

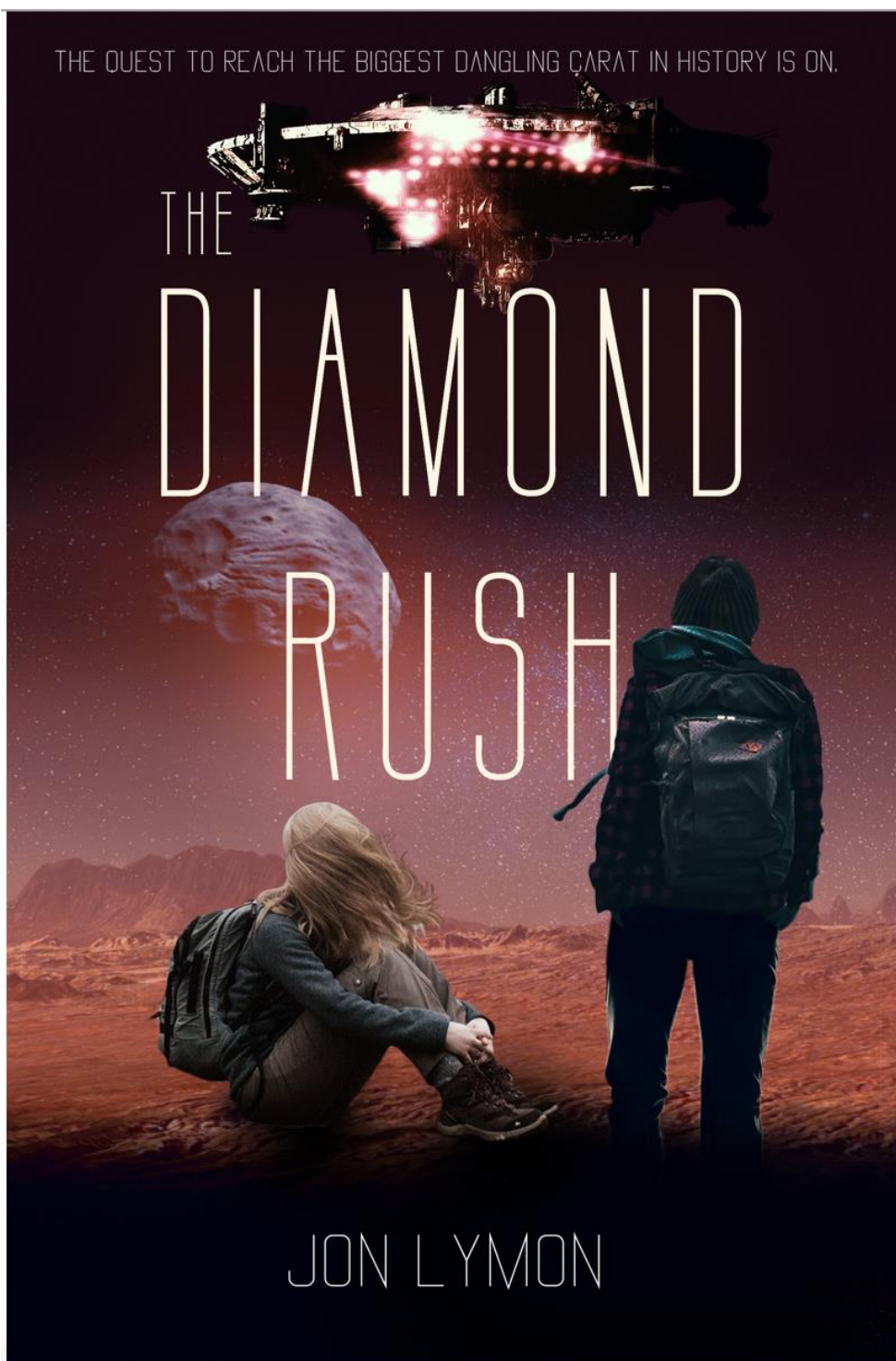
THE QUEST TO REACH THE BIGGEST DANGLING CARAT IN HISTORY IS ON.

THE

DIAMOND

RUSH

JON LYMON



THE DIAMOND RUSH

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It's 2049.

And apart from the usual technological advances,
nothing much has changed.

Chapter 1

What the diamond robbers lacked in equipment and experience, they made up for with their desperation and determination.

Simon Remnant was not one of them. But he was acutely aware of their fumbling presence in the jewellers next door to the café outside of which he was toying with a late fried breakfast, feeling every one of his forty-six years following another evening wasted getting wasted.

He had been sitting at the table for nearly two hours, catching the autumnal sun rays that managed to beam between some of central London's lowest high rises. During that time, he'd been forced to shoot several smiles at the little girl sitting with legs swinging at the next table. She was determined not to take her eyes off him, staring like he was an outcast here in his own neighbourhood. Trying to figure him out. Who was he? What was with his old face and his streaky grey hair? Where were all his friends and why was he pushing his food around his plate like her mother told her not to?

In between glances down Greville Street to the junction with Hatton Garden, Remnant demonstrated his disappearing napkin trick, much to the girl's fascination and her mother's consternation. It was a trick he'd

perfected while trying to entertain his own little girl some twenty years before.

After another performance, he looked down at a sheet of paper that had held his attention periodically for the past week. What to say, what to say about her? 'This is the proudest day of my life.' That was a good start, but was that a word, proudest? Edgar would know.

He looked up to see the girl's mother pointing out the bits of blueberry muffin her daughter should be eating while berating an absent father on her mobile phone.

A yell from within the jewellers and the sprinkle of a necklace falling on concrete diverted Remnant's fragile attention. His first thoughts were for the audacity of the raid. Straight in the front door, bold as brass bracelets, middle of the day. They had to be amateurs.

Remnant had a few plans of his own tucked away in a drawer in his council flat over the road. Plans he'd developed over the years. Most men who lived around here had something similar. The ultimate 'job' on a jewellers. Nothing serious. Nothing they'd ever carry out. Merely something to dream and chat about in between gulps down at The Old Mitre.

