

# The Graft

Martina Cole

Published by Headline

Extract is copyright of the Author

---

Copyright © 2004 Martina Cole

The right of Martina Cole to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2004  
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in 2005  
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A HEADLINE paperback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 0 7472 6766 9

Typeset in Galliard by Avon DataSet Ltd,  
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING  
A division of Hodder Headline  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

[www.headline.co.uk](http://www.headline.co.uk)  
[www.hodderheadline.com](http://www.hodderheadline.com)

## Prologue

---

It was so hot in the room, like an oven. He could feel the sweat trickling down his face and wiped it away carelessly. He wished that it would rain, that the storm would break and everything would finally be over.

The thought brought a smile to Nick Leary's handsome face.

He was restless, tired but far from sleep. Unable to sleep. He had too much to think about.

His wife was sleeping soundly beside him, her faint snoring loud in the quiet room. She was as usual curled up in a ball, her face devoid of the frown lines that day-break inevitably brought with it. Her blond hair was still immaculate even as she slept. Tammy never looked untidy, it was part of her personality. He believed that if she had a head-on crash in her  $4 \times 4$  she would die with every hair in

place and her make-up untouched, like film stars did in the movies. She broke wind gently and it made him grin in the dimness of the room. She would be mortified when he told her. Tammy hated any reference to bodily functions and would go to great lengths to hide the fact that she burped, farted and crapped just like everyone else. She snuggled down and he smiled in the dimness.

He was lying on his back, one forearm thrown casually across his eyes. Nick Leary was a big man. Big in stature, and with a big personality to match. He had a reputation as a shrewd businessman and loyal friend. He cultivated this image carefully because it was important to him.

He rarely did anything without it being of some benefit to himself, which was why he had an eight-bedroomed farmhouse, enough money to do what he wanted, and a lifestyle envied by most of his peers. But Nick had grafted for it, had pulled himself and his family up by the proverbial bootstraps – and pulled them up as high as they could go.

He heard a distant rumble of thunder and felt his whole body finally relax. A few seconds later the insistent drumming of the rain hit the windows and he almost cried out with joy. He had prayed for this rain, known that it was coming and dreaded that it might not arrive. He had a tension headache. He always got them when it was stormy

but this time he had a lot on his mind as well. He moved restlessly around in the bed once more.

‘Keep still, Nick, for Christ’s sake.’

Tammy’s voice was muffled but he could hear the impatience in it.

‘Sorry, Tam.’

He willed his body to be still. All he needed now on top of everything else was her up and ranting her head off.

Tammy Leary liked her Sooty and Sweep and no one interfered with that – not if they valued their own hearing anyway. Her nasal twang he could cope with in the day, he loved her dearly after all. But at night her voice sounded like a banshee wailing, and that banshee had a toothache and a temper on it. Best leave her to sleep, especially tonight with the storm well on its way overhead and his neck and shoulders stiff with pain and the trepidation that was surrounding him.

He closed his eyes once more, but knew he would not sleep.

Then he heard it.

He opened his eyes and lay motionless. Sweat still covered his body when he felt the first chill hit him. He was straining to hear now, every fibre of his being on red alert. Thunder clapped loudly overhead and a flash of lightning lit up the room. He slid quietly from bed and tiptoed across the

wooden floor of the bedroom. The en-suite light was on and there was a crack of light coming from underneath the door. It was enough for him to see by.

Nick slipped out on to the landing.

The rain was heavier now; he could hear it surrounding the house.

He stopped dead as he heard the muffled movements once more. Someone was moving around downstairs. He could hear the sounds of drawers opening and closing. His heart was thundering in his chest, so loud he wondered if anyone else could hear it. He passed his sons' bedrooms and was relieved to see that their doors were shut tight.

At the top of the staircase he paused and listened once more before descending the staircase as quietly as he could. At the bottom he felt inside the large umbrella pot and located the baseball bat he'd left there for just such an occasion as this.

The house was large, set in seven acres and not easily accessible. You gained entry through electric gates and you never turned up at the Learys' without first letting them know you were coming.

