

PROLOGUE

Back in the days before AirCars and AI, back when the veracity of the Climate Crisis was still being disputed and no one was doing much to combat it, no wind farms or gravity batteries or solar harvesters, that's when Shane and Evie first met in high school in the city of Cassum. They were relatively carefree days - until they weren't.

Shane was aware, by the way strangers stared at him, how different he looked. Like every bone in his face had been broken and put back together by some rogue surgeon, deliberately asymmetric.

Donny, from down the street, was his closest friend. They'd known each other for years, riding bikes and skateboards up and down the local streets until sunset. Donny was a year older and the closest thing to a sporting superstar the school had ever produced.

Benny and Josh, his friends at school, paled by

comparison. Familiarity was the thin glue that fixed their flimsy bond.

Benny talked constantly out of nervousness and Josh hardly talked at all.

Shane told Benny one day that he'd cracked the secret of opening a lock without using a key. He thought he wasn't saying much, he thought he was more excited by the feat than anyone else would be. But Benny surprised him.

Oh yeah? Prove it!

O... kay. Do you want me to bring a lock tomorrow?

Yep, bring a lock tomorrow.

Okay.

Okay.

Benny then, thinking this could be his road to popularity, proceeded to tell everyone that Shane was going to bring a lock to school the next day and open it without using a key. No one much cared when they were told but by the next day at morning recess a groundswell of interest had cut through the everyday tedium and Shane and Benny and Josh found themselves surrounded.

Shane pulled a padlock out of his bag and asked Benny to hold it at a certain angle. He pulled out his tools and inserted them carefully. By this time, he'd become so adept he could have opened it in a second but he decided to introduce a little

theatricality. By pretending to struggle, accompanied by facial wincing, he drew out the performance. At the point where he felt interest was starting to wane he changed his expression to one of satisfaction and clicked the lock open.

There were oohs and aahs and wows.

Do it again! Do it again!

This time Shane did it quickly to show he could.

One of the older kids said Can ya open any lock?

Probably.

What about the school lockers?

Probably.

The bell rang for end of recess.

Alright. We'll do it at lunchtime.

Okay.

Shane felt the warmth of attention. Was this what popularity felt like? Benny slapped him on the back, a new look of respect in his eyes. Shane walked back to class thinking already of what he could do at lunchtime.

But lunchtime didn't turn out to be the complete success he'd been imagining. The older kid told the bullies about his ability and when he arrived in the corridor ready to be the centre of attention again, they took control and decided which lockers to open. A large crowd followed them, high-spirited and rowdy, including Evie. Many of the throng were

recording the event on their phones. Evie had no idea what was happening until she saw it. Shane dutifully opened each lock (a cheer went up each time) but by the third locker he realised the bullies were not interested in his incredible ability, they had their own reasons for selecting the lockers. This wasn't good. They searched through each locker, looking for anything incriminating. Shane felt sick. Evie could see by the look on his face he didn't like what they were doing and despite her usual reservation, she found it endearing.

That's it now.

Whatta ya mean that's it? Let's keep goin.

That's all I'm doing.

The crowd groaned and the bullies - three of them - stared at him, trying to figure out how to handle him. The crowd started chanting More! More! More!

Come on. One more.

No. That's it.

The bullies, thinking about coercing him with physical force, saw the determined look in his ugly mug. Evie liked him even more for standing up to them.

One of them took hold of his shirt and pushed him up against the bank of lockers, knocking his head into the steel.

You'll do what we say or we'll make your life hell, you ugly shit. C'mon, let's open the next one.

He tried to drag Shane down the hallway but Shane knocked his arm away.

I'm not doing it any more.

Evie could see the bully was about to hit him. That's enough, she called out without thinking.

Everybody turned to look at her, including the bully. She was usually regarded as one of the most beautiful girls in the school, held in a kind of reverence, but they were looking at her in a different way now.

What?

I said that's enough. He's shown us what he can do. That's it. That's enough. Leave him alone.

What if I don't want to?

Just because you say so? No one has to do anything they don't want to.

There was now a space around her. The bully walked up close to her face and stared at her. He was clearly angry but, she thought, what was he going to do, hit a girl in front of all these people?

He leaned in close to her ear and whispered: Stuck up slut.

He backed off. As he walked away with his mates, he called out to Shane, This aint over you ugly cunt.

The crowd slowly disbursed. Benny and Josh and Shane all walked off together. Evie saw Shane glance over at her as they departed. Benny couldn't stop talking.

Wow! That was great!

You could be... like a cat burglar... or somethin.

Can ya teach me?

How'd ya learn to do that?