The sound of smashing glass in the jewellers was Remnant's cue to grab his fork and leap to his feet,

deliberately scraping his chair on the pavement as he stood to attract the mother's attention.

"Get inside the café, love," he said. She resented the interruption, pointing to her phone. Remnant pointed to a warty-faced, green-skinned, one-eyed alien clutching a holdall (that wasn't quite holding all the gems he wanted to steal) emerging steel toe-capped boot first from the jewellery store. The mother grabbed her protesting daughter and dashed inside the café, which the proprietor swiftly declared 'Closed' with the deft flick of a wrist on the door sign.

Like a one man wall, Remnant stood in the path of the confused alien in the jeweller's doorway. The robber shouted expletives in an unexceptional south London accent that didn't suit his face.

Remnant stared at the alien and spat out the sausage he'd been nervously chewing on for too long like a cowboy might spit out a wad of tobacco. He heard shouting inside the jewellers, and out of the corner of his eye spied an arm with a black, leather gloved hand at its end sweeping a shelf clear of shiny stuff.

He gripped his fork, a better weapon than a knife when it came to cutlery, his broad expanse of hangover and greasy spoon filling the doorway.

“Give it here, mate,” he said to the alien, more calmly than he felt as he held out his hand for the holdall. It was soon withdrawn as the butt of a shotgun held by the second thief (a pirate) crashed down on his right shoulder. Remnant went down, his left hand both protecting and inspecting the damaged area, checking to see if his shoulder was still at right-angles to his neck, not shattered and dispersing shards of bone around his upper torso. Satisfied he wasn’t badly injured, he struggled to his feet and ran after the thieves who were already on their way down Leather Lane.

The two thieves turned to see Remnant in a pursuit that no one could call hot. Although he looked thin for his age and level of alcohol consumption, his internal organs were far from in good working order. The strains, stresses and a diet stunted by slashed benefits were to blame for his lack of shape, his physical condition a sign of these difficult times.

The two thieves’ getaway vehicle was an inadequate and illegally parked white moped. It took two kicks before the engine emulated the sound of suburban Sunday lawnmowers, enough time for Remnant to close in and fire off shouted threats about police action and harsh sentences.

“Get a fucking move on, I think he’s gone mad,” the alien shouted to the pirate.

As Remnant reached within spitting distance of the moped, the overloaded vehicle slowly pulled off.

Still gaining but struggling for oxygen, Remnant was regretting the fifth, sixth and seventh pints of Gates lager he’d sunk the night before as the escapees raised the speed and volume and hung a right into St. Cross Street. Remnant rounded the corner in time to catch them discarding their respective masks and leaning a left up Hatton Garden and away towards Clerkenwell Road.

Remnant’s breathless arrival back at the crime scene barely registered with the two smartly dressed, sweating jewellers, still dazed and tense in the robbery’s aftermath. They had been joined by the two Polish security guards who were employed by all Hatton Garden’s jewellers to deter criminals. These guards were frowning in tandem as one of the jewellers berated them.

“Your job is to protect us from people like them.”

They nodded in unison.

“So where were you?”

The steaming polystyrene cups of fresh coffee they held answered that question.

“They went that way,” Remnant told the guards, pointing up Hatton Garden. The Poles looked at each other, threw their coffees into the gutter and ran.

The elder of the two jewellers whom Remnant recognised as the shop’s Nigerian owner, DT, asked him if he’d seen the robbers’ real faces. Remnant shook his head and rubbed his shoulder.

DT looked for something to kick and found nothing but a tree stump which was soon on the receiving end of his aggression. Remnant looked at DT, who was all clammy hands, pacing the pavement, criticising the failure of his expensive alarm system, (installed by Edgar, Remnant seemed to remember) questioning the whereabouts of the police, and wondering why no journalists were yet on the scene.

Remnant waited expectantly, thinking some kind of reward from DT was surely in order. A thanks for the effort, maybe one of those gems the thieves dropped, or at the very least a fiver for a pint. A gem would be the most suitable though, Remnant concluded. DT could claim it on his insurance. ‘Wrap it as a present for your little girl’s wedding. You deserve it,’ he hoped DT would say.

But DT’s mind was obsessed with his loss, and the absence of a publicity-generating police and press presence.

“You’re just like all the rest,” Remnant shouted at him as the jeweller trudged away from the scene. “In it for yourself.”

DT stopped, turned and looked in no mood for criticism. “What have I done now? Do not be having a go at me when I have just been robbed.”

“I tried to catch them for you.”

“But you didn’t catch them, did you? They got away. And I wouldn’t be surprised if you let them. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were in on it, part of the gang.”

Remnant shook his head in disbelief. Ten, five, maybe even just a year ago, his next move would have been a violent one. But he’d learned to turn the other cheek, and he walked away down Greville Street toward The Old Mitre, desperately fighting the urge to turn back and shove the words right back down DT’s throat. Teach him a lesson. Talking to me like that, blaming me, for what?

He needed a Gates, a golden Gates lager that would ‘take him to the promised land’ as the old adverts used to say, before saying stuff like that about alcohol was made illegal. After a few more steps, he felt a tug on his sleeve and turned and looked down to see the little girl holding up a toy.

“For me?” he asked.

She nodded five times. He took the toy. It was a small, plastic man with a slightly scratched yellow hard hat. He couldn’t stop himself breaking into a smile.

“Thank you, darlin’.” He patted the little girl on the head before her scowling mother (still on the phone) pulled her away and walked in the direction of Chancery Lane tube station, reprimanding her daughter for talking to a strange man.

Remnant heard the little girl ask ‘why is he a strange man, mummy?’ but their voices faded until they were drowned out by the constant hum of central London

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Chapter 2

Days had been merging into each other latterly in Remnant’s world. There was little to distinguish one from the next. Flat pub flat. Flat pub flat. Flat pub, think about putting a bet on in the bookies, flat. But this had already been an extraordinary Sunday, and there was still half of it to go.

