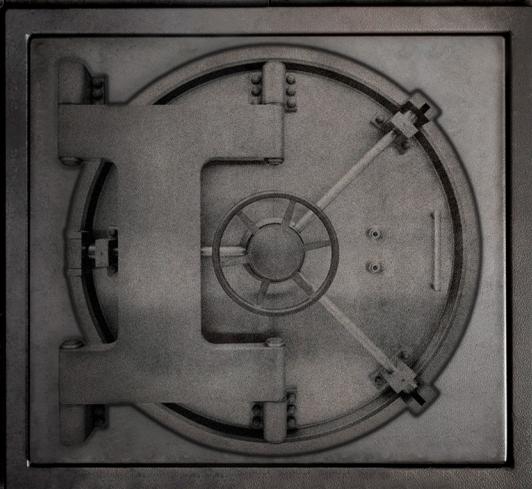


NORTHERN

A NOVEL



“A cunningly plotted thriller.”
—*The Independent*
(Ireland)

RICHARD O'RAWE

NORTHERN HEIST

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ADVANCE READERS COPY

Melville House
Brooklyn | London

ONE

They say lazyboneitis is in the blood. It isn't in James 'Ructions' O'Hare's blood. Not when it comes to robbing banks.

At RJ's gym, on Belfast's Boucher Road, Ructions watches his childhood friend, Billy Kelly, set down dumbbells on the weight bench and inspect his bulging biceps. He likes what he sees.

A female fitness trainer yells at her aerobics class, exhorting the masochistic faithful to spill even more sweat. A middle-aged Arnold Schwarzenegger lookalike, in a tight pair of latex shorts, with clenched fists in black fingerless gloves, strolls across the floor. Mini-Arnold's eyes inspect the pot-bellied and the over-the-hillers. Chesney Hawkes' 'The One and Only' blasts over the loudspeakers as Mini-Arnold grins at himself laciviously in a floor-to-ceiling mirror. He sees Billy, winks and strolls over towards the pull-up bar. Billy, the pocket-sized champion weightlifter, opens his bottle of water and puts it to his lips.

Ructions – forty-five years old, blond hair, full lips, thin Roman nose and athletic build – lies on the bench, breathes deeply and prepares to start his set of bench-curls with the dumbbells. After only five bench-curls, Billy's upside-down face appears above him.

'One hundred and fifty large? Before the move? That's what you said. You're going to give me—'

Ructions sets down the dumbbells, sits up and wags his finger. 'Ah, ah, ha, Billy.'

'Let me get this right ...'

'Uh-huh?'

'You're going to give me one hundred and fifty—'

'I'm not *giving* you anything, Billy.'

'Now,' Billy says, 'your client—'

'Uh-huh?'

'Who we both know well—'

'We know a lot of people well, and any of them could be the person to *whom* you are referring.'

Billy ignores Ructions' provocations. 'Let's call this person to *whom* I am referring Robin Hood.'

Ructions feigns surprise. 'You've guessed my client's name.'

'So, Robin Hood is going to give me ...' Billy looks about, making sure he will not be overheard, 'one hundred and fifty thousand pounds *before* the job is done?'

'Yes.'

Billy's foxy eyes try to read Ructions' face. 'Nice bait.'

Ructions does not disguise his ire. 'Nice bait? Nice fucking bait? Are you serious?'

'There's a catch,' Billy says, pointing to Ructions' chest. 'C'mon, amigo. This is your best mate you're talking to. What is it?'

Ructions puts his arms on Billy's shoulder. 'You and me – we joined the Immaculata Boxing Club together, didn't we?'

'We sure did.'

'And I taught you how to swim in the Falls Baths, didn't I?'

'No,' Billy says. 'I taught you.'

Ructions is reminded that Billy will be a controversialist to the day he dies. 'Take my word for it, Bill, there is no catch. Once the money is in your hands, it's yours. So, if the move goes ahead, you get paid the big bucks. If, at the last minute, it gets called off, you still get paid the big bucks. If your boys get knocked off by the cops, they eventually come out of the nick to the big bucks.'

Billy strokes his black moustache. 'I see.'

'And remember this – you're the boss man. You pay your employees what *you* think they're worth.' Gone is the frivolity as Ructions whispers in Billy's ear. 'Billy, believe me, it doesn't get much better than this.'

'Robin's no philanthropist.'

'I never said he was.'

‘So, for him to claw back his money – and get the wages he’s used to – this thing has to work.’

‘Bingo.’

