immediately.

‘Are you still there Benny. You appear to have lost your tongue.’

‘I’m still here.’

He needed time.

‘Oh don’t worry, I’m not expecting you dropping the cash off tonight. I do realise that it will take a day or two for you to get hold of it anyway. Nicole is still

in the process of transferring the money from her offshore account into one of her UK banks.'

'Shit,' thought Benny, 'he knows a hell of a lot. But how? Had Nicole or Alf slipped up and told somebody else what they were up to?' *No. He couldn't believe that for a second.*

'I need time.' said Benny.

'That's fine.' the caller replied. 'Today's Wednesday, I'll give you until Friday lunch time. But if I don't get it by then, everything goes to the Police. Is that understood?'

'Yes.' Benny replied. 'How do I get in touch with you? Can you give me a number that I can call you on?'

The caller rhymed off a London landline number, and then hung up.

'You alright in there?' shouted Caroline from outside the bathroom door, whilst twisting the handle trying to open it.

It was locked.

'I'm fine. I'll not be a minute.'

He needed to get in touch with Nicole and tell her what had just gone on. But it would have to wait until morning. He couldn't take the chance on Caroline or any of his kids, overhearing any of his calls.

It was going to be a long, drawn out, nervous night.

How did this guy find out about the money and the gem?

Had one of them been bugged?

But for someone to attempt to plant a bugging device on any of them, there must have been a leak from one of them, to cause somebody to even think about that course of action.

Benny was confounded.

But whether he was baffled or not, between them they would have to come up with a solution. Otherwise, they could all three be serving time at Her Majesty's Pleasure.

Chapter 31

Thursday, April 29th. 6:16 am.

Nicole was up early.

She was sat at the dining table writing out a list of things she wanted to pick up for Alf, and a number of places that needed a visit, when Hartley walked in.

‘What’s up with you?’ he enquired, ‘you’re up earlier than usual.’

‘I’ve got a lot on my mind.’ she replied.

Then, after a moments thought, she continued.

‘Do you need me in the shop today?’

It didn’t take more than two seconds for his reply to arrive.

‘I was expecting this to happen,’ said Hartley, pleased that he’d had enough foresight to make the relevant arrangements, ‘so I’ve got both Victoria and Becky working today. I’ve got a few things to do. I need to go to the bank, and I’ve got a meeting with Proudlove’s at two o’clock.’

‘What do you want with our estate agents?’ queried Nicole. ‘Your not thinking of buying *more* properties are you?’

‘No.’ Then came the reply she didn’t want to hear, ‘I’m thinking of selling the domestic rentals. We don’t really need them. And you clearly don’t have time to look after the tenants. What, with spending so much of your days with Eve and Beth.’

‘There’s no problem with the tenants at all.’ she couldn’t let him sell the houses, or where was Alf going to stay.

She had to stop these sales.

‘Don’t sell them,’ she was all but pleading, ‘every one of the families are settled, and we never have any problem with late payments or complaints from their neighbours.’

‘I don’t know. They’re probably more trouble than they’re worth.’

Nicole didn’t want to appear desperate to keep the properties, just the one where Alf was hold up. Plus, she knew it would probably take at least a couple of months for any sales to go through, even if the houses were snapped up pretty quickly.

‘It’s up to you,’ she remarked, ‘but would it not be worth just keeping hold of one or two, even if its just for the sake of the tenants.’

‘We’ll see.’ Hartley replied. ‘I’m still going to see Proudlove’s and get them valued.’

Thursday, April 29th. 7:35 am.

Hartley was just about to leave for work, when Nicole’s mobile sounded. The usual ring tone of ‘do you think I’m sexy’ always annoyed her husband. He’d always said that she gave *tack*, a whole new meaning, and before she could answer the call, he headed for the door.

‘Will I see you later?’ he mouthed as he could see her putting her phone up to her ear.

‘Maybe.’ she shrugged her shoulder displaying doubt.

Nicole waited until he’d gone outside before answering the call.

She’d already glanced at the caller display, and knew that it was Benny on the other end of the line.

‘Hi. How come you’re ring me at this time of day?’ said Nicole, ‘I hope there’s nothing wrong’

‘Unfortunately yes, there is something wrong. Big time.’ Benny was speaking quickly and sounded rather panic struck.

‘What is it? You don’t sound too good.’

‘We need to talk – like – now.’

‘What’s so urgent?’

‘I’ve had a call from a bloke who appears to know everything about the money and the Appleford. He’s demanding five million quid, or he’s taking some kind of evidence to the Police.’

‘What evidence?’ enquired Nicole, ‘there’s only us three that know what’s going on, since you got rid of Chan Lee and his mate.’

‘Well clearly somebody else knows. Otherwise how would he know that the diamond is called Appleford, and that we’ve got hold of twenty million quid?’

There was a moments silence then Benny continued.

‘Anyway, it doesn’t matter how he know, the fact is *he does*. We need to get together and try to come up with either five million quid, or some other way of getting this guy off our backs.’ he paused. ‘So I suggest you get hold of Alf, and we arrange a meet, like – now.’

‘He’s hold up in one of our rental houses, so I’ll give you the address and you can get over there straight away. I’ll probably get there first. So I’ll see you soon.’

Nicole gave Benny the address. Then, as quick as she could, jumped in her car and shot off in the direction of the house.

Thursday, April 29th. 8:06 am.

Benny said his goodbye’s to Caroline and the kids, and said that he was heading off to work. He told them that a fault had occurred on one of the CCTV systems, and needed his urgent attention.

As he was climbing into his van, his mobile sounded.

His boss. Clive Woodbridge.

‘What the hell does he want at this time?’ thought Benny.

‘Hello boss. What can I do for you, I’m just about to set off. I’m due at the Royal Hotel by a quarter to nine for a service call.’

‘Just making sure you’re on the ball.’ said Woodbridge. ‘After your disappearance yesterday, I’m just making sure that you’re actually working.’

‘There’s no need to keep checking up on me,’ Benny was sounding a bit pissed off, ‘I’ve been one of your best employees for the last three years, so I’m not going to jeopardize my job on silly excursions. Oh and just for the record,’ he was trying to appear as genuine as he could, ‘it was me that went AWOL, not George of any of the other guys, so you don’t need to take it out on them.’

'I won't,' replied Woodbridge, 'just make sure *you* do your job.'

He hung up before Benny could reply.

'What the fuck was all that about?' he thought. 'He should know that I would be out and about by this time.'

He pushed the call to the back of his mind. He needed to get to the house where Alf and Nicole would be waiting.

Thursday, April 29th. 8:37 am.

Nicole arrived at Alf's hideaway before Benny, and let herself in.

Alf was still in bed.

'Get up you lazy bastard,' she shouted through the bedroom door, 'something's cropped up.'

'Uhh.' Alf grunted as he lay all nice and cosy under the quilt. 'What time is it?'

'Never mind about the time, just get up.'

She made her way downstairs, giving him time to climb out of bed and come round. By the time he got to the bottom of the stairs, Nicole was letting Benny in through the front door.

Alf rubbed his eyes. Even though he'd been up a few minutes, he still hadn't woken up completely.

'What's going on?' he looked at Benny. 'Shouldn't you be in work?'

'Shut up Alf and listen.' said Nicole.

'Right Benny,' she was looking him straight in the eye, 'what *is* going on?'

