

Author's note: This is an abridged opening chapter to a longer story, rather than a self-contained story.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

* AMY *

Amy Bowden looked enviously at the striking blonde striding purposely into the coffee shop where she worked and thought how lovely it would be to swap places with her, just for a day. Rather than deal with Dennis, her ex, or her manager Dave who was in one of his moods.

She tapped her phone willing Dennis to pick up guessing that she had two more minutes on her break before Dave went on the warpath.

She was about to hang up when she heard a laconic "Yeah?"

Amy breathed in deeply attempting to control herself. "Dennis, I got your message this morning about not being able to have the kids today".

She could hear the strike of a match being lit and the sound of his satisfied inhalation as he replied, "Thing is Ames, I got some business in Southend so I...."

"You can't keep doing this", Amy interrupted "the girls have been so excited to see you, and you know it's Daisy's hen do tonight. I'm relying on you."

"You're always saying I've got to provide for my kids", he snapped, "so how come you throw a wobbly when I've got to work?" Just tell them"

"No, I won't do your dirty work for you!"

She cut the phone off furiously and spun around, crashing unseeingly into the blonde from earlier. They both watched in horror as the contents of the coffee cup spilled over, splashing drops onto the woman's cream blouse.

"Oh God, I'm so so sorry" Amy stammered attempting to dab at the blot, aware of the futility of the action.

"No, leave it, just about sums up my morning!" the woman snapped.

"Yes, me too!" Amy responded, her eyes filling with tears.

She took a ragged breath, "My ex keeps letting my kids down, my mum keeps telling me to take him to court or she will disown me, **and** my boss has got it in for me today!" To her horror she

burst into tears. "Please, I'm on my last warning," she pleaded "Can I get you another and some paper towels?"

The woman glanced down at her blouse, where a stain was developing, but looking up she could see a furious red-faced man – the manager no doubt - glaring at them.

The poor girl deserved a break.

"No real harm done", she said fishing into her bag to retrieve a business card and a tissue. "Here, Amy is it? She said nodding toward her name badge, give me a call if you need any advice on child maintenance, I could probably put in you in touch with someone"

"Thank you so much", Amy gulped gratefully.

"That's okay, we girls have to stick together sometimes," the woman smiled "my name's Jenny by the way. Hope your day gets better"

*** SUSIE ***

No sooner had Susie Bowden plugged in the Hoover than her phone buzzed. She looked at the screen with a mixture of affection and irritation as the faces of her grandkids filled the screen. She knew Amy only called her at work for one thing – babysitting.

"Don't tell me", she said "Dennis can have the kids for two extra days this time? No wait, he has remembered a little thing called child support. Am I getting warmer...?"

"Don't be like that mum," Amy sighed. "I'm having a crap day. He was supposed to have them tonight for Daisy's do and..."

"When will you realise that he'll never change unless he is forced to?" Susie replied then relenting added, "What time do you want to drop them off?",

"Thanks mum; is after school, ok?"

Susie knew that she would be finished cleaning long before then. The Clarks kept such a spotless house that it was a joke having her come in twice a week.

Paul and Jenny were a lovely couple, but Susie knew the signs of trouble in paradise when she spotted it. Jenny must be daft if she hadn't realised that Paul hadn't been to work in months. He wasn't fooling *her* with his patter about nightmare traffic or making a show of coming home with piles of paper. She had also seen him in the park in the middle of the day looking lost and if she hadn't had her grandchildren with her, she would have tapped him on the shoulder.

"Why doesn't he just tell her?" Susie thought. She'd kill her Keith if he pulled a stunt like that.

Bending to re-start the Hoover she noticed a bundle of notes under the trouser press, together with a small packet that even to her untrained eye looked suspicious. A scrawled note bore the words 'Dennis D 07555 777812 – 2.30, Traders' Bar, Southend'. She scrolled through the contacts on her phone and her blood froze as she saw the number appear.

This could not be good.

As she was deciding what to do, she heard a car pulling into the drive. Paul "back early from work" no doubt, she thought. But looking out the window she could see Jenny's black car pull into the drive.