He felt the little toy man rub against his chest in his breast pocket as he passed the shuttered shopfronts,

the barred doorways, the for sale, to let and up for auction signs, all now so prevalent in central London in the wake of the second double dip recession in a century that wasn't yet half done. A century dying on its feet when it should be entering its prime.

The Polish security guards were back at their post on the junction of Hatton Garden and Greville Street, eyes desperately searching for an alien and a pirate, or a souped-up sports car skidding to a halt over a double yellow.

That was the clever bit about the earlier raid. The lack of a discernible, credible getaway vehicle. The more Remnant thought about the plan, the more he was impressed by it. Outwardly amateurish, it had probably been months in the making. Wait until the guards were out of the way, then in the front and out before anyone knows it. Easy as.

Remnant nodded to the Poles who had both vowed to give up coffee. They eyed him with suspicion but he smiled at them, knowing this dynamic duo were done. There'd be a new double act on the corner this time tomorrow. Same build, same brains, same brief.

The earlier excitement in the area had given way to the customary Sunday calm, a few muted clubbers from the night before staggered to Chancery Lane tube

with ringing multi-ringed ears, still high on what they'd imbibed, the encroaching come-down weighing heavy on their eyelids. A return to reality was fast approaching after a night when they'd forgotten about the state of their world, double whiskeys drowning out the double dip doom and gloom. 'Can't get a job. Too expensive to go to university. What else do you expect us to do other than forget about it Friday to Sunday and plan our next Friday to Sunday Monday to Friday?'

The ghostly quiet Hatton Garden they walked through was a different beast compared to the place during the working week, when it was loud with market stall holders from Leather Lane, office workers from High Holborn and lawyers from Holborn Viaduct. Most, save those from the legal firms who rarely saw their expensive homes, didn't venture into town on a Sunday, leaving the day strictly for locals and lost tourists, none of whom seemed as keen on drinking as Remnant, who took the short alleyway that led from Hatton Garden to The Old Mitre, a path you could easily miss if you didn't know it was there.

Gordon, the landlord of The Old Mitre, was still trialling the idea of Sunday opening. Trade on the once holy day had been sluggish, too reliant on unreliable locals. Gordon was a single man with a double helping of

belly, thanks to his fondness for the beer he sold. When the distance between him and the handle of the font became too much of a stretch, he knew it was time to cut down on the bitter and go for occasional walks to shift a little weight from his midriff. But he felt vulnerable when he wasn't on the tap side of the bar or in the two storey flat above the sixteenth-century pub.

The regulars respected his territory as well as his honesty, directness, and occasional freebie he'd pour them. He knew Remnant's tippie well enough, and a pint of Gates was delivered before Remnant had time to sit on his barstool. He made a big deal of searching for the tatty fiver he knew was warm and flat in his back left pocket, grimacing and rubbing his right shoulder, hoping the delay would give the landlord time to say 'this one's on me'.

It wasn't to be.

Remnant handed over the money and asked if the landlord had heard news of the raid.

"Not another one?"

"I saw it all. I nearly stopped them getting away as well, but they were too young. Too fast."

It was then that Edgar entered, looking as bad around the eyes and in the hair as Remnant hoped he might. At forty-eight, Edgar was two years Remnant's senior, but a life of opportunity and hope and money

meant the elder looked the younger by at least a decade. Edgar's bitter (he was not a Gates man) was frothing dangerously close to Remnant's elbow by the time he had removed and hung his jacket and glared at the quiz machine.

Words didn't flow easily from Edgar at the best of times, and this clearly wasn't the best of times. Edgar's thick, rough hands shakily gripped the glass and delivered a few gulps to a mouth whose vocal chords needed oiling, while Remnant filled him in on the morning's events. Edgar expected and duly received the blame for Remnant's state of health, and his inability to give chase for more than thirty seconds. He nodded sagely at Remnant's incredulity over DT's lack of an offer of a reward, and the accusation that he – Simon Remnant – could have been part of the raiding gang.

"The truth of the matter is that you didn't actually do anything that's deserving of a reward," Edgar told him. "You didn't salvage any gems."

"But I tried."

"And failed. Do you expect him to reward failure? Do you expect anyone to reward failure?"

"I just wanted a bit of gratitude, really. It's people like him give people like me a hard time. Putting all those

things I can't afford on display in his shop. He's a flaunterer, if that's a word?"

"It isn't."

"Well, you know what I mean. I could've saved him thousands."

"And so could I," said Edgar, stacking a tower of pound coins as he prepared to do battle with the fiendish quiz machine, "if I hadn't been flat on my face sleeping off a vicious hangover."

Remnant checked the screen of his vibrating phone. It was Chloe. He dared not risk answering. She'd hear the tinkle of a glass or the hum of a radiator or some other tell-tale pub noise in the background. He let it ring, praying she would hang up before the pain of his neglect intensified.

When the ignored call had finished, he pulled out the bit of paper that was sharing pocket space with the little toy man.

"Proudest is a word, isn't it?"

"It is."

Remnant ticked the page. "Oh, and before I forget, could you take a look at my boiler sometime?"

As a former engineer, Edgar had grown used to such requests. Tell someone you fix stuff or that you know how machines work and you end up having to take looks

at all sorts of their malfunctions. It was the mechanical equivalent of admitting you're a doctor, with people forever asking you to give them a quick once over. 'I've been having this pain here' or 'I think I've got a problem down there.'

Edgar was too kind hearted a man to refuse. He had enough money not to need to work, though regularly bemoaned the lack of returns the interest on his savings was generating. The fact that he had any savings at all meant he was regarded as something of a novelty by the locals he shared a tower block with. And the fact that he was the only one to own his apartment in his block merely increased his novelty value. He'd been a successful engineer, technically and creatively gifted in equal measure, a heady mix of skills that were much valued in the Thames Valley where he'd lived and worked for twenty-five years. He'd retired at forty-three and toyed with the idea of seeing out his days in the country, but the Thames Valley had been country enough. He wanted a taste of city life.

