This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Good Thief's Guide to Amsterdam

Chris Ewan

ONE

"I want you to steal something for me."

It wasn't the first time I'd heard those words, though usually the person saying them liked to warm up to it first. Not the American. He got straight to the point, casual as you like. If I was a lesser writer, I'd tell you it set alarm bells ringing inside my head or that a chill ran down my spine. In truth, it just made me listen a little harder.

"You've made a mistake," I told him. "I'm a writer, not a burglar."

"Some writer. I've been following your work. You're good."

I smiled. "A hack with a pricey education, nothing more."

"Oh sure, as a writer. But as a thief, now that's a different story. You've got talent, kid, and that ain't easy to find around here."

Around here was Amsterdam. To be exact, around here was a dim-lit brown bar on a northern stretch of the Keizersgracht canal, a twenty minute stroll or a ten minute bicycle ride from my apartment. It was a cramped space, warmed more by the closeness of the walls than the fading embers in the fire across from our table. I'd been here before, though only in passing, and the name had meant nothing to me when the American suggested it as a meeting point. Now here I was again, a glass of Dutch beer in front of me and a tricky proposition beyond that.

The American had contacted me through my website. Most suspense writers have a website nowadays and you can go there to find all kinds of information about me and my writing. There's a page for each of the burglar books I've written to date and a News section with details of any readings I'm involved in, as well as some personal stuff my fans might care to know, such as where I happen to be living while I'm writing my latest novel. There's also a link that allows readers to e-mail me and that was how the American had been in touch.

Copyright © 2007 Chris Ewan
Published by Pocket Books

A job for you, he'd written. Name your price. Hear me out at Café de Brug. 10pm Thursday (tomorrow).

I had no idea who the American was, of course, and far less reason to trust him, but then again, the lure of a new job was something I'd long since given up trying to fight. Because the truth, in case you haven't already guessed, is that I don't just write books about a career thief - I also happen to be one.

"This talent you're referring to," I said. "Supposing it did exist."

"Supposing, I like that."

"Well, just supposing, then, that I really do have this talent - I'm curious how you'd like me to use it."

The American checked over my shoulder, towards the doorway, then over his own shoulder, towards the rear of the bar. When he was satisfied that his neck worked just fine and that nobody was eavesdropping on our conversation, he reached inside the front pouch of his windbreaker and removed a small object that he placed on the wooden table before me. The object, it turned out, was a monkey figurine, about the size of my thumb. The monkey was sat on his haunches, knees up around his chest, with his front paws covering his eyes and his mouth wide open, as if in shock at whatever it was he'd just seen inside the windbreaker.

"See no evil," I said, half to myself, and the American nodded and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

I picked up the monkey for a closer look. From the weight and the dry, gritty feel of it, I could tell the figurine had been rendered in plaster of Paris, which went some way to explaining why the finish was not very precise. The look of astonishment I'd read on the monkey's mouth could just as easily have been intended to show fear or even dumb joy by its maker. All things considered, it was hard to imagine it was worth more than a handful of pounds, or even dollars or euros for that matter.

"There are two more of these monkeys," the American said, not altogether surprising me. "One covering his ears, the other covering his mouth."

"You don't say."

"I want you to steal them."

I tilted my head to one side. "Supposing I could...obtain them for you. I'm not sure it would be worth my while."

The American leaned towards me and cocked an eyebrow. "How much to make it worth your while?"

I thought about a figure, then doubled it.

Copyright © 2007 Chris Ewan

"Ten thousand euros."

"You want it tonight?"

I laughed. "But this is worthless," I said, tossing the figurine back to the American, who scrambled to catch it before it struck the table.

"Not to me, kid," he told me, carefully dusting the monkey down and then placing it back inside the pouch of his windbreaker. "What do you say?"

"I'll think about it. Another beer?"

I stood and picked up our glasses without waiting for his answer and crossed to the bar, where a not unattractive blonde was filling some finger dishes with cashew nuts. She was tall and lean and tanned in that year-round Scandinavian way that never fails to make me feel impossibly English. You could tell she was used to fools like me hitting on her and when her eyes met my own, it was with a look that was like a ready apology.

"Twee pils astublieft," I managed, meanwhile holding up two fingers just in case the fact I was stood before a beer tap at a bar with two empty beer glasses left her in any doubt as to what I was aiming to buy.

"Of course," she said, in clipped English.

She pushed her hair behind her ear, then took one of the glasses and began to fill it, and meanwhile I tried to think about something other than the freckles on her neck and ended up considering how the American had found out about me instead. It was intriguing, alright, because I was always careful to keep my thieving a secret, and that was one of the reasons I travelled around so much. The only person I talked about that side of my character with at all was back in London and here in Amsterdam I'd carried out just three jobs in the past four months, none of them the type of thefts to draw much attention. True, one of the jobs had been a commission, but the man who'd hired me was a Belgian who passed his instructions through a Parisian fence I happened to trust and it seemed unlikely the Belgian would have told the American about me, given we'd never actually met. So how had the American known to contact me? And why on earth did he want me to steal two worthless figurines?

"Your beers," the blonde said, scraping the froth from the top of the half-pint glasses with a plastic spatula and placing them in front of me.