From about the age of twelve Evie began to change and the effect this had on boys and men became very obvious very quickly. Men she hardly knew went out of their way to have contact with her. Uncles hugged her just that bit longer than before. Boys lost their capacity to speak to her, believing from the way she looked that she was unattainable, some staring at her strangely from a distance, others believing if they gave her shit she would somehow find their attention attractive. When she walked home in her school uniform, she saw the leer on men's faces as they passed by.

She was too nervous to approach anyone she was attracted to.

Her best friends were girls in a similar situation to her. They had very shallow conversations. She felt locked into a cliché of what girls like her were supposed to do and be. She wasn't brave enough to break free.

The day after the locker melee, Shane caught up to Evie as she walked home.

Hey, wait up.

She turned and saw him.

Hi.

Hey. Evie, isn't it?

Yes.

I just wanted to thank you for what you did yesterday. You didn't have to do that.

I don't know why I did. It just came out.

She smiled. He smiled at her smiling.

I liked the way you stood up to those guys. They bully everybody. I just thought I should support you.

Well, I think you stopped them beating me up.

He walked her home that day and they talked all the way and it felt easy and comfortable with none of the sexual undertone that she'd come to expect when talking to boys. He told her about his fascination with locks, the mechanisms, the logical beauty of them, things she'd never heard any boy talk about. He asked her what she was interested in and she told him how she wanted to do something to help the planet. They began walking home together regularly and even meeting up at other times. She was well past her reservations about his appearance. They became friends.

On his fifteenth birthday Evie gave him a key she found in a curio shop. An ornate nineteenth-century design made of bronze with the head depicting a stylised shamrock. He unwrapped it and turned it

over and over, examining every detail.

Well, do you like it?

I... think maybe it's the best present I've ever been given.

Evie had a secret crush on Donny Franklin, Shane's best friend. Donny was the school's football superstar. There was talk of The League scouting him.

As a result of spending more time with Shane, Donny entered her life. It didn't feel forced on her part. He witnessed her conversations with Shane and perhaps realised she wasn't aloof or vain and they became friendly too. It wasn't long before they were spending every possible moment together, to the detriment of both their friendships with Shane. He didn't seem to mind, he was happy for them to be happy. Shane and Evie would sometimes arrange to meet up to watch Donny play football. Without being biased, he really was the best player on the field.

Donny and Evie were together for three years. He asked her to marry him and of course she said yes, just that she wanted to wait a few more years. She thought they were too young to be married and she wanted them to be set up better. She also wanted to go to uni. Donny was playing in The League Under 19s and he'd been offered a seniors contract when he was ready for the big-time.

They were both so excited about their future and it seemed that nothing was going to stand in their way.

Donny was a passenger in John Hook's car. John was his best friend in the team. Driving back from an away game in torrential rain, a truck ran a red light and rammed the passenger side of the car. John was shaken up but Donny took the brunt of the impact and was airlifted to hospital. They were standing outside his room in Emergency, his parents and John and Shane and Evie, when they learned that he had extensive internal injuries and spinal cord damage, leaving him paraplegic.

They were told there had been huge advances in spinal cord treatment, something called DMN - Dancing Molecule Nanofibers - and the treatment could start just as soon as Donny had recovered from his other injuries. Evie was devastated and clutched onto the hope of this new treatment making their lives normal again. During his recovery, Donny seemed upbeat and confident. He too had read up about the amazing new medical breakthrough that showed such promise. The treatment began two months after the accident. It required incredible patience as the process took some time. Blood vessels had to regrow and lock into place inside the damaged spinal cord.

It appeared to be working at the beginning, with incremental improvements, but then the regrowth stopped. The doctors tried manipulating the molecules in different ways to springboard them into action. It didn't work. They told Donny and Evie there weren't any avenues they hadn't tried. Donny was obviously crushed by the news and through her own trauma, Evie tried to lift his spirits in whatever way she could. He went home in a

wheelchair. At the first opportunity, Donny suicided, overdosing on prescription drugs. The chasm between his vision for the future and his current condition was just too much. He didn't want to live that way.

Evie found herself without footing. She thought of herself on The Rotor, spinning around, stuck to the wall when the floor dropped away. That was how she felt. Nothing was stopping her from slipping.

She ran away. Just ran away from it all. If she kept running she wouldn't have to feel anything.

She thought of Shane often and how he must be suffering from Donny's death too. She didn't know that he was suffering more from her departure.

Chapter One

FRIDAY

Shelling told Shane about the set up at Grogan's house, the layout, the number of rooms, the CCTV, but warned him there could be more alarms he didn't know about. There were usually two men doing security but there could be more.

You'll know soon enough because the morons congregate.

Grogan would be away for the weekend so he probably had most of his goons with him. Shelling told him to surveil the place to work out the best time for the job.

Mick and Tommo would be taking care of the muscle.