He glanced around the entrance hall. There were three sets of double doors. These led to the large front room, the television room and dining room. Another staircase led down to the cellar and two more doors to the kitchen and

study. Off the study was a well-stocked library. But it was the study that the noise was coming from.

It was inside the study that Nick kept his safe.

He crept across the entrance hall. His heart was in his mouth now. He swallowed with difficulty. The storm had quietened momentarily but was picking up in intensity once more. The wind was whistling round the house now and it was an eerie sound, a frightening sound, and God knew Nick was frightened. More frightened than he had ever been in his life before.

He thought of Tammy and the boys to stop the fear from making him turn back and run away.

The study door was open a crack. He looked through it, then pushed it further open. There was someone standing by the fireplace, his back to the door. He was wearing a ski mask and was dressed all in black. He was holding a weapon, a large hand gun, but it was dangling by his side.

He turned as Nick leaped across the room, raising the hand with the gun in it. Nick caught him with the baseball bat on the raised arm and heard the crunch of bone. The man crumpled to the floor and Nick hit him over and over again, on the head and the body, putting all his considerable strength behind the blows. This fucker was not getting up again, he would make sure of that. He was panting with exertion when he finally stopped.

In the dimness he saw that the intruder was still and breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to put on a lamp and then saw Tammy in the doorway, silent and terrified, the two boys standing to either side of her, their little faces white with fear and shock. Even in his terror at what he had done he noted how handsome they both were. He went over to them, dropping the bloody baseball bat as he ran, and gathered them up, all three of them, into his bear-like embrace.

‘It’s OK. Everything will be OK.’

He said it over and over like a mantra, his voice quavering with reaction to what he had just done, the violence of his attack. Then he ushered them from the room and across the entrance hall to the kitchen, turning on all the lights as he went. They needed light now.

The sudden glare made the boys squint and Nick smiled at them as best he could.

‘It’s all right, boys, Daddy’s here. You’re OK now.’

He hugged the two blond heads to him, felt their fear in the tremor of their narrow shoulders.

‘What’s happened *now*, Nick? What the fuck is all this about?’

Tammy grabbed her sons from him, holding them to her, all the time looking at the door, clearly wondering if the intruder was coming after them. The shock was making her teeth chatter.



## The Graft

---

‘A burglar, sweetheart. I caught him . . .’

Nick’s voice trailed off and he picked up the phone from the wall.

‘What you doing?’

‘I’m phoning the police, love.’

Tammy stared at the doorway again.

‘What if he gets up . . .’

The boys started really crying then.

Nick shook his head, trying his best to calm them all down.

‘He won’t. I promise you, he ain’t going nowhere, darlin’.’

He held up a hand to them all for quiet as he heard Emergency Services replying.

‘Police, please, we’ve been burgled. I caught the fucker . . .’

He was babbling into the receiver now. Aware of it, he passed the phone to his wife.

‘You tell them, I’ll check on him.’

‘No!’

It was a scream. Tammy dropped the phone on to the floor and started to shout in absolute terror.

‘He had a gun, Nick, I saw a gun . . . He’ll shoot us all!’

She was hysterical. By the time he had calmed her down they could already hear police sirens in the distance.

‘Oh, thank God, thank God!’

His wife ran out of the house and on to the wide driveway with her sons to greet the police and ambulances.

‘He’s got a gun . . . He’s got a gun . . .’

She was shouting it over and over again.

The police quickly moved her and the boys away from the front door and tried to calm her down. They needed to know if the intruder was still armed, if he was going to try and fight his way out of the house. They wanted to know where her husband was, if he was OK or being held hostage.

But she was past any sensible conversation and they realised it. They handed her over to the paramedics.

It was the eldest boy, Nick Junior, who filled them in on all the details they needed.

Nick Senior meanwhile returned to the study and stared at the body sprawled on the floor. Blood had pooled all around the head. He could smell its sickly sweetness. He backed away and out of the room, finally dropping down on to the small loveseat in the entrance hall when his legs wouldn’t function any more.

The police found him there with his head in his hands, muttering over and over, ‘What have I done? Dear God, what have I done tonight?’

