

# ONE

FRIDAY, 26 JULY 1996

I was nineteen years old and scared to death. So scared that I had to clench my teeth to stop them from chattering. Which was ironic, because it was the height of summer, 32° in the shade. The inside of the car was rank with the smell of sweat, testosterone and baked leather.

I was aware of Chris sitting beside me, his black-gloved hands gripping the steering wheel as if it was a safety bar on a roller coaster. His face, what I could see of it, was a lumpy, dark blur in its stocking mask, like a sculpture of a human head worn smooth by the wind and rain. Neither of us had said anything for the past five minutes. I didn't know about Chris, but I was worried that if I spoke the waver in my voice would give away how terrified I was. I stared out through the windscreen at the terrace of derelict houses opposite, and tried to pretend I was calm, in control. But really I was thinking: *Why the fuck am I doing this?*

I knew why, though. I was doing it for Candice. That's what I told myself anyway, though in hindsight I have to admit that that wasn't strictly true. The thing is, with what I earned driving a furniture delivery van six days a week (plus overtime), I *could* have managed to pay Michelle for Candice's welfare, *and* pay my rent on my grotty bedsit in Dagenham, *and* just about scrape by on a weekly diet of baked beans, mashed spuds and cheap mince. I *could* have. People do, don't they? But I was nineteen, and I wanted a bit of a life. Nothing special, nothing extravagant. Just a few extra quid to go out on a weekend, buy some decent clothes, maybe get a car.

So when it boiled down to it, I suppose you *could* say that I was about to hold up a security van with my mates just so that I wouldn't have to stay in every night, eating Pot Noodles and staring at my little black-and-white telly. I know that sounds pathetic, but what you've got to understand is that crime wasn't such a big deal where I was brought up. To most of the kids I knew, and many of the adults too, it was a way of life, of getting by. Though when I say 'crime', I don't necessarily mean the sort of crime that we were about to commit. I didn't live my early life surrounded by murderers and rapists and armed robbers – though I knew of a few people who fell into one or other of those categories. No, I'm talking about petty crime: shoplifting, nicking cars, selling drugs, robbing houses. More serious crimes were still a bigger deal – but at the same time they weren't *that* huge a leap. The prospect of being drawn in, as I had been, wasn't as shocking or unthinkable as it would have seemed to the law-abiding majority.

I'm not sure whether that's an explanation or an excuse for my actions. I'm not sure whether I'm trying to make you understand or gain your sympathy. I'll leave my words for you to judge as you see fit. Because the thing is, everyone's unique, and everyone interprets what they see and hear based on their own experiences. I'm a different person now to the one I was on that hot summer's day in 1996. And what I've learned over the years is that we're each of us a stew of physical and psychological ingredients, shaped by genetics, environment, upbringing, peer pressure and human interaction. So what's acceptable, or at least understandable, to one person is going to be unacceptable or inconceivable to another. *C'est la vie*. When it comes down to it, there's no black and white. Only grey.

So there I was, sitting in the passenger seat of a ripped-off Ford Mondeo next to my best mate Chris Langtree. From where we were parked, in the shadowy forecourt of one of a row of abandoned warehouses, we had a view of the long, quiet road almost up to the mouldering brick wall at its far end. At that far end, although we couldn't see them from our position, Ray Duffy and Cosmic Dennis were sitting in a brown Vauxhall Vectra, also ripped off. The Vectra was tucked into the pot-holed entrance of a long-disused textile factory, so snug against the high wall which enclosed the factory grounds that Cosmic Dennis wouldn't have been able to open his door more than an

inch even if he'd wanted to. This meant that the car would be unseen by any vehicle turning on to the street at its far end. I couldn't help imagining the Vectra as a funnel-web spider, poised in the darkness of its lair, ready to leap out on unsuspecting prey.