Shane hoped they knew what they were doing. His life was on the line. He'd never worked with them before but Frank, Shane's father, highly recommended them. They both looked about five years older, maybe thirty-three or so. Fit.

Shane had been scouting the outside fence for the past week to decide on the best entrance. He couldn't see any cameras on the outside. He'd even jumped the fence the night before to check on the alarms on the grounds. Shelling was right, there were laser trip-wires laced along the inside of the wall, normally invisible so you wouldn't know you'd set it off. Cameras on the corners of the building, hidden under the eaves, no lights. Shane could see them easily with night vision glasses. He knew the model. They rotated one-eighty at a regular rate unless they detected movement. Then they locked on. There was a period of ten or so seconds between the arcs of the two cameras on this side of the house where you could walk between them and not be picked up, from the cover of the trees through the middle of the lawn to the house without being seen. Provided the goons weren't watching.

He decided that was going to be their approach. All three of them, with the gear, could cover that distance within ten seconds. There was a small decorative garden wall close to the house they could hide behind if need be.

As he was leaving the night before, a security drone, half the size of a helicopter, came thwapping overhead, just above the treetops, its rotors shrill like a wasp on steroids, its searchlight

scouring the streets. It was a wealthy area, it was probably a Neighbourhood Watch drone, more for show than effect. It didn't notice his car, parked under the canopy of trees. It hovered at the end of the street and moved on. Hopefully, it wouldn't be around on Saturday night.

Shane saw the night sky was still a sickly orange, thick with smoke from the fires to the east of Cassum. They'd been burning for a week, still out of control. Some outer suburbs had already been evacuated, entire streets burnt to the ground. There were health alerts in the city to stay indoors or wear breathing apparatus. The climate crisis was wreaking havoc everywhere. There were microclimates throughout the state, flooding in the northwest, drought and bushfires in the east.

Shelling had told him which room the safe was in and where the security room was with the CCTV monitors and recorders. No one manned the room as far as he knew. He'd been in the house a month ago. Grogan, who'd heard about Shelling by reputation, had asked him to give an appraisal on the house. He was thinking of moving on up.

Shelling was amused.

The fucking idiot thinks he's going to get top dollar for it. Who's going to buy a gangster's house? Just think about what could have gone on in there. There could be fucking bodies buried in the backyard.

Shane was worried.

Aren't you scared he's going to know it's you that set up the fuckin job?

He's not going to suspect me. I come recommended. I'm protected.

Shelling was as slimy as they come. Equal parts real estate agent and shyster, he reeked of decadence and cunning. Sweaty, shiny skin, a shabby suit with shiny spots where it was worn, a comb over way past the time they fooled anyone, if they ever did. You wouldn't know he was worth millions.

Apparently, according to Frank, he could be trusted with his tips. He was the real deal. Frank had been using Shelling's tips for the past year with some success, sometimes with Shane in the crew. But this job was on another level.

Earlier that night, Shane and Mick and Tommo had met up to go over the final details. Shane drew a diagram of the house and yard to show them where the tripwires were located.

We have to be silent. At least until we get the guards subdued, said Shane.

Like fuckin ninjas, said Mick, smiling at Tommo.

I'm serious.

Don't sweat it man, said Tommo, we know how to be quiet. It's not our first gig.

Yeah okay. The trip wires will be connected to alarms in the house, probably to the guards' phones

too. There's no way this guy has an outside security firm. He wouldn't want anyone, cops or security company guys, snooping into his business.

He put a cross on the sketch where they were going over the fence and showed their route to the house between the cameras. They nodded understanding.

When Shane returned home, Evie was there. After they ate, Shane opened up about his state of mind.

I'm buzzing with nervous energy. I need to calm down.

Do you want a drink? There's some vodka in the bar fridge.

Yeah sure. I'll get it. Do you want one?

Not right now.

Shane caught his reflection in the mirror behind the fridge. He still managed to be shocked at how ugly he was. A cruel joke. And yet, he was glad he looked tougher than he felt. No one ever gave him shit.

He turned to look back at Evie, as beautiful as he was ugly. Ever since high school, she was the best-looking woman in every room she walked into. And she didn't rest on those substantial laurels, she was smart and creative and considerate. More than him. He pondered again on his good fortune to have her around.

He poured his drink and returned to the couch.

You know, this is going to be the biggest job I've ever pulled. A lot of risk. Grogan can't ever know who did it. Or else we're fucking dead men.

What about the other two? Do you trust them?

Yeah, I trust them not to talk, but to me they're the weakest link. Just because I don't know their form. Frank says they're the best.

Sounds like they're up for it, if Frank recommends them.

Yeah, I s'pose. And then there's the safe. What if I can't open it?

Evie laughed.

