

CARBON GAME

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Chapter 1
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CHAPTER 1

Britain: February

At 06:16 on an unusually cold morning in late winter, a grey Sherpa van waited forty yards from the road junction of Ampsden Road and Hawley Way near Heathrow Airport, on the outskirts of the light industrial centre. In the front sat two men with black woollen hats pulled down so low they partially covered their faces. From their position, the vehicle could not be seen from the innocuous-looking single-storey grey-clad building approximately four hundred yards away. The only distinguishing features of the building were the numerous CCTV cameras and bright lights.

At 06:27 an old Toyota passed the van and stopped at the junction to turn left. At that moment the driver looked in his rear-view mirror and flashed his hazard warning lights twice. The van driver flashed his lights once in response. The car turned left and continued on, then paused at the security gate of the grey building and drove into the car park. A very thin young man with ragged shoulder-length blonde hair got out, a self-made cigarette dangling from the corner of his thin lips, and casually sauntered over to the entrance. He took a quick glance behind him and, flicking his cigarette to the ground, pressed the buzzer. It crackled into life.

'It's John,' said the scrawny character, jumping up and down, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his Securelock jacket. 'Let us in. It's bloody freezing out here.'

'Nah, it can't be John White. He never gets here on time,' came the reply.

The buzzer went and, chuckling quietly to himself, John White went into a large cargo vehicle bay. Inside, the place was alive with electronic devices; the whole area was screened by cameras.

'How come you're on time, then?' said Reynolds, who was in charge of this particular shift. He was ex-army, stocky and in his mid-forties.

'Give me a fuckin' break,' White mumbled. He picked his nose as they walked, rolled his capture into a ball and flicked it. 'What's my task for today, then, sir?' He unwrapped some chewing gum, wishing he could tell his boss what he really thought of him.

'We've got a pickup in an hour and a quarter. You're doing the paperwork ... And do up your shirt.' Without waiting for an answer Reynolds turned and walked away, muttering to himself.

White stuck a finger under his nose and did a Nazi salute. He looked at his watch: 06:36.

Up a small narrow staircase to his right was the security control room from where all the security cameras were monitored. The room was situated up from ground level and could only be reached by the staircase which climbed eight or nine feet. At control-room level there was a flimsy glazed wooden door. Taking the steps two at a time, he reached the door and went in to find Nigel Greaves with his feet up on the control panel, a cup of tea in one hand and a copy of *The Sun* newspaper in the other.

'Stop looking at those tits, you filthy bastard,' said White in a jokey manner. 'Your hands is shaking, so just think what it's doing to your heart.'

‘You can talk, you filthy bastard! You just want to have a gawp too,’ replied Greaves lightly without looking up.

‘How was your weekend then, Greavsey?’ White asked, looking over his mate’s shoulder at the topless beauty on Page Three.

‘Had a bird just like this one on Friday night. She couldn’t keep her hands off me all night. Took me the weekend to recover. Still feeling a bit sore.’ Greaves grinned and rubbed his crotch for emphasis.

White knew that Greavsey was no stud. He was fat and balding and despite being twenty-six years old, still lived at home with his parents. He existed in a fantasy world fuelled by porn mags.

‘Yeah, I bet she was a right goer,’ said White. ‘You make me right jealous, mate.’ He picked up Greavsey’s mug of tea and took a slurp. ‘Seriously, mate, I need your help to shift something. It’ll only take a min.’

‘No can do.’

‘My, my, we are keen today! What’s up? Is it promotion you’re afta?’

‘Rules is rules and I’m not allowed to take my eyes off those little screens, so I can’t help.’

‘Yeah, I noticed how much attention you was paying.’

They both laughed.

‘Come on, or that effing bastard will only give me more agg. He’s right on my back already. There’s nuffink happening until the truck gets in, and that’s not for over an hour.’

‘Oh, alright – but you owe me, right?’

White grinned and gestured with a curved sweep of his right arm and a slight dip of his head for Greavsey to leave first. Just before White followed Greavsey down the stairs he turned and re-entered the room, leaned over the electronic panel and flicked several switches, then casually picked up the newspaper and joined his mate, jibing him again about looking at girlie pictures.

Nobody saw them come in. No bells or alarms went off. There was nothing but the sight and sound of four men dressed in black brandishing guns and batons.

‘Everyone get down. Say nothing. Get down now,’ ordered a large burly man wearing a black balaclava and wielding a pump-action shotgun. Behind him were three others.