"Hi Mrs B." Jenny called as she climbed the stairs to the bedroom, "I need to change my top – I managed to get coffee over myself!"

She stopped suddenly, and her voice quivered uncharacteristically "And to tell the truth, I don't really feel up to going in today." She sat down heavily on the bed.

"Jenny love," Susie said gently. I hope you don't mind, but I need to tell you something".

Jenny looked at her cleaner closely, "*Jenny love?*" she had never been that familiar with her before.

Susie handed her the package. "I'm not snooping but it's just that you're about the same age as my daughter and I would tell her if I thought something was wrong". She hesitated "I found these under your husband's things."

Jenny took the package from her and read the words carefully.

"It's just that I think I know who this Dennis is too...." Susie continued.

Before Jenny could respond, Susie picked up her phone and called Amy on loudspeaker.

"Me again", she said when Amy answered, "Did Dennis say why he couldn't have the kids today?"

"Something about going to Southend", Amy whispered, aware of Dave's eyes on her again, "why?"

Susie looked at Jenny.

"Mum what's going on? Amy demanded

"I'll tell you later, bye love", Susie said looking at Jenny whose eyes were wide with disbelief.

"There's something else. Susie continued, "I don't think Paul – I mean Mr Clark - has been going to work, he's been back at all times, and I saw him in the park the other week...."

Jenny shook her head trying to understand what she was hearing.

"I thought he was having an affair". She laughed bitterly. "If only"

"Look let's try to find out what is going on before jumping to conclusions," Susie said.

"Do you think he is planning to meet this guy?" Jenny asked. "He wouldn't drive to Southend surely. If he's not at work, he might be at the station?" She sounded close to tears.

"There's only one way to find out." Susie said.

“Will you come with me Mrs B? I don’t think I can do this by myself” Jenny was suddenly shaking, all sophistication gone.

Susie nodded, “Let’s take my car – you’re in no fit state to drive

* AMY *

Amy and the children were on Susie’s doorstep just after half past four that afternoon. Once they had been hugged, her granddaughters screamed past her into the garden as Amy flopped down onto the nearest chair in Susie’s spotless kitchen.

“You’ll never guess the day I’ve had” Susie said, putting the kettle on to boil.

“No, me first” Amy interrupted, “I spilled coffee on a woman at work but instead of getting the sack I got this from her. Do you think it’s worth a call?”

Susie looked at the business card and a smile spread across her face as she read the words “Jenny Clark, Gildcrest Family Law”

“What’s so funny?” Amy asked as she pocketed the card.

“Nothing”, Susie replied as she put a mug of tea in front of her daughter. “I just have a good feeling about her”

The two women sipped their tea companionably each lost in their own thoughts.

“Well, that didn’t last long! Amy sighed as a scream followed by “Muuummm!” came from the garden.

The two girls careered into the kitchen. “All I wanted was to see the silly present from her *boyfriend*...” Kyla said protested.

“Give it back and he’s **not** my boyfriend!” Kelly demanded “Tell her, muuum...”

“Give Kelly back what’s hers”, Amy instructed her younger daughter, “why do you have to wind her up all the time?”

Kyla sullenly dropped a bracket into her sister’s hand “Looks pathetic anyway” she pouted.

“Let me see that” Amy gasped catching sight of the sparkling silver and diamonds that Kelly tried to cover with her free palm.

“Did you get this from your friend Connor?” Amy asked.

Kelly shook her head, “No, from a friend of Dad’s” she mumbled not meeting Amy’s eyes.

Amy’s blood ran cold “What friend?” she demanded.

“Luke; he was outside school. He said it was from Daddy to say that we are being watched out for.”

“I don’t know any friend of Dad’s called Luke,” Amy said striving to keep her voice level. “And what have I told you about talking to strangers? Give it to me”

"I knew you wouldn't let me keep it," Kelly said sullenly handing over the jewellery.

"What's going on?" Susie looked at Amy curiously.

"I have to go" Amy stood abruptly, all thoughts of the hen party vanishing as she grabbed her keys. "Girls be good for nanna and gramps; I will see you tomorrow".