'I got a phone call last night from a bloke who says he knows about everything we've been up to. He knows about the money. He knows about the Appleford. He says he's got proof of who we are, and what we've done. And he wants five million quid to keep quiet. So. What are we going to do?'

'And you've no idea who this guy is?' asked Nicole.

'No. His voice was muffled as though he had a handkerchief or something over the mouthpiece.'

'Did he say anything else?' queried Alf, by now starting to wake up.

'Just that he'd be in touch in a couple of days, because he knows it will take that long for you to get the cash from your offshore account transferred.'

'He knew about that?' questioned Nicole, stunned.

'Like I said,' continued Benny, 'he says he knows everything, and has evidence that the Police would love to get their hands on.'

There was a very uncomfortable silence resounding around the room, as each of them considered their predicament.

After a couple of minutes Nicole broke the silence.

'As far as I can see, we'll have to go along with whatever he wants. But sooner or later we'll have to come face to face, even if it's only to hand over his cash. We will then do to him what you did to Chan Lee. There's no way he's getting away with that kind of money.'

'Is that wise.' remarked Alf. 'We're already wanted for murder and robbery. Do we really want to add multiple murders to the charge sheet.'

Nicole looked at Benny, then turned her gaze to Alf.

‘No Alf,’ she said, ‘Benny and me aren’t wanted for murder and robbery. The Police are only looking for you. So if I was you, I’d do what I’m told.’

She paused.

‘All we can do is carry on. You go back to work Benny, and I’ll see about sorting the money out. As soon as you hear from this bloke again, get in touch, and we’ll take it from there.’

‘And what about me?’ asked Alf.

‘Just do what you’re already doing. Nothing.’ Nicole replied. ‘But I must admit you do do it brilliantly.’

Chapter 32

Thursday, April 29th. 10:17 am.

As soon as Nicole arrived home, she booted up her laptop. Money had to be transferred from Grand Cayman to one of her Nat West personal accounts. However, not wanting to arouse too much suspicion with the bank, she decided to move half of the cash that they'd got out of Chan Lee, into one of the accounts that they occasionally used for purchasing gems for the shop. Not an account that Hartley would monitor regularly, but one that he would only use periodically, when he was keeping the accountant and taxman out of the loop. Then once it had been in there for a couple of hours, she'd move it into one of her other personal accounts.

The minute the transfer of the initial ten million pounds had gone through; Nicole switched off the laptop and put it in its case. She collected her coat, made her way to her car, and headed back to the shop. Thinking that, sometime during Victoria and Becky's lunch break she'd have time, and hopefully enough privacy, to transfer the money into another account.

Still Thursday, April 29th. 10:17 am.

Benny's mobile sounded. It was Clive Woodbridge.

'Hello boss, want can I do for you?'

'Where are you? The Royal Hotel have been on to me, asking what time you will be arriving to do their service.'

'Sorry,' Benny had to think quickly, 'I wasn't feeling too well, so I called at the chemist for some Paracetamol.'

'It doesn't take an hour to pick up a pack of tablets, so where...'

Benny interrupted.

'Firstly the pharmacist was running late, and didn't open up till nine thirty.'

'He's not the only one who's running bloody late.' Woodbridge's raised voice echoed down the line.

'And because the shop didn't open on time,' Benny ignored his boss's little outburst and continued, 'quite a queue had built up. That's why I'm not there yet. But don't worry I soon will be.'

'Just get a move on. And don't forget. I'm watching you very closely. You won't get away with a single thing.'

'I'm not trying to get away with anything,' replied Benny, 'I wasn't feeling well, and...'

'Just get going, and don't let me hear any further complaints about you arriving late. That clear.'

The phone went dead.

Thursday, April 29th. 11:11 am.

Nicole pressed the door buzzer on the shop.

Becky did the honours and opened the door to let her in.

‘Hartley said he wasn’t sure whether or not you’d be in this morning,’ she remarked, ‘but I bet he’ll be pleased to see you.’

‘And why’s that?’ said an inquisitive Nicole.

‘I’m not sure. But he’s in quite a good mood, so I’d be aware. He’s bound to be up to something when he’s acting so pleased with himself.’ Becky grinned.

Nicole made her way to the office. Hartley was sitting behind his desk speaking to someone on the phone, and sure enough, just as Becky had indicated he was smiling.

‘That’s fine.’ Hartley continued speaking, and Nicole sat down on the visitors chair opposite him. ‘No rush; just let me know what you think once you’ve had a good look round.’

He listened to rest of the call, and then replied.

‘Yes, I’ll see you later.’

The call ended.

‘Who was that?’ Nicole enquired.

‘Simon from Proudlove’s.’ he replied.

‘So you’re serious about selling the domestic rentals then?’

‘Yes, but not straight away.’

A slight sense of relief cruised through Nicole’s body.

‘What do you mean, not straight away?’

‘I had Bob Jenkins on the phone earlier,’ Hartley was smiling more than Nicole had seen in ages, ‘and he wants to buy his shops premises and the flat above. Apparently, business is doing well, and he’s thinking about following in my footsteps. Bob said that he and his partner have already bought a pair of semis over Enfield way. And if they can get possession of their shop and the flat, it would be a good start to what they expect to be a growing portfolio.’

‘So what’s that got to do with Simon if you’ve already got the buyer?’

‘Yes, but he does a good job of valuing as well. And even though I’ve already got my outlay back, with interest, from renting it, I still want the best price I can get. There’s no sense in giving it away.’

‘No wonder he’s pleased with himself.’ thought Nicole. ‘That shop and flat are worth a small fortune, being just round the corner from Wembley Stadium.’

‘Are you staying for the next hour or so?’ Hartley enquired. ‘If you are we can let Victoria and Becky get their lunch breaks together. It’ll make my life much easier this afternoon.’

‘Perfect.’ she thought. ‘I’ll be able to get the cash transferred whilst they’re out.’

She glanced down at her watch. It was almost five to twelve.

‘Of course I’ll stop if it’ll help you out.’ Calm down. Don’t go overboard with helpful, or he’ll wonder what’s going on. ‘Should I let them go now? It’s not far off twelve anyway.’

‘Yes you might as well.’

Thursday, April 29th. 12:16 pm.

Benny had completed the Royal Hotel's regular service, and was just about to leave, and make his way to Heathrow airport. He always enjoyed doing the inspection checks there. It was only the Boot's chemist and Waterstone's bookstore that he serviced. But he was regularly treated to coffee at Boot's, and the bookstore manager would more often than not give him an even greater discount on novels, than were already on offer.

His mobile sounded.

Number not recognised.

'Yes,' he answered

'You don't know me,' remarked the caller, 'but I know you. And I'm fully aware of what you're up to.'

'Who is this? Is it you again?'

'What do you mean, *is it you again?*' the caller sounded flummoxed, 'No, I've never been in touch with you before now, and this is not a crank call, if that's what you're thinking.'

Who the hell can it be if it's not the same guy who's demanding five million quid from them?

'Didn't you ring me the other day?' asked Benny, trying not to give any more information than was necessary, realising that the two voices didn't sound exactly the same.

'No way. I've only just discovered what you and your friends have been getting yourselves involved in. And you're up to your necks in trouble if you don't give me what I want.'

'Which is?'

'All I want is one million pounds, and I'll forget everything I know.'

He had to think.

'Well I don't know what you think that you've found out, but I'm afraid your information isn't correct. I don't know who you presume you're speaking to, but you must have a wrong number.'

