



## A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

I can't help feeling angry sometimes at a system that locks so many people out. Everything seems designed to make the rich get richer and the poor poorer, while the young especially are ignored or patronized. But in *Payback* we find a group of young people fighting back, taking expensive, privileged objects and selling them to give the money to the poor. But what's the power behind the Robin Hood slogans and social media sensation? And what happens to those caught up in the movement? This is a gripping adventure that makes you think as well as gasp – a thriller of soul and importance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Cunningham', with a stylized, flowing script.

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM**

Publisher

Chicken House

# PAYBACK

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*For Saffiyah Khan,  
Juan Manuel Sanchez Gordillo  
and of course for Robin Hood*

Also by M.A. Griffin

*Lifers*

*Everybody knows the fight was fixed  
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich  
That's how it goes  
Everybody knows*

Leonard Cohen, 'Everybody Knows'

# 1

## The Night of the Jaguars

‘Everybody know their roles?’

**E**We all nodded. We’d been through it a hundred times.

Satisfied, Gedge slipped his mask down and we followed suit. Now we were a gang of four anonymous identical foxes; red, lean faces, high ears and dark noses. Kallie adjusted her mask, loosened her stance and stretched. Coke went through a final check of the camcorder, panning it across the darkened car park. These guys were real pros. Me? It was my first ever steal. I was fizzing with terror.

We dipped our phone torches and moved off, skirting the walls and following Coke’s CCTV map to ensure we stayed off-camera. Gedge made short work of a locked door and led us through into the dark, deserted shopping mall. It extended, vast and silent, towards the glittering glass roof of the central dome. Above us was the first floor – two wide balconies with brass balustrades. That’s where we were headed. We stuck to the shopfronts and doorways.

‘The night guy swiped in at ten p.m., just like normal,’ Gedge whispered, ‘but right now he could be anywhere. First rule – don’t get yourselves caught before we reach the



cars or it's all off.

My breath felt hot and damp against the plastic mask. I followed Kallie and Gedge, high with panic. Coke brought up the rear, filming. He'd be uploading the footage once we were home and dry. We skirted a silent fountain, its glassy water still, and squatted against the shuttered hut of an ice cream vendor. No sign of the night guy. Gedge made a bunch of incomprehensible SWAT-team hand signals – mostly for the camera, I guessed – and I nodded, pretending I knew what the hell he was on about.

Mostly adrenaline and fear kept my mind on the job but now and again terrifying thoughts surfaced. *What if we get caught? What if the cops are waiting for us? Imagine if Dad finds out . . .* I'd be kissing goodbye to my cushy allowance, for one. I wouldn't be enjoying the luxury of the sixth-form dorms come September either. The thought sent stabs of shame through me. I was jumpy as a bag of caffeinated puppies and my Zen breathing trick – in through the nose, out through the mouth, count the breaths with your eyes on the mile of shadowy shops ahead – wasn't working.

The Westwater Mall is basically two giant wings extending from a central atrium designed to look like the deck of an ocean liner. In the domed hall hangs the world's largest chandelier. There are Egyptian columns, acres of Italian marble, statues of lions, griffins and angels. And that summer, two elegant Jaguars. Top spec, high performance, the works. They were due to be there until the end of August. But we had other plans.

We'd be liberating them, breaking them into bits, and selling them online.

The first of the Jags looked like a silver bullet with a red

leather interior. Gedge and I tucked ourselves in against it. Kallie and Coke continued along to the second car. I checked the mall again. A grey-blue emptiness punctuated by low lines of safety lights. Maybe the night guy was taking it easy in an office somewhere. Gedge hopped into the open-top car and used his phone torch to illuminate his work. He plugged in some tricky gizmo that could disable immobilizers and tracking devices. Nothing happened. He leant in close, cursing.

‘Hold my phone. I need both hands.’

I jumped in alongside him. The car was incredible – sleek dash, dials and data screen, bucket seats in soft leather and that unmistakable fragrance of the new and the beautiful. I felt a rush of pleasure. ‘Rendall!’ Gedge hissed.

In a daze, I’d begun taking my gloves off to run my hands along the surfaces. I stopped myself. ‘Sorry.’