Have you ever met a safe you couldn't open?

There's always some asshole who thinks buying a fancy one will put me off.

It'll just take a little longer.

That's just it. I'm worried about how long it will take. I want to be out of there fast.

Chapter Two

I had no intention, when I started this project, to insert one iota of myself into this story. However, circumstances have changed to the degree that I feel I don't have much choice if I am to continue at all.

You don't know what I'm talking about, of course, since you haven't read the original story yet and don't have enough information to decide for yourself whether my intrusion is warranted.

Please allow me to elucidate. Or not. If you decide right here and now that this introduction sounds bogus, then I hold no grudges and blame you not a scrap if you put it down and move on to some other diversion. However, if you do decide to continue, it's my belief that you won't be disappointed.

But regardless of the reaction of you, my reader, I need to write it anyway. For my own reasons, which will become clear as we progress.

Some months back now, I finished writing the first draft of a story that I was reasonably happy with. I knew, from my experience of previous manuscript first drafts, that this one was a decidedly more difficult subject, and I was expecting a different level of feedback from my trusty group of amateur editors, who read and provide valuable objective and sometimes subjective critiques of my work and force me to reconsider various aspects of the story. In other words, a generally healthy dynamic and a positive experience.

Indeed, the writing of it was far more difficult than any previous work I'd completed. It had taken twice as long as anything else and contained the least number of words. I found the balance of the various strains of the story to be a very delicate exercise; I was always aware of the danger of heavy-handedness or gratuitousness or unbelievability in the required action scenes on the one side and callousness or lack of empathy in the emotional scenes on the other.

And so, I was sufficiently satisfied in my efforts that I gave it out to my clan of editors without feeling embarrassed or precipitous.

What I got back was alarming.

Chapter Three

SUNDAY 12 - 2 am

They sat in the grey van Mick had stolen and garaged a few days earlier. They'd parked on the quiet street beside the high fence of Grogan's house. Tommo was rambling to Mick about his girlfriend's sister's boyfriend.

He's trying to get me to put money into Apple Indicators.

What the fuck is that?

I've been tryin to work it out. Somethin about research for quantum AI. Anyhow, he reckons it's gunna take off.

Huh. Count me out.

Shane opened a small case and took out some button shaped devices.

I thought we should wear these.

What are they?

Have you heard of SDs? They're new.

No.

Signal Disruptors. You stick them to the sides of your face like this...

Shane fitted one on each side of his forehead and switched them on. His face became blurred immediately.

Whoa!

It saves wearing a balaclava.

Can you see through that shit?

You can see perfectly. But they send out rapidly varying wavelengths so others outside the field can't see in. They also jam digital sensors so your face won't be recorded if you're filmed. Do you want to wear them?

Fuck yeah.

Shane fitted them both.

They hadn't seen a car pass in ages and Shane looked at his watch. After midnight.

It's time. Are we good to go?

Yeah, ready, said Tommo. Mick nodded. They all

pulled on latex gloves. Shane set the timer on his watch and pulled his sleeve back over it. With any luck they'd be out of there in thirty minutes. Forty tops.

Remember, silence is a weapon.

They jumped out and pushed the doors closed gently and moved to the wall. Tommo swung the neoprene covered grappling hook to the top of the wall and it held first time. He climbed up and sat straddling the fence. Mick lifted the bags to him and he set them down on the top of the wall. Shane went up next, climbed over and lowered himself on the other side. He let go and dropped the few extra feet. Tommo handed the bags down to him, swung his leg over and shimmied down the wall. Mick was at the top. He pulled the rope up, turned the hook around and dropped the rope down the inside wall. He climbed down.

They moved forward in the darkness of the tree cover, careful to avoid the tripwires. The lawn in front of them was lit by a floodlight and there was dull light in some windows of the house. They squatted down on the edge of the darkness and waited. Shane put on the night vision glasses and began timing the movements of the cameras. Mick and Tommo watched for the security guys. After a few minutes they saw the silhouette of one guy pass through a window. They saw him again in the next window. He was on the outside of the house, walking around it. He had a cigarette in his hand. He turned the corner on the right. They looked at Shane, waiting for the go-ahead.

Shane pulled the glasses off and looked at them both. They both did thumbs up. Shane held his hand up, five fingers outstretched. Five, four, three, two... they lifted the bags onto their shoulders... one. They moved low and fast across the lawn and squatted in the shadow of the garden fence. No sound, nothing different. Mick reached into a bag and pulled out two guns - matte black Glocks - and handed one to Tommo. He went into the bag again for gaffer tape and pushed it into the pocket in his jacket.

They nodded at each other and Tommo and Mick moved off in different directions around the house, staying in the shadows when they could, moving cautiously. Shane picked up the bags and waited.

