

PAY

DAY

C E L I A W A L D E N



SPHERE

S P H E R E

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Sphere
This paperback edition published by Sphere in 2022

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-8315-1

Typeset in Minion by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Papers used by Sphere are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

For Ed Victor

PROLOGUE

‘**Y**ou forgot the brown sauce again.’ Terry inspected his bacon roll, sighed and took a bite. ‘These have to be done by the end of the day.’ Indicating the adjacent pallet of concrete blocks, he eyed his crew without much hope. ‘Hey.’

But they were assembled around an iPhone, watching one of their YouTube clips.

‘Come on. Where’s the mixer? Let’s get going.’

Picking his way around the piles of bricks and timber, Terry trudged to the back of the site. There in the corner, in the shadow of the vast disused building the site backed on to, lay his mixer.

‘Useless wankers,’ he muttered. Then he saw the man.

Terry took in his suit – ‘poncy’, his wife would have called it – his shoes – the kind of suede loafers those braying Chelsea lads wore, but distinctive for the gold chain links across the tops – and the iron railings that he was impaled upon. Bread and bacon paste flew from his mouth. ‘Steve,’ he heard himself say, registering the flower of flesh pushed out by the railing running through the man’s abdomen. And then in a holler that sounded shrill, feminine: ‘Steve!’

By the time his foreman reached him, Terry was patting down the pockets of his hoodie. ‘Your phone, mate,’ he managed, without taking his eyes off the body.

And when all Steve could do was repeat ‘Fuck me. Fuck me,’ Terry took it from him and dialled 999.

Only after telling the impassive voice on the phone, ‘There’s a dead guy on our building site’, after running his eyes from the corpse on the spikes up the full height of the blank façade behind, after realising and telling the operator, ‘He must’ve fallen’ – only then did Terry see the man’s foot twitch.

CHAPTER 1



JILL

THURSDAY 5 AUGUST

Pick up, pick up, pick up.

Sitting in her driveway in a blouse, work skirt and fleece-lined slippers, Jill stared at the single letter on her iPhone screen. 'A'. The initial felt like an admission of guilt. As her employee it would have been natural for Alex to figure in her scroll of contacts, professional and personal. Only nothing about Jill's connection to 'A' was legitimate, let alone justifiable – and as of half an hour ago, she had everything to hide.

Welcome to the O2 messaging service. The person you are calling is unable to take your call.

People don't tell you that chaos has a sound: a churning,

crashing, intravenous beat. And it's deafening. They don't tell you that once you've invited that white noise into your life, there's no way of turning it off.

Terminating the call – leaving a message was too risky, and with the four previous attempts to reach Alex, Jill had already taken the precaution to hide her caller ID – she slumped forward to rest her forehead on the steering wheel, forcing herself to breathe. In, out; in, out – slowly now, slowly. Each exhalation misted up the winged chrome logo at the centre of the wheel, and she watched it dissipate in hazy patches before breathing out once more.

The police said they'd be in touch. That was what Paul had said. It could be hours. Or it could be minutes. And she couldn't have that conversation without having spoken to Alex.

'Where *are* you?' Out loud, the words were startling. Imperious. And she wondered what the neighbours would think if they saw her sitting in her car, talking to herself. She wondered whether Stan, inside, had noticed her absence yet, and how much a human being could withstand before, like an overloaded electrical system, they cut out.

The buzz of her phone brought her to, but it was only another message from Paul. *It's on the news.* With fumbling fingers she slotted the key into the ignition, switched on the radio and sat numbly through an amped-up exchange between an LBC presenter and a vegan campaigner before, finally, they cut to the news. Jamie was third on the bill. Only he was no longer Jamie, but 'a forty-six-year-old man, found impaled on railings on a north-west London building site'.

It was only a matter of time before the office found out that the dead man was their boss, and as a reporter 'at the

scene' delivered details she could never unhear, Jill pictured the news spreading in startled cries and wild, unpunctuated emails from desk to desk. She saw hands clamped across mouths, tears of disbelief: mayhem. As Jamie's partners, it was up to her and Paul to make an announcement; 'manage' the fallout. But going into work was also unthinkable – until she'd spoken to Alex. Then there was Nicole.

Her colleague's name wasn't disguised by an initial, although it should have been, and the sight of it on her phone screen made Jill feel no less toxic. Her own name would have a similar effect on these two women, she realised. They were bound by that, now.

You've reached Nicole Harper. I can't come to the phone right now, but you know what to do . . .

That both women were going to voicemail, despite repeated attempts, wasn't right. But then none of this was right, and what could Jill do, but try, try, try again?

'Hello?'

Nicole's voice sounded artificially bright, as though put on for her benefit. Then Jill remembered her withheld number. 'It's . . .' She cleared her throat. 'It's Jill.'

'One sec.' A party blower blared in the background, followed by a discordant jumble of childish joy. 'Sorry, who?' She heard the jingle of a door swinging shut, all jollity sealed off behind it.

'It's Jill.' She closed her eyes.

'Sorry, I'm at a kids' party with my daughter – they're about to bring the cake out. Can I call you back?'

'No.' She had to stop Nicole talking and make her listen. 'Jamie's dead. They found him this morning. The police want to talk to me. They'll want to talk to you, too.' The words

came out in a rush. ‘And Nicole –’ she heard her own voice dip down ‘– I can’t get hold of Alex.’

There was a muffled clunk at the other end of the line, followed by silence. Then another clunk, and a whisper: ‘How?’

‘They don’t know yet. He was found by the Vale Theatre early this morning. There’s a building site behind—’

‘He was at the theatre?’

The change of tone made Jill sit up straight. It wasn’t just alarm, but recognition.

‘If you know something . . .’

At the end of the line Nicole let out a faint moan. Then there was a choking noise. And as Jill waited she saw her own slipped foot tapping impatiently by the pedals. There wasn’t time for this.

‘We’ve got to find Alex.’

Silence.

‘Nicole, are you there?’

‘The theatre . . . there’s this little glass hut on the roof . . .’

The rap of knuckles against glass made Jill jump, every synapse now on high alert, every word Nicole was saying drowned out, and she looked up to see Stan’s face peering in at her.