He hung up.

'If it's not the guy that rang yesterday, then who is it?' thought Benny. 'And how the hell could two different people have found out what they've managed to steal?'

'This is getting crazy.'

Thursday, April 29th. 12:31 pm.

There weren't any customers in the shop. Hartley was busy in his office. Victoria and Becky were still on their lunch break. So Nicole booted up her laptop.

She entered her details into the Grand Cayman account, and opened up another tab and keyed in her Nat West account numbers.

As she glanced at the seldom used business account, Nicole could see the ten million pounds she'd transferred from the private Grand Cayman account, plus the

two thousand that was always left in there, just to keep it open. Then, after she'd keyed in the transfer request, she only had to wait about thirty seconds, and the cash was moved into the Nat West.

Done, and just in time.

Hartley came walking into the sales area, frowning.

'Everything alright in here. It's unusually quiet. Haven't we had any customers since the girls went for lunch?'

'Not a soul has come to the door, and I've been here waiting all the time.'

'It's just a bit strange. We're normally a bit busier than this on a Thursday afternoon.'

He turned and headed straight back to the office.

'Close call.' thought Nicole.

Chapter 33

Thursday, April 29th. 1:26 pm.

Alf was sat in the lounge watching an episode of *Wish you were here* on the television, wishing he *was* there.

When he heard something drop through the letterbox.

‘A bit late for the Postman,’ he thought as he stood up and made his way to the front door.

He bent down and picked up a standard sized white envelope lying face down on the carpet. Alf turned it over. It read.

To Alf.

Nothing else.

No stamp.

Just, To Alf.

Clearly it had been hand delivered, so he rushed over to the window to try and see if there was anybody around that could have posted it.

Nobody.

He opened it.

Alf, I just wanted to let you know that as well as knowing how to contact you by mobile, I also know where you're staying. I will give you until five o'clock tomorrow afternoon, but then we will be making arrangements of when and where I'm going to relieve you and your friends of five million pounds. Try anything, and the Police will get hold of the information that will put you and your buddies away for a very long time. Signed. C U Soon.

‘Shit, I need to let Nicole know that this guy knows where I am.’ he thought, as he picked up his mobile and started to input text; it was wiser than ringing.

Thursday, April 29th. 1:43 pm.

Victoria and Becky had been back from their lunch breaks for well over half an hour, so Nicole knew that she'd be alright leaving for the rest of the day. She went into the office, and just before letting her husband know that she was going, Nicole lifted her mobile out of her handbag, which had been sitting on top of a filing cabinet while she was in the sales area.

‘Fuck.’ she thought. Two messages and both from some time ago. ‘I should have kept my phone on me.’

One from Benny followed by one from Alf.

Benny's simply read. Ring ASAP.

Alf's was a tad longer. Get in touch. The bloke who wants five million quid knows where I'm hold up.

She slipped her phone back into her handbag, and turned to Hartley who was sat behind his desk.

‘Am I alright going now that the girls are back?’

'I'm surprised your still here,' he replied with a sneer, 'I expected you taking off, the minute they got back from lunch.'

She didn't have time for any tit for tat bickering so her reply was short.

'Right then I'm off.'

'Will you be coming back here?'

'No. I'll see you at home.'

Thursday, April 29th. 2:04 pm.

'Who first.' Nicole thought as she exited the front door.

Benny, as his message sounded the more serious. And she didn't believe for one second, that this guy, who was trying to rip them off for the tune of five million pounds, could know where Alf was staying.

Benny picked up on the first ring.

'About bloody time,' were his opening angry words, 'where the hell have you been? It's well over an hour since I sent you that text.'

'Calm down,' she replied, keeping her voice even, 'what's so urgent?'

'We've got another interested party, who wants a million quid or he's giving the Police the information that he claims he's got.'

'Is it not the same guy trying to get a bit more money out of us?'

'No. It's definitely not the same one. But he knows as much as the first bloke.'

'How the hell are they finding all this information out, has one of you blabbed?'

Benny didn't take kindly to that derogatory comment.

'Well I've not said a fuckin' word to anybody, if that's what your insinuating.' He took a deep breath and then continued. 'How do we know that it's not you who's said something? Or maybe you want to keep all the cash for yourself, and you've got Hartley to make these calls.'

'Don't be a pillock;' she replied furiously, 'do you seriously think that Hartley would soil his hands with a caper like this.'

'Well somebody's blabbed, and there are only three of us who know what's going on. So - it must be Alf, if its not one of us.'

'I can't believe that,' Nicole remarked, 'he's in enough shit to keep a pig farmer happy for the rest of his life. What's Alf got to gain with a bit of extra cash? He's already going to be a multimillionaire isn't he?'

'We need to get in touch with him.' answered Benny.

'I'm going to give him a ring as soon as you hang up. He also sent me a text earlier, and I've not responded to that yet. I'll let you know what he says, as soon as I've found out.'

They both hung up.

Alf answered on the third ring.

'What the fuck took you so long.' he remarked, clearly pissed off.

'I've been busy,' said Nicole, 'what's this about this bloke knowing where you're staying?'

'He knows where I am.'

'How.'

‘I don’t bloody know, but he does. He shoved a note through the letterbox, so I know he’s not bluffing.’

‘And what did the note say?’

Alf read what had been written in the letter.

‘I’ll see you soon,’ said Nicole, ‘I’ll ring Benny. All three of us need to get together, or everything’s going to go ape shit.’

She closed the call and rang Benny straight away. Explained to him about the conversation she’d just had with Alf, and told him to get over to the house where Alf was staying as soon as he could.

Chapter 34

Thursday, April 29th. 2:04 pm.

Benny and Nicole arrived at the house at the same time. Understandably, both were in a bit of a panic, wondering what the hell was going on.

‘So come on Benny,’ said Nicole apprehensively, ‘you say you’ve had another caller claiming to have information concerning the cash and the gem. So do you have even an inkling of who it is?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ Benny replied, ‘but just like the first guy; he seemed to know just about everything we’ve been up to.’

Alf chirped in.

‘Here’s the note that came through the letterbox.’

He handed it over, and as Nicole was reading it Benny was leaning over her shoulder to get a closer look for himself.

Benny glared over at Alf.

‘You’ve not been opening your big fat gob when you’ve been outside have you?’

‘Don’t even go there,’ Alf replied furiously, ‘how the hell could I open my mouth to anybody. *I daren’t go out - remember.* My mug shot is most likely in every Post Office window in the fuckin’ country, in case you’ve forgotten.’

The three of them sat there staring at each other, not knowing how these two callers could have got hold of so much information.

‘Pass me the envelope.’ requested Benny.

He only glanced at it, and then remarked.

‘How come whoever it is, has done the note on a computer or typewriter, but written your name by hand. Do either of you recognise the handwriting?’

Nicole and Alf took a closer look, and then said simultaneously.

‘No.’ as they shook their heads.

Nicole looked at her watch.

‘We’ve only got just over twenty four hours before the first bloke is going to get in touch, and he’s expecting us to hand over five million quid.’

‘Have you managed to do the transfer yet?’ queried Benny.

‘Yes. It’s all in hand.’

‘And can you get hold of six million,’ asked Alf, ‘because we’ve got two interested blackmailers, who are going to land us right in the shit, if they don’t have their demands met.’

‘Yes.’ replied Nicole saying the word slowly as though she was deep in thought.

