



SAY CHEESE

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They'd chosen a seedy part of town for the drop.



Not surprising. It was the old banking district, all high-rise glass temples to the god of finance and greed. Except god had left the building, now the glass was smashed and daubed with graffiti demanding an unpleasant fate for all bankers. It was fitting in a way, the banking crisis of 1998 brokered the kind of entrepreneurialism we were trying to stamp out. Some of our regular cases, who we arrest with the reliability of a Swiss clock, used to work there. They think of it as their turf.

In front of us Canary Dock reached up into the twilight, a glass splinter in a bruised sky, now a flop house for the homeless who had believed London offered a better life.

'Wilf? You awake?'

A quick glance at the bedraggled figure of my partner slumped in the passenger seat was inconclusive. He was recovering from a massive bender on confiscated German lager, courtesy of his previous partner, Jeff from the Alcohol Squad.

I got a huge burp for an answer. At least this time his reply came out of his mouth, even with the car windows wide open the stench still lingered from before.

'It's approaching 8 o'clock Wilf. Get yourself ready. They'll be here any minute.'

His reply contained more expletives than actual words, the general gist of which centred on the limited importance of prosecuting cheese smugglers. Nothing, he slurred, was as crucial to the national economy as the revenue from alcohol. Wilf's rant concluded with the extensive list of synonyms he used for the rest of us and our apparent preoccupation with self-abuse. He reserved the serious name-calling for our colleagues who prosecuted meat processing bootleggers, affectionately called the Sausage Squad. His insults were predictable, his use of the sausage for gaining pleasure was admittedly quite inventive.

Once he'd finished his lecture, identified by a series of loud burps, I was obligated to defend the Cheese Squad. I reminded him of our seizure of Camembert, with its street value

of ten thousand pounds. He cursed again. Demotion into the Cheese Squad was demotion; however you looked at it.

His frustration did stir him into sitting up and looking around though.

‘Harry, what are we doing in the bloody banking district?’ I prepared myself for another lecture. Wilf is never short of an opinion.

‘Bloody bankers. Got what they deserved, the lot of them.’

His burp filled the car with the smell of second-hand lager. He lowered the window, I assumed it was to vomit but he performed an impressive spitting arc instead.

‘Thanks to Gary Barlow. Best Prime Minister we ever had. Still believe it was a banker who assassinated him, not a Take That fan.’



I drew his attention to a rusty Austin Metro grinding its way towards us, along a road covered in the detritus of two decades of neglect.

‘Get ready Wilf,’ I say loudly enough to penetrate his political review.

The car ground to a halt, its bearings screeched loud enough to make dogs howl. It drew up in front of an office building where faded posters proclaimed the ease of obtaining a hundred percent mortgage. I reached over to the back seat and grabbed my Tesco carrier bag. It was retro enough to establish my hardship and bad taste. I checked out Wilf, he shared the same qualities. We got out of our unmarked Austin Allegro and stood in the middle of the road, a bit like Gary Cooper and Lloyd Bridges in High Noon. Except we carried a plastic carrier bag filled with wads of paper with a twenty quid notes on the top and bottom, HMRC can’t afford a genuine stash of a ten thousand quid.

Two men got out of the Metro. There was a big guy, the muscle, he carried something powerful in the pocket of his overcoat. Very Edward G Robinson. The other guy was smaller with narrow facial features, rat like. He was new. There’d been stories of a bunch of villains whod’ joined us from the ruins of Newcastle. Now the bacon boom had ended with the closure of the Danish smuggling route, it had hit the Geordies badly.

'Mister Cagney?' he called over. I give a curt nod. 'Here's ya stuff.'

'A dozen Brie, the same of Edam and a couple of Parmesan?'

Ratty looked around in panic, the bigger man didn't react. I wondered if he was even sentient, his face was devoid of any expression.

'Haddaway, shut ya gob! Are ye stupid?'

When no one leaped out from the derelict buildings to snap handcuffs on him, he relaxed slightly.

'Sorry,' I reply. I'm giving the impression I'm new to all this.

'Yee ain't got none of that Parmesham,' he said. Obviously Italian cheeses haven't reached Tyneside yet. I nod. 'Got the cotterils?'



I assume he meant money and held up the Tesco carrier bag.

Ratty nodded at Lurch, he stepped forward with the grace of a man with cement already in his shoes and reached out to take my bag. The other hand remained deep in his coat pocket. I moved to hand over the bag and paused. Lurch blinked and frowned.

'If I want more, do I upload my order like last time?' I asked innocently.

Ratty frowned. I think he smelled a rat. Ironic really.

'Course. Why?'

A nonchalant shrug. 'It's just a load of hassle. Isn't there a simpler way? I mean, all that stuff about mirror sites and using the identities of the dead. Can't I just go straight to the dealer?'

Lurch looked over at his comrade whose nose was actually twitching now. I half expected it to grow long whiskers. I'd got his interest.

'Depends,' Ratty muttered.

'I'd make it worth your while,' I smiled innocently and nodded at Wilf. 'Only my business partner, Mister Raft and I, have a number of friends who will pay handsomely for European cheese. Especially if you could find some Roquefort, or Gorgonzola.'

'I'll need to check, like,' he says. I can tell by the glint in his beady little eyes he's interested, despite his ambiguous reply.

'If you ask me,' I said as conversationally as I could without sounding like a complete idiot, 'if we'd gone into the Common Market in '73 we wouldn't have all this trouble.'

The guy looked bewildered, I suppose he wasn't born then. He pointed to my Tesco bag.

'When you hand over the cheese,' I say firmly.

We march over to the back of the Metro, the hatchback is opened, there are dozens of Asda carrier bags stacked neatly inside. Ratty takes out one with 'Cagney' scrawled across it in marker pen by someone who hasn't mastered the difference between higher and lower-case letters. I guess it's Lurch.

Wilf exploded into action. He yanked a length of steel pipe from his trouser pocket and smacked it against the back of Lurch's knees. The big man crumpled, smacked his chin on the Metro's bumper, splattering blood against the rust on the paintwork. Another wallop and Lurch decided it was sleepy time as he laid down peacefully on the rotting tarmac.

Ratty was too slow to react, by the time he'd realised it was a sting, my fist struck his jaw, jerking his head to one side. His head bounced off the side of the car and he joined Lurch on the road.

'Bloody amateurs!' Wilf gave them a disparaging sniff, disappointed at not getting more of a chance to vent his frustration.



A couple of hours later and we