Mick could see the guy walking towards him, sucking on the cigarette and looking at his phone, the light from it illuminating his face. He looked like an islander, maybe Samoan. Mick liked Samoans, the ones he'd met were friendly. As he passed the bush, Mick silently stepped out behind him and pressed the gun to the small of his back. He whispered to him quickly, as if he was agitated.

You know what this is, right?

Yeah bro...

Speak softer. Put your hands up where I can see em.

The Samoan lifted the phone and the cigarette into the air. Tommo had done a circuit of the house and appeared beside Mick. He shook his head.

How many more are there?

Tommo reached around quickly and found the gun in the man's shoulder holster. It was also a Glock. He slid it into the waistband at the small of his back.

You're makin a mistake bro...

How many more?

Just me.

You know that aint fuckin true. There's at least one more here. Where is he?

Just me bro.

Get down on your fuckin knees.

He complied. It took a while, he was a big guy.

Mick put the gun to his head.

If you don't tell me, then just me bro will be the last fuckin words to ever come out of your mouth.

Last time I saw him was in the security room, slackin off. Fuckin waste of space bro.

Tommo walked off.

What's his name?

Fitzy. If ya gunna shoot somebody, wack him, he's a pain in the arse.

Hah! You're a funny man. I want you to call him.

Mick walked around in front of the man and he saw Mick's blurry face for the first time.

What the fuck? Who are you guys? That's some fuckin spy shit ya got on.

I want you to call Fitzzy.

What?

Call out to him. Say Hey Fitzzy come here. Ya gotta see this.

Nah bro.

Mick brought out a hunting knife and pushed it into the man's neck.

Then we'll knock him after we knock you.

Fi... he spluttered, coughing.

FITZY... HEY MAN... COME HERE. GOTTA SEE THIS.

Fitzzy opened the door of the security room with his gun raised in front of him, looking nervous.

Aych?

Yeah Fitzzy. Over here. Get a load a this.

Tommo whacked Fitzzy on the head from behind and as he went down Tommo jumped onto him and grabbed the hand with the gun. The gun went off into the ceiling. Fitzzy hit the ground and Tommo pushed the Glock into his face.

All good here, Tommo called out to let them know he was okay.

Give it here Fitzzy.

Fitzzy was stunned by the hit to the head and Tommo found it easy to take the gun. Fitzzy lay on his back. Tommo took out a plastic case containing Mogadon tablets, counted out four and pushed them

into Fitzy's mouth. He coughed but then he swallowed them.

Shane came out of hiding and dropped the bags beside Mick, who handed him the gaffer tape.

Put your hands together behind your back.

Where's Fitzy? What happened to him?

Dunno. Could a carked it.

He dropped his head and put his hands behind him.

Shane taped his wrists together.

C'mon, get up.

Shane helped him to his feet. He started running across the lawn. Mick ran after him and tackled him to the ground and pushed the gun between his eyes.

Having fun? You'll never win a foot race.

Gotta try bro.

Get up.

Mick helped him up and walked him to the room where Fitzy was on the floor with Tommo standing over him.

Get down beside him.

Mick taped his feet together and then Fitzy's hands and feet.

Tommo had pills in his hand for the Samoan.

Here. Take these.

What are they?

Sleeping pills.

No way. I never take shit like that. They fuck up your metabolism.

Do bullet holes fuck up your metabolism? Just take em this once.

No way.

Okay.

Mick kneeled down behind him, put an arm around his neck and held his head so he couldn't move. Tommo ripped off a strip of gaffer tape and stuck it over his mouth, leaving a small opening. He stuck a finger into the corner of his mouth and stretched it open, pushed the pills in and closed the tape before he could spit them out.

Shane entered the security room and disconnected all the plugs in the back of the CCTV recorders. He sat down at the computer. The cloud access was already open and he found it easy to delete the day's film. He ejected the two back-up drives and stuck them in his pocket.

The house was theirs.

He checked his watch. That all took fourteen minutes. Kind of on track.

Chapter Four

My brother was my most trusted source of objective criticism. He was the one that told me if the plot had holes or the dialogue was cliché. He was generally ruthless and did not spare my feelings if he thought the story could be improved. And he was almost always right. His life path was very similar to mine, particularly in the early years obviously, and so he understood my language and what I was trying to do. We thought in a similar way.

But this time his take on the story was very different to my intention. To the point where I was shocked and it took me a while to get my head around what he was saying. I found myself defending aspects that he clearly hadn't seen or hadn't placed any significance upon, when really, if he hadn't noticed them, it meant they were badly written. And his interpretation of my ultimate aim was somewhat wide of the target I'd assumed was obvious.