Reynolds had been on his way up to the vault via the ramp when he heard the voice. Immediately he had looked to the control room, but saw White and Greaves standing next to each other downstairs.

‘What the hell—’ he began to say and grunted as the butt of a gun hit him in the lower gut, forcing him to double up and fall to his knees.

The man wielding the gun pushed him so that he keeled over onto his side.

‘He told you to get down, baldy, right?’ The man didn’t wait for an answer but kicked him hard, prompting Reynolds to grunt again.

‘Oy! Enough! We need him,’ said the leader as he came over to Reynolds. He had immediately recognised Reynolds from the inside information given to him and also from his name on the front of his Securelock jacket. ‘Bind him,’ said the man and walked off.

The only sound in the room was the low deep hum of the ventilation system.

The other five security guards, seeing the treatment doled out to Reynolds, were lying flat on the ground on their stomachs, their hands behind their backs waiting to be bound. After a short time Reynolds started to groan, but this annoyed one of the balaclavaed men who came and stood by him and gave him a nudge with his boot as a warning.

Another man completely dressed in black arrived on the scene. Each guard was forcibly grabbed, their head yanked up and a canvas sack pulled over it and tightened.

Then they were all dragged into the centre of the room and left there lying on their fronts a few feet apart.

‘Which one of you is Smith?’ asked the one in charge.

No one said anything.

‘*WHICH ONE OF YOU IS SMITH?* If you don’t answer, I’ll blow someone’s balls off,’ said the leader. The prostrate guards visibly flinched in terror.

One of the guards muttered something barely audible. He was immediately grabbed, had his name tag checked and then dragged away from the others to join Reynolds who was in more control of himself. At fifty-four Rodney Smith was the oldest of the guards. He was thin with mouse-like features, and had little going for him except many years’ loyal service with Securelock, which had led to him being entrusted with part of the combination for the vault on this shift. Reynolds had been given responsibility for the other part.

There was the sound of a lock turning and it was obvious to the remaining guards that the barred door leading to the main vault had been opened. The first door served as more of a visual deterrent, designed to impress likely customers. It was the door after that, the main vault door, that was the real obstacle to the robbers. It was nearly two feet thick and constructed of high tensile steel. Contained within the door was a mechanism which, when turned, caused the twelve steel pins to engage with the frame. The walls surrounding the vault were four feet thick and almost impenetrable. Access to the door was very confined, with just enough room for two people to stand side by side.

Reynolds and Smith, the sacks still over their heads, were harshly pushed against the main vault door while the men in black stood behind them. Reynolds was still feeling weak and was leaning heavily against the vault door for support. They heard the faint sound of a metal cap being unscrewed and the shrill noise as it was tossed across the

steel grating onto the floor. Both guards were then pinned against the door as a can was waved under their noses. Petrol fumes wafted up.

The guards shrank against the door in terror.

'Now then, gents, let's just see what good company men you really is,' said the leader in a very measured, menacing tone.

Laughter emanated from the other one, its resonance so out of place that it only heightened the fear in Reynolds and Smith.

Petrol was poured over Reynolds. It soaked into his clothing and undergarments and stung his genitals. Then the can was passed to the other man who poured it over Smith who was nearly frozen in fear.

'Oh, my God, no, no, no,' screamed Smith in terror and began to feebly struggle, but a thick arm pushed him back against the door.

'Keep fucking still.' Resignation washed over Smith. Reynolds was pulled away from the door but turned so that he faced the vault. The hand which gripped him then pushed him hard so that his knees partially buckled. Then his hands were cut free and the canvas bag removed.

The first thing he saw was the faint gleam of the stainless steel door. He looked up to see the reflection of his captor enshrined by the glow of the overhead light: he had an awesome, almost unrealistic, image. All he could see was the black balaclava and two faintly visible eyes. Reynolds lurched towards the door, slightly breaking his fall with his right arm.

'Don't pass out on us, you fucking bastard.' The leader pulled Reynolds upright. 'Right, now get your fucking fingers working ... or else.' Reynolds saw the man flick open the lid of a Zippo and slowly curl his thumb over the strike plate to indicate that next time he would light him up like a candle. The air stank of petrol fumes and Reynolds shook his head trying to clear the nausea.

'I'm okay,' muttered Reynolds.

