

Barry Vernon had every reason to be pleased with himself as he sat behind the smart mahogany desk in his well-appointed office, closing the lid on his laptop. He had beaten the system, he had played the game and won. It really shouldn't have surprised anyone who knew him, after all, Barry Vernon was the smartest person that Barry Vernon knew, and the phone call he had just taken confirmed that for him, once and for all.

His lawyer had been brief. The CPS had considered the case and decided that since it couldn't be sure what money had gone missing, even though it was fairly sure some had, there was no realistic chance of a prosecution. It meant that the shell companies of which he was a silent partner would face no further probing, and that the links to the companies where the money had gone, would remain unnoticed, and Barry Vernon could begin to think about that early retirement. Somewhere hot. Somewhere easy going. Somewhere without an extradition treaty. Just in case.

He was of course a cautious man. That was probably why he got away with it, that necessity to take the extra precaution, that need to never feel complacent or comfortable. A little part of him knew he might never feel completely safe ever again, there was still that slight nagging in the back of his mind, but he figured that sooner or later, as with everything, he'd get over it. Time's a great healer and all that.

He pushed back from his chair, contemplating his next move. It was going to be in many ways the one that he would feel the most regret over, at least in the short term. He was heading to the airport, to get that flight out of the country, and start his new life. It meant leaving his wife and his kids behind. The kids, he would contact them, and tell them where he was. They were all adults now, grown up and flown the nest, and capable of making their own decisions. He knew sooner or later, with a few gifts sent their way, they would forgive

him, and their relationship would pull through. After all, they were his kids, and money talked.

His wife, Jenna, was a different story. They'd been married twenty-seven years now, and certainly for the most part they'd been good. In the early days, they'd been great, but like so many people, as age had caught up with them, that spark had gone, and now he had the chance to find it somewhere else. He was no fool, he knew that any young gold digger that showed an interest in him, was doing it as much for the money, as they were anything else, but in the end, who the hell cared? He wasn't looking for a soul mate now, he was looking to feel good.

He knew Jenna would never truly understand what he had done, and he reassured himself that she would never, ever be able to live a life on the lamb, living off what, in truth, were stolen monies. Jenna Vernon was a good, and honourable lady. Too good for him. In truth, he was doing her the biggest favour of all, he surmised.

He took one last look around the office, drinking in his surroundings. This had been the epicentre of his enterprises, both criminal and legitimate. He'd spent the last eight years here, pushing his brand to the position where he'd been given the trust to look after public funds. That had been an incredible honour, and one he had originally revelled in, and embraced.

He'd never thought this would be how it would end, of course. He never once thought he would be the one who was on the take, but here he was. Like so many good men before him, when the chance came, it became irresistible. At first, he had just wondered if he could get away with it, and then, he had realised that he could, and in doing so, he made himself a criminal. He let that concept resonate around his head for a moment. A criminal, albeit one who had got away with it. He sighed, then stood up. Time to go.

The laptop, on which so much of his work had been done, was quickly slipped into his briefcase and, his coat slipped on, before he stepped out into the office. Louisa, his secretary sat opposite. She had no clue what her boss had done. He often wondered if he should have told her. Perhaps Louisa was one of those girls who were seduced by bad boys and money, but he had stopped that little fantasy in her tracks. As pretty as Louisa was, she wasn't worth the stretch. He smiled at her as he went to leave. She was on the phone and she waved at him, urgently, trying to catch his attention.

“Mr Vernon, I've got a call for you.”

“Tell them I've gone fishing,” he replied, before adding, “Have a nice weekend.”

And then he was gone. Out of the door. A free man, a new man. In seconds, he was out in the street, and that's when it started to hit him, the magnitude of not only what he had done, but what he had succeeded in getting away with. The sun seemed a little brighter, the air a little fresher. He felt seventeen and full of bluster.

Had he been a little less preoccupied with that, he might have noticed the tall, muscular man in the black leather biker jacket, with the cropped brown hair, hanging up his phone as he spotted him. He might have noticed that as he reached the corner to turn towards the multi-storey car park, that the tall man was following him, rapidly closing the gap between the two. But he didn't, and he was blissfully unaware, basking in his own brilliance, just the split second before the man's hand clasped firmly on around the top of his elbow.