Chapter Five

SUNDAY 12 - 2 am

Shane found the room where Shelling told him the safe was located. The door was locked. He grabbed his lock picks out of the bag and worked the lock open in thirty seconds. It looked like a study, with a desk, but most of the space was filled with gym equipment. He found the safe behind a picture of Michelle Pfeiffer in a slinky dress from Scarface. He took the latex glove off his left hand to better feel the dial. It was an old S&G 4 wheel. He'd opened them before. It would only take fifteen to twenty minutes.

Mick and Tommo searched the rest of the house.

Shane had worked out the number on the first wheel

and was onto the second when Tommo came in.

Hey Shane, ya gotta see this. We...

Can it wait? I need to keep going. I'm in the middle of it.

Yeah okay.

He walked out.

Five minutes later, Shane heard a deafening bang, like a train had hit the house. He lost his concentration. He raced out to see what it was. He found Mick swinging a sledge hammer at a brick wall with Tommo watching.

What the fuck are you doing?

Tommo answered, Ya gotta take a look at this. See this wall? The other side of it isn't on the outside of the house but it looks like it right? Now if ya walk around the corner here, there's no windows. And none on the other side neither. Now come outside.

Shane followed them outside.

See? This was a courtyard or somethin but it looks like it's been filled in. This wall here is false. It should be back there where we've been smashing it. Do ya get it?

Shane nodded as it dawned on him.

So there's a space in there with no entrance?

Exactly.

Why would you do that? What could be in there?

That's what I wanna to know.

They walked back inside and closed the doors to reduce the sound escaping.

Where'd you find the sledgehammer?

Raided the garden shed. Plenty a shit in there.

Mick swung at the wall again. Thump! Nothing moved.

I'll get back to the safe. Let me know how you go.

Shane had to start again but he'd already worked out the first three wheels so he was onto the fourth in no time. He found the most likely give point and tried the handle. It turned and clicked open. Piece of piss.

There wasn't much inside. A wad of cash, maybe ten thousand dollars, a USB flash drive in a case and small white paper bags, folded, about thirty of them. Shane opened one just to confirm. Three large diamonds inside, at least 3 carats each. He folded it back. He grabbed one of the bags they'd brought with them and opened it. Inside were more bags. One was smaller, like a large wallet. He carefully placed all the paper bags in the wallet and slid the wallet inside his shirt, along with the USB case. He tucked his shirt into his belt to make sure they wouldn't go anywhere. He chucked the cash into one of the other bags. He wiped the dial and handle of fingerprints and put the glove back on. He checked his watch. Forty-five minutes. He thought they'd be out by now.

He picked up the bags and walked out to the room

where the other two were attacking the wall. There was one brick loose but it couldn't be removed.

Whoever made this wall did a fuckin good job. I think it's double brick.

It was Tommo's turn on the sledge hammer. Shane walked outside again to study the opposite wall. It looked solid, probably double-brick too. Why would you make a room like that? If there was something valuable in there, what if you had to get it out quickly?

He walked around the house looking at the skirting on the subfloor, looking for an opening. Nothing stood out. He walked back to the brick wall and studied it again. The roof on this part looked different to the rest. It was added on, just like the room itself. He looked around for the garden shed. It was at the back beside the garage. Using a torch, he searched the shed. He found an A-frame ladder and carried it to the wall. He climbed up onto the roof. There, exactly in the middle, was a hatch with a padlock on it. He climbed back down, walked inside and told Mick and Tommo to stop.

There's a hatch in the roof. That's the way in. I'll open the lock.

Shane grabbed the bags and took them outside. Mick checked the condition of the two guys sleeping on the floor. They were fine. Tommo was already on the roof. Shane climbed up and handed a torch to Tommo. He pulled out his picks and started on the padlock.

Hold the lock for me so it doesn't move.

Tommo grabbed the lock with one hand and shone the torch on it with the other.

That's good.

Shane had the lock open in a minute. Tommo unlatched it, twisted the handle and lifted the hatch. He shone the torch down into the cavity. It looked about half full. All they saw were white plastic covered boxes, stacked high around the walls. Tommo reached down and slid a box out from the pile and tried to manoeuvre it out of the hatch door. It was heavy and he couldn't get it to fit with one hand. He let it go and it dropped to the floor with a thud.

Should I get down?

Yeah... be careful. There could be boobytraps.

Tommo put the torch in his mouth and lowered himself into the space and dropped the few feet to the floor. He bent over the box he'd dropped and ripped a small hole in the plastic and tore some of the cardboard box. Inside were tightly bound fifty dollar notes. A box, sixty by forty-five by thirty centimetres, of tightly packed cash. There were maybe twenty boxes, maybe more.

Can you see this?

Yeah... I see it. The fuckin motherload.

Mick was on the roof and he lowered his head into the hole.

