

Chapter 2

Riley Donovan had been a thief since the age of 12 when he stole his first piece of candy from Simpson's Drug store. It was easy and pretty exciting the first few times he did it. Then he got caught. The punishment turned out to be worse than the reward for his efforts. His father made him pay Mr. Simpson back, whipped him with his belt, and then locked him in a closet with no food or water.

After about an hour of being locked up, Riley began to whimper and cry and then eventually started to scream for release. The door was opened almost immediately after his screams began but he could see in his father's face that it was not for relief from his suffering. Instead he was kicked in the gut. "Shut the hell up or I'll really give you something to scream about."

So Riley sat in the pitch black of his prison in silent sobs, pain, and terror. When he was finally released, Riley became aware of two things. First, if you're going to do something that others saw as wrong, you better make sure the reward was worth at least as much as the risk. In other words, stealing ten cent candy wasn't worth a beating, captivity, and starvation.

Secondly, he knew he could never stand prison for any length of time. Being locked in a dark closet, hungry and thirsty, and at the mercy of his captor had been pure agony.

He thought, at first, that he had also learned a third lesson. To never steal again. But as it turned out, Riley was hooked. In fact, the fear of the beatings and suffering somehow added to his excitement, and he longed to do it again. But the memory of that beating and the closet kept him under control, at least for a time.

His friends became people like himself: Boys and girls on the fringes of proper society. Soon he had friends that were breaking into the neighborhood Porsche for a joy ride. Riley stayed on the sidelines and watched. There was no point in risking 5 years in prison for an hour in a hot car.

Then a couple of other friends thought it would be cool to walk into the local liquor store, pull a gun, and demand the money in the cash register along with a case of Jack Daniels. Again, Riley

was content to simply sit and watch the outcome of this endeavor. The 10-15 years of prison for armed robbery just to get a couple hundred dollars and some booze seemed ludicrous to him.

Riley simply waited and watched. He hadn't taken a single thing since that last piece of candy at the age of 12. He studied hard in school and read constantly. The entire time, though, he daydreamed of pulling off some big heist like they did in the movies or in the fictional capers that he read about. For now, he would live vicariously through them and his hooligan friends, but someday he would make his own move.

Then at the age of 17 he met "Lucky" White. Lucky, at 46, seemed like an old sage to Riley. Lucky was also a con man. Riley figured this last bit out the hard way the first time he met Lucky. Lucky took him for \$100 in a pool game after Riley had easily won the first 3 games they played.

"I'll play you for \$10," Lucky had said when Riley first walked in.

"Sure, why not?" was Riley's response.

Riley barely one the first game and Lucky, seeming upset at having lost the money said, "Double or nothing?"

"You got it," Riley replied. After all, he now had nothing to lose. Worst-case scenario he got another game of pool and left with what he started with. No risk at all in this scenario.

Again, Riley won by a slim margin. This time Lucky actually sank the eight ball but scratched. "Damn it!" he said as the cue ball fell into the side pocket. "I had that game won! Alright, one more, double or nothing?"

"It's your money, man," Riley had said.

This time Riley lost but again it was close. *Oh well*, he thought, *I'm still even*. But now the old man said, "One more time? Play for \$20 again?" Riley was confident he could beat him. After all, he'd won the first two games, he was 17, and he was cocky.

"Damn It!" This time it was Riley that was upset. He thought for sure he had the game won but at the last minute Lucky cleaned up with a couple of tough shots.

"Wow. I haven't made two shots in a row like that in years," Luck explained to him. "I feel I should give you a chance

to win your money back, son. What do you say, double or nothing?”

“Hell yeah,” Riley said as he racked the balls.

Lucky won again with a couple of brilliant shots. Now Riley new he was getting hustled. Instead of getting angry, though, he was curious. Here was someone making easy money with zero risk. This was the kind of thing he could get into. He wasn't even sure it was illegal, but he new it was still stealing. He wanted to learn more.

Lucky was surprised by the kid. Most people react one of two ways when they realize they've been taken. They either get really pissed off and demand their money back or they slink away ashamed. But not this kid. He wanted to learn how to do it.

“Your first lesson, kid,” Lucky started out, “is you've got to get good at playing pool. You're not hustling anyone if they're better than you. So start practicing.”

All Riley did after school for the next month was come to the pool hall and practice. Four or five hours every day until he was one of the best players in the place.