‘I will get hold of the cash,’ she looked and sounded like she’d got a plan, ‘but they won’t get a penny. We will make the arrangements for an exchange, the cash for the information. But once we’ve got the information, I’ll blow their fucking heads off before they get out of the door with the money.’

‘That will depend on how they want the exchange done.’ remarked Alf.

‘No Alf,’ said Nicole categorically, ‘it depends on how *we* want the exchange done. Don’t forget it’s those two who want the cash. And we still don’t know for certain, what information they’re supposed to have acquired.’

‘Well we’ve only got twenty four hours before we’ll know for sure,’ commented Benny, ‘so I suggest that you go and get hold of the cash, and I’ll wait for the call.’

‘And me?’ queried Alf, ‘what do I do?’

‘The same as you’ve been doing,’ answered Nicole, ‘but this time keep your eyes on the outside, just in case this bloke drops of another note.’

Thursday, April 29th. 3:11 pm.

Nicole headed for the bank. Benny made his way to work, hoping that he hadn’t been missed. And Alf just sat there contemplating how the hell they were going to get out of this mess.

Nicole didn’t have any problem at the bank. They were used to dealing in large quantities of cash, when dealing with her and her husband. However, she only drew out five hundred thousand pounds out, not six million.

Two reasons.

One. There was no way she was parting with money like that on two blackmailers.

Two. There was no way that she could carry so much cash. Six million would need a pallet, or at least half a dozen suitcases. But she knew that she would be able to fit and carry half a million in a single suitcase.

Alf on the other hand was feeling rather jumpy. So much so, he was forever going over to the front window, peering out to see if there were any signs of unusual activity.

Benny pulled up in his usual parking spot behind the office. And as he was climbing out of his van, George was about to climb into his, clocked him, and called him over.

‘Where the hell have you been - *again?*’ he asked. His voice all but a whisper, as though he didn’t want anybody else overhearing what was being said.

‘Why?’ replied Benny not wanting to say too much. ‘Has Woodbridge been looking for me again?’

‘No. But if you continue to do your disappearing acts, he soon will be.’

‘So. What the problem?’

‘Nothing, I was just wondering what you’ve been up to, that’s all.’

George closed his door, started the engine, and left. Leaving Benny wondering what the hell that was all about.

He went over to the office to see if Clive Woodbridge was knocking about. It was simply a precautionary measure to see if he was in line for a bollocking or not.

A couple of his other colleagues were busy in the workshop, and both nodded as he sauntered past. Benny didn’t want to look like he was flustered.

When he arrived the office was empty. No Woodbridge.

He gave a little sigh of relief, as he started to look at his rota that was pinned up on the notice board; he was attempting to look genuine.

As he was so called making a note of his calls, Harry walked in. 'Clive was handing out our P60's this morning, did you get yours?'

'No, I've only just landed.'

'I know he's had to nip out to one of our suppliers, something about new batteries for the systems. But if you have a look round, you might be able to locate yours, probably somewhere on his desk.'

He left without another word.

Benny started to have a root round on Woodbridge's desk. He couldn't see anything resembling a P60.

As he was leaning on the desk, he heard a loud bang which made him jump. He glanced out of the window and saw Harry messing about with the service doors; he'd managed to jam one side of the door, and was using a crow bar to get it released. But as he jumped his hand disturbed some of the documents on the table, and some had fallen onto the floor.

'Bugger.' he said as he bent down to pick them up.

He'd collected about half a dozen invoices, but when he put his hand down to pick up the rest, something caught his eye.

It was a business card.

That in itself wasn't unusual. A business card on Woodbridge's desk would be the norm. But what seemed to jump out at him, was one of the telephone numbers. It rang a very disturbing bell.

Benny lifted his mobile out of his pocket to check his calls received list. And sure enough, the telephone number of the first caller, tallied with the one on the card.

It was the number of the first caller who was blackmailing them.

The business card was Clive Woodbridge's, and the number was his home landline. Not a number that would be known or used by any of the workforce.

As Benny flipped the card over, a shiver went running down his spine.

There was some writing on the back. It had nothing to do with the blackmail attempt. It was another company's phone number. But the name associated with that particular firm was Alan Kennings.

The name didn't cause concern, but the letter A did.

It was written in the same box style that was on the envelope which Alf had received. Not a style that anybody that Benny knew, would use.

Clive Woodbridge was one of the blackmailers.

His first thought was, Nicole and Alf need to be informed. But more than anything, that Alf needed to be on his guard. Because Woodbridge, as Benny was well aware, was capable of doing almost anything, to get what he wants.

He needed to get out of the office and off the premises before Woodbridge came back. Otherwise if he was discovered anywhere near the desk and the business card, his boss would no doubt put two and two together and come up with the right answer.

Benny had only just made it back into the workshop, when he spotted Woodbridge's car pull up. He watched as the boss climbed out of his car, and started to head towards the building.

'I don't want to be here.' thought Benny. 'I need to get out. We can't afford any confrontation.'

Quickly he made his way to the washroom, and stood behind the door. Keeping it slightly ajar so he could see the entrance clearly.

Clive Woodbridge walked in. His eyes seemed to scan the whole room in a second. Benny even imagined that Woodbridge could even see through the door he was hiding behind.

After a few seconds, he started in the direction of his office. But just as Benny was about to leave the bathroom, Woodbridge stopped.

Benny froze.

'Harry,' Woodbridge shouted, 'have you seen Benny?'

'Err, yes,' he replied, 'he was here a minute ago. I think he's gone up to the office to see you.'

Without reply Woodbridge turned and started to walk briskly towards his office.

The second he was out of sight, Benny came out of the washroom, and made for the exit.

'Hey,' shouted Harry, 'the boss wants a word with you. He's in the office.'

'Sorry,' replied Benny hurriedly, 'I need to be somewhere. Tell him I'll see him later.'

Chapter 35

Thursday, April 29th. 4:22 pm.

Nicole decided to drop the cash off back at the house where Alf was staying. The last thing she wanted was for Hartley to find a suitcase full of cash. There *would* be questions asked in the house.

When she arrived, Alf was standing at the window, looking like he was on sentry duty.

‘What the hell you doing there,’ Nicole laughed as she walked through the front door. ‘You look like you’re a look out on a bank job.’

‘I’m keeping an eye out, just in case that blackmailer turns up again.’ Alf replied.

‘Well I’m just leaving this case here for a while. I’ll be back to collect it later. But make sure you don’t get spotted peeping from behind those curtains.’

‘What’s in it?’

‘Never you mind. You’ll find out soon enough.’

Nicole was keeping her cards held close to her chest. She only wanted people to know, what she wanted them to know, and nothing more.

As she left, Nicole spotted Alf return to the window, so she turned and shoed him away with her hands.

He didn’t take any notice. His remained at his sentry post.

As quickly as she could, without breaking the speed limit, she drove straight home. Nicole needed to collect a number of items.

Thursday, April 29th. 4:35 pm.

Nicole had only driven about two miles, when her mobile sounded.

It was Alf.

‘Yes. What is it, I’ve only just left. Do you not realise I’m driving.’

‘You’d better get back here.’

‘Why, is he back again?’

‘No, but Benny is.’

‘What’s he doing there, shouldn’t he be at work.’

‘He’s got some news that we both think you should hear face to face, not over the phone.’

‘Is it so urgent? Can it not wait for a couple of hours?’