Fuck!

C'mon... get started. We need to move.

Tommo left the box on the floor to stand on to get closer to the hatch and began passing boxes up through the hole. They weighed about fifteen kilos each. They stacked them on the roof and Shane tried to work out how many they could get into the van. He figured they'd have enough room for all the boxes. Mick started throwing them onto the grass. Shane passed them to him as he received them through the hatch. He called down to Tommo, We'll get them all. They'll fit in the van. How many? Do you know?

Who's countin? Not me.

We're up to fifteen.

So let's see. Fifteen... he counted the rest.

There's twenty-five all up.

Mick climbed off the roof and started taking the boxes, two at a time, over to the wall where they'd entered the property. Shane threw the boxes down. When they'd reached twenty-four, Tommo had to step off the one he'd been standing on to lift it up to the hatch. Shane leant in and grabbed it and with Tommo's help below he hauled it out.

Now you'll have to jump up and I'll grab your arm and pull you out.

Okay.

They tried but Shane couldn't hold his weight and lift him too. Mick had to get back up and help. They grabbed an arm each and Tommo was lifted out quickly.

Shane closed the hatch and fastened the padlock and they climbed down.

With all three of them moving the boxes to the fence they were done in a few minutes.

Either of you touch anything without gloves on?

Na. The gloves ripped when I was swinging that sledgehammer but I put fresh ones on.

Where's the old ones?

In my pocket.

Okay, good.

Mick climbed over the wall and Shane climbed up and sat astride the wall. Tommo handed boxes up and Shane passed them over to Mick. Mick moved them to the back of the van. It took ten minutes to get them all over the fence, as well as the bags they'd brought with them.

The van was more than half full. They looked at each other and smiled.

Let's get the fuck outta here.

Shane looked at his watch. Just over two hours. So much for thirty minutes in and out.

Chapter Six

My partner was another trusted editor. She operated in the world of emotions and had gifted me many valuable insights into that world over the years we've been together. Her reading was always about ways the story could be improved by the emotional interaction of the characters. She read into their situations and how they would or should react far more insightfully than I did. She pointed out where dialogue was lazy or introspection failed to deliver.

Her feedback on this occasion was also disheartening. I hadn't conveyed many emotional scenes as convincingly as I'd thought. We went through it together, referencing the many notes she'd taken, and it was clear to me that the draft needed a lot more work.

I'd given it out to my few other editors, friends all, who usually provided valuable readings on the work and suggestions for improving it. After the findings of my brother and my partner, I asked them

all to stop. The feedback I'd already received was overwhelming. I wouldn't be able to cope with any more. Besides, I wanted them to read a more finished version. It would be a better experience for them and less embarrassing for me.

Chapter Seven

SUNDAY 2 - 4 am

The plan was to drive to one of Shelling's houses directly after the job, but on the way Shane had a thought.

What do you bet there's trackers in every box?

Oh fuck! What do we do?

Start checking them all. I'll just have to keep driving around until we're finished. We don't want to stop somewhere in case they're tracking us. You'll need to check the bottom of the box and flick through every wad of notes. They can be really small.

Mick and Tommo climbed into the back of the van and

started work. They grabbed a box each and began pulling the cash out.

Found one, said Tommo as he held it up. It was a small orange disc the size of a fingernail.

It was inside the paper binding of a wad.

Okay, that's what we're looking for, said Shane. Give it here.

Tommo handed it over. Shane had a good look at it and threw it out the window.

Check inside the plastic lining of the boxes too.

This was going to take a few more hours. He texted Shelling to let him know.

Found one in the binding too, said Mick, and handed it over to Shane, who threw it out.

They found two more in the bottom of the boxes. They repacked the boxes and started on the next ones.

Shelling owned houses all over the city. The one they drove to at three-thirty that morning had a large empty double garage. Big enough for the van.

Mick and Tommo climbed out and began jumping up and down, hi-fiving and punching each other and it degenerated into wrestling. Shane watched on smiling. They had so much pent up energy, they had to release it.

I can't fuckin believe it!

Well I can't fuckin believe it!

It was exhilarating and terrifying at once. They piled the boxes onto the concrete floor and Mick drove the van off to dump it. Tommo walked out, closing the garage door on the way and followed Mick in another car to pick him up. Shane was counting the cash in one of the boxes when Shelling arrived, entering the garage through the door from the house.

Howdy Shane. How did we go? Looks good from here. They even put it in boxes for us did they? Very nice of them.

Why didn't you tell us about the secret room?

What?

You surveyed the house. Why didn't you know about the secret room?

I... didn't see it. Why? What was in it?

These.

He pointed at all the boxes.

There's fuckin millions here. They're gunna to be pissed off Shelling. They're gunna come looking for it.

