

When Jesse didn't call

When Jesse didn't call I knew something was badly wrong. Jesse always called. We were mates, see. Had been since we were nippers and I found a couple of big kids bashing him up in the playground of our junior school. He was crying and had snot and blood running out of his nose. I could've just kept going to Miss Harker's class but I didn't. I pulled the two of them off Jesse, slapped one round the face and they ran off. Then I gave Jesse the clean handkerchief that my mum made me take to school each morning, to wipe his nose, and he gave me half of his Curly-Wurly bar and that was that.

We've been together ever since, and pulled our share of strokes, but he's always called when he said he would.

This time we'd done a couple of naughties and pooled the money and bought a bunch of coke off a geezer Jesse met in a club up west. I was worried we were going to be ripped off, but it all went as good as gold. The deal was that we sold it on sharpish to a bubble Jesse was friendly with but I couldn't stand called Racina. He was an evil bastard and we got on like junkyard dogs and couldn't be trusted in the same room without starting a ruck. That's why Jesse hadn't wanted me at the trade. He didn't want any trouble. That was a laugh. Jess told me it was cool and I believed him. He told me he'd get someone sorted as back up and sling him a few quid.

We started off with fifty grand and Racina agreed to buy the coke for a hundred thousand. The reason the deal was so good was because the geezer Jesse met was strapped for cash. Really strapped. It was also the reason I thought we were going to get ripped off. It seemed too good to be true, so I made sure that I was with Jesse when we did the buy. And we were both carrying. But sometimes even what seems too good to be true is true. Mind you, if I'd've known what was going to happen I'd've left well alone.

So we were due to split a hundred grand. Not a fortune, but enough to keep the wolf from the door for a few months whilst we sorted something else out. I tried to get Jesse on the phone that afternoon, but all I got was an unobtainable signal and I knew things had gone badly wrong. But 'how badly I didn't yet suspect.

But before we get into what happened that couple of days last summer I think maybe I'd better tell you a little about myself.

My name is James. Not Jim, James. My last name doesn't matter. We're never likely to meet again and I don't suppose you'll ever want to send me a letter or look me up in the phone book, so let's leave the last name out of it.

I'm thirty-four years of age and I'm a gangster.

I've been gangstering, if that's the right word since I was old enough to remember, which was just about the time I teamed up with Jesse. And we did alright. We weren't the Kray twins, but then we never wanted to be. We've made a living and never done any bird. That's the secret. All these high profile criminals you read about in the papers have got one thing in common. They've been caught. The really clever ones never do.

I've got a flat in Peckham, a decent car and some decent clothes. Which I suppose I could've got cleaning windows since I left school. But gangstering has been more fun.

And I've got a gun. Let's not forget that.

I'm on my own now, which I suppose is the only regret I've got. I used to have a house and a wife and two boys. They've gone now. And they're better off out of it really. My wife thought that, and my wife's family. So I let them go without any fuss, and the last I heard she was knocking around with a bloke who works at Dixons down on the Purley Way. He's doing well, she's doing well, and the boys are doing well.

So when Jesse didn't call I put on my leather jacket and a pair of jeans, put my S&W 9mm semi down the back of my pants, and went looking for him. I also took my cut-throat razor in case there was any hand to hand. I've found it works good as a frightener. People tend to get a bit squeamish about their health when I show it to them.

I went over to Jesse's place on the Isle of Dogs. It's a flat in one of those new developments. Dead quiet during the day when everyone's out earning the mortgage. I've got keys to the security entrance and his front door like he's got a key to mine. I didn't bother with the video entry phone. If there was any trouble up there didn't want anyone to know I was about.

Trouble. I didn't know what trouble was.

I went up in the lift to the top floor and down the hall to his door. I put the key in the lock quietly, turned it and pushed the door wide open. As I stepped inside I took out my pistol and cocked the hammer. -

I knew something was up as soon as I got inside and closed the door behind me. There was a smell inside that I've smelt before and never in pleasant circumstances. The place had been trashed. I could see that by peering into the bedroom. It was empty and someone had been through it.

