

# CHAPTER 1

I drop from the window and land in the freshest dog turd north of Carlisle. My new, but somewhat distressed, loafers soak up some juice and the tread greedily accepts the new filling. I want to curse, but silence is needed. Silence is demanded. I trail my non-excrement-laden shoe across the small flower border. A lawn, dark in the moonlight, stretches out before me. I can't see the far end in the gloom. To be fair I couldn't have seen the far end in the noonday sun with a pair of binoculars and Google Maps open on my iPhone. This is not a lawn cut by a fifty-quid Flymo from B&Q. It's one that requires the services of a top of the range John Deere industrial-grade tractor and cutting set. I have a vision of dropping the turd-laying dog into the blades and starting it up.

I scrape the dog dirt shoe across the lawn in a lame attempt to rid me of the worst of the, now smelling, mess. Knocking the crust off one is never a good mood enhancer. This one seems to release the sort of scent that suggests the dog has a regular evening diet of meat vindaloo, eight cans of Special Brew and a fully loaded kebab.

I rub the shoe a little more, this time at an angle, but time is not a friend. Escaping from a window is not a method chosen by those with hours to spare. I move to my left, keeping the side of the enormous house close at hand.

I say 'house,' but the house is a house in the same way that Cunard liners are considered rowing boats. As one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in Scotland it has little in

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common with what I call home, other than it sports the required walls, roof and windows.

I know the risk I'm taking. My heart is reminding me one hundred and thirty times a minute. I scuttle along, waiting on the beam of a searchlight from on high, or the sound of a siren. It is not inconceivable that, at this moment, a pack of slobbering Rottweilers are sniffing my spare underpants and being given instructions to seek, kill and eat. As to the probable appearance of heavyweight armoury, well, that's as likely as the dogs. Maybe a manhunt with me as the live bait. I shit you not. This is not mad imagination running away with itself. This is all based on the most likely of reactions when the owner of this pile establishes what I've just done.

I reach *a* corner, not *the* corner, of the house, for this house has many corners. Too many to dick around with. At some point I need to cut loose and make a break for it. However, given the scale of the openness surrounding me, I need to choose my moment. The nearest road is five miles away and public transport from here to the road is strictly for paying guests at the weekend. For the sake of clarity, the estate owns its own London Routemaster for the convenience of the public. No cars are allowed in and the public only gain access because of the enormous tax burden that would ensue were the house not a visitor attraction.

Gravel is next. And gravel is a noisy bastard. It may reek of upper class wealth and sound wonderful under the tyres of a newly minted Range Rover, but it doesn't make for a quiet getaway. There's no silent way to walk on the stuff. If you slow down it just advertises the fact that you've slowed down. Speed up, and it telegraphs the increase in velocity. It is also non-skirtable. The stones are a moat to a castle. At a minimum, a hundred yards wide. At the maximum, twice that.

I have no intention of walking the five miles to the gate, partly because there's a further twelve miles of single-track road to negotiate beyond. Partly because I have an aversion to

walking that delayed my first steps until I was four years old. But, in the main, because I won't get five miles. The security around here will pick me up in less than a quarter of that distance. I may have got lucky with the window, but the motion detectors are relentless around here. My only option is to steal a car from the eight-car garage that lies next to the south wing of the house. Even that's a long shot, but having now done what I have done—I've no choice.

The garage is a brick-faced work of art lying near the mansion's main door. It would serve as a luxury example of residency in any city suburb. All the doors are automatic, all the doors are alarmed, and none of the metal that sits behind the solid oak barriers has a price tag south of six figures. The lack of car keys is a bit of a hindrance. The lack of remote controls for the doors is also an issue. The noise when I fire up a car won't help either—it'll echo around the courtyard, that forms the sweeping entrance to the house, with the sort of volume that would wake a dead whale. All in all, this is not a plan that is, in any way, connected to what a dictionary would describe as a plan. The odds against me succeeding are greater than Pelé making a shock return to football to play for Albion Rovers.

I place my non-caked foot on the driveway and wince at the sound. I take a second step and cringe. A third and I'm scanning the world for signs of life. Step by step I make a crow look wayward as I crunch my way to the garage.

I try to keep my mind on the task at hand. With the threat of a bullet up the backside, or worse, it should be easy, but it isn't. A few years ago, after a major brush with the crime world, I vowed never to get involved in anything more exciting than a stag night, if said stag night was held at a monastery, was booze-free and had me as the sole attendee. I had promised in more ways than I thought possible that I would spend the rest of my accountancy days in dull, number land.

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For the last few years I have aged poorly and added little to my bank balance. My job vanished, only to be born again when an old friend called me and asked if I could help with his tax. Without the regular, if not substantial, salary afforded me by my previous employers—Cheedle, Baker and Nudge—I negotiated a rate and undersold myself. I found the job less than demanding and...

The call of an owl takes me back to the reality of my current world. The garage in front of me has the appearance of a small castle. At some point in the not too distant past, the owners of the house had grown tired of parking their cars in the open. With each lump of metal costing the price of a small semi in Simshill, it was unthinkable that the elements would be allowed to tarnish the unblemished paintwork.

A crenelated wall tops the building, with the eight doors evenly spaced beneath. Inside is a slab of concrete the size of four tennis courts. The cars will be lined up against the back wall. At least that's what I'd been told last night.

At the far end of the garage, just visible in the light of a quarter moon, is a door for the humans to enter by. Earlier that night I had seen it used on a frequent basis. I was praying that, in the fug of the party, no one had remembered to lock it. A small pile of cigarette butts lies next to it, guarded by a collection of beer and champagne bottles. I flick a look at my ancient iPhone and need to get a shift on.

The door handle is cold in my hand. It's round, smooth, golden, with a button in the middle that, if depressed, will pop the lock. If it doesn't depress then I'm on Shanks's pony and, in all honesty, dead.

I place my forefinger on the button and rub it, circling the indent in the metal where the button meets the handle. I put some pressure on and back off. I don't want a negative. I want the damn thing just to press in. I look at the house door, still, silent, solid. I check the lower windows and all is dark. I check the rows above and still no light. I scan the skylights

and a dim glow burns behind a curtain. I freeze and lock my eyes on the light. I wait to see movement, shadows, or any sign that someone is up. I sigh with relief when the faintest sound of a flushing toilet brushes my ears. I see the light flick out as the last of the flush from the toilet drifts away.

I take the count in my head up to twenty and, without conscious thought, press the button in the handle. It depresses with a satisfying click—and I thank the god of small buttons. I go on to say a prayer to the god of car keys, remote controls, quiet driveways, open gates and any other deity that can help me put distance between my current location and one that's a lot safer. Although I'll never be safe, not with what I now know. Not ever.