So? They won't be looking at me. I'm squeaky clean.

Yeah right.

Shelling looked him in the eye, slightly offended by the sarcasm, wondering how far he could push his cred.

I set this whole thing up you know. I'm the one with the info. This - he cast his arm across the garage

- this wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for me. A bit of respect would be nice.

Shane looked back at him, wondering if Shelling really believed his own bullshit.

C'mon Shelling, you're about as squeaky clean as a fucking oil spill. You don't have to prove anything to me. I know who I'm dealing with and I'm telling you, the image you present to the world, when you're just walking down the street, no one's ever going to look at you and think, Gee, that guy looks squeaky clean.

Shelling smiled.

Well if they come for me, the next one they'll come for is you.

That's what I'm worried about.

Why take the job if you're so worried?

I didn't know it was gunna be this fuckin big. There must be about a hundred mill here.

You're kidding!

Not kidding. From a rough count, this box has about four mill. Times that by twenty-five. That's a hundred mill. Plus the diamonds in the safe. Who knows what they're worth?

Diamonds too? Where are they?

Shane tapped the wallet inside his shirt.

Good. Give them to your old man. He's the only one who can fence them.

Mick and Tommo returned, backing the car up to the garage door. Mick opened the door and Tommo backed the car in. They were still jumping around like teenagers.

Hey Shelling.

Howdy boys. Quite a night uh?

Yeah. Looks pretty fuckin good.

Shane here was just telling me he thinks it could be a hundred mill.

Tommo whistled, Well fuck me!

Mick just shook his head.

We should celebrate, said Tommo. Any alcohol in the house Shelling?

Shelling walked across to a small fridge at the back of the garage and took out a six-pack of beer.

That all ya got? No vodka or whisky?

This is it.

He handed them out. Tommo raised his beer.

Cheers then, to a ripper fuckin job.

Ripper.

They all clinked bottles and drank deeply.

We can't go out and celebrate but I tell ya, I'm not going to sleep tonight. Who wants to come around to our place - he pointed to Mick and himself - for a drink?

I'll pass, said Shelling.

I can't, said Shane, worried about Grogan finding out.

All right, just us then, he said to Mick. Let's divvy it up and be on our way.

Shelling looked alarmed.

But... why don't we leave it here and work it out properly tomorrow?

Tommo stared at him.

Shelling said What?

Look... I'm not saying I don't trust ya. But I'm also thinkin, why place you in a situation where I have to test that trust? If we all take roughly our share tonight and we all count it and then we come back together and compare notes and make any adjustments we need to make. That way the amount that we need to trust each other with is reduced to hardly anything. That makes more sense to me. Mick?

Mick nodded.

Sounds good.

Shane?

Yeah, that makes sense.

Tommo looked at Shelling.

Agreed?

Shelling reluctantly nodded.

Good.

They divided the boxes into quarters. The open one that Shane had been counting remained. They separated the packets of cash into what looked like quarters. Tommo and Mick put their shares into one of the left over bags.

So we're square for now, okay?

Shelling and Shane agreed.

Mick opened the boot of the car and he and Tommo placed their boxes in there and the back seat.

So we'll meet up again tomorrow night or the night after, okay? Let's meet at Frank's and we'll take it from there.

Shane nodded. See you then.

Tommo walked over to him and held his hand up.

You were great tonight. Good to work with ya.

Shane shook his hand.

Yeah. I must admit, I didn't know what to expect from you and Mick but you really came through.

Mick shook Shane's hand too.

Let's do it again sometime.

Deal.

They shook Shelling's hand too without fanfare, jumped in the car and took off.

Shane collected his car from around the corner and

loaded it up with his share too.

I'll probably see you tomorrow at Frank's place?

Yeah. Don't forget to take him the stones.

Will do. See you then.

Shane drove home.

Chapter Eight

This was where my head was at when the thing happened. I was mulling over how I was going to approach all these changes, whether it needed a major structural shake-up or I could get away with elaborating on the story the way it was. Some of my deliberations were based on fear. Was I even capable of what was required? Did I want the story to change this drastically? Was it even worth it? I was see-sawing between feeling positive about the challenge that lay ahead and the fear that I would fail. Self-doubt is a part of any creative act. You don't grow if you're certain about what you're making. I was familiar with this feeling. I could see it for what it was. And so, I wasn't shaken to the core by it.

Anyway, as I said, the thing happened. I'd had a low-grade cold for about a week which didn't stop me doing stuff. One morning I woke up with a blocked ear. I didn't think much of it because my ears produced a lot of wax - I think more than most people - and I had to clean them regularly. But it

developed into an ache in the back of the ear and I decided to visit my GP to have it checked. I made an appointment for the next day, a Thursday.