‘Ructions O’Hare,’ Billy says, beaming, ‘you must be one hundred and ten per cent.’

‘Aren’t I always?’

‘I’m in. You knew that anyway. You knew that before you came to me.’ Billy inspects his biceps in the mirror and sings, ‘I am the one and only ...’ He falls silent for a few seconds and then turns to Ructions. ‘You fellas must be expecting a heavy haul.’

‘I’m an optimist, Billy. I always expect a good result.’ Ructions had anticipated that Billy’s greed would kick in sooner or later, and he is not disappointed.

‘Can we say two hundred, Ructions? Our pal, Robin, he can do that, can’t he?’

‘No.’

‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

Billy nods. ‘Be thankful for small mercies, eh?’

‘Small mercies can be plenty costly.’

‘Yeah. Well, as I say, I’m in.’ Billy lifts his towel to go, and then stops. ‘Oh, I forgot to ask – how many players do I need?’

‘Five max, maybe less – if you’d a mind to do the prep work yourself and go no-frills.’

‘Hey! You’re looking at “No-Frills Kelly”.’

‘And one more thing.’

‘Yeah?’

‘I might need you to do some overtime. I probably won’t, but if I do, I’ll look after you.’

‘Time-and-a-half?’

‘Double-time.’

‘I’m your man.’

Seamus McCann is a man who thinks the world of himself. Lanky and thin, and with a sombre disposition, this former commander

of the South Down IRA Brigade looks more like a door-to-door Mormon missionary than someone who has spent the best part of his life plotting to kill British soldiers and police.

The dark mornings are upon them, and Seamus and Ructions are the only people on Bright Castle golf course, outside Downpatrick.

Ructions puts on his golf glove, takes out his driver and turns his attention to the first fairway. ‘Is there any point in hitting a ball?’

‘It’ll lift soon,’ Seamus says, his head tilting backwards as he scans the mist for signs of a break in the weather.

Ructions inhales the dewy crispness in the air as Seamus slowly pulls back his driver and drills the ball into the lifting mist. ‘Straight up the middle.’

‘You think so?’

‘I know so. I haven’t missed this fairway in ten years.’

Ructions pushes his tee into the ground and sets a golf ball on top of it. He takes some practice swings and focuses: arms straight, eye on the ball and a sharp strike. His ball flies straight into the trees to the right.

‘A decent effort,’ Seamus says, ‘but you didn’t aim for the fairway. You’ll find your ball easy enough.’

The two men pull their golf trolleys up the fairway.

‘Do you ever miss it, Seamus? The IRA ... the struggle?’

‘Nah. It’d run its course. Too many people died for too little, Ructions, and too much time was spent in jail. Like, I’ve done twelve solid years.’

‘Yeah, you told me that last time.’

‘Did I? There y’are now. You were saying?’

‘Saying what?’

‘About big money.’

‘Oh, right. My client—’

‘Panzer O’Hare—’

Ructions gives Seamus the undertaker’s stare: measured and stern. ‘My uncle is not the client.’

Seamus studies Ructions with bemused eyes. *Are you trying to read my thoughts, Ructions? You are, you fucking reprobate.*

Seamus cannot turn back the tide of a smile. Neither can Ructions. Both men have worked together before, and each knows that Panzer is the client, but for Ructions to acknowledge it would be unprofessional. Seamus puts up his hands. ‘Sorry about that.’

Ructions nods his acceptance of the apology. They walk towards the trees. ‘My client is committed to investing a large sum of money in a team that would be prepared to hold some people for twenty-four hours – thirty-six max.’

‘Yes?’

‘The money would be paid up front.’

‘Before the move?’

‘Yes.’

‘So all they’ve to do is to hold people till the job is over? Nothing else?’

‘That’s it.’

‘And the money, it’d be ...’

‘Made available twenty-four hours before the job commences.’

Seamus points towards the trees. ‘Your ball is in there.’

The two men go into the trees to search for Ructions’ ball. Ructions finds it and takes a club out of his golf bag.

Seamus walks up the fairway. His thoughts are like dodgem cars crashing into one another. *We get paid before the move? But no percentage of the take? Old Panzer must be expecting some turn. Demand a percentage of the take. Hold on there, Seamus, ye boy ye. Ructions will walk if you do that. Maybe he won’t. He’ll get another team. He will. He won’t. He will.*

Ructions chips his ball out of the trees. The mist has lifted, as Seamus had predicted. His ball is in the middle of the fairway, as he had also predicted. He takes out his five wood and drives the ball to the edge of the green.