“Barry Vernon.” The voice was gruff, uncompromising. It should have been a question, but there was no doubt, that the man knew who he had in his grip.

“What...” Barry stammered for a second trying to compose himself. “Who are you?”

There was no answer.

“This way.” The stranger pulled at his Barry’s arm forcefully, directing him towards the far reaches of the car park, and a plain, inconspicuous white van.

The pace was quick, and Barry, even though he prided himself on being in good shape for his age, found himself quick stepping alongside the stranger, just to keep up with his assertive strides. He wanted to ask more questions, but he knew that silence was the smarter move right now. If he was in immediate danger of being killed, he would be dead already, and there would be time for a man of Barry’s expertise to talk himself out of trouble later, of that he was sure.

As they approached the van, a sliding door on the side of it opened, revealing another man inside. Shorter than his companion, although that was to be expected, given the law of averages, and certainly around the six-foot mark himself, if not passing it. He had wavy black hair, curling on top of his head, and a slightly cheeky smile on his face, which seemed to seep out of him, even as now he tried to scowl as Barry was thrust in his direction.

The first stranger pushed Barry towards the van, releasing his arm. “In,” he ordered.

Barry stumbled forward, into the grasp of the other man, who hauled him into the back of the van, before Barry could even think about attempting to affect an escape. The door slid shut, Barry and the second man disappearing into the van. The first man walked round the cab of the van, and into the driver’s seat.

At some point on the journey, the smaller man in the back had placed a hood over Barry’s head. Barry had at first felt the panic strike him, as his sight was taken, but then his analytical brain began to contemplate why that had happened. Whoever they were didn’t want him to see where they were going, or who they were going to see, one of the two, and therefore, that meant he was probably going to live, as long as he didn’t do anything stupid of course.

With that thought implanted in his mind, he relaxed and then began to consider who had taken him. There was no doubt that this wasn't law enforcement. No agency in this country would ever adopt such draconian methods as lifting someone off the street and bagging them. Certainly, not one he had ever heard of. Even the SIS was scared of its own shadow to a certain degree now, following its implication in the rendition cases with the USA. No, this was something else.

That left private enterprise. Which meant that he had probably been earmarked as an asset by someone from within the criminal fraternity. That of course had always been an issue with the scheme he had set up, especially once investigations began into what he had done. He had pulled off a plan that had worked, and made him money. Why wouldn't someone want him to replicate that?

As the drive went on, he became more and more convinced of this being the likely outcome. So, what then, should he do when the inevitable 'offer' was put to him? There was little doubt he would have to take them up on it. The sort of people who lift you off the street in this manner, aren't accustomed to being told no, and even less accustomed to accepting it. It was a case therefore, of making the deal work for him.

It was a massive inconvenience, nothing more. He could carry out the rest of his plan, he'd just have to wait a while. He let out a silent sigh of relief as he thought about never having left a 'Dear John,' for Jenna. That would have thrown a real spanner into the works had he returned home and needed to explain that one away. It had eaten at him at first, almost seemed like an act of moral cowardice, but now he saw it as inspired.

The sound of the vans engine changed, as it entered into a tunnel, or perhaps a large building, the echo of being inside unmistakable. Then they had stopped, the engine cutting out. Still no one spoke to Barry, and he waited patiently. The door slid open, and the darkness

inside his hood was alleviated a little, as some light crept through the material from above him.

Someone reached under his arm, and pulled him up. Probably the shorter man, the grip didn't seem as firm, and the movements less forceful. Barry felt himself led across a hard floor, for what seemed to be an eternity, before the grip on him was released, and he stood still, waiting.

The hood was removed.

Barry stood in a tall room, surrounded on all sides by a circular wall that rose ten feet above him. Powerful lights shone down from the roof, backlighting a number of figures that sat at the top of the wall above him, and made it impossible to make out anything, other than their outline. As he strained to look, the power of the lights stung at his eyes.

“Who the hell are you lot?” He demanded, attempting to seize control of the situation. As if he had a chance.

