

DIRTY DIAMONDS

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Carl took Jamey by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Okay. It's almost time. Be ready to split the second I yell."

She shivered and slumped down on the edge of the hotel bed.

He pulled the truck keys from his pocket and placed them in her hand. "You'll do the driving. The cops won't be looking for a woman." He smiled as he leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. "Don't be scared, baby. Everything's going to be just fine."

Opening the tote bag she'd dropped on the end of the bed, he removed a suit coat and pre-knotted tie. Shrugging into the jacket, he slipped the tie over his head and let it hang loose around his neck, giving the appearance he'd just come in from a party.

Keeping his gaze on Jamey, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a pair of brass knuckles. She tapped the tips of her painted nails across her lips as she watched him shove them over his fingers.

He cuffed her lightly on the chin and grinned. "Yes, sweetheart, I know how to fight. When you're six foot two, you learn to use your brawn as well as your wit." He glanced around the room and snatched the cell phone off the bureau. Dropping it into the tote, he handed her the bag. "Bring this with you. Be sure we don't leave any evidence here."

Trembling she slipped the handles over her arm.

"Hey, what's the matter, sweetie, cat got your tongue?"

She shook her head. "No. Just a bit scared and nervous."

Pulling her toward him, he planted a long sexy kiss on Jamey's lips, then held her at arms length and winked. "We'll celebrate when this is over. And if you think silk dresses and fake bangles around your wrist are pretty, just wait until you take a gander at the next ones we get."

Throwing a kiss, he nabbed the ice bucket from the bathroom and headed out the door. "Fix this so I can get in quickly," he said over his shoulder as he disappeared.

Slipping the plastic 'Do Not Disturb' sign between the lock and facing, Jamey closed the door softly. She then dashed to the dresser and searched the drawers. Near the back of the bottom one, her hand closed around an item, which she whipped out and stuffed into her jeans pocket.

Within minutes, the shattering sound of gunshot caused her to bolt toward the entry. Carl staggered into the room, clutching his shoulder as blood soaked through his coat. Her heart pounded as he thrust two small velvet bags and the brass knuckles into her hands. "I'll be all right," he hissed. "Watch the newspapers. If all goes well, I'll meet you at Rusty's Bar in Amarillo in two weeks. Now get the hell out of here. Take the stairs." He gave her a shove

toward the hallway before collapsing onto the floor.

Jamey dashed for the fire exit stairwell, raced down three floors, then charged out a side entrance. Frantic with fear, she kept looking behind her as she ran toward the front of the building. Stopping at the corner she caught her breath and glanced both ways, then walked swiftly down the sidewalk in the direction of where they'd parked the Tacoma. Just as she reached the black pick-up, she heard the wailing sirens in the distance. Her stomach tied in knots as she jumped inside the cab and locked the door. Throwing the brass knuckles into the tote, she shoved the two velvet bags into her purse and flipped on the ignition. Making a U-turn and keeping her eye on the mirrors, she bore down on the accelerator and headed toward the rear of the hotel. She held her breath until she knew for sure she hadn't been followed. Reaching one of the main streets, Jamey drove as fast as she dared.

When the apartment came into view, she sighed in relief and parked. She jumped out of the truck, dashed inside and secured the door behind her. Leaning against the wall, she took several deep breaths to regain her composure. "Stay calm," she said aloud. "Everything has gone as planned. Don't fall apart at the first stage."

Jamey went into the kitchen and sat down at the table. Her hands shook as she opened her purse and pulled out the pouches. Peering inside one of the bags, she moved it around until the light caught the glittering jewels. "Gorgeous," she gasped.

Glancing at the wall clock, she jumped up, realizing she couldn't risk staying here much longer. She crammed the small velvet sacks back into her purse, then went into the bedroom, snatched the already packed duffel bag from the closet and plopped it on the bed. Racing into the bathroom, she dampened a washcloth, then ran out to Carl's truck where she fiercely rubbed down the steering wheel, the stick shift, and any other surface she might have

touched. Climbing out, she slammed the door shut with her butt.

Back inside the apartment, she picked up the duffel, whipped her purse straps over her shoulder and headed back out toward her own car. She tossed her luggage onto the passenger seat, then slipped behind the steering wheel. Careful of her speed, she made her way to west Interstate Forty. Her eyes narrowed as she stared down the road. "Goodbye sucker," she murmured.

Jamey Gray's stare was fixed on the freeway ahead, but her mind churned. Nothing must go wrong. Now, she'd be on her own for at least six months to a year before the final steps were completed.

Even though it brought tears to her eyes, the death of Aunt Rachel, her last relative on earth, couldn't have been more timely. She'd left Jamey with a small furnished cottage in Medford, Oregon, where she and Uncle Ross had lived for many years until he became ill. He wanted to spend his last days back in Oklahoma where he'd grown up, so they relocated and had rented the place for extra income. No one knew that Jamey's aunt and uncle had come from Medford, so it fit perfectly into her plans. That's where she would disappear for six months. She'd notified the renters that they had to move. But her first thoughts were how to lead Carl Hopkins off course, because she knew the minute they released him from the hospital, he'd come after her.

Carl had been chosen as the patsy because of his computer hacker abilities. She found him to be one of the most handsome nerds she'd ever met and he seemed equally intrigued with her, so the job of snaring him into a trap hadn't been difficult. However, she shuddered when she thought how it almost backfired the day he talked her into letting him move into her apartment. At first she'd objected, until he promised to pay the rent, utility bills and

groceries, letting her use her pay check for personal purchases. It worked in the beginning, giving her more time to entice him with talk of diamonds and gems. Then he became possessive, which grated on her nerves. But things came to a climax last evening when he called her into the living room and pointed at the computer monitor.

“You see that?” he’d asked. “Those are Canadian diamonds.”

She smiled when he kissed her arm and hooked his finger under the tennis bracelet dangling around her wrist. “All your talk about diamonds set me to thinking about this little bangle. These are only cubic zirconias. What if the stones in it were real?” He’d let out a whistle and flipped the bracelet, making it whirl around her arm. “That little baby would be worth a bundle.”

She remembered gazing into his eager blue eyes and asking. “Why all the sudden interest in diamonds?”

He pointed at her. “It’s your fault. You kept talking about all that beautiful jewelry in the shop where you work, plus the high prices of gold, diamonds and rubies. Those beautiful stones have to come from somewhere.” He reached over and patted the computer. “So, I did research to find out how we could get some.”

She pretended to scoff at his idea. “You’re talking dangerous.”

“It could be, but if we’re careful, it should be a piece of cake.”

She’d inadvertently told Carl about a diamond courier, Bob Evans, that her boss had talked about. For several months, Carl had tracked the man with his computer and cell phone. He’d discovered that the courier came to Oklahoma City about every three or four weeks with a briefcase full of diamonds to sell to local merchants.

“He carries enough diamonds to make four or five of those bracelets,” Carl had told her in an excited voice.

When she warned him that some of the couriers carried guns, he waved off

her concerns.

“This one’s a real klutz,” he said. “Stupid as they come. Doesn’t even put the diamonds in the hotel vault. Instead, he takes them to his room.” He then proceeded to tell her his plan.

Jamey remembered drifting into a natural high at his words, but the thought of jail time if they got caught, made her stomach quiver.

Shaking her head, she brought her thoughts back to the present and forced herself to focus on driving. This phase of the plan had ended successfully, so she could relax. She hoped to be rid of Carl Hopkins soon, so she wouldn’t have to listen to any more of his rude remarks about her friends or his criticisms of her taste in clothes.

Next stop, Amarillo, Texas, where she’d begin phase two of her plan.