Five and a half years into metropolis living he was still enjoying it, and still looking at temperamental boilers, flickering televisions and unreliable broadband services. He gave his skills freely to the locals on the proviso that whoever benefited from them would never, ever ask him

for cash, or an advance or a loan or help with their bills. He figured that relenting to one would open the floodgates for others, and his savings wouldn't, couldn't stretch to that sort of charity.

It was a system that had, by and large, been immaculately observed. Those who broke it found they neither got the cash they desired, nor the attention their household appliances required.

Remnant edged his crumpled bit of paper in Edgar's direction. "Any good at wedding speeches?"

Edgar edged the crumpled bit of paper back and explained as politely as he could that boilers were one thing, performances, speeches and getting all emotional were another. Machines were his thing, and right now there was one in the corner of the bar that was goading him, questioning his intellect, challenging him to a battle of wits. Edgar could resist no more and strode toward his foe, bitter in one hand, a tower of ammunition in the other.

Remnant knew his presence would not be required, save to answer the occasional shouted American Football question, a sport Edgar had little time for. Gordon watched as Remnant's attention returned to the sheet of paper. 'This is the proudest day of my life,' he

read, 'seeing my little daughter Chloe all grown up and walking down the aisle.'

He had already invited Edgar to the wedding, even though his daughter hadn't. He'd clear it with Chloe before the big day, of course. She wouldn't have a problem with him bringing a mate, surely? There was no chance of female company accompanying him. His ex, Chloe's mum Elena, would be there with her new bloke and Remnant didn't fancy the chances of the occasion passing off peacefully should he turn up with a female on his arm, especially if both he and Elena put away their usual quota of alcohol.

Edgar slapped the machine and cursed.

"I'm not good at standing up in front of people and talking," said Remnant to Gordon. "What do I say?"

Gordon was his usual helpful self and shrugged.

"Just talk about funny stuff that happened when she was growing up," said Edgar, his back to them and attention on the machine. "Embarrass her a little bit, maybe."

Remnant searched his mind's files for Chloe's Early Years, but any reference points were as hazy for him as they would be for her.

As he finished his Gates, a fear gripped him. What could he say about her, his only child, his little girl, with

her mother there, listening out for any lies, any exaggerations of the truth, any attempts by Remnant to make it look like he'd been a decent father?

Chapter 3

Nearly a generation had passed since the lift in Remnant's block had worked. And although there were only three flights of stairs to ascend to his flat, each had become progressively harder as he'd aged.

Invites back to number forty-eight were seldom handed out and even more rarely accepted. He was not proud of where he lived. He was ashamed. The décor was minimalist, but not by design.

What he'd eaten of the fry up earlier had been digested by the time he returned from The Old Mitre to be greeted by a disappointing lack of options in his kitchen. Two sachets of rice, an old packet of soup and a tin of corned beef in his cupboard complemented the out of date milk in his fridge. He needed something green inside him, something that had grown naturally and tasted fresh.

He took himself to bed in an attempt to sleep off his hunger, but his mind was still analysing the events of the day. He fumbled in his breast pocket and pulled out the

little toy man, its eyes wide and staring. He gripped him, willing sleep to come and find both of them. But it was elsewhere.

He staggered into his lounge and slumped onto his shapeless sofa. He could stomach some rice, he felt. Rice and soup. It went down yesterday and stayed down. No reason to think today would be any different.

He grabbed the tin of soup and guided the opener around its rim, watching it twist and cut through metal with ease. He took a gulp of the contents. Garden vegetables apparently. But his insides were tired, repelled, repulsed. An apple, a carrot, something fresh to digest. That's what he wanted. He launched the tin across the kitchen where it exploded against a wall, processed chunks of potato, cubes of carrot and florets of pale brownish-green broccoli all soiled in a tannish, syrupy gloop trickled down the woodchip and over the lip of grout onto the cracked tiling below. Remnant grabbed his jacket and keys and slammed the door on his way out.

Leather Lane was quiet, save for a small, elderly couple walking a big dog. Remnant paused outside Sanj's, the local newsagent, security lights casting a dim blue brilliance over the lurid festival of coloured brand wrappings and magazine front covers that were within. He walked to the supermarket, which was always open,

nodding to the guy who was squatting by the cashpoint, his dirty blue sleeping bag over his dirty blue knees, preparing for a night's begging.

Remnant grabbed a basket and felt the rush of air conditioned cool as he entered the store. He filled it with fresh broccoli, carrots, potato with soil on their skin, a cauliflower, a pack of six squeaky fresh apples, an orange, a watermelon and four pears. He left room in the basket for the four-pack of Gates which he planned to pick up from the stunted drinks aisle near the tills.

The staff in the store knew Remnant. He envisioned his face on their monitors right now: 'It's him again, watch him, secure the exits, over.' He caught an exchange of eyes between the two cashiers serving cigarettes to an old lady with the shakes and a small bottle of vodka to a young Sunday night clubber on her way to Shoreditch where most of the mainstream London nightclubs were located.

Remnant stooped to examine the cans of Gates, each emblazoned with a 'fifteen per cent extra free' promotion around the top fifteen per cent of the can. This was not only free beer, he reasoned, it was extra free beer and bound to taste that much sweeter as a result.

He slotted the cans next to the watermelon in his basket and headed toward the end of the short queue for

the till, which he bypassed at the last minute, striding head down and heart racing out through the door and onto the street, autumn's darkness almost totally fallen now. He ran toward High Holborn, basket in hand, Gates four-pack rattling, scraping against the basket's plastic sides.

He threw the beggar a pear on his way past, but was gone before he could hear the 'thanks, mate'.

They'd be after him now, for sure, grabbing coats and weapons, short, sharp words into their handsets. Don't look back, keep going, he thought. He grabbed a pear for himself and crunched into it, jogging now, holding the basket out in front of him so it didn't bang his knees or scrape his thighs. He was dribbling, the flood of saliva the pear had unleashed unprecedented, the sensation of something fresh and moist unfamiliar to his tongue and tastebuds.