Benny snatched Alf’s mobile off him.

‘No it can’t wait. Now get the fuck over here - *now*. Before it’s too late.’

He hung up.

Realising that Benny was coming across as being terrified; Nicole immediately turned the car round and headed back.

Thursday, April 29th. 4:48 pm.

‘What took you so long?’ remarked Benny not looking at all calm.
‘Come on then,’ said Nicole, ‘what’s with all the rush.’
‘I know who one of the blackmailer’s is.’ replied Benny.
‘Who is it then?’
‘Clive Woodbridge.’
‘Who?’ Nicole replied, not being exactly up to date with who Benny’s work colleagues were.
‘Clive Woodbridge. My boss.’
‘Are you sure?’ frowned Nicole, ‘Isn’t he supposed to be an upstanding business man. How would he get hold of information to blackmail us with?’
‘I don’t know,’ remarked Benny, ‘but somehow or other he has.’
‘Shit.’ said Benny as he started to head for the front door.
‘Where the fuck are you going now?’ Alf voice was raised.
He didn’t answer. Benny just kept heading for his van, like a man on a mission.
Nicole and Alf followed, not having a clue what had sparked off this sudden impulse to look in his van.
Benny unlocked the door, and jumped in.
Nicole and Alf looked on as he started looking round and fiddling on the top of the dashboard.
‘What the hell are you doing?’ questioned Nicole.
‘That’s how he knows what we’re up to.’
Benny lifted the so called imitation dash cam up, and found wires going through to the inside of the dashboard.
‘This was supposed to be a deterrent to stop would be thieves. It was never connected to a hard drive. It was only there for show. Many a time when I’ve been annoyed, I’ve used it for target practice and thrown it at the window.’
‘So how long has it been there? As a working devise I mean.’ queried Alf.
Benny had to think for a few moments. Then said.
‘Middle of last week. I had a lot of paperwork to catch up on, and Woodbridge said that whilst I was going to be in the office all afternoon, he would get the van serviced.’
‘Did it not dawn on you that he would probably have had to book it in first? You can’t just turn up and expect the garage to jump.’ Alf remarked.
‘I never gave it a second thought.’ replied Benny, shaking his head. ‘He must have taken the van back to his house and rigged it there. It wouldn’t take more than an hour to set up.’
‘So how would he get the information from that dash cam?’ asked Nicole?
Benny started fiddling underneath the dashboard again.
‘Got ya.’ he said in a louder than normal whisper, as he started to pull out a small dark grey box with wires attached, located directly in front of the steering wheel.
‘A hard drive.’ Benny paused.
‘The bastard. Woodbridge had put a hard drive recording unit in. And, when I’ve been in the office doing paperwork, he’s come out, removed the drive. Copied it and probably wiped it clean, and put it back to see what else he can discover.’

'Can you check to see what's on it? Whether it has been wiped clean or not.' asked Nicole.

'Yes. Come on.' Benny replied, as he disconnected the hard drive from the front of the van.

The three of them rushed inside. Benny set up his laptop, and plugged the unit into one of the USB slots on the side.

It started to play.

They all watched as the recording showed the three of them. Jumping into the van after they'd been to Euston Station and had the dealings with Chan Lee. You could hear them bragging about what they'd just accomplished. The murders of Chan Lee and his associate. The twenty million they'd managed to steal. The Appleford diamond. And Nicole, giving Benny the address where Alf was staying, and giving him directions on how to get there.

'There's enough proof there to put the three of us away for life.' said a disconcerted Nicole.

'There's only one thing for it,' she continued, 'he's got to go. And soon. We can't have him holding information like that for a second longer than we have to.'

'Hang on a minute,' remarked Benny, 'aren't we forgetting something. There's still that second caller. Who the fuck is he, and how did he get the same information. Are they both in it together? We'd better be careful here. We could kill Woodbridge, and leave the other guy free to carry on blackmailing us.'

Silence resounded round the room while they pondered their dilemma.

They heard the letterbox lid clang.

Without giving a second thought, they all jumped up and ran to the front door.

Nicole opened it to see if the person who'd delivered the letter that was lying on the floor just inside, was still in sight.

Not a chance.

Whoever it was had got their timing right, and scarpered, before he could be spotted.

It had Alf's name on the envelope, written in the same box style as before.

Benny opened it, and read it out loud.

Alf. Just a little reminder that I know where you are staying, and that you should let your friends know that I want my five million pounds sometime on Saturday. I'll ring at five o'clock tomorrow afternoon to make arrangements for the exchange. My information for five million pound. Signed. C. U. Soon.

'This is from, what's his name, Woodside?' said Alf.

'Don't you mean Woodbridge.' corrected Benny.

'Yes Woodbridge. But we still need to know...'

He was cut short when Benny said with his voice raised.

'George. The bastard.'

'And who the fuckin' hell is George?' asked Nicole.

'He's a work colleague, and he's been acting a bit strange this last week.

Asking probing questions. He's our other blackmailer. I'd swear to it.'

'And how would he get hold of that hard drive?' queried Nicole, 'but more importantly, how would he know that it even existed?'

‘If he’s spotted Woodbridge acting suspiciously inside my van,’ said Benny, ‘he could have spied his chance and gone to take a look for himself.’

‘And when he’s found that hard drive,’ continued Alf, realising what Benny was implying, ‘he’s made a copy for himself, and is blackmailing us the same way that your boss is.’

‘So he’s got to go as well.’ confirmed Nicole.

Benny glanced down at his watch, it was five thirty two.

‘We’ve got just short of twenty four hours before Woodbridge is due to ring,’ Benny stated, ‘and I suggest that we try to get Woodbridge and George together in the same place, and dispose of them both at the same time.’

‘But where?’ asked Alf.

‘Here.’ replied Nicole.

‘Isn’t that a bit close to home Nicole,’ remarked Benny, ‘after all, this house does actually belong to you.’

‘That won’t matter,’ she continued, ‘there’s only us three know that we’ve been using it. And according to our records this house is supposed to be empty. So we do the deed. Then I ring the Police and report a break-in at one of our rental properties.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ remarked Alf, ‘wouldn’t it be a bit *too* coincidental for two blokes that work together. To break into the same house. At the same time. And both get killed, *with the same gun.*’

‘Let’s not worry about that now.’ said Nicole, ‘Benny, when Woodbridge rings, see if you can arrange for him to come here for his money. And if you can get hold of that George bloke, tell him to be here as well. Just make sure that they don’t arrive at the same time, or that would fuck the whole thing up.’

Chapter 36

Friday April 30th 9:18 am

Nervously Benny walked into the office after suffering a rather restless night. He glanced over at George, who appeared to be busying himself working on one of the spare monitors. After a couple of moment's silence, Benny shouted over to him.

'Everything alright, George?'

He looked up from the monitor, but seemed like he didn't really want to look Benny in the face.

'Yes. Why? Shouldn't it be?' he sounded a tad on the evasive side.

'Just wondering, that's all.' replied Benny.

'Benny.' Clive Woodbridge shouted from the office door.

'Can I have a word?'

'Here goes.' thought Benny.

He walked slowly trying to compose himself. Even though he knew that his boss wouldn't confront him, there and then on works premises, he still had his doubts about how Woodbridge was going to play it. He'd be under the impression that five million pounds was about to land in his lap sometime tomorrow. But it was inconceivable that he would know that Benny was aware that he was a blackmailer.