The heist had been Ray's idea. By the time Chris got me involved everything was sorted, all the details worked out with military precision. I didn't know what I was getting into at first. Chris rang me at work one day – I couldn't even afford a home phone – and said that he had a proposition for me. I went round to his flat that night, expecting... I don't know... something mildly dodgy, I suppose. I'd known Chris since primary school and we were like brothers. We didn't live in each other's pockets, we didn't always see eye to eye, but we trusted each other implicitly. Chris worked in a shop selling electrical equipment for DJs and bands – record decks, sound systems, that sort of thing – but he made most of his money from fencing (the kind that involves stolen goods, not poking people with swords) and from selling dope to muso potheads on the side. In the past he'd slipped me a few quid to store ripped-off gear in my bedsit or to look after his stash while the cops were sniffing around. I'd once had a pair of speakers taking up most of the floor space in my bedroom with 'ZZ Top' stencilled on the side.

This time it was different, though.

The second I stepped through the door of his grotty Housing Association flat I heard voices. Chris handed me a tin of McEwan's, which wasn't anywhere near cold enough, and cast me an odd glance, half sly and half apologetic, which immediately made me uneasy.

'Come through,' he said, turning away from me. 'We're in here.'

I followed him down the narrow corridor, breathing in the musty scent from the damp-mottled walls, and into a square room which doubled as his bedroom and main living space. The floor was carpeted with a sludge-brown nylon weave and the walls were lined with haphazard stacks of electrical equipment. The low central table was cluttered with crumpled beer cans, empty coffee mugs and joint-rolling paraphernalia. To my left, slumped on the sagging sofa-bed beneath the big window which looked out on to the street, Dennis Jasper snorted in apparent mirth, snagging my attention. He was a rangy, raddled man with a long, bony, deeply lined face and stiff, mousey

hair that stuck out at all angles. He wore a ratty old waistcoat over an off-white T-shirt, drainpipe jeans which made his legs look as spindly as broom handles, and tan leather cowboy boots. He was sucking on a spliff pinched between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, his mouth wrinkling inwards like a contracting anus. He took a good lungful of smoke, the end of the spliff crackling and glowing orange as it burned down, then offered it to me.

I shook my head, not because I was averse to weed, but because I couldn't face the thought of putting my lips where his fingers had been. Dennis Jasper – known as Cosmic Dennis because of the bullshit he spouted whenever he was high (which was most of the time) – was one of life's grubby men. His teeth were brown, his over-long fingernails were permanently clogged with black gunge, and his moist-looking, dirt-ingrained skin exuded a faint odour of old toilets.

He gave another cackle, as though my refusal was the punchline to a private joke, and said something incomprehensible about the 'angel of death'. Still holding the unopened can of beer in my hand, I looked away from him, turning my attention to the other man in the room. He was already leaning forward, an old dining chair creaking beneath his solid, meaty bulk, as he offered his hand across the cluttered table. The chunky bracelet encircling his wrist and the thick silver rings on each of his fingers gave the impression that his body had been strengthened with metal joints, like a cyborg from a sci-fi movie.

'Alex,' he said, his voice a husky croak, 'good to see you, mate.' He had the amiable but vaguely threatening presence of a man who was so hard that he didn't feel a need to prove it.

I took the hand and shook it. 'How you doing, Ray?'

'Doing good, mate. How about you?'

'Can't complain.'

He nodded, his sleepy eyes assessing me, his gaze unwavering. After a moment he said, 'Sit down, mate, have a drink.'

I couldn't help feeling I was about to be interrogated, that as soon as I sat he would drop his nice-guy persona and start to pump me with questions. I racked my brains, wondering what he thought I'd done, what he'd been told I might know, but I couldn't think of anything. I wanted to ask what was wrong, whether someone had been bad-mouthing me, but I thought that might sound like an admission of guilt, so I stayed silent.

I glanced at Chris, who was standing behind me with his arms folded, looking pensive. He nodded at me – encouragingly, I hoped. I sat.

'Aren't you gonna open your beer?' Ray said, nodding at the can in my hand.

'Sure,' I said. I popped the ring-pull, took a swig of the fizzy, metallic-tasting stuff, and forced it down.

He nodded in approval, his close-cropped hair gleaming with styling wax. When he moved, his black puffa jacket made a dry, slithering sound like a snake. Over by the window Cosmic Dennis watched the sweet-smelling smoke coiling above his head and chuckled for no discernible reason.