“You're ready,” Lucky told him. It was then that Riley picked his first mark and ran his first scam. It was thrilling! He kept this up for about 6 months before he started to get bored with it. He needed some new action, and it turned out that the pool hall held just the kind of characters he needed to move him along in his criminal career.

He was so nervous before his first robbery that he puked all over the Morrissey's backyard right before he smashed a window, let himself in, and walked out with a jewelry box and a couple hundred dollars in cash. A trip to the pawnshop with the jewelry earned him an extra hundred. Not bad money for a 17 year-old kid at the time.

This technique had been given to him by Sam Jacobson. He was one of the pool hall regulars that Riley had become good friends with. Sam made his real living as a burglar.

“Breaking into houses is easy,” he told Riley. “Just drive out into the nice rich suburb some weekend, spend the day in your

car watching and taking notes on who lives where, how many people in the house, and what kind of security they look to have. Your best marks are parents with a couple of kids with neighbors in the same horrible state. Papas will go off to work and Mamas will take the kids to school. You then stroll up to the back of the house.

“All of these yuppie homes have some sort of large back patio door that slides open. Smash the window, open the door, and you’ve got free reign to grab what you need. I recommend something small and easy to carry out of the house. Jewelry boxes are perfect.”

“What about an alarm?” Riley asked.

“Just take a quick peak in the front window when you walk up to the house. If you see a little keypad there, the house has an alarm. Move on to the next house.”

Despite the excitement of the robbery, Riley wasn’t too comfortable smashing windows and breaking in. Too much noise and too obvious. So he made some inquiries and eventually found someone that taught him how to pick a lock. Just as he had with the pool games, he practice every day until he could open up one of those “Yuppie back sliding doors” in about 10 seconds.

He also spent not just a weekend, but hours in neighborhoods all over the tri-state area watching people and taking notes. He needed such a wide area because once you hit a suburb, people in the area got very cautious, and cautious people do not make good marks.

He quickly learned just the type of people he wanted to go after. He started studying jewelry, clothing, and shoes. A big house and expensive cars didn’t really mean much. They could be borrowed to the hilt, which would mean all their jewelry would be cheap, imitation crap. It was the people wearing the expensive shoes and suits you needed to find. They were the types that bought the real silver, gold, and diamonds, and this was where the money was.

He had stopped using pawnshops to hawk his goods shortly after his first robbery. It turned out most of them were crooks and they were robbing him. He had been too naïve at first to know

what his stuff was worth but as soon as he did, he was no longer willing to take \$40 for a \$600 ring. Instead, he started expanding his connections to include people that dealt in stolen merchandise. He found people to buy his stolen jewelry, art, shoes, coats, dresses, and anything else of value that Riley could throw into a plastic bag.

By the time he was 19, Riley was bringing in about ten grand every three months. He was very good at his job but he was also becoming very bored. He needed to expand his enterprise to include the very rich. These were the huge homes on ridiculous plots of land and they were always guarded by a top-notch security system.

This meant Riley needed to expand from a one man operation and find people adept at picking all kinds of locks, breaking high-end security systems, opening wall safes, and that were better than him at appraising art and jewelry on the spot. In short, he wanted to become a boss.

A typical job involved scouting a very high-end neighborhood for at least a month to find just the right family. Someone with money, art, jewelry, the right schedule, and mind-their-own-business neighbors. He would then put together a crew that could break the homes security system, appraise the art or jewelry, and do it all in a hurry. When the right day came, they would gather together, break in, grab the most valuable stuff that 3 or 4 of them could now fit in a garbage bag and get out. Then Riley would find all the right buyers to take the stuff off their hands. A typical job would net them ten to twenty thousand dollars. All of this on one house instead of having to rob 10 homes.

Riley made sure no one in his crew ever carried a gun. It wasn't that Riley was opposed to violence, it's just that it would have wrecked the risk-reward calculation. Getting caught as an unarmed burglar carries a much lighter sentence than getting caught as an armed robber. Riley felt he could stand a few months or even a year in jail, but anything beyond that was terrifying to him.

The other reason to go in unarmed was the homeowners. You were never sure when someone would forget something and have to come home or when some housewife might come back for an afternoon fling with the neighbor next door. Riley had had more than one close call. But what he did not need was some panicked, armed accomplice to go blasting holes in someone. Twenty thousand dollars wasn't worth the risk of life in prison.