"That man," I said, indicating the American with a nod of my head. "Has he been in here before?"

"Yes. He is an American."

"Does he come here a lot?"

Copyright © 2007 Chris Ewan

She pouted. "Many times, I think."

"You know his name?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "But he is polite, always tipping"

Of course he was. I laid a few extra notes on the table and collected our beers.

The American was in his late fifties, I guessed, though it was hard to gather much else about him. He had a thick head of grey hair, cut in a jagged, youthful style, and he looked relatively fit for his age. The windbreaker suited him, making him appear sporty, like the type of guy who enjoyed sailing in his spare time, and I had it in mind to pay attention to his hands and look for signs of rope chaffing when he pulled me out of my thoughts by saying, "You want to know my name, all you gotta do is ask. It's Michael."

"Michael..."

"You don't have to say it so slow."

"I was waiting for your surname."

"Now that could be a long wait. The monkeys," he went on, "are in two locations. It's important to me that you take them both. It's also important that you take them on the same night."

"Two separate locations?"

"Uh huh."

"In Amsterdam?"

"That's right. Two places, fifteen minutes apart by foot."

"And these places are private dwellings?"

"Private dwellings," he echoed. "Jeez. One's an apartment and the other's a houseboat, alright? You don't have to worry about alarms and you don't have to worry about being disturbed because the night you do this, both places'll be empty."

"How come?"

"Because the men that live in these two dwellings will be having dinner. Here. With me."

I gave this some thought. I wasn't crazy about what I was hearing.

"Sounds complicated," I said. "Why don't you take the monkeys yourself? I can't imagine they'll be missed."

Copyright © 2007 Chris Ewan

"For one," he said, hitching an eyebrow, "the guy in the houseboat has a safe and he's kind of guarded about the combination. The other guy, he has an apartment in the Jordaan - it's on the top floor of a five storey building and he happens to have three door locks I know of."

"But no alarms."

"None."

"You're sure?"

"Listen, you can't have an alarm on a houseboat - you get a storm or a barge goes by too fast, the movement of the canal water'll trigger it."

"And the apartment?"

"Like I said, it's on the fifth floor. Way I see it, the guy figures he don't need no alarm."

"These locks..."

"Won't be a problem for you. Me, I don't have the keys or your talent, which is how come we're having this conversation."

"Something else occurs to me," I said. "Supposing these two men value their figurines in the same way you do, well, what if they go home after your meal and notice the figurines are gone - they'll suspect you."

He shook his head. "They trust me."

"Maybe. But if they do suspect you and they come looking for you, well, you can see how my name is liable to crop up."

"Not from these lips."

"You say. But I don't like it."

"Well try this for size - I don't plan on being any place they can find me. We meet at seven and we'll be done eating by ten - that gives you three hours to do your job, which I figure is plenty of time. The bar here closes at eleven and I have it in mind for you to meet me with the figurines at a half after ten. If all goes to schedule, I'll be out of Amsterdam before midnight. And I ain't coming back."

"You're leaving the Netherlands?"

"Well now, there's no need for you to know that, is there?"

I paused, tried something else.

Copyright © 2007 Chris Ewan

"The timing's kind of tight. Say I can't get into this safe."

"You'll get in."

"Or I can't find the figurine in the apartment."

"Guy keeps it under his pillow."

I frowned. "He sleeps on it?"

"Sleeps with it for all I care. But you'll find it under his pillow."

I backed away from him and looked about the room. The blonde was wiping down the bar with a damp cloth, her hair dancing around her face. The only other customers were three Dutch men drinking beer at a table near the front door. They were laughing and clapping one another on the back, grinning toothily as if life simply didn't get any better. Behind them, sheet rain blasted against the picture window, blurring the outline of the lighted canal bridge I could see on the other side of the glass. I sighed, and gave it to him straight.

"Listen," I said, "I'm going to have to say no. I don't know how you found me and that's part of the problem. The other thing is you want this done tomorrow night and that's a concern for me. I like to look around a job before I get inside of it and you're not giving me the time I need."

The American laced his hands together on the table and tapped his thumbs against one another.

"Say we double your fee?"

"It's funny," I told him, "that just makes me more nervous. See, I have to think it's vital to you now, for whatever reason, that this thing is done tomorrow night. And the fact you'd pay me twenty thousand makes me think there's twice the risk I'd considered in the first place."

"Risk is a part of it. So's the reward."

"It's still a no."

The American grimaced, shook his head wearily. Then he reached inside the sleeve of his windbreaker and removed a square of paper. He hesitated for a moment, looking me in the eyes once more, before sliding the paper across to me.

"Kid, I'm gonna take a chance. These here are the addresses. I want you to keep them. Say tomorrow night comes around and it gets to seven o'clock and you change your mind."

"That's not going to happen."

Copyright © 2007 Chris Ewan

"And you're confident about that. But why don't we leave ourselves open to the possibility that you just might reconsider your attitude? This way, you have the details you need and everything's in your control. You make the decision."

I held his gaze, and, fool that I was, reached out and took the piece of paper.

"That's right, kid," he told me. "

Copyright © 2007 Chris Ewan