Gedge fiddled and cursed in the torch beam, and something made me look up.

A sound.

Gedge killed the torch and we sat next to each other, two breathless thieves, statue-still in our badass masks. There was someone approaching. The passageway ahead was a high-ceilinged space designed to look like an oriental street market – cafes, noodle bars and conveyor-belt sushi places crowding either side of a marble walkway. Whoever it was moved cautiously. If they had a torch, they weren’t using it. The two of us instinctively slid down in our seats.

It was our night guy. By his chunky silhouette, I’d have guessed he was middle-aged. He held his guard’s cap under one arm and he was creeping through the dark like a pantomime villain. He hadn’t seen us yet; an advertising hoarding obscured the front of the car. But he was in our way.

The food hall was our escape route. Gedge set to work again. His hands weren't as steady as before.

The engine exploded into life.

The roar echoed up the mall. The headlights came on and the night guy shouted 'Hey!', shielding his eyes and dropping his cap. Gedge crunched the gears with a desperate series of jerks and released the clutch. We were off. I was petrified Gedge was going to mow the night guy down, but he reversed, thank God, and we crashed backwards through a display board, wheels squealing on the polished floor. He swung the Jag to the left, hit the brakes, spun the wheel right, and we shot off along the upper floor of the mall. I saw the night guy running after us, his jacket open and his shirt untucked over a swaying belly. He was already knackered. We hit maybe forty miles an hour, the engine wailing in third gear, and I winced and flinched as the balustrade flew past on one side and the store windows on the other. The car's dash was beeping a shrill seatbelt warning.

Gedge hit the horn a couple of times. Ahead, Coke and Kallie in the second Jag were still struggling with Yate's gadget. And they were in our way.

'C'mon, C'mon!' Gedge yelled, accelerating towards them.

I found myself stamping on an imaginary brake. Kallie had the video camera on us, and even through her mask I could see her eyes widen from behind the viewfinder as we closed in.

Then I heard a guttural roar as their engine sprang to life and the Jag's lights came on full beam, dazzling us as Coke reversed wildly, leaving us a sliver of space. We screeched between the storefront of a jeweller's and the car, swung a

sharp left and tore towards the food hall, smashing a sandwich board aside as we went. Coke and Kallie followed, their engine bellowing. I got the blurred impression of a thousand cafe seats whizzing past in the dark as we screeched between marble pillars.

‘This is it! Hold on!’

The stairs – that’s right, the actual designed-for-pedestrians stairs – that took us down to the exits felt steeper than I’d imagined. We both screamed as the Jag tipped forward, its tyres hammering down the marble steps. We crashed noisily against the ground floor, braked hard and skidded to a standstill, leaving space for Coke to pull up alongside. As I leapt from the car and ran for the doors I could hear his extended howl as he followed us down, his headlights pitched towards us like an aircraft coming into land.

Ferg had disabled the alarms on the main doors. They were built to concertina open, so all we had to do was push them apart. We kept the engines running. Gedge and I shouldered the left-hand doors, Kallie and Coke the right.

‘Enough!’ Gedge yelled. ‘Let’s go!’

I held my breath as we edged through, wincing as Gedge smacked a wing mirror, but we were out.

The night air was warm, the sky a pale purple underlit by the sodium-yellow of London. We hit the gas and roared across the painted grids of the empty car park making a crow-flies line for the exits, howling wolf-whoops under a crescent moon.

Gedge threw his head back and bawled, ‘Smashin’ the system every damn day!’ as behind us mall lights exploded into life and an alarm blared. Ferg had hacked security so the police would get a delayed signal, allowing us time to vanish

into the night. Gedge put the radio on and we both gave a roar of celebration at the opening of 'Carjack', a Kiss FM fave that name-checked us in a chorus that went, 'Crown Heights carjack, ass on the tarmac. I'll make you holler, shake your dollar like Payback.' We roared the words out between gales of laughter, chanted them back to each other when the track was over.

Weird to think that only a month ago I'd started as a porter at the Midland Hotel back in Manchester, helping out Mr Ruiz. It was how I first met Payback. How all this madness began.

But for now I was sixteen, Payback was famous and it all felt good.

I wasn't thinking about Ruiz.