'Chris says you can be trusted, says you can keep secrets. That true?'

Ray's voice was a rasp in the otherwise silent room. I shrugged, trying not to feel intimidated. 'I think so.'

'Think so? Don't you know?'

I sensed rather than saw Chris tense behind my right shoulder.

'No,' I said, 'I can definitely.'

'Can what?'

'Be trusted.'

'You sure?'

'Yes.'

He stared at me a moment, then nodded. 'Okay.'

I waited. Ray reached across, lifted a can from the table and tilted it towards his mouth, before replacing it carefully on the ring of moisture it had formed on the scarred wood. After a moment he said, 'I hear you've got money problems, Alex. That you'd jump at the chance to earn a few extra quid.'

'Doing what?' I asked.

'Does it matter?'

'It might.' I swallowed. 'I don't want to hurt anybody.'

Ray flashed his teeth in a sudden grin, as though the idea was ludicrous. 'Nobody's gonna get hurt.'

Over on the sofa-bed, Cosmic Dennis muttered, 'We're not in the crying game, Mr Churchill,' and dissolved into breathy laughter.

Ray ignored him. 'So you interested?'

'I might be,' I said carefully, 'but I'd need to know what you want me to do.'



Ray narrowed his eyes and tilted his head to one side, as though contemplating how much to tell me. He'd been in the year above me at school, but I knew him more by reputation than anything; we'd never been on much more than nodding terms.

'You wouldn't need to do anything except back us up,' he said eventually. 'There's this geezer, Amir Mahoon, Paki businessman. He owns half a dozen supermarkets round Leyton, Wanstead, Hackney.'

I nodded. 'I've seen them.'

'Right. Well, every Friday afternoon Mahoon's brother collects the takings in his van and drives to the NatWest in Walthamstow to pay it in. He follows the same route every week, and part of it takes him along March Road near the cemetery. One side is houses, the other's warehouses and factories - but it's all derelict, due to be knocked down. There's only one way in, one way out. Do you see where all this is leading?'

I nodded. 'How much will he be carrying?'

'I'm reliably informed it'll be somewhere in the region of a hundred grand. Interested?'

I blinked. All I could see at that moment was pound signs in front of my eyes. I felt my throat closing up, my stomach clenching, my limbs tingling. I suddenly got the impression that I was sitting on the edge of an abyss, and that if I leaned forward I'd fall, and keep falling, down into endless blackness. I tried desperately to keep all of this hidden, to not allow any of it to show on the surface. Although warm, fizzy beer was the last thing I wanted in my stomach at that moment, I forced myself to raise my arm slowly, to tilt the can towards my mouth. The liquid lubricated my throat enough for me to ask, 'Split four ways?'

Ray rocked backwards in his seat as though I'd punched him. His response, though derisory, at least had a bark of laughter in it.

'Fuck off! You honestly think I'd set all this up and give you equal fucking shares? Do you take me for a muppet?'

I felt my face growing hot and knew my cheeks were blazing red. 'Course not,' I mumbled. 'Sorry, Ray, I wasn't thinking.'

'Too fucking right you weren't.' He stared at me so intently I thought I'd blown it, but after a moment he shook his head, like a teacher resigned to dealing with dim pupils. 'I get fifty per cent,' he muttered. 'You three share the other fifty. Take it or leave it.'

I made a quick calculation. A third of fifty grand was still about seventeen - which for me was well over a year's wages. 'I'll take it,' I said.

'Yeah, me too,' said Chris quickly behind me. Over by the window Cosmic Dennis seemed oblivious to the conversation. He had a grin on his face and his eyes were darting about the room. I wondered what hallucinatory wonders were cavorting in his frazzled brain.

Chris spent the next hour talking us through what the job would entail, and over the following few weeks we met on at least a dozen more occasions to discuss the finer points. By the end of that period even Cosmic Dennis knew exactly what was expected of him. It did occur to me to wonder why Dennis was on board, but that would have been questioning Ray's judgement, so I kept my mouth shut. In the end I was glad I did, because when I mentioned my misgivings to Chris one night over a pint he looked at me like I'd just walked unwittingly across a minefield.