He felt the man behind him relax slightly and close the lid of the lighter. Smith, to his right, had his head bowed and was shaking and whimpering.

'Get on with it,' said the leader, pushing the barrel of a shotgun into Reynolds' left shoulder.

Reynolds had the combination to the upper tumbler. Six numbers had to be entered going left to right, but first he had to set the tumbler to zero. He performed the operation that he had carried out hundreds of times before, then reached up to pull down the lever to the right of the tumbler. The unlocking of the lever made a loud, dull clunk.

Reynolds' relief was short-lived. He was immediately grabbed by the back of his shirt, turned and had his hands bound again. Then he was forced to kneel. When he looked over his shoulder, Smith had had his canvas bag and bonds removed. One of the men had the barrel of a shotgun in the nape of Smith's neck.

'Your turn now, mate.' As the man spoke he jerked the gun slightly so that Smith's head moved in a nodding-dog fashion.

In the same position that Reynolds had taken up, Smith faced the steel door and was muttering to himself. 'I can't do this. He's going to torch me. I can't do this,' he said over and over again, getting faster each time he said it.

Reynolds silently urged him to concentrate.

Smith fumbled with the tumbler. His hands were shaking and his mind was a fog of terror.

'What's up with you, you fucking little prat? Do you want me to torch you?' He was shown the lighter again and the repeated movement of the thumb.

'Oh, God, no, no, no, no. He's going to burn me,' Smith squealed in terror and collapsed in a heap. The small space was filled with the smell of shit and urine darkened his trousers.

'You ain't going to get the fire out that way, you bastard,' said the man standing behind Smith. He grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him hard against the door.

'I'll do it,' said Reynolds weakly.

'Shut it. He's got to do it,' said the man standing behind Reynolds.

'Nah,' said the leader. 'If you want to be the hero, you do it.'

The two security guards swapped places with Smith, kneeling next to Reynolds, both facing the door, their captors standing behind them with their guns placed at their necks. Reynolds' hands were cut free again. In a firm voice he asked Smith for the combination numbers.

Smith called them out to him in a quiet, shaky voice while Reynolds carefully turned the tumblers. When he had finished he took a deep breath, prayed a short silent prayer and pulled down on the lever. It unlocked. Smith was immediately yanked backwards and thrown against the iron railings where he remained, shaking and whimpering. Reynolds turned the vault wheel and opened the door. Inside, stacked neatly on several trolleys, were many large green tins.

Reynolds was dragged over to where Smith was and had his hands bound again. They were lying next to each other, face downwards. While the gang leader went into the vault, the nutter with the lighter was left to keep an eye on them.

'I ought to torch you, you lump of yella shit,' he said.

He kicked Smith and placed the gun in the middle of his back. In utter terror Smith quaked even more. Reynolds could feel him and was relieved when the leader came back from the vault.

'Get these two wankers out of the way,' the leader said. 'Get the van and load up the tins now. Come on, get on with it.'

Smith and Reynolds were pulled further across the floor to make way for the van. They were a few feet apart but did

not say anything to each other. Smith was in no condition to speak as he was half curled up, shaking and whimpering. The criminals loaded the van in a matter of minutes. The leader banged on the van's side and it moved to the main exit door where it waited with its engine running.

'Right, get these two with the others,' said the leader who walked off to the main area.

The nutter with the lighter came over and placed his foot on Smith's back preventing him from getting up. At the same time he nudged Reynolds with his gun.

'You heard him – get up.'

As Reynolds raised his head, he could see that it was just the three of them. His mind began to race. He knew that just inside the vault there was an emergency alarm button. If he could get to that, the police would be there in a few minutes. As he began to rise he saw that the gun was pointed at Smith's head.

'Oy, what's taking so long?' called out another member of the gang.

'Here, you take this one.' The nutter jabbed the now erect Reynolds in the stomach, forcing him to stumble backwards. 'Here, put this on 'im,' he said, throwing a canvas bag at his mate. 'I'll bring this one.'

Reynolds was led to the toilets where he found the other four guards. In the small space they were sitting up against the wall with their legs outstretched and hands bound behind their backs.

As soon as Reynolds had been led away the nutter had taken out his cigarettes and using the lighter he had petrified the guards with earlier, lit one and taken a few deep drags. He had then walked a few steps away from Smith who had stayed as still as he could. Just as Smith smelled the first wisps of smoke the nutter flicked the cigarette.