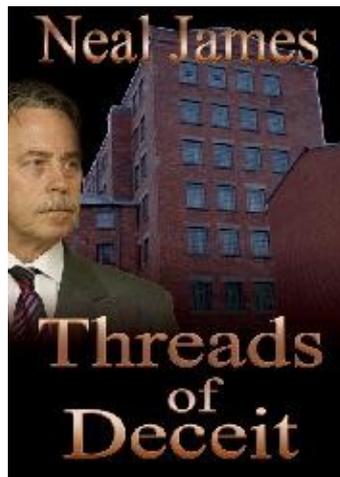


Threads of Deceit

By : **Phil Neale 1952**

George Carter is a man with problems â big ones, and of the financial kind. Accustomed to getting his own way, he rules his roost at Brodsworth Textiles with an iron fist. James Poynter is a young man out for revenge. Set up for a crime which he did not commit, and by someone whom he believed he could trust implicitly, his sole focus becomes one of retribution against his former boss and the firm which he is defrauding. His future at Brodsworth Textiles disintegrates one Friday evening prior to his wedding, when conscientiousness overtakes him and he returns to the factory after work to rectify an error in his paperwork. What he learns in that moment sets off a chain of events which sends him spiralling downwards, and out of a job which had promised to propel him to senior managerial level. Murder, deception, drug trafficking and embezzlement combine to derail the futures of everyone connected to the company, and set off a Europe-wide chase for the man at the centre of a plot so intricate, that the forces of law and order in several countries are thwarted at every turn leading to a stunning climax at Bristol Airport.



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James Poynter was at home in the shower when he remembered the production schedule for next week. It was Friday evening, and he had no option but to go back to the factory; it was vital to send the e-mail out to the shift supervisors in time for the changeover at 6am on the following Monday. He had missed it once before and, although it had been a few years ago and not long after he had joined Brodsworth Textiles, George Carter, the production director, had never let him forget. He used every opportunity to remind all those in the department who was in charge. James had an excuse, well he felt so; tonight was the evening of his stag party and, with the wedding now only one week away, his mind had been on other things. He had met Rachel Stimson at a friend's wedding three years before and, although they didn't hit it off at first, a gradual understanding developed between them and the relationship had blossomed. It had taken him quite a while to pluck up the courage to pop the question, and, in the end, he had mumbled something at the bus stop one night when he was taking her home to her flat.

“Pardon?” A mischievous look flitted across her face.

She had jet black hair, deep brown eyes which seemed to hypnotise him, and full red lips terminating in a dimple on either cheek. At five feet six she was considerably shorter than James, but made up for the lack of height with a personality which shone like a beacon.

“Will you marry me?” He leaned towards her, trying to keep the occasion as private as possible.

“James Poynter!” She hissed. “A girl likes to be proposed to properly, not whispered to in the corner of a bus stop in the rain. Do it right.”

He looked into her eyes; those deep, deep brown eyes, and he melted. His throat dried, and he glanced around nervously. The bus stop was full of passengers waiting for the last ride home, and he was certain that one or two had heard Rachel's demand. Faces suddenly turned to stare intently into the window of the draper's shop a few feet away, but glanced again in his direction as soon as he had looked back at her.

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“What?”

“I said a girl likes to be asked properly. You know?” Her eyes pointed at the ground.
“I properly.”

He could feel the back of his neck starting to burn with embarrassment, almost as if thirty additional sets of eyes were boring holes into it. He cleared his throat and shuffled his feet as Rachel stood expectantly before him. It was now or never, and he was down on one knee in a flash.

“Rachel Stimson,” he said, arms outstretched in supplication, “Will you be my wife?”

Her face was a picture of horror as she looked down at his kneeling form. He had now clasped his hands almost in a gesture of prayer, and was staring up at her in anticipation of an answer. She had never believed for one single moment that he would go through with it. The nondescript chatter of the bus queue had now ceased as everyone stood with bated breath at the drama unfolding before them – you could have heard a pin drop. The frieze-like quality of the event was broken by a middle-aged woman standing just behind James.

“Go on dearie, what you waiting for? He might not ask again, and then where would you be?”

A mumbled agreement of all those in attendance, and a communal nodding of heads, had Rachel on the back foot as James remained, trousers now becoming wet in the evening rain, statuesque in his position at her feet.

“Oh! Err...well, yes, alright! I will, yes I will. Now get up off your knees and stop being daft!”

She had turned a brilliant shade of red, and was feeling distinctly uncomfortable in her heavy winter coat. To thunderous applause Poynter got up, and Rachel’s blushes were saved by the arrival of the bus. They had laughed about it many times since, and a few of those in the queue that night had reminded them of the incident on a number of occasions.

That was then; this was now, and if he didn’t get back to the office before Carter found out – and the man always did – there would be hell to pay. Getting dressed quickly he was off back to work, and, looking at his watch, worked out that he had a couple of hours to spare so that he would not be late for the evening’s festivities. The front of the factory was in darkness as he pulled into the parking bays on the

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corner of the site, and normally he would have had to disable the burglar alarm system before getting past the reception area. Total silence greeted his entry into the building and, although it was not unusual for staff to be working after hours with the doors locked, he found it odd that all the lights were out without the security systems being activated. James checked the time at 6.34pm; he made a mental note to mention the matter on the following Monday, to George Carter.