'You know Dennis is Ray's uncle, don't you?'

I goggled at him. It had never occurred to me that they might be related. 'Seriously?'

'Yeah. Dennis married Ray's mum's sister. Sometime in the late seventies this was. Got her pregnant, I think.'

I thought back on all the meetings we'd had over the past few weeks, of how Ray had seemed to push Dennis around, to control him in the same way a dog owner would control an unruly puppy. I wondered what the true nature of the relationship was between them. Was Ray babysitting his uncle? Did he feel he could trust and rely on him because he was family? Or was he maybe trying to help out his mum's sister financially by bringing Dennis on board? Whatever the reason, it struck me as a weird family dynamic. And it made me uneasy too. It made me feel that Dennis might prove to be Ray's blind spot.

Chris, though, shook his head. 'Ray knows what he's doing,' he said confidently. 'Everything'll be fine.'

I hoped so. I was still hoping so when Amir Mahoon's brother's grey van turned the corner on to March Road and began to rattle along the pitted tarmac towards us.

I described it as a security van earlier, but it wasn't really. It was little more than a ramshackle Transit with bald tyres and a bad paint job. In many ways it was crying out to be robbed - Ray had said on more

than one occasion that the Mahoons were taking the piss, and that by robbing them we'd be teaching them a long-overdue lesson. He even made it sound as though we'd be doing them a favour, saving them from a much bigger fall along the way.

That's not how I felt, though, as Chris tensed in the driver's seat beside me. Not for the first time I felt as though I was getting in way over my head. Compared to the average nineteen-year-old, I was a pretty hard lad from a rough estate, who had taken more than a few knocks in life. Even so, as Chris said, 'Here we go,' and slammed the car into first, it suddenly struck me for the first time how fucking *real* this was, how *serious*.

At the same time I knew there was no backing out now, that I had no option but to follow it through. I couldn't do it half-heartedly either. I'd spent weeks thinking that Dennis might prove to be the weak link, so there was no fucking way I was going to allow it to be me. I gripped the edges of my seat as Chris accelerated and the car shot forward out of the warehouse entrance, veering in front of the van. Through the gauze of the stocking mask, I caught the barest glimpse of a shocked brown face - a boy's face - in the passenger seat, all wide dark eyes and a gaping oval of a mouth. As the driver tried to take evasive action, Chris twisted the wheel of the Mondeo and turned us sharply to the left, directly into the path of the already swerving van. I saw a wall of grey metal hurtling towards the passenger window, and then - BANG! - the door next to me buckled inwards and the window shattered, a thousand tiny cubes of safety glass showering into my lap and across my legs.

My entire body jolted with the impact, sending hard, jagged shockwaves shooting through my limbs, back, ribcage and head. For an instant I was aware of my body as an inter-connected unit, if only because it felt as though my flesh, bones, heart and brain had suddenly become dislodged from one another. The feeling lasted for no more than a split second and then everything dropped back into place. Next thing, the two vehicles were scraping against one another as they careened sideways, but only until the van hit the high kerb side on and crunched to an abrupt halt.

The Mondeo lurched, skidded in a half-circle so that we were facing the van almost nose to nose, and stopped with a screech of brakes

and the sharp tang of scorched rubber. Before I'd even recovered my wits, Chris had snatched up one of the two baseball bats lying in the well between the front seats and was shoving open the driver's door. I grabbed the other bat and tried to push open the door on the passenger side. But it was jammed solid in the frame, too twisted and buckled from the impact of the crash. I kicked at it a couple of times, then gave up and scrambled over the front seats to exit via the driver's door, almost falling on to the road in my eagerness to show willing. By the time I'd jumped to my feet and joined Chris, he was already holding his baseball bat out in front of him and screaming, 'Get out of the fucking van!'