'Yes boss.' said Benny as he popped his head round the door. He wouldn't normally use that term, but under the circumstances he was trying to keep things amicable.

'There's going to be some changes around here in the next few weeks,' Woodbridge remarked casually, 'and I'm thinking of promoting you to general manager.'

'What the fuck is he up to?' pondered Benny. 'He's deliberately attempting to throw me off track by offering me a promotion. It's clear that he doesn't know how well informed I am. Is that a good or a bad thing? I'm not sure.'

'Why, what's up with you continuing to run the business?'

'I'm thinking about retiring, and I reckon that you're the best person to take the helm.'

'But I couldn't afford to buy the company even if I wanted to, which just for the record, *I don't*.'

'Careful,' thought Benny, 'don't give him any clues as to how much you know.'

'I'm more than happy carrying on with my service calls,' Benny continued, 'I don't particularly want any added pressure.'

'Well if that's the way you feel,' Woodbridge looked rather put out, 'I suppose I'll just have to make George the offer.'

'A lot of good that'll do.' ran through Benny's head.

As he turned and started to walk towards the workshop, Woodbridge queried.

'What time will you be leaving work today?'

‘He’s trying to ascertain whether or not I’ve cottoned on to him.’ thought Benny,

‘Oh, the usual time, half three if I can get everything done. Why?’

‘No reason.’

As Benny was heading for his van, George asked.

‘You off on your calls?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘Just wondered, that’s all. What time will you be back?’

It was more than obvious that Woodbridge and George both wanted to keep a check on Benny’s whereabouts. The pair of them were under the impression that before the end of the day they’d be set for life, financially at least.

‘I’m going straight home once I’ve finished. See you next week.’

He was going to add, *if not before*, but thought better of it.

Friday April 30th 11:17 am

Benny was checking the security hard drives at Southern Electric Company’s head office when his mobile sounded. He glanced at the number on the caller display.

It was George.

‘Hello.’

‘How soon can I get hold of my cash?’ said a muffled voice. He was obviously using the handkerchief method again.

‘Who the fuck is this?’ Benny still needed to appear none plus.

‘It doesn’t matter who I am. When do I get my money? Or do I have to go to the cops.’

‘No,’ replied Benny trying to sound somewhat alarmed, ‘don’t do that. Ring me back at six o’clock and I’ll let you know when and where to collect it.’

The line went dead.

‘That give us time to sort Woodbridge’s phone call out at five o’clock,’ thought Benny, ‘and then we can arrange for George to arrive first, considering he’s the weaker link.’

Friday April 30th 11:51 am

‘Not going for coffee today?’ asked Hartley.

‘No, I thought I’d give you the pleasure of my company for a change.’

‘In that case the girls can take their lunch breaks together.’ he said. ‘Would you like to go and let them know that they can leave whenever they want?’

‘Of course. No problem.’

She’d no sooner informed Victoria and Becky that they could leave for lunch, than they were out the door as though the place was on fire.

Ten minutes after the shop assistants had left, the front door buzzer sounded.

Nicole looked up and saw a man, probably in his mid fifties wanting to gain entry.

She opened the door and let him in.

‘Good afternoon sir. And what can we do for you today?’

‘I’m looking for a watch for my wife. I’m about to retire, and have decided to treat her. After all, she’s going to have to put up with me a lot more now that I’m not working.’ they both grinned.

‘Any brand in particular?’ said Nicole as she lead him through into the sales area.

‘Something that looks expensive, but isn’t too fierce on my wallet.’

‘Typical man.’ she thought.

‘Nicole,’ said Hartley as he walked into the shop, ‘have you got... oh hello Clive, I didn’t realise you were here. Come for anything in particular?’

‘Just a watch for the missus. I’m about to retire and thought it would be a nice gesture.’

‘Nicole, this is Clive Woodbridge. He owns the CCTV company that looks after our security system.’

‘Shit.’ she thought. ‘What the fuck is he doing here? He’s pushing his luck a bit isn’t he? But no. He’s got no idea that I know he’s one of the blackmailers. So just play it cool.’

‘Whilst you two are already acquainted, do you want to serve him?’ she glanced at her husband.

‘Oh - no - please,’ said Woodbridge, deliberately wanting Nicole to serve him, obviously trying to suss her out, ‘I’d much prefer the ladies touch. After all, you’ll have more idea of what a woman would like best.’ he turned and smiled at Hartley, ‘you don’t mind, do you?’

‘Not at all.’ Hartley replied. ‘Right then, I’ll more than likely see you at the golf club sometime, Clive.’

‘Every chance.’

Hartley turned and headed back to the office, as Nicole lifted a selection of ladies watches for Clive Woodbridge to look at.

‘Do you always work in the shop?’ Woodbridge queried.

‘No, not really. We have two assistants who normally run the store, but they’re on their lunch break, so I’m just filling in.’

‘So what else do you do? I bet you have the life of Riley on the QT.’ he sniggered sarcastically. ‘I’ll bet you and your nearest and dearest have quite an open relationship arrangement. Do you?’

He was clearly trying to sound her out. See what made her tick.

‘Is that a proposal?’ she decided to play along with his little game. ‘I’ll have to see what Hartley has to say. But if he OK’s it, then we could always give it a go.’

‘Let’s not bring your hubby into this. We don’t want to make him jealous now, do we?’ that little snigger reared its ugly head again.

‘I don’t think he’ll get jealous if we make it a three some. Do you?’

Nicole was much better at this game than Woodbridge was. And he soon realised that he wasn’t just dealing with a good little housewife who was helping her husband out in the family business. He quickly changed tack. He’d learned all

that he needed to know about Nicole, and thought it would be best to make a quick exit.

‘Tell you what,’ Woodbridge started making his excuse, ‘we’ll forget the watch, and I’ll find another way to give my wife a treat.’

‘What? No watch? What is Hartley going to say when I tell him that you left empty handed? He’ll think that I’m losing my touch.’

He turned to make his getaway.

‘Will I see you again?’ asked Nicole provocatively.

‘Possibly.’ he replied. Knowing full well that the probability of them meeting again was all but guaranteed.

Nicole closed the door behind him, as Hartley was walking out of the office.

‘Clive gone? What did he buy?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing. Well why did he bother coming in in the first place if he’d no intention of purchasing something. Did you show him a good selection?’

‘I tried. I offered him the best selection that we have in stock. But to be honest, I think he only came in to see what kind of wife you’re married to.’

Chapter 37

Friday April 30th 4:11 pm

Benny had arrived home at his usual time, but was well aware that he'd need to give his wife a good reason to leave before five o'clock. He couldn't afford for her to over hear the conversation he was about to have with Woodbridge.

'Done for the weekend now darling?' said his wife Caroline.

'Not quite,' he replied, 'as I was driving home I thought that I heard a strange knocking sound coming from the engine, so I'm going to have to take it to the garage and get it looked at. There's no way I can leave it until Monday, otherwise my work load will back up, and I'll end up working late all next week.'

This seemed to do the trick.

'If you must,' she remarked. 'But don't be too long, I was thinking that we could take the kids to the cinema later.'

'I'll see what I can do.'

At that he left.

And sure enough, no sooner had he closed the front door than his mobile vibrated. He'd deliberately put it on silent vibrate.

Clive Woodbridge, using the same voice disguise as before, probably covering the mouthpiece with something.

And without messing around, no introductions or formalities, he said.