He reached Hatton Garden and sheltered in the darkened doorway of one of the many bookies that had stores there. They knew this was the place to pick up a steady trade. Several independent turf accountants mingled with the nationals, intent on taking the rich pickings from the poor who lived along a road which had several tributaries that wrapped themselves around blocks of non-descript offices like giant necklaces. The

bookies called out to Remnant and the area's many other council tenants who lived in layer upon layer of residential flats. Foreboding abodes merely metres above the jewellers, the poor so agonisingly close to the rich.

The bookmakers were forever subtly tempting these lofty tenants into their lairs. The lairs of liars who promised riches but delivered debts. 'Who knows, your luck could change.' 'Get lucky on a computerised nag or a mustard-arsed greyhound and you could leave our shop flush with riches and pop next door to buy one of the gems on show for that special person in your life.' Cheesy dreams that suckered in. And Remnant was once one such suckered-in sucker.

But he didn't gamble for him. He gambled what little he had for her, he told Elena. Get Chloe a nice pram, a pretty school dress. Send her on that field trip, get her that computer she wants for her studies, buy her a car before the lure of motorbikes gets a grip, send her to university. All dreams Remnant dreamt of financing, if only that nag would romp home and the one in the next race and the next. The three-horse accumulator that so often fell at the first, the scrunch of the ticket, the clamp-shut of the eyes and the clench of the jaws, the look back to the form and the nap of that tipster, the trickster.

Catching his breath in the shadows, a distant siren from up west silenced and froze him. He listened close to assess if it was for him. But it soon faded into the soundtrack of another London night and he breathed again. He reached into his jacket and pulled out plastic bags bearing the logos of various supermarkets and small-time grocers, one now defunct. He transferred the food to these worn bags, fumbling in the dark, pausing and retreating into the shadow when a car pulled up at the lights on Holborn Circus. It was away at the first hint of amber, and Remnant finished packing his shoplifting, being careful to wipe the handles of the basket thoroughly before leaving it in the doorway and heading home.

As he walked back to his flat, his phone vibrated and he feared reading 'unknown caller' on the screen. But it was Chloe. 'Not a good time, baby. Not a good time. Not feeling good about myself right now,' he thought to himself. He was feeling the anger and impatience brought on by hunger. 'Let me eat and I'll call you back later.' He replaced the still vibrating phone in his pocket, yearning for the call to end as he entered his block of flats and ascended three storeys of spit-scarred, chewing gummed circled, alcohol stained stone steps.

Chapter 4

Bread. Where was the bread? Its absence confirmed Remnant's suspicion that as well as being a failure at almost everything in life, he was a failure as a thief. He knew something of the theory, having learnt it from watching listening talking to the regulars in The Old Mitre. But he let himself down on the practical side. He berated himself for not possessing the required calmness or coldness of heart.

He put all the shopping straight into the fridge on his return to the flat. Everything save a can of Gates which he immediately opened. Fifteen per cent extra free tasted like a small victory, somewhat diluted by the fact that his entire shop had been free in a manner of speaking. He made short work of a second pear and first apple, abandoning the orange after finding it too difficult to peel. Then his phone vibrated.

It was Chloe again.

Three strikes would surely mean out. He had to answer this time.

He breathed deeply, nerves flooding his stomach.

"Sorry darlin'," he said. "Saw your calls earlier, meant to call you back."

There was a pause, filled, Remnant presumed, by a hand gesture to her fiancé that illustrated Chloe's lack of belief in what her father had just said.

"Are you drunk?" she asked.

Remnant put down his can of Gates.

"No, I ain't had a drink all weekend. Did you hear about the raid?"

"What raid?"

"On the jeweller's. DT's. Two lads on a moped dressed as an alien and pirate."

"No, what happened?"

"I saw it all. I even chased after them."

"You didn't catch them?"

"Nearly. Well, no. They were on a moped."

"Oh."

Silence.

"The owner reckons he could give me some kind of reward, you know, as a thank you for trying to catch the thieves."

"Ah, that's good."

"Yeah, could buy me a new suit and help me put some money behind the bar for drinks at the reception."

"I've told you, Dad, you don't need to worry. Carl's paying for all that."

Remnant grabbed another mouthful of Gates.

“I want to do it. It’s a father’s job. Oh, and I know someone who knows someone who can put stuff in the clouds, to stop it raining on your big day.”

“Yeah, Carl’s got those guys on standby already.”

Another silence that Remnant filled with Gates.

“Listen, Dad, the reason I’m calling is that the wedding rehearsal is on the 18th. Have you got a calendar or diary to hand?”

“I’m just writing it down now, darlin’. Wedding. Rehearsal. 18th.”

Remnant had neither pen nor paper just a furrowed brow that was desperately trying to commit the date to memory.

“Is it a dress rehearsal?” he asked. “Do I need a suit, ‘cos I’m not sure if that reward money will come through that quick.”

“No, it’s just a run through, you can wear what you like.”

“Will your mother be there?”

“Of course she’ll be there.”

“What about him?”

“I don’t know if she’ll bring him along to this. He’ll probably be working.”

“Oh, but you’ve invited him to the wedding?”

“Look, Dad, I just need you to be there on the 18th so we all know what we’re doing on the day. Can’t you just be my dad for once? No hitches or arguments with Mum?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll be there darlin’, don’t you worry about that. You getting nervous yet?”

“Listen, Dad, I’ve got to go.”

“Yeah, right. Sorry, er. Take care. See you on the 18th. Love you, darlin’.”

The line had already gone dead and with it his appetite.

At one minute and fourteen seconds, that weighed in as one of the longest conversations he’d had with his daughter. He always reviewed his telephone calls with Chloe, trying to keep them going for as long as he could, mentally making a note of which lines of conversation elicited the longest response. He knew it was a desperate attempt on his part to make up for lost time.

So, his ex-wife’s new bloke would definitely be at the wedding. That would make the need for a stiff drink or two ahead of the speeches even more essential. But it would also mean Chloe would have two dads there, one real, one fake. And Remnant wasn’t sure which one he was.

