

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

W H Hilton

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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.'

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