

Annie

She was getting too old for this game, Annie decided.

It was a straightforward job, the bald man had said. In through a window which would be left open for her. Negotiate the machinery on the factory floor. Upstairs to the manager's office - the door would be unlocked. The safe was a SecuriFirst type 3B, a small model about five years old, with the usual combination lock. Not a problem for you, Annie, he'd said. He was right, of course - she'd cracked a few of those in her time. The documents would be in there, and all she needed to do was to photograph them, put them back, and make her escape. It would be a doddle, he said. And she would get £5,000.

"Why can't you get them some other way - hacking or fracking or whatever it's called?" she'd asked.

Apparently hacking had been tried, and hadn't worked. Annie got the impression that the bald man was annoyed about it. She was told not to ask questions, just do her job.

Out of habit, and mindful of her reputation for driving a hard bargain, she insisted on a better deal. £4,000 in the hand to get her agreement, and another £4,000 later, once he was satisfied that the photos were OK. The bald man agreed - rather too quickly, Annie realised. She wished she'd asked for more.

She was handed a phone to take the photos with. Annie made a fuss. She didn't understand smartphones. How does it take pictures, she wanted to know. The bald man got even more annoyed, but spent several minutes showing her what to do, until he seemed reasonably happy she had got the hang of it.

Annie made her way home and stashed her £4,000 in the top drawer in her bedroom, under all her knickers. She idly wondered who the real clients were. The Chinese, or maybe the Russians? The North Koreans? How much were they paying the bald guy for the documents?

She went to bed with a cup of Horlicks at eight, but woke at half-past midnight. A couple of hours later, she drove carefully to the target location. It was now 4 AM, and down the lane to the left of the factory's main entrance a window was open, as promised. It was a bit higher than she'd expected. She went back to the car to fetch her stool, and stood on it to heave her arthritic body through the window. It was a white plastic stool, and she hadn't thought to find a way to pull it up after her. Nobody would notice it, though. Probably.

The dim safety lights helped her weave her way around the machinery. The stairs, when she found them, were steeper and longer than she'd expected, and she was wheezing a bit when she got to the top. The office door was ajar, and street light reflecting off the ceiling gave a creepy orange glow to the room.

Annie dropped her backpack full of tools by the safe, knelt down with her joints creaking, and swapped her varifocals for a pair of reading glasses. The important thing was to be methodical. This type of lock had a 'slop' of several degrees, so it was only necessary to try every second number for each digit in the combination. A really good sense of touch was her main weapon, but vision was vital too, and she had a small head torch to help her see as well as feel the tiny movement in the dial when one of the fences dropped inside the lock. A sense of hearing was not much help, she'd found. Just as well, since she was getting somewhat deaf.

It took forty minutes of delicate manipulation, but eventually the last fence dropped down. She sighed with relief, turned the handle to withdraw the bolts, and pulled open the heavy door. Behind her, unnoticed, a tiny red light started flashing in a panel on the wall.

The safe held a single folder of documents. She began systematically photographing every page. There were lots of diagrams, and many pages had handwritten annotations and amendments. It took about ten minutes, then she replaced the folder and closed the safe. Only then did she notice the blinking red light.

Ah, she thought. That wasn't blinking earlier. Better get a move on.

As she hastened downstairs and breathlessly trotted the length of the factory floor to the window, she wondered if the alarm might end up being a blessing in disguise. A police car would be on its way.

Thankfully it wasn't difficult to heave herself up to the window from the inside. As she awkwardly levered herself through and felt for the stool with her feet, she was grabbed from behind. Someone lifted her up bodily, like a baby, and put her down unceremoniously, still holding her arms, in front of a second person.

It was the bald man.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "I told you I'd bring the photos tomorrow."

"It is already tomorrow. Mister Fury, would you find my phone please."

The other man kept firm hold of her left arm as he rooted around in her backpack.

He retrieved the phone and tossed it to the bald man.

"I want the rest of my money!" Annie insisted.

"I have the phone and the photos. You've already been well paid. Goodbye, Annie."

Rubbing her left arm, Annie watched them walk off towards their large black Range Rover. As they jumped in their car and roared off, a police car appeared round the corner, paused briefly by the factory entrance, then switched on its siren and gave chase to the fleeing intruders.

Down the lane, unnoticed, Annie collected her white plastic stool and trudged in the opposite direction back to her tiny grey car. Idiots, she thought. If they get caught, it serves them right. If not, well, wait till they find the malware I installed in their precious smartphone.

She felt for her own smartphone, strapped to the inside of her thigh. She wondered how much bitcoin she could get for the photos on the dark web. Maybe she wasn't too old for this game after all.