Chapter 5

Remnant's exceptional Sunday had one more trick up its sleeve. It was delivered just after 11pm as he was hacking into his watermelon with a blunt bread knife.

Like Remnant himself, his intercom had long given up working, so visitors were forced to ascend the three flights of stained stone stairs. It was usually enough to put off everyone bar the most determined of souls.

Consequently, a knock at his door always shocked Remnant. It was like an invasion of his privacy, almost unbelievable that someone should want to see him so badly they'd come all this way. And this late meant it could only be bad news.

He wiped his hands on a dirty tea towel and walked to the door.

"Who is it?"

"Police."

He grimaced and envisaged a warm night in a cell (not his first). At least there'd be someone to talk to and a half-decent breakfast to look forward to.

He edged open the door.

PC Ramage looked a little older than Remnant remembered him, a few more greys on the sides and sideburns and lines around the eyes.

“It’s been a while, Mr Remnant.”

“Can it be a while longer and wait until the morning?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Remnant widened the door enough to allow Ramage in. As is a policeman’s wont, the PC’s eyes explored the flat, searching for anything that might have been lifted, diverted or illegally imported. Remnant watched him, wondering if he should own up to the shoplift now and go quietly.

“You’re to be commended on how clean you’ve kept your nose recently, Mr Remnant.”

Pinpricks of relief spread across his nerve-ridden guts.

“I’ve been keeping my head down, getting on with me life. Me daughter’s getting married soon, did you know?”

“I did not. Congratulations. I imagine weddings are exceptionally expensive for fathers these days. Lots to pay for.”

“I’m doing my bit, but her boyfriend is paying for most of it. He’s a lawyer.”

“Ah, so he can well afford it, I suspect. Still, you’ll want to get your daughter a nice present.”

Ramage picked up the sheet of paper on which Remnant had been writing his father of the bride speech and nodded his approval. He put it down and picked up a post-it note next to it, on which were written the letters 'IOU'.

"It's to go in her wedding card," said Remnant. "The way things are going, there ain't going to be no present. But I'm working on it."

"And how exactly are you working on it?"

"Stopping gambling. Cutting down on the drinking. Looking for work down the market. Are you here to arrest me, because if so, let's go. I've had a long day and could do with getting me head down."

Ramage held up his hands in mock surrender.

"I'm just wondering why you left the scene of a crime this morning without giving us a statement, Mr Remnant."

He felt like he'd dodged one bullet by walking into the path of another.

"I didn't know I had to give a statement."

"It's police procedure, Mr Remnant. We like to gather the facts while they're fresh in a witness' mind."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. I was a bit all over the shop. I needed a drink after getting whacked on me shoulder."

He instinctively grimaced and rubbed that area.

“I hope there’s no permanent damage.”

“It’ll be all right. Just takes a while to heal at my age.”

For the first time since entering the flat, Ramage looked Remnant straight in the eye.

“Why would Mr Terku suspect you were part of the gang that raided his shop?”

Remnant had to stop his anger from surfacing. “I can’t believe he’s said that, accusing me. Where’s his evidence? I’m not taking the blame for this.”

“Mr. Remnant. No one is blaming you for anything. We have to assess the facts and analyse the situation before apportioning blame.”

“I tried to stop the thieves, for f...flip’s sake.”

“But you failed to get a look at them.”

“They had masks on.”

“Another witness says you were sitting outside the cafeteria next door for in excess of an hour before the raid.”

“I was having me breakfast. No law against that, is there?”

Ramage shook his head. His eyes had examined every item in Remnant’s lounge.

“May I take a quick look around?”

“I’ve nothing to hide.”

Remnant walked over to the window as Ramage poked about. The London sky was its usual brown self, most of the stars hidden by a veil of pollution and the yellorange light that leaked from streetlamps. Down below, the roads and pavements were deserted, the calm before the storm of another week of commuters, shoppers, travellers, chancers. Another week of flat pub flat pub flat pub flat for Remnant.

“Good to see you’re eating healthily, Mr Remnant.”

He swung round to see Ramage nodding in the direction of the fruit stained kitchen worktop.

“I like to treat myself every now and then.”

Ramage nodded to himself. Remnant doubted whether he’d even heard his answer to the question. He knew a bit about how a policeman’s mind worked, how some of their questions were carefully phrased to trick you into revealing information you’d rather keep hidden. But Ramage took things a stage further. He’d stand there, saying nothing for ages. Waiting for you to break the silence, to blab a little too much. Here he was, at it again, and after about a minute thirty, he broke Remnant.

“Look, I know how it looks. I’ve got a motive to steal, I was at the scene, but I was nothing to do with it. Honest. They were amateurs, no plan, no idea.”

“You have a better plan?” Ramage asked.

Remnant stalled for a second. “I’ve lived round here all my life. I’ve had time to think. I’ll admit it’s crossed my mind to do a job, but all sorts of thoughts cross a man’s mind. It’s those you act upon that count.”

Ramage pulled a smile that didn’t include his eyes.

“Well, we’ve both had long days, I think I’ll call it a night,” he said.

He made his way to the door but halfway there stopped and turned, purely for dramatic effect, Remnant presumed.

“You’re not planning to go off anywhere, no holidays abroad or trips to the moon?” Ramage asked.

“I can check my calendar, but I’m pretty sure I’m stuck here until the day I die.”

“Good, good, because I may well have more questions to ask. I’ll let myself out.”

And seconds after that he was gone.

Remnant breathed a sigh of relief, then slowly made his way to the kitchen where he angrily hacked the watermelon to shreds.

Chapter 6

If only boilers were as reliable as Edgar. He arrived at Remnant's flat the following day exactly when he'd promised at half-past one, tool bag in hand, and sporting stained navy blue overalls. Once inside number forty-eight, he brushed past the pyjama-wearing council tenant and headed straight for the boiler cupboard, knowing it was just outside the lounge as it was in his and every other flat in the blocks on Hatton Garden.

Remnant knew Edgar would be wanting a cup of tea but asked anyway, and once he'd laid the mug on the coffee table near the lounge door, he settled down to finish watching a slow documentary about swans.