“Barry Vernon,” began one of the figures that loomed above him. Her voice was stern, clear, crisp, and was amplified through a hidden speaker system, allowing it to reverberate through the chamber. “You have been found guilty by the Vehmic court of money laundering, and the proliferation of public funds.”

Barry was taken aback. It was true, he had done all of those things, but he had made good his escape already. “Guilty? Excuse me, but I was investigated and they found out I didn't do it. I wasn't found guilty, I was found innocent.”

“Perhaps your understanding of the law isn't as it should be,” the woman replied plainly. “Mr Vernon, you weren't proven innocent. No case was brought against you because of a lack of evidence.”

“Exactly,” snapped Barry. “I had no case to answer.”

There was a silence, and Barry tried to seize the initiative. “I think I want my lawyer now,” he added.

The voice came again. A little irritation now. “Mr Vernon, let me explain a little about where you are.”

Barry span around looking at the figures above them. They seemed to be growing larger. Maybe he was getting smaller, but the dynamics were shifting.

“We are not a normal court system,” the lecture continued. “We exist to punish those who believe that they can operate with impunity. Those in power, or, like you, who believe they’re in power. We apply the law in a common-sense manner, removing the need for jargon, for technicalities, and for lawyers. We punish the guilty, regardless of privilege.”

Barry Vernon swallowed. This was not what he expected. The saliva had gone from his mouth, and he croaked as he began to speak, trying desperately to assert himself.

“Well, one thing I know, and correct me if I am wrong, but it’s innocent till proven guilty in civilised western society.”

“Then perhaps you think we’re not civilised. A small price to pay,” there was a hint of a smirk in the voice, as it taunted him. “We work on a guilty till proven innocent basis, and rest assured, we’ve done our homework on you, and we invite you to put forward the case in your defence, and if you can refute our allegations, then of course we will let you go, with our humblest apologies.”

“And if I can’t?” Barry’s mind raced at the potential outcomes. He had been so close.

“Well, we know you cannot, and in your case Mr Vernon, there are two choices. You can return the money, which we know you have most of squirreled away, where Jenna would

never see, and of course most importantly, spend it. Or, you can spend the next 15 years in a private prison facility, invisible to the outside world.”

There was no question that this shook Barry Vernon visibly. His head swung from side to side, like a rabbit in a trap, his eyes widened and darted from side to side, looking for an escape that wasn't there.

“Yeah, and, yeah...” he stammered, “About that, what's to stop me telling the papers about all this? I mean, come on, who do you think you bloody are?”

“Oh, you absolutely could of course. Many who have stood where you are, have threatened to do exactly that. However, given the extent of our network, we're in a far more capable position to damage reputations than you will ever be. And after all, who would you even level your accusations at?”

Silence dripped across the chamber. Barry, felt it weighing down on him, piling more pressure on his shoulders, adding to that, which had originally been put there with each and every word he had heard since he set foot in front of his accusers. He knew what he had done, and apparently so did they.

“Now,” the voice came from above once more, only now, it seemed to be coming from all around him, closing in on him, strangling him. “If you would like to begin your defence.”

The tall man, Jack Quinn, took the phone from his ear, clicking it off. His partner, the man with the curly hair, Adam Morgan, looks at him quizzically.

“He took the money option, didn't he?”

Jack shrugged. "Paying back every last penny. Probably take him the rest of his life, but he made the right choice."

The two of them turned and began to walk in unison towards where a silver saloon car was parked at the opposite end of a small parking lot.

"No kidding," Adam shook his head as they went. "Bloke like him in one of our prisons. He'd have a heart attack if someone stole his dinner. Wouldn't have lasted a week."

"I'd give him two." Jack replied bluntly.

"You're generous," laughed Adam. "Anyway, come on, I need to get back. Laura wants me to get the cot out. Fancy giving me a hand?"

"That's a two-man job?" Jack raised an eyebrow at this partner.

"Oh, come on, you've had kids. You know that cot means all sorts of other junk. I'm just figuring this stuff out. I need a veteran head to guide me through."

Adam's not so subtle challenge brought a wry grin and half-hearted chuckle from Jack.

"Fine, but you gotta call me sir."