But the smell didn't come from in there, or from the kitchen or from the bathroom. It came from inside the living room that was straight in front of me at the end of the short hall. I walked in and saw them and had to run for the bathroom and upchuck the kebab I'd had for lunch.

I knelt in front of the toilet and wondered why me? Before I got up, I rinsed out my mouth with the metallic tasting water from the cold tap and went back for another look.

Nothing had changed.

Jesse sat in a straight-backed chair facing the door. There was a bullet hole in his head and most of the contents of his skull were splashed up the curtains. Another geezer sat in the armchair by the gas fire. He'd been hit in the chest. Shotgun at close range. At least I could see what he looked like and I knew who he was. It was Rancini. The bloke on the sofa had taken another shotgun round that had just about blown his head off his shoulders. Even his own mother wouldn't've recognised him, so why would I? But there'd supposed to've been a pair of them at the buy so he must've been the other bubble. There was no sign of the

money that Jesse was supposed to have collected or the drugs he was supposed to have exchanged for it.

Not much chance that there would be.

I went back to the bathroom and went to Jesse's stash. It was hidden behind some loose bricks at the back of the lavatory cistern. We'd dug it out soon after he'd moved in and as far as I was aware no one else knew about it. It was a pro job. Jesse had done some building work for his dad as a kid and he knew the ropes. It hadn't been touched.

Inside was two hundred quid, about an ounce of skunk weed and a little .22 semi auto with a silencer.

Jesse would've been armed with something bigger when the exchange was due to be made, but there was no sign of that either. Or of a struggle. All three of them had been calm when they'd been killed.

I had another quick look around the flat but there was nothing of any use. I left the place as I'd found it and went looking for Little Arnie.

Arnie was Jesse's cousin and usually knew what he was up to. If Jesse was going to pay a minder it would've been Arnie.

I found him in a council house in Hackney. When he answered my knock he didn't look too pleased to see me.

"How's it going Am?" I asked when we were settled in the kitchen with the kettle on. It was all neat inside, mostly thanks to his wife Rita. She kept a clean house and cooked like a dream. On the kitchen cabinet all lined up was the kettle, a toaster, a microwave and a big food blender. Funny what you notice when you want to rip someone's head off.

"Can't complain," he replied.

"How's Rita?"

"She's good. At work."

I didn't think he knew the meaning of the word.

"So what's new?"

Arnie shrugged.

"Seen Jess?"

A shake of the head. But he looked a bit uncle Dick.

"Let's not waste time," I said and pulled out my niner. "I don't believe you son," pointing it at his head.

"Jesus Jim," he said.

"James," I corrected him and pulled back the hammer. "You were there weren't you?"

"Where?"

"Don't piss me about you cunt."

He gave in then. It was only a matter of time. He was a stupid kid. Always had been. He knew I was involved and when it all went on top he must've known I'd come to him sooner or later. It just happened to have been sooner. "I didn't mean nothing to happen," he said, and he was almost crying.

"What did happen?" I demanded.

"It was their idea."

"Whose?"

"The Bill."

"What Bill?"

"That DI at Bow. The bent one."

"They're all fucking bent."

"Stacey."

I didn't know him, but the less coppers I know the better I like it.

"And?"

"I was up for one. We had a chat. I told him about Jesse and the deal."

"Did you by any chance put my name in the frame?"

"No."

"Arnie."

"No, I swear." Probably saving me for another time I thought.

"He said he'd just bust him," said Arnie. He was shaking now. "But he didn't."

"No."

"So what happened?"

"I was there with Jesse when the two geezers come."

I'd been right. Shit, I should have been there. But we all make mistakes. Mine was leaving Jesse alone. Jesse's was trusting Arnie. Arnie's was not grassing me up and leaving me on the streets.

"He knows you and that geezer Racina didn't get on," Arnie stammered on. "He had me there as backup. With a shooter."

"A shotgun?"

"That's right."

"So?"

"I let them in, but I left the door on the latch so's the coppers could come in after."

"Coppers?" I queried. "So there's more than one now."