"I hear you had a visitor last night," said Edgar, peering into the depths of the cupboard with a slim black torch.

"Who told you that?"

"Word gets around."

"I forgot to give them a statement, didn't I?"

"They like a statement, the police."

"I'd completely forgotten. What do you think I should do about DT accusing me of being part of the

gang? He's blaming me for not catching or unmasking the thieves."

Edgar emerged from the cupboard for a face full of tea and to switch the television over to a news channel.

"I'd ignore it, if I were you. The more fuss you make, the more likely it is the police will think you're trying to hide something. You know the way they work."

"I hardly know DT, yet he seems to have it in for me, like everyone else round here."

"Maybe he just said it in the heat of the moment."

"It's not my fault his alarm never went off."

Remnant smiled at Edgar.

"Nor mine, if that's what you're getting at. I told him it was old and needed replacing. Speaking of being old and needing replacing..."

Edgar ran his tongue along his front teeth, trying to think of a solution that wouldn't cost too much.

"Look at that." Remnant's attention had turned to a news report of a riot in Greece. "What have they got to riot about?" he continued. "They might be unemployed, but they're living in a nice hot country by the sea."

"You're not the only one suffering, Si. There's millions out there with no jobs. No future. People older than you."

“You ain’t heard from any of your old colleagues about any jobs have you?”

“Sorry, like I said, there’s not much about. And anyway the only jobs they’d know about would be in the Thames Valley. That’s not an easy place to get to from here, even with a car.”

Remnant grimaced and saw Edgar shaking his head at the boiler.

“If you could just keep it working until winter’s been and gone, that’d do me,” Remnant told him. “All I need is a few hours of heat a day.”

He turned back to his television to see the newscaster smiling as she introduced the light item at the end of the bulletin.

“And finally, it seems the internet is being gripped by asteroid fever.”

A picture of a bright white light flashed up.

“Blogger Joakim Onamoto claims this bright light is in fact the glare from an asteroid discovered by an American spacecraft. An asteroid he claims is made of pure diamond.”

Remnant scoffed and was about to switch channels when Edgar snatched the remote and raised the volume.

“What started as an internet rumour and suspected hoax has now snowballed into an online phenomenon, with diamond asteroids out-trending all other topics on the social networks. And space experts have done little to dispel the rumours.”

An unattractive man, with a skin condition not suited to the extreme close-up he was being subjected to, spoke with grim clarity.

“Given the vast number of asteroids in the solar system and the huge variety of elements from which they are made, it is entirely possible, nay, highly probable that at least one is made of diamond. We mustn’t forget that much of the Earth’s mineral resources were deposited on our planet by falling asteroids.”

It took a lot to stop Edgar working, but this news item had him gripped. Remnant stared at his friend, unused to seeing him so entranced by a television programme.

“What are you thinking, Edgar?”

He stood there, open-mouthed.

“I’ve fixed your boiler the best I can,” he said robotically. “It’s old. It needs replacing. I think it’s got one winter left in it.”

“I know how it feels.”

Edgar was still staring at the screen.

“What’s up with you?” Remnant asked.

Edgar frowned at Remnant. “There’s a massive diamond up there,” he said, pointing to the sky.

“So they say. So what?”

“A massive, unprotected, undefended diamond worth untold money just waiting for someone to bring it home. There’s no alarm system. No guards. No police. No prison sentence for stealing it.”

“That’s because it’s millions of miles away. What chance have I got of getting to the asteroid belt when I can’t even get to the bloody Thames Valley?”

Edgar sighed. “That’s the problem with you, Sye. Always seeing the problems before the opportunities. You’re saying you can’t get there before spending time thinking of ways you could get there.” He rapidly packed his tool bag. “I need to go home,” he said

“I think you need a lie down, mate. You’ve gone as pale as the picture of that asteroid. Thanks for sorting the boiler, though.”

Edgar waved away the thanks as he always did.

After seeing him out, Remnant slumped onto his shapeless sofa and stewed over Edgar’s parting comments.

Like many men and women desirous of a better life, he did not sleep well that night. He was gripped by

news broadcasts which saw fit to promote the asteroid story from the light item at the end in their afternoon bulletins, to third in the pecking order at tea time, to the main item at ten o'clock, all reflecting the mania that the picture on Onamoto's website had provoked.

Remnant ripped apart his thin curtains and examined the brown night sky over London, unable to discern whether it was clear or cloudy. And he gave himself a moment to think about what it would be like to get a slice of that diamond and bring it home. Give some to friends and sell the rest. Make it up with everyone he owed. No more IOUs.

Chapter 7

Errol Haygue had the misfortune of being the inaugural chief of the USA's Space Exploration Council (SEC), the successor to the recently disbanded NASA. He was the United States' 'go-to guy' for all things space at a time when its budgets weren't so much being cut or slashed, as totally annihilated.

A veteran of three Mars missions, he was comfortably his nation's most experienced space expert, yet it had been over a decade since he'd left the Earth's

atmosphere. 'Such a fate awaits men who find that age, experience and a desire for a bigger salary force them into soul-destroying managerial posts,' he reasoned to his wife in a moment of reflection back at his New England ranch.

He had no option but the desk job by the time the opportunity to take on one arose with the sudden demise of his predecessor, who had held the role of NASA Chief for twenty-one years, during which he'd overseen the colonisation of Mars by ten thousand 'specially selected' individuals, and the near total collapse of government funding for anything space related.

By the time Haygue settled into the power-exuding leather seat of office in Houston, NASA was no more and news of people emigrating to Mars was old news. The ships they travelled in were well designed, and when take-offs to and landings on Mars failed to result in disaster, hacks who were waiting for front page stealing explosions and bodycounts scurried elsewhere for their headlines.