Brodsworth Textiles occupied an almost cathedral-like structure in the West End of Taunton, at the junction of Bridge Street and Brook Street. From the towering former silk factory of Longs Mill at its south-eastern boundary, an iconoclastic tribute to Victorian expertise rising some ten stories, to the more modest but no less awe-inspiring Abells Mill at the north-western tip, it had been the brainchild of Matthew Brodsworth's grandfather, Nathan, in the inter-war years. The central nave of these two giants housed the power house of the company's output. The Centre Mill, forming the central bar of the H-shaped structure, ran some two hundred feet in length, and was the main productive facility on the site. At its zenith, the Brodsworth family reigned supreme from the suite of offices which currently served the present incumbent, Nathan's grandson, Malcolm.

The production office was located on the first floor, with access to the factory via the mezzanine walkway which led out from the administration block. Sprinting up the stairs, and with no time to spare for idle speculation, he switched on the lights in the area which housed Carter's production staff, and logged on to the computer network. A few clicks of the mouse were enough to ensure that the missing schedule found its way to the correct workgroup in time for the shift change. That now done, James switched off the computer, made sure that all the lights were out, and returned to reception. Setting the alarm to secure the premises, he made his way back to the car park and got into his Astra. He re-checked the time; he had just over an hour to get home, change, and get the bus back into town for the evening planned with his mates. He would just about make it.

Leaving the car park, and heading for the ring road at the end of the street, the route took him past the main goods inwards yard, and although it too was in darkness, the gate was open and a lorry was stationary just inside. It was a flat bed with tarpaulins which were currently on the ground, and the payload area was half full of cartons. Poynter slowed down as he drove past, but moved on again when figures appeared in the yard pushing sack trucks of double-stacked cartons. He turned left at the end of the street, and hard left again to take him round the block once more; there was time enough for one more look before he went home.

This time, James parked the car short of the yard and round the top corner of Brook Street. Remaining in the shadows on the opposite side of the road, he made his way silently down towards the factory gate until he stood opposite the lorry. There was no doubt about it now. His first thought had been that of a late delivery of yarn the company had always kept a substantial level of raw material stocks - but these cartons were being loaded and taken away. He had seen no order sheet for either returns or sales, and although that sometimes initially took place without the instruction, it was unusual for there to have been no paperwork. In any case, he should have been informed about it verbally in advance to forewarn him of the effect on stock levels. He frowned at this didn't feel right. Three figures suddenly appeared out of the yarn store doorway and into the light cast by a full moon in a cloudless sky, and he shrank back to the wall of the builders merchant's premises. He turned up the collar of his fleece as a brisk wind whistled down the

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street.

Holding his breath, he could hear voices from across the street. The lorry pulled out of the yard, parked up, and was silent. The large green gate swung into place. A figure appeared out of the small recessed wicket gate and approached the vehicle. James saw a white envelope pass from one of the men now getting into the lorry to the suited figure on its right hand side. With tarpaulins once more secured, the vehicle started up again and, in a cloud of fumes, headed off for the ring road and the motorway. Minutes later it was gone, leaving the solitary figure standing in the centre of the goods inwards yard entrance. The man opened the envelope and flipped through its contents. Clearly happy with what he found, he stowed it away into the inside pocket of his coat and looked around prior to locking the gate for the night. It was only when he moved back to the wicket gate that James caught a glimpse of his face under the security floodlight. It was all that he could do to keep silent; the man before him, not fifty feet away, was none other than George Carter himself.

Now James understood why the security system had not been active when he had initially returned to the office. The factory area was on a separate circuit covered from the yarn store office, and he needed to get away before Carter triggered the sensors which covered the interior of the administration block. Once his boss was back inside, James was off at a run, inside the Astra, and away from the premises. At the bottom of the street he heard the familiar klaxon sounds of the intruder alarm blaring out from the front of the property; linked to the emergency services, it was sure to herald the arrival, shortly afterwards, of at least one police squad car, and would leave Carter to face the embarrassment of explaining his presence on the premises at that hour.

All the way home, he turned the events of the last hour over and over in his mind in an attempt to make some sense of what he had seen. The lorry carried no identifying marks that he could make out and, in the fast fading light, it did not seem to bear the livery of any of the company's regular suppliers. The fact that Carter appeared to be the only company representative on site also made the entire event seem extremely suspicious. A rough estimate of the number of cartons on the back of the vehicle led James to suppose that around twenty boxes of yarn had been removed from the stores, and this would represent a weight of approximately a tonne of raw materials. Depending on the type of yarn in the consignment, the value involved could easily be in the region of two and a half to three thousand pounds. An envelope had changed hands, of that there was no doubt, and assuming that some sort of discount for the risk involved was given to the customer, George Carter could have walked away with a cash sum of around fifteen hundred.

By the time he reached his flat, James's head was spinning with a myriad of possibilities, and all through the evening's celebrations with friends, his mind would be elsewhere as he struggled to come to terms with his position. He had a number of options, that was clear, but what to do was quite another matter. His immediate future was tied to the company as he progressed through a professional course funded by the firm's training programme. With one year left to go with the Institute of Management, a universally recognised qualification at the end of it, and a substantial uplift in position and salary, he could not afford to ruin his chances by some precipitate action which may have a totally innocent explanation. On the other hand, if he kept his mouth shut and the matter subsequently came out into the open, he could be deemed to be as guilty as the perpetrator himself. If *that* got back to the Institute, he would almost certainly face expulsion and the loss of a very promising career.

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A shove in the back snapped him out of his thoughts, as his mates shepherded him towards the door of the first of what was to be a number of drinking establishments during the evening and early morning. He laughed, and joined in the good-natured horseplay as they made their way further into town, and the night club area of the place. Next week would come around soon enough, and he banished all thoughts of the earlier incident from his mind for the rest of the weekend.

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