"That's right. Stacey's sergeant. Skinner. They came in and stuck us up."

"So who shot Jesse, Arnie?"

"Stacey."

"And you shot the two bubbles?"

Arnie nodded. "Stacey made me."

"And then you all went home for tea."

"No. They made me go out before them."

"That was a joke, Arnie," I said and I stood up and moved over to him and took the .22 out of my jacket with my left hand, exchanged it for the Smith and stuck the silencer up his nose.

"You fucking little traitor."

"I never hurt Jesse," he said.

"But you let Stacey do it. Where's the money and the dope now?"

"They got it down the nick."

"Are you joking?"

"No. He's going to weigh me in later."

"You'll be fucking lucky you cunt." I had to think. My future was down the Bow nick one way or another. Then it occurred to me that it was double bubble. Drugs and dough. And now that Jesse was gone no one to split it with. Not that I wouldn't rather have Jesse here with me

now instead of that little shitcunt Arnie, but what's done is done. "What shift is he on?" I demanded.

"What?"

"Stacey. When's he working? You're his fucking grass you ye got to know."

"Nights. This week he's working nights."

"Lovely," I said, ground the gun further into his face and took out my dick and pissed all over him just to show him what I thought of grasses. And he took it. When I'd finished I zipped up, then I shot him twice, moving out of the way to avoid any blowback. It's not much of a bullet a .22, but put in the right place it'll do the job. One shot in each eye did the trick. Then I pulled out his tongue and sliced it off with my razor. He'd only been dead a few seconds so the blood was still flowing. There was blowback there too, but I managed to avoid that too.

I put his tongue into the blender and gave it a quick spin. Something nice for Rita to make into soup when she got home from work.

I worked out a plan in the car on the way home.

And first I needed a bird. So as soon as I got back to the flat I called up Janine. She's a right old spunker. She'll do anything. Two ups, three ups, orgies, anything. But she looks like a convent girl and she would be just right for what I had in mind.

I got her at her place. "Janine. James."

"Hello James." She sounded pleased to hear from me.

"You doing anything tonight?" I asked.

"Not a lot. What have you got in mind?"

"I'm Going to take you out to dinner."

"Sounds good. Where?"

"That yuppie dump on Bow Wharf. Dress like an office girl. Smart. Short skirt, very short. And sheer black tights with high heels. Not whore high. but just high enough, you know what I mean."

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about it. Meet me in The Cat and Canary at seven and don't be late."

She did just like I said. When I got to the pub in my best dark suit, white button down and striped silk tie she was sitting waiting. She had a suit on too. Black. Short skirt, black tights and little heels. Perfect.

I bought her another G&T on the strength and said. "I've booked a table for half past."

We got to the restaurant on time and it was just like I remembered, full of couples and groups from the offices that were dotted all around. I scoped the place and saw a bunch of likely looking lads at a table for six two tables down with their jackets off and the champagne flowing. It looked like they were in for a session.

That's good, I thought.

And they all gave Janine a blimp as we sat down. Who wouldn't? She had another G&T and we ordered a pair of steaks and all the trimmings with a bottle of red wine and got stuck in.

As the evening wore on the boys at the table were in and out of the gents with increasing rapidity and I'd've bet my motor that I knew what they were up to. The one I fancied as favourite was at the furthest end of the table from the bar and kept taking his wallet out of the inside pocket of his jacket that was hanging over the back of his chair each time he went to powder his nose. Silly boy.

When we'd finished eating I said to Janine. "Go up to the bar and order coffees and brandies, there's a love. And ask for the bill while you're at it. And let those boys at that table there get a good look at your pins as you go."

"You re not going to start a fight are you."

