

# Chapter 1

2007

## *I Shot The Sheriff*

**N**OT TODAY! PLEASE not today. Give me one more hour and I can get out of this. I'll never do it again. Never. Never.

SHE WILL RERUN this inch of tape loop for the rest of her life.

She indicates left and drives slowly round the corner into the street where she has lived, quietly and anonymously, for the past seventeen years.

Two police cars are parked outside her house.

Down comes the jam jar trapping Alice Green.

FOR THE PAST week, Alice has not bothered to cover her tracks. She's left evidence strewn all over her bedroom for anyone to see. Two days ago she pulled off her most outrageous binge – she might as well hold out her hands and tell the police to click on the handcuffs.

Quick. A plan. An escape.

Some lies.

IT'S LIKE DROWNING. Like that book Pincher Martin she read at school, where the whole of a man's life flashes in front of his water-logged eyes. She watches her personal documentary and in re-watching the beginning, knows the predictable, inevitable ending.

The cars are not exactly discrete, with their brazen POLICE sign and the orange and yellow squares all over the bodywork. You can hardly mistake them for a taxi or a Molly Maid car or a green-painted florist's delivery van.

One is parked right outside the big house opposite hers; owned by a portly property developer who on Sunday evenings pressure-washes his three silver cars. One for him, one for the wife, and one for emergencies. Boy, this man loves his nozzle of shooting water. Having hosed the cars to within an inch of their lives, he turns his hose on the dead leaves and debris outside his house, whooshing his power-squirt of soapy water all along the pavement to the gutters. Sometimes, when Alice draws her bedroom curtains at eleven at night, he is still at it. He doesn't speak to Alice Green, perhaps because she owns an old Citroen Diane and never washes it.

The second police car is parked in the spot reserved, in invisible writing, for the very proper and upright couple who inhabit the flat below hers. Theirs is the more prestigious ground floor conversion with its own barricaded front garden and main door. In the driveway sits a red, phallic convertible with personalised number plates. He is a sheriff – something to do with the Scottish courts – and suddenly Eric Clapton is singing along in accompaniment. Appropriate, but inaccurate. She hasn't shot the Sheriff. Nor his deputy. Nor his

wife. She hasn't shot anyone but she has been very bad.

ALICE GREEN IS on her way back from an after-work swim at the local baths; council, not private, because it is only a dream that she might one day plunge into the infinity pool at One-Spa where the monthly membership fee is more than her salary. Instead, her passion for swimming is precariously balanced against the discomfort of public baths with eye-reddening chlorine, screaming children and water that is far too hot for exertion. There she contends with testosterone-charged men who stir up the entire pool and sluice water over her head and capsize her gliding breaststroke. Recently, a friend with a strong interest in these matters, informed her that men at the baths eye up the young mothers. The acronym is MILF – Mothers I'd Like to Fuck. Alice knows that she falls about a hundred lanes outside this category. Not even the very old, skinny-legged pensioner in baggy swimming shorts notices her.

While she travels up and down her lane, she dreams of an empty, embracing sea with a shimmering horizon. Alone, she glides through cool cobalt water that caresses her skin with each wide-open stretch of her arms. She is a sharp silver blade, cutting into the silky fabric of the water and leaving in her wake only a murmur of disturbance.

Alice passes briefly under the public shower which is positioned at the end of the pool. Children must wear swimming costumes to shower. Grown-ups, too, if they want to avoid arrest. On she pads towards the exit and into the confined space of the changing room where she bumps hips and elbows with other damp women. She towels briefly, and

pushes her sticky-wet limbs into grey track suit bottoms and an old T-shirt. Her hair drips chemical-water and will later paint dark spots on the seat of her car. Her face is pink and shiny from the exercise and naked of make-up. All this she will amend but only after she has walked her dog, who has been left alone in the house and waiting for his exercise.

Alice Green does not shoot sheriffs or shower naked in public baths or neglect her beloved dog.

HEART POUNDING, IN the three remaining seconds before she comes to a halt, Alice considers her options. She could do a runner; drive straight on past her house, head for Morning-side then speed along the city bypass to the ring road. And head for....um...where? Obviously she doesn't have her passport with her so she can't catch a plane and start a new life in Mexico. Nor can she fly to a tiny island in the sun, where, in the thrillers she reads, bank robbers and tax evaders flee and live happily ever. Or she could drive round and round Edinburgh until the police get bored and go away. Surely they won't hang around all evening. After shuffling the cards she has, she settles on the obvious option. Pull up, park nicely and express shock and bewilderment at the police presence. She is just minding her own business and will ask in alarm if there has been an accident. This is nothing to do with her. They have no proof, and it's innocent until proven guilty, right? Don't they need a search warrant to look inside a house? Having never tangled with the police, nor committed any crime worse than parking on a double yellow line, she is ignorant of her rights. Perhaps she can persuade them that they need a search warrant, so she can bin the evidence and

slip back into her normal self; an ordinary, middle-aged, law-abiding citizen.

That's a lie. In fact, two lies. First, she did have an encounter with the police, but it was thirty years ago and she dismisses it as irrelevant. Nothing after that. The second lie runs deeper. Who are you kidding, Alice Green, when you describe yourself as ordinary? Ordinary middle-aged women don't steal clothes from high street shops. They don't come home to two police cars parked outside their door.

Absorbed in this emotional stocktaking, she doesn't notice the much younger woman, an erstwhile Alice standing on the pavement beside her. Alice stares at the model of herself made more than thirty years ago. *Now I'm hallucinating. It's the shock of four very visible policemen outside my house. I'm cracking up.* She looks at the waif with the waterfall of fair hair and khol-rimmed eyes in a long gypsy skirt and jangling bangles. Her feet are bare.

"You'll catch your death without shoes." Maternal instinct is stronger than fear. Stronger than guilt.

"You never wore shoes when you were my age. We all went barefoot. In the summer, anyway. The summer of love!"

"It's not summer. And we're in Edinburgh with an East wind. You need warm shoes."

"I'll go back and get my red boots later. I've come to help."

"I'm beyond help."

"No, you're not. What's happened?"

"I honestly don't know. I'm about to be arrested."

"Goodness...what did you do?"

"I've been on a bit of a rampage."

Alice is comforted by the presence of this sympathetic young woman, even if she is an apparition. She's about to talk to four angry policemen so why not entertain a ghost, too? At least the ghost is friendly. The day became surreal some time ago.

"You won't know this yet, but even when you're middle-aged on the outside – wrinkles and greying hair – you still feel twenty on the inside, only with more luggage. Though not all women go shoplifting when they hit fifty, I suppose."

"Why did you do it?"

"I felt diminished."

The young girl shrugs and Alice somehow knows what she's going to suggest before she speaks. "OK. Let's go back. Let's tell the story and see when we went off the rails... it all sounds a bit tragic."

Alice agrees. Close to weeping, she lets her gaze wander over the girl's youthful beauty and wonders how anyone so lovely morphed into the tired person she is now.

"You know, you're more of a shock than the uniforms," she says finally. "There's so much joy and hope in your eyes. It breaks my heart to know it will fade."

"I'm pretty dismayed too. Sounds like you lost the plot."

"It's true."

"Then tell me what happened."

"I haven't time. The police are waiting for me."

"OK, the bottom line. Who hurt you first?"

"Julian," Alice says, not missing a heartbeat.