'When and where can I collect my five million pounds?'

Benny kept quiet for a few seconds.

'Are you still there, or am I taking my information to the Police?'

'We both know you're not going to do a stupid thing like that,' laughed Benny, 'because if you did, you'd end up with nothing.' He paused to give Woodbridge time to take that in, and then continued. 'So why don't we come to a compromise.'

'Like what?'

'How about a million.'

'That's a bit of a drop down from five, don't you think. How about three.'

'Do you want one, or nothing? The choice is yours.'

'OK.' he felt like he was in a do-or-die situation.

Benny had him where he wanted him now.

They both knew the score.

Woodbridge wouldn't go to the Police. That would leave him with nothing. But he was so desperate to gain some kind of remuneration, that he wouldn't give a second thought to where Benny would suggest for a cash for information exchange. So Benny gave him the address where Alf was hold up, and told him to be there at eleven o'clock prompt, tomorrow morning.

'And don't arrive early or late,' insisted Benny. He didn't want Clive and George turning up at the same time. 'If you're not there bang on eleven, then you might as well not come at all, and you can kiss your cash goodbye.'

Benny hung up before Woodbridge could come back with a response.

Friday April 30th 5:04 pm

As Benny turned into the street where Alf was staying his mobile sounded.
George.

'He's early as well,' thought Benny, 'they wouldn't be so eager if they knew what the end result is going to be.'

'Hello.'

'You told me to ring at six, but I thought I'd get in touch a bit sooner,' said George, his voice also disguised, 'so when do I get my money?'

'Ten thirty tomorrow morning,' replied Benny, and gave him the same address that he'd not long since given to Woodbridge, 'and don't be late. Otherwise you can say goodbye to the cash. Is that understood?' said Benny forcefully.

'Don't worry I won't be. And as soon as I get hold of the money, I'll give you the information that I've got, and you'll never see me again.'

'That's a laugh,' thought Benny, 'I know I'll never see you again, after Nicole's finished with you.'

He pulled up outside the house and noticed Alf, trying not to be seen, unsuccessfully, peeping out of the front window.

Benny waved, and, being embarrassed at getting spotted, Alf quickly moved away, pulling the curtains closed.

Nicole was grinning when she opened the door.

'He still has to play look out,' she remarked as she let Benny in, 'even though we've got everything under control.'

Once the three of them were in the lounge, Alf enquired.

'Have they both been in touch yet?'

'Yes,' replied Benny, 'George is going to be here at ten thirty in the morning, and Woodbridge will arrive at eleven. I've made sure that they won't get here at the same time, but we'll have to keep George entertained for the half an hour difference.'

'That shouldn't be too much of a problem,' remarked Nicole holding up the SIG.

'Having this thing pointed at his head should keep him occupied.'

'Right,' said Benny, 'if that's everything I'm off home. Caroline's promised the kids that we'll take them to the pictures, so it looks like my evening's been mapped out for me.'

'Have fun,' replied Alf, 'but don't be late in the morning. We need all three of us to be here when our visitors arrive.'

'Don't worry I won't be. I'm up to my neck in this thing, just as much as you two.'

Chapter 38

Saturday May 1st 8:31 am

Nicole had made her excuses and told Hartley that she wouldn't be going into Hatton Garden this morning, but promised that if she finished her 'so called' shopping trip early enough, she'd try to get in.

But to be honest, he didn't really care either way.

Both Victorian and Becky would be there to look after whatever customers there were, so his wife's contribution wouldn't make that much difference anyway.

Benny had told Caroline that he needed to take the car back to the garage. He'd said that they'd found the problem last night, but didn't have time to fix it. So he had to get it in there first thing.

Alf on the other hand, was just sat cradling a cup of coffee at the kitchen table. He hadn't had the best of nights sleep, and was starting to get rather nervous.

By nine fifteen the three of them were in the house waiting, not so patiently, for the first of their two blackmailers.

'What are we going to do when George arrives?' queried Benny, 'he's not going to be exactly pleased if he's put on hold why we wait for Woodbridge, is he?'

'Don't worry,' replied Nicole, 'we'll let Alf open the door to let him in. I think it would be best, as he already pretty familiar with who you are. And the minute he's in the lounge, I'll pull the Sig on him. He'll have no option but to sit and wait.'

'OK.' Alf frowned as he was walking around, constantly pulling the curtains back slightly, and taking a peek through the window, 'But what do we do when the other bloke gets here? Is he not going to cause ructions, as soon as he walks into the room and sees George being held at gun point?'

'I do wish the pair of you would keep calm,' Nicole was shaking her head; 'I've got everything under control. As soon as they're both here, and they've been informed that they're not getting any money. And once I've told them that they should have kept their noses out of our business, I'll blow them both away.'

'You make it sound so simple.' said Benny, 'What if something goes wrong. What if either one of them has got a contingency plan worked out.'

'Stop panicking, and for fucks sake, sit down,' said Nicole, glaring at Alf, her voice raised, 'you're making the place look untidy. I'll deal with whatever comes, OK.'

An uncomfortable silence filled the room.

Saturday May 1st 10:26 am

An expected but still a surprising knock came on the front door.

Benny and Alf seemed to freeze.

'Take a look then.' whispered Nicole, looking Alf straight in the face, as he was stood close by the window.

Cautiously he pulled the curtain back a touch.

‘There’s a man stood at the door, and he’s looking around as if he’s expecting to see somebody else.’

‘Do you know who it is?’

‘How the hell should I know,’ he replied, ‘you have a look Benny, is it the bloke who’s supposed to be here?’

Carefully Benny walked over, pulled the curtain open a little further, and took a look.

‘Yes. That’s George. And right on time.’

‘Go on Alf,’ said Nicole, ‘open the door, and don’t worry I’ll be ready.’

Nervously he walked out of the lounge, and into the hall.

George knocked again, sounding impatient.

As soon as Alf had started to open the door, George pushed it open, causing the door to force Alf backwards.

‘Wow, hang on.’ he shouted as he stumbled, and landed on his arse.

‘Where’s my fucking money?’ cried George.

‘It’s in here.’ Nicole’s raised voice called from the vicinity of an open door further down the hallway.

Without waiting for Alf to get up off the floor, he headed straight into the room where the female voice had come from.

‘Well,’ he remarked hurriedly, ‘wheres my...’

He was staring straight at Nicole, who had the pistol pointed directly at his head.

‘Hang on a minute,’ George was sounding terrified, ‘I only wanted to get hold a bit of extra cash. I didn’t want to end up being confronted with a gun, or worse still - dead.’

‘Where’s the proof that you claim to have?’

‘Here, it’s all on this pen drive.’

Benny reached over and snatched it out of his hand.

‘Is this the only copy?’ he queried.

‘Yes. I didn’t think I’d need another one.’

‘Sit down, and shut up.’ Nicole pointed to the arm chair located over near the window, but not in full view from the door.

He did as he was told without any further objections.

Benny glanced down at his watch.

‘Only about twenty minutes to go, before the fun starts.’

‘I wouldn’t exactly call it fun.’ laughed Alf, with no humour intended.

‘Why,’ stuttered George, ‘what happens in twenty minutes.’

‘I thought I told you to shut up,’ growled Nicole, ‘because if you don’t do as instructed, I can always pull the trigger.’

His eyes enlarged with fear, his lips were now quivering, but shut.

Alf remained by the window, cautiously keeping a look out for Woodbridge.