"Don't be silly, course not. In fact I'm off to the khasi for a hiss." She did as she was told again, taking a slow stroll up to the bar to order the drinks. The boys couldn't keep their eyes off her, and so as I walked behind their table I took a quick look round and before you know it I had the geezer at the back's wallet in my coat pocket. I hoped it was his turn to pay the bill. I went into a stall in the gents and checked the contents. Three hundred nicker in assorted notes, an Automobile Association card, two regular credit cards, two gold cards, and an American Express. An identity/access card to an office in Canary Wharf, a slash card for the parking garage there, all in the name of J.K. Wallace, a driving license in the same name, and in a secret pocket about a gram and a half of coke in a Superman comic wrap. "Fuck," I thought. I wonder if the dope would stop him reporting the theft of the wallet. No. Not with all the cards. He'd never expect to get anything back out of this little lot. He'd just put the dope and cash down to experience and cancel the cards straight off. In fact, maybe he'd be able to claim the cash of his home insurance, add one and a half for the blow and he'd come out a score or so ahead for the aggro of talking to the

Old Bill. He'd have to explain to his boss how come he'd lost his work ID, and the card companies would need a police report in case someone started skanking the high street. If Mr Wallace didn't file a report with the cops he might be liable to an excess charge, so he'd definitely put in a shout.

When I got back to our table the waiter was just delivering the cappuccinos, brandies and the tab. "Alri~ht?" Janine asked after I'd paid the bill and added a nice tip.

"Beautiful," I replied. "But we'll have to hang about a bit until that kid has to pay his corner."

There was a commotion at the table for six a few minutes later, and as soon as I heard the face yelling about

Calling the cops I helped Janine on with her coat and we left, with a smile for the head waiter and a look of condolence for the bloke who'd been robbed.

Janine let me come back to hers' and we snorted the coke I'd found in the wallet and I stayed the night.

The next morning just to be on the safe side I phoned Bow nick from a call box. "CID," I said when I got through.

"CID — Ross," said the next voice on the line.

"DI Stacey," I said.

"Hold on." The voice went away and came back. "He's on after ten tonight. Any message?"

"No thanks. I'll call back," and I put the phone down on his next question.

I hung around the flat all day and at just before ten I drove over to Bow. I took my Smith, the .22, the wallet minus coke, cash, and credit cards and a gym bag with me. The .22 was in the bag, and before I left home I gave the shiny surfaces on the wallet a good wipe. I wore my overcoat over jeans and a sweat shirt, with thin, black leather gloves on my hands.

I went through the front door of the nick, up to the desk and said to the constable on duty. "Excuse me, I found this." And I put the wallet on the desk in front of him.

He picked it up and opened it. and he pulled out the driving license. "Is that right?" he said. "Where?"

"In Victoria Park. I was coming back from the gym." I put on a bit of an accent just to keep him in his place. I'm a solid citizen returning property. Treat me with due respect.

"Can I have your name, sir?"

Sir. That's better. "Bell," I said. "Colin Bell."

"And your address?" "16 Victoria Park Gardens." "And when did this happen?" "Just now," I replied. "Would you just wait a minute please, sir."

He went into the back and I stood studying the recruitment and wanted posters on the wall.

He came back after a minute and said. "Did you see anyone drop it?"

"Yes," I replied. "And he didn't drop it. He threw it away. Into some bushes, It was a black man.

"Would you know him again. sir?"

"I do know him as matter of fact. Well I don't know his name, but he drinks in the Victoria pub. My local. I see him in the public bar quite regularly. Was it stolen?"

"Last night."

"I'm not surprised. My car was vandalised last month. There's too much of this sort of thing going on."

That was just what he wanted to hear. A witness. And an angry one who was prepared to do something about it. And a lemonade in the frame. Perfect. There's nothing the Old Bill like more than getting hold of a spade and giving him a bit of a slap. "I think you'd better have a word with CID. Please take a seat," said the constable.

Five minutes later a man came to the door through to the back of the station, opened it and said. "Mr Bell?"

"I'm Sergeant Skinner. Come on up please. DL Stacey will see you now." This was perfect. Two birds with one stone. Stacey and Skinner.

I followed him through, carrying my bag, and up two flights of steps and to a door marked CID. Bow is only a small police station, and at that time of night it seemed pretty well deserted, which suited me down to the ground. On the way up we didn't see another soul, which meant another soul didn't see me. The CID office was dimly lit and empty and he led through to another office where a big bloke was sitting behind a desk. The wallet was on the desk in front of him. Skinner whispered something to the bloke, turned to me and said. "This is DI Stacey."