# Book One

---

No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.

– William Shakespeare  
*Richard III* (Act I, scene ii)

Protection is not a principle but an expedient.

– Benjamin Disraeli, 1804–1881

## Chapter One

---

Tammy was finally asleep, the paramedics had seen to that, and the boys were with their nanny in the playroom. Nick could feel the silence hanging over the house and he hated it. Dawn had come and gone and somehow the day had passed. The police had talked to him, over and over, until eventually his doctor had told them he needed breathing space. He was after all in shock. Not that the police had taken that into consideration, of course.

But once they had ascertained the intruder's identity they seemed to go easier with Nick somehow. Were softer, more inclined to believe in his fear for his family. He had worried for a while that they would see him as the villain of the story and not the boy who'd been burgling his house. The world had gone mad that way lately.

His mother Angela watched the changing expressions on

her son's face and said stoutly, 'You'll be all right, Nick. No one in their right mind would give you a capture for this, son. You was defending your own.'

His mother's voice was harsh, its cockney twang seeming out of place in these palatial surroundings. She had slept through it all thanks to her penchant for a bedtime whisky.

'Let it go, Mum, eh? Make a nice cuppa.'

She plugged in the kettle but he could see the anger in her stiff shoulders and the set of her back.

He smiled gently then.

She was game, his mother, a right little firebrand. He adored her with all his being. But her mouth had often got her into trouble, not just with her family but with others who came into her orbit. Angela Leary never knew when to leave well alone.

'That little fucker was going to get a slap eventually.'

Her voice rose with her anger and her animosity at what had occurred. To enter her son's home armed! It was the gun that frightened her most, that and the fact the boy turned out to have been a known drug user and all-round thief. When the paramedic had removed his balaclava the investigating officers had instantly identified him. In fact, he was well known to all the police round about. He was in short a little fucker, and a dangerous little fucker at that.

Ignoring her son's need for peace, Angela Leary carried on talking.

'Who do these people think they are? Coming in other people's houses to rob them, *harm* them. Creeping around while decent people sleep in their beds . . . beds paid for with graft, not thievery. And he had a gun! Jesus Christ, when I think of what might have happened, I feel ill with the fright of it all. Shot in your beds, you could have been . . .'

Nick felt as if his head was going to explode at any moment.

'All right, Mum, we get the picture.'

He was shouting at her now.

She instantly came towards him, all concern. She looked old and frail and he wanted to cry with the love he felt for her then. Angela Leary had fought all her life, first to get money from the drunken sot she had married, then to put a roof over her family's heads and food in their bellies. She'd been up and out at four in the morning cleaning other people's houses, scrubbing and polishing for strangers. Then home to get her kids off to school before she was out again to work in the plastics factory in Romford. Nick adored her and never raised his voice to her but today he was on edge. He couldn't listen to her any longer.

'I'm sorry, Mum, but it's still all so raw . . .'

His voice trailed off.

‘No, I’m sorry, son, I should know when to shut me trap. But I can’t believe anyone would do that to me or mine. If I’d have got my hands on him . . .’ She shrugged. ‘Let’s hope he don’t die anyway. Let him live and go to prison. Though they don’t put them in prison now, do they? He’ll probably end up on holiday in bleeding Africa or somewhere. You know what them bleeding bleeding hearts are like!’

Nick would have laughed if he’d had a laugh left in him. Angela made the tea and carried on ranting and raving at the world but he had tuned her out now.

The boy was alive.

That was all Nick could think about.

The boy was still alive.

‘Your son is very ill, Mrs Hatcher.’

The doctor’s voice was quiet and she looked into his face steadily.

‘I ain’t surprised, are you? His head was caved in with a baseball bat.’

She laughed, a nervous high sound, and the doctor’s heart went out to her.

‘You really should think about what I said. Organ donation can be very comforting to some relatives. It’s as if a part of a person lives on . . .’

She turned on the doctor then, her eyes bright and her voice harsh with emotion.

'I ain't turning nothing off! He'll be all right. A fighter, my Sonny, a strong boy.' The tears spilled over on to her cheeks. 'He'll be all right, love him. He just needs a bit of sleep, that's all.'