‘Nice shot,’ Ructions says. ‘You should make your par.’ Ructions hits his ball up the centre of the fairway. They amble on.

‘If a man was to express an interest in this job,’ Seamus says haughtily, ‘what, ah, what sort of wages might he expect to take home, like?’

‘One hundred and fifty large.’

Seamus’ arching eyebrows tell Ructions everything he needs to know. Realising immediately that he has made a serious faux pas, Seamus tries to sound non-committal. ‘Not bad. How many men?’

‘That’d be up to the controller, but it’s straightforward enough. I’d say three – four at the very most. And it’d be up to the controller how much he pays his workers. As long as the job gets done, that’s none of my business.’

‘I see.’ Seamus stops and turns to Ructions. ‘And how much money is there in the job?’

‘That’s none of *your* business.’

Seamus can’t shackle the greedy voice in his head: *ask for a percentage of the take*. ‘Ah, but it *is* my business. I’d like to think there’d be a percentage—’

‘Shh!’ Ructions says, as he zips up the top of his golf bag and unclips the button on his glove. ‘Be seeing you, Seamus.’ Ructions puts out his hand.

Astonished at the sudden turn of events, Seamus automatically takes Ructions’ hand, but his grip is weak.

‘This conversation,’ Ructions says, ‘never happened, okay?’

Seamus looks like a man who has pulled his house apart and still cannot find his winning lottery ticket. ‘Wow, Ructions, wow! We can talk about this, can’t we?’

Ructions looks at his watch. ‘I need to go. I’ve to be up the road for half-eleven.’

Seamus has no idea where ‘up the road’ might be, and he cares even less. Sensing that his stock is dwindling away, he decides to play the man-to-man card, chuckling and holding up his hands appealingly. ‘Come on now, Ructions, you’re not gonna blame me for having a rattle, are you?’

‘You declared your hand,’ Ructions says, ‘and I’ve moved on. That’s it.’

Seamus smiles and points a golf club at Ructions. ‘You’d have done exactly the same thing. Admit it.’

If Seamus finds the situation amusing, Ructions doesn't. He rolls his head from one side to the other, as if evaluating his options.

'I got greedy,' Seamus says. 'It won't happen again.'

'No more shit talk.'

'Gotcha, buddy.'

No, I've got you, Seamybo – and by the cobblers too. 'Okay. Now, if I *was* to give you this job, I'd expect the same protocols as before.'

'I know – no forensic traces left behind, everything on a need-to-know basis.'

'I'd want a clean, professional operation.'

'Isn't it always?'

'As always, you're the only one on your side who knows who I am, and I'm the only one on my side who knows who you are. We keep it that way – just you and me. We watch each other's backs.'

'Ructions, I'm the only person alive who knows the names of the volunteers who stiffed fourteen Brits and cops. I know how to keep my trap shut.'

'I know you do, but what has to be said has to be said, and just when we're on the subject of—'

'You don't have to—'

'Listen to me—'

'I'm telling you—'

'Fuckin' listen to me!' Ructions snaps. *You're not an IRA commander now, Seamybo. I give the orders, and you take them.* 'My client would be really pissed off if the IRA turned up at his door—'

'That won't happen,' Seamus says icily.

'It'd better not.'

One shallow breath later, and Seamus' irritation finds its voice. 'Are you threatening me?'

'I don't do threats. I state the position on behalf of my client.'

'Don't talk to me like I'm a little boy.'

'I'd never do that.'

'It sounded very like it.'

'If it did, then I apologise.'

Seamus swallows hard. 'Okay. The IRA won't find out about this from my end. You've my word of honour on that.'

Ruictions puts on his glove again, unzips his golf bag and takes out a club. 'I'll finish this hole,' he says. As he readies himself to take his shot, he turns to Seamus. 'One last thing before we get down to the nitty-gritty ...'

'What?'

'No regrets.'

'I'm not with you.'

Ruictions lets almost thirty seconds pass. 'It's simple: I don't want you getting your greedy head on again after the job. I don't want you whinging in my ear that you want more dough. The deal we do now is the only deal there is or will be. Are you with me?'

Seamus is aggrieved, almost to the point of distraction. 'Are you trying to make an asshole out of me altogether?'

'No. I'm stating—'

'The position on behalf of your client. I know. I heard you the last time.'

Ruictions puts out his hand again. 'Do we have a deal?'

Seamus takes Ruictions' hand and this time his grip is firm. 'We have a deal.'