Sweet as a nut.

Stacey was well built, young and handsome. Maybe the same age as me, and bet he did well with the birds he came into contact with on the job. He looked like he could be trusted with your darkest secrets. I knew better. "Inspector," I said, but didn't shake hands.

"Take a seat Mr Bell," said Stacey. "Tea?"

"Please," I said as I sat in the seat in front of his desk. "Sergeant." And Skinner went off to be all domestic.

"So you say you saw someone you know dispose of this wallet this evening."

"That's right."

"And you could identify him?"

I nodded.

"Good," said Stacey, and sat back with a look of satisfaction. "There's been a spate of thefts from restaurants recently."

"In fact I can do better than that," I said, pulled my bag onto my lap, unzipped it, pulled out the .22 and pointed it at Stacey's head.

His mouth opened in an 'O' of astonishment, and suddenly he wasn't so well built, young, handsome and satisfied anymore. "What's this?" he gasped.

"Your worst nightmare," I said, borrowing a line from a film. "Payback time."

"For what?" he asked.

"You killed my mate Jesse yesterday on the island," I said. "And you nicked my money."

"I see." He was getting some of his cool back. "And what gives you that idea?"

"Your little grass Arnie told me."

"So I imagine it was you that shot Arnie and cut out his tongue."

"Spot on."

"That wasn't a very nice thing you did, putting it in the blender."

"He was a grass and a thief."

"It didn't do Rita any good, finding it like that."

"She shouldn't've married the cunt then."

"Did it occur to you he could've been lying."

"No. I'd stake my life he was telling the truth."

"Which is exactly what you are doing. You must be a very stupid man to come here after me, and then admit to a murder."

I didn't bother telling him that he wasn't going to be around to tell anyone.

"Don't fuck about," I said. I was wise to his game. The longer he kept me talking the more chance he had of Skinner coming back or someone else coming in. "Just give me the money and the dope."

"You don't really think I'd keep it here do you?"

"Where better," I said, and I shot him in one arm. You could barely hear the report above the sound of the air conditioning.

He looked down at the wound. "I'll keep on blowing bits off you until you give it up," I said. "I've got plenty of bullets."

"Alright," he said. "Keep calm. It's over there in the cupboard."

"Get it," I ordered. "And no tricks."

He got up to do as he was told. "The keys are in my pocket," he said.

"Pull them out slowly."

He did just that, inserted one in the keyhole and turned it anti-clockwise.

But just as he was opening the cupboard door Skinner came in carrying a couple of cups, one in each hand.

"Put them down gently," I said, moving the pistol in his direction.

"Who the fuck are you?" he said. Of course whilst this pantomime was going on Stacey saw his chance and turned round holding a revolver. He fired and the bullet smashed into the wall beside me. I fired back twice and he went down, then Skinner gets into the act and lobbed the tea in my direction and made for the door. I shot him twice in the back and he skidded face forward across the carpet to lay still. When I went over he was dead.

I went to the cupboard, checked Stacey's pulse. Nothing. I pushed his still body to one side and saw two bags sitting on a shelf. One I recognised as where Jesse had put the dope. It was still inside, intact in its plastic wrapper. I opened the other and saw bank notes. Loads of them. I picked them both up, pushed them into the gym bag I'd brought with me, and, stepping over Skinner's body, picking up the wallet I'd brought with me as I went, left.

On the way out I met the desk constable coming upstairs. "Did you hear that noise?" he said.

"No" I replied.

"Are the DL and the sergeant still in the office?"

"Yes."

"One of them should've shown you down." He suddenly looked suspicious, but didn't want to make a fool of himself.

Unfortunately he'd clocked me too well, so I killed him too. That was the only thing I regretted as he was just a bit of a kid, but that's the breaks. They shouldn't have killed Jesse, see. It was all a bit unnecessary.

When I was sure he was dead too, I let myself out into the fresh air of Bow and drove home.