Adrenaline was pumping through me. I felt wild, exhilarated, abandoned. I ran up and smashed my bat down on the van's bonnet, putting a big dent in it. Through the windscreen I saw Mahoon's brother, a chubby man with a thick black beard, a white skullcap on his head. He looked terrified, and the skinny kid next to him - who couldn't have been more than ten or eleven - was crying in fear, mouth wide and drooling as he blubbed.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ray and Cosmic Dennis getting out of the Vectra, which had come screaming up behind the van and was now jammed tight up to its rear bumper. Like me and Chris, Dennis was wielding a baseball bat, but Ray had a sawn-off shotgun. He strode unhurriedly to the driver's side of the van, and pointed the shotgun at Mahoon's brother's bearded face through the window.

'Open the fucking door,' he said, his voice business-like, brooking no argument. When Mahoon's brother hesitated, he barked, 'Now! Unless you want to lose your fucking head!'

Mahoon's brother became a mass of jittery movement as he complied with Ray's request. As soon as he had pushed the door open, Ray reached in, grabbed his thick beard and wrenched him out. Although I still felt high on adrenaline, I winced as Mahoon's brother hit the tarmac hard and sprawled in front of us, his baggy white trousers tearing at the knee. The skin beneath tore too, blood mingling with dirt on the white cotton.

Mahoon pushed himself up with one arm. The other he raised as if shielding his face from the sun. 'Please,' he begged, 'please... please...'

Ray stood over him, staring down, and even through the stocking



mask I could see the contempt on his face. A chill went through me. For a second I believed that Ray was about to end Mahoon's brother's life - and maybe even that of the boy still cowering in the van, goggling at us with big dark eyes. Then Ray jerked his head up and looked at Dennis.

'Open her up,' he said.

Dennis cackled and loped like a big black stick-insect towards the side of the van. Curling his long fingers around the handle of the side door, he tugged, and the door slid open on gritty, squealing runners. Inside was a heap of dirty nylon sacks with draw-string tops. Dennis hopped up into the van and tugged one open. He reached inside and plucked out a thick white envelope which he waved above his head.

'Christmas presents for all the little children!' he cried gleefully.

We spent the next minute or so loading up the boot of the Vectra with the sacks from the van. Some of them were full of coins, which it took two of us to carry, and which caused the Vectra to creak in protest as we dumped them in. Before leaving, Ray made Mahoon's brother and the boy - who was so terrified he had to be wrenched from the interior of the van by the scruff of his neck - lie spreadeagled on the road, face down. Both were shaking violently and the man never stopped begging for mercy, even when Ray told him to shut the fuck up. I'd never seen anyone in genuine fear of his life before, and despite the adrenaline still buzzing through me, it made me feel dirty and ashamed for my part in putting the two of them through such an ordeal.

Ray locked the van doors and threw the keys into the overgrown garden of a derelict house across the road. Then the four of us piled into the Vectra - the Mondeo was a write-off, and would have attracted too much attention even if we *had* been able to start her up - and fucked off. As we drove away, I peeled the now-sweaty stocking mask from my face and looked out of the back window. The last thing I saw before we turned the corner was Mahoon's brother slowly raising his head to watch us go, his bearded face betraying shock and wonder at the fact that he was still alive.

## TWO

SUNDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 2012

'You all right, Dad?'

Her voice was soft, but it still startled me. She saw the cigarette jerk in my fingers as I lifted it to my mouth and expressed her amusement the same way she'd done since she was two or three years old, by crinkling her nose in such a way that it tugged the corners of her lips into a smile and squeezed her eyes into slits. Even at eighteen it was an adorable expression, and gave me an unexpected pang of nostalgia, an almost melancholy sense of time slipping away.

'Sorry,' she said, putting a hand lightly on my arm. 'Didn't mean to make you jump.'

'I was miles away,' I told her.

'What were you thinking about?'

I shrugged. 'Nothing much. The past. Everything that's happened. How much you've grown.' I turned on my heel to face her, then leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. 'I mean, look at you, Candice. You're a beautiful young woman.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Dad,' she said, drawing out the word like she used to as a kid when I was mucking about, embarrassing her. I put my arm around her shoulders and we stood for a moment, side by side against the wall of the pub, watching the tourists and post-performance theatre-goers streaming to and from the bustling attractions of Covent Garden. The Rusty Bucket, whose upstairs function room Candice had hired for her eighteenth, was a sturdy old London boozier on Russell Street, whose wooden fittings had apparently been constructed