The doctor shook his head at the nurse sitting beside the distraught woman and sighed.

She grabbed her son's hand once more and said gaily, 'My Sonny Boy will be awake soon. He's only seventeen. They never get up before five in the afternoon, do they, teenagers?'

She nodded at the nurse for confirmation of what she'd said. The absolute misery in the woman's eyes made the nurse feel like crying herself.

'I'll get you some more tea.'

She left the room with the doctor. Both of them knew that Sonny Hatcher would never open his eyes again. He was brain dead.

Judy Hatcher closed her eyes and tried to stem the tears. Her face was haggard, but these days it always was. Drink and drugs had seen to that. Her blond hair was greasy and scraped back off her face. Her blue eyes were listless, almost as dead as her son's, and her naturally slim body emaciated from too much vodka and a liking for weekends devoted to



cocaine and amphetamines though heroin was her drug of choice. She was supposed to be trying to get off it but methadone didn't have the same kick, the same way of obliterating all her troubles and thoughts.

She leaned over and opened her bag, taking out the photos once more.

'Here, look at this one, Sonny, you and me in Yarmouth. You was only two, remember that?'

There was hope in her voice, but in truth she hardly remembered it herself; she had been drunk and stoned for most of that holiday. Tyrell, Sonny's dad, had still been around then. He'd been so handsome; still was. She gazed sadly at the photo. Sonny was the image of him except his skin wasn't as dark.

She had left a message with Tyrell's mother and hoped he would come to see Sonny before . . . She wouldn't think about it. She wasn't turning nothing off, no matter what they said. Deep inside she wanted Tyrell to come and make the decision for her. But he was in Jamaica with his second wife and their two kids, so he had a long journey back.

Tyrell's mother was in a right state, bless her. She loved this boy but was housebound now, too scared to leave it. Jude would ring her again soon, let her know how he was. She was a good woman, old Verbena, a star really. She was the nearest thing to a mother Jude had ever had, and she

adored her eldest grandson. But then she would. She had practically brought him up.

Verbena had been good to his mother as well. She had always made sure Jude ate and tried to help her take care of herself. In fact, over the years Jude did not know what she would have done without this help.

Verbena was someone she could go to. No matter what Jude did, or more to the point didn't do, Verbena was always there for her, the only constant in her constantly changing world. She had never judged the mother of her beloved grandson, instead she had tried to understand her.

Which was no mean feat as Jude Hatcher had never really understood herself.

She wished Verbena was here now, wished Tyrell was here, wished someone, anyone, would come and take this burden from her shoulders. She had never been very good at decisions; she always made the wrong ones.

Jude rested her head on the pillow next to Sonny's and cried. She didn't know what else to do.

'He's a little bastard, it was bound to happen to him sometime.'

Detective Inspector Rudde's voice was bored-sounding. Once they had realised it was Sonny Hatcher lying broken on the study floor police interest had waned. He was a

known creeper, with a string of offences as long as his arm, and was also a mouthy, uneducated little fucker who had been done for practically everything you could be done for bar murder. And by the looks of it, if Nick Leary hadn't jobbed him he would be up for that now and all.

'He is still a human being, and there's nothing to say he was actually going to harm anyone . . .'

Peter Rudde rolled his eyes to the ceiling in annoyance, his big fat face incredulous at the inanity of what he was hearing.

'A loaded fucking gun, a farmhouse with more antiques in it than Sotheby's, and *you* think he had it for a laugh? Use your fucking loaf! No, I'm recommending to the CPS that no action be taken. Sonny Hatcher was an accident waiting to happen. Fuck me, that geezer Leary just cut our crime rate by forty per cent. They should give him a fucking medal.'

DC Ibbotson sighed. It was a waste of time trying to reason with his boss who didn't know the meaning of the word.

'What, I ask you, would Sonny Boy know about antiques?' he tried, changing tack.

'Fuck all, I should imagine. Knowing him, he would just have nicked the ashtrays. But that ain't the point. He thought there was swag there and that would be good enough for him.'