Sensing that loss of interest would soon yield a similar result when it came to the scant funding SEC received, Haygue suggested staging a crash or a death on board a flight to Mars to re-ignite public interest. It was then that he realised despite it saying 'Chief' on his office door and the long, triangular whiteoak plaque on his

wooden desk, there were bigger, more powerful chiefs with heavier triangular plaques on their desks who could and would veto his every decision. They didn't work in the same building, or even the same city, hell, Haygue didn't know where they were. All he knew was they were out there somewhere, ready to intervene and delay and question and procrastinate. And they certainly weren't thinking that a staged crash or disaster was in the public interest.

They were more concerned with the unwelcome public interest that had been generated by Onamoto's picture and the sheer number of online comments about it. Haygue knew it was only a matter of time before his superiors ordered him to host a press conference to assassinate Onamoto's character, ridicule his pictures and belittle those who believed in the existence of an asteroid made of diamond.

All standing room at the briefing was taken within minutes of the seats going, seats which Haygue had ensured were the most uncomfortable in the building.

He strode to his pedestal, flanked by attractive juniors, and framed on Remnant's outdated 3D television by a pictorial rendition of the White House, the SEC logo, an important-looking but ultimately meaningless coat of

arms and a plush flag of the United States with extra shiny red stripes.

During his career, Haygue had developed an oratorical style specifically designed to heighten boredom. He deliberately droned, especially when revealing important information that the laws of the land required him to. There were no peaks in his tone, no patterns to his speech, merely relentless troughs. Many hacks had grown tired of his lack of personality, turning their attention to other stories and, in several cases, other careers. Some who decided to remain journalists took to making up stories and fabricating leads in order to avoid being assigned to a Haygue briefing. As a result, Haygue had virtually slipped off the radar.

“Ladies and gentleman, I will keep this brief,” he droned, and many of the gathered journalists immediately recalled why they had always given these ‘occasions’ a wide berth. “As we all know, rumours have been circulating regarding the nature of these pictures.”

The shot of the bright white light that had made Onamoto a household name brought forth gasps from the assembled press. Haygue shook his head at their over-reaction.

“This is a shot taken from the Prospector mission to Jupiter,” he said, turning to the screen behind him. “It

is a shot taken by a malfunctioning camera. As is this, this and this.” He toggled through three more almost identical pictures of a bright white light, then turned back to face the journalists, inadvertently triggering a storm of flash photography.

An impatient Haygue squinted as journalists tried to intervene with questions, only to be shushed down and glared at by the assembled security.

“It’s just an over-exposed shot. Nothing more, nothing less,” he added. “So let’s stop all this talk of diamonds and asteroids.”

“So what do you say to the scientists who say that there’s a hundred per cent chance of there being an asteroid made of diamond in the belt?” asked a voice from the throng.

“If there is such a thing, no one’s found it yet, but we’ll keep our eyes open,” said Haygue, looking at someone else. He could see from the serious expressions on the gathered faces that they’d all been briefed to keep this story alive.

“The camera that took the shots, that’s an expensive bit of kit to be malfunctioning, don’t you think?” Haygue recognised the voice as belonging to John Stock, the scourge of the latter ten years of his career. He was

one of the few who bothered turning up to all of his briefings, mostly to heckle and harass.

Stock was an annoyingly boyish man who was at least a decade older than he looked. The writer of a spaceblog that Haygue could never remember the name of, (but he had Googled it once and was left unimpressed), Stock looked younger and younger every time Haygue saw him, and today was no exception.

“A thorough investigation is underway, as you might expect, Stock. So I don’t have any hard and fast reasons why that camera malfunctioned.” Haygue said, watching Stock type something on his tablet.

“Remind me again of the Prospector’s mission,” was Stock’s follow-up question.

“Prospector is on a very important mission to help develop mankind’s understanding of the solar system’s most powerful planet,” said Haygue.

“Why then does Onamoto’s most recent post, published as recently as a half hour ago, say that there is a Prospector II? With astronauts onboard? In the asteroid belt as we speak?”

There was uproar in the briefing room, even from the security guards. Haygue glared at Stock who was loving being the centre of attention. “Astronauts on a mission to test the purity of the diamond asteroid,” Stock shouted.

“There’s no truth whatsoever in these rumours,” Haygue yelled. “No truth in any of that crap Onamoto puts on his site. It’s all conjecture. There is no Prospector II.”

The buzz in the room prevailed. Another voice brought calmness.

“So what’s the latest with the first Prospector?”

“The only Prospector,” Haygue corrected him.

“We expecting any more film back?”

“The Prospector will continue to send back pictures of Jupiter, for the next nine months.”

“I look forward to seeing them,” said Stock, not totally ingenuinely, although some journalists laughed. “You said before that these pictures of the white light are several months old. Why were they not released sooner?”

“Who’d be interested? Who’d publish them? Who wants to see a picture taken by a malfunctioning camera? When was the last time any of you attended a briefing of mine, apart from you, Stock? I can assure you there is nothing in this. No diamond asteroid for you to worry about.”

“Hey, it wouldn’t worry me any,” said Stock. “But I know a few people who’d be interested in checking out if there was any truth in the rumour. A few millionaires with spaceships wanting to go take a look.”

“Good luck to them, but they’re wasting their time. And you’re wasting mine.” Haygue looked set to leave.

“So you can categorically state that no SEC mission is underway to the asteroid belt?” asked a female journalist from one of the financial papers.

“We’re in a double dip recession, as you’ll know better than me. There aren’t the funds hanging around for us to launch a hunt for a diamond, should there be such a thing, which we don’t believe there is.”

“So you’d be happy for anyone with a ship to go on up and check that out for themselves?”

“Be my guest. OK, thanks everyone. This one’s over.” Haygue gathered his papers and looked up to see Stock addressing the cameras and the journalists.

“I don’t think this is over. I think anyone who believes in this rumour, who believes there’s something up there owes it to themselves to go check it out. Don’t let anyone talk you out of it.”

“I think everyone gets the picture,” Haygue raged. “This one’s definitely over.”

It was a line that brought forth many questions asked at the same time and same high volume by equally desperate journalists.

Haygue ignored them all and walked out of the room with far less confidence than he’d had when

entering it, knowing a summons to meet the powers that
be would be waiting in his inbox.

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