While Nicole and Benny sat on the couch, watching George’s every movement.

‘Shouldn’t we tie him up?’ queried Benny.

‘No,’ replied Nicole, ‘I don’t think he’s going to try anything. Are you?’

George stayed silent but shook his head in confirmation.

Saturday May 1st 10:59 am

Even though it was just a short wait, the twenty minutes seemed to take forever. But then at bang on eleven o'clock, there was a knock on the door.

'I think its him.' said Alf.

'Do you want to do the honours,' remarked Nicole, 'considering he's your boss?'

Benny smiled, stood up, and made his way to the door.

He turned the Yale lock, and as he opened the door, he was looking straight down the barrel of a pistol.

'Shit.' he thought. 'I didn't expect this.'

'Turn round and head to the room where your buddies are waiting.'

Benny obeyed.

'Everything alright?' shouted Nicole.

'Err.' Benny didn't know what to say.

If he warned them about the gun which Woodbridge was holding, pressed up against his spine, he couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't use it, and he'd be the first one to go.

Within five seconds Benny was easing the lounge door open.

Nicole could tell with the look on his face that something was amiss, so she redirected the Sig towards him.

Woodbridge had just crossed the door line, when he saw George sat on the armchair.

This threw him.

'George,' he was dumbstruck, 'what the fuck...'

As Benny glanced at Nicole he could see where she was pointing her gun, and he quickly dropped to his knees.

Not wanting to kill Woodbridge before they'd got the information he was supposed to be holding, Nicole put a bullet into his right kneecap.

He went down like a bag of shit.

'Fuck.' he shouted as he fell, dropping the gun in the process.

Benny grabbed Woodbridge's weapon, and stood up.

'I think you fucked that up Clive, didn't you?' grinned Benny. 'Now where's this evidence you claim you've got?'

'In my pocket.' He used his head to indicate which pocket.

'Lift it out,' growled Nicole, 'unless you want another lump of lead in your other knee.'

Woodbridge struggled with his left hand to get the pen drive out of his right hand side pocket, as he was holding his kneecap with his right hand.

'You bastard.' he said as he handed the information to his, by now former employee.

'Is this the only copy?' queried Nicole.

Woodbridge suddenly thought. If he said no, then such a reply could save him, or at least prolong the situation to give him more time to try and escape.

'You don't think I'd come in here with the only piece of evidence, and not keep something back for insurance.' he replied. 'If you think that, then you're dafter than you look, you fuckin' idiots.'

'So where's the rest of your proof?' asked Alf, wanting to get in on the act.

'Like I'm going to tell you.' Woodbridge laughed.

'I know.' George chirped in nervously, clearly wanting to save his own neck.

'Where?' said Nicole.

'I'll tell you when I'm clean away from here.'

'You've no idea where I've hid the other copy,' claimed Woodbridge, 'so how the hell are you going to get it for them.'

'Oh yes I do,' replied George, 'how do you think I got hold of it for myself. So that I could do exactly the same thing that you'd planned on. Blackmail.'

'You said *copy*,' remarked Benny, 'which indicates that we've only got one other piece of evidence to worry about.'

'If that's the case,' Alf chirped in, 'why don't we just shoot Woodbridge, take our chances, and....'

'What's that?' interrupted Nicole.

Silence enveloped the room, as everyone glanced at her.

'I thought I heard something outside.'

'What like,' replied Benny, 'I didn't hear anything.'

'Take a look through the window Alf.'

Quickly but cautiously he pulled back the curtain just enough for him to see outside, hopefully without being noticed by anyone who could be out there.

'Shit.'

'What is it,' whispered Nicole, 'what can you see.'

'There are at least two cop cars out front, and it looks like they're starting to surround the house. I can see a couple of Police helmets making their way down the side, behind the privets. And there's two more cops taking cover at the side of your car.'

'OK, which one of you two shopped us?' Nicole said sharply.

No reply was forthcoming.

'How the hell do we get out of here?' mouthed Alf, as much to himself than anyone else.

'You don't.' laughed Woodbridge. 'You're right in the shit now, aren't you?'

'Not as much crap as you're in.' stated Nicole, as she swung the Sig round, pointed it straight at his upper body, and pulled the trigger.

With already being wounded, arse on the floor, his body could only squirm, as the life blood oozed out of his chest.

Woodbridge slumped forward, and he gasped his final breath.

'What the fuck did you do that for?' shouted Benny, 'we'll never get out of here now. Every bastard in the area will have heard that shot.'

'Not with the silencer on, you daft cunt.' Nicole replied.

‘Drop your weapons, and come out with your hands up.’ was the instruction, clearly being voiced through a loud haler. ‘You are surrounded.’

‘Think.’ thought Nicole out loud.

‘What’s there to think about?’ laughed Benny without any humour in it. ‘We’re nicked.’

‘Not yet,’ Nicole remarked, with a slight hint of confidence, ‘we’ve still got George. He’ll make a good hostage.’

‘And how long do you think that’ll last,’ said Alf negatively, ‘there’s no way the cops will let us just walk out of here, whether we’re holding him or not.’

‘Oh yes they will,’ continued Nicole, ‘they won’t want another body on their hands. They’ll do everything they can to keep him alive. It’s good for PR.’

‘PR my arse.’ said Benny. ‘Like Alf said, they’ll never let us get out of here. You might as well face up to it Nicole, we’re fucked.’

‘You’ve got ten seconds to come out of there,’ the loud haler sounded again, ‘or we’re coming in.’

‘We’ve got a hostage in here,’ shouted Nicole, ‘and if you don’t let us leave, then I will take great pleasure in shooting him right through his fuckin’ head.’

There was a moment’s silence. Then they heard a different voice.

‘You might as well give it up Nicole. There’s no way out.’

It was Hartley.

‘What the hell’s he doing here?’ she remarked, frustrated. ‘How did *he* find out what was going down.’

Nicole, Benny, Alf, and even George froze, as the front door was kicked in, and the Police burst into the house and surrounded them.

With the speed of the Police action, nobody even had time to think.

Nicole stood there staring, as Hartley walked in behind the officers.

‘How did...’

‘I became suspicious when I couldn’t find the keys to this place. I wanted them to give to Proudlove’s so they could value it.’ interrupted Hartley. ‘Then when Clive came to the shop, it made me wonder why, especially as he didn’t buy anything. What’s the point going to a jeweller, and leaving without a purchase. Then when he turned up again and asked me to hold on to a small package, and said that if anything happened to him, I was to let the Police have the contents, it made me even more curious. I was probably out of order, but I opened the package, and watched the DVD that was inside. It was quite a show. And I wasn’t going to let you get away with murder and robbery, so I went to the Police.’

‘Nicole Granger,’ the voice appeared to be coming from a distance away, she was so dumbfounded. ‘I’m arresting you on suspicion of murder, among other crimes. You will be given the full list of charges once we’ve concluded our investigations.’

The room went deadly quiet.

‘Do you understand?’

Silence, as Nicole stood in shock, still staring at her husband.

‘Do you understand?’ the officer repeated.

Still silence. Nicole was in a daze, and couldn't believe how this was turning out.

She was supposed to end up being a multi, multi millionaire and set comfortable for the rest of her natural. But here she was, on her way towards an extremely lengthy time in a woman's prison.

'Shit.'

'Hello. Anybody in there?' said the raised voice of the arresting officer.