Susie followed her to the door. "Amy be careful; after everything you have gone through with that scumbag. You've got the girls to think of now."

Amy nodded, squeezing her mum tight, "Don't worry, I won't do anything stupid."

"Ok Amy, calm down" she whispered frantically as she climbed into the car.

She dialled Dennis's number. It went straight to voicemail

She started the car in fury, as she felt a creeping dread coursing through her body. *What the hell was this bracelet coming back to them for? She was determined not to be sucked back into that life; it had nearly killed her.*

*** DENNIS ***

Dennis made his way through the lunchtime drinkers in the bar. "Den, over here!" He heard a shout and could see his boss Mick surrounded by his usual flunkies and floozies, waving a bottle of champagne in one hand, and motioning him over.

Dennis slapped a grin on his face and raised his hand in greeting as he seethed inwardly knowing he would have to explain himself. He couldn't believe that the deal he had set up with that banker Clark had gone so wrong. If he couldn't pull it back his reputation would be gone as well as the money he owed.

He felt his bravado slipping farther away as he thought about Amy's attitude on the phone. Something about her manner rattled him. He could usually sweet talk her, but she sounded different this time. She'd changed and not for the better he thought, reflecting that she wasn't so holier than thou when she was living the high life with him.

He looked at the large diamond in his pinky ring and flexed his thick fingers grimly as he made his way over to the boss. He'd think of something: he wasn't known as "The Diamond Geezer" for nothing.

*** AMY ***

Amy drove in a daze to the private road where Dennis and his new girlfriend lived, not knowing exactly what she was going to do when she got there. She parked outside their gates noting the matching Range Rovers parked on the drive, the girlfriend's bore the registration plate 'B24N D1E'. "Very nice", she thought, "while I have to beg for child support!"

She pressed on the intercom and when there was no answer began frantically punching numbers onto the keypad before remembering the combination of the girls' birthdays. *'Good job he lacks imagination,'* she thought pushing the gates open.

She entered the same key code at the front door, calling out as she entered. The words died on her lips as she felt the crunch of glass under her feet. *"What the hell?"*, the words barely formed in her mind as she stopped short in horror unwilling to believe her eyes. In the gloom she could see Brandie, slumped against the far wall, blood streaks from a wound in her neck and shoulder marking a trail of her descent to the floor.

Amy crept towards her, holding her breath. The young woman had an unmistakable grey pallor on her face and looked barely older than Amy's own girls. She felt the same sense of dread flood her body as she caught sight of a glint of silver clenched in her hand and instinctively knew it was the same as the bracelet that was given to Kelly.

Against her instincts, she crept into the kitchen, her heart pounding.

"Dennis?" She croaked into the silence and then jumped as the landline on the wall trilled into life. She picked it up with foreboding, holding it wordlessly to her ear.

"Last chance," a voice rasped "we want that debt paid in full – it would be a shame if your kids had to be without their mum again." The line went dead.

Amy threw the phone in the sink and inexplicably turned the taps on flooding it with water as her dread turned to anger. "Damn you, Dennis, damn you" she hissed; "you don't care about me that's fine! but to play with the kids' lives again!!"

She jumped as her mobile buzzed and the word "Den" appeared on the screen. She shoved the phone in her pocket and backed out of the kitchen into the hall. She retraced her steps to the front door, only hesitating as she passed Brandie's lifeless form, resisting the overwhelming temptation to wrest the bracelet from her fingers, the stones glinting with menace.

Amy closed the front door carefully and walked with studied calm to the gates. In the sanctuary of her car, she looked at Dennis' message, stark in its brevity:

"Amy – call me. I'm serious. Use this number - 07776 887149"

Damn him, Damn him!

She thought of Brandie again and shook her head, reflecting grimly that anyone who became involved with Dennis paid a price. She had; and now she had a choice to make – old life or new.

She pulled the card from her pocket, her fingers trembling as she dialled. "Hello Jenny," she hesitated, then resolve hardening continued "it's Amy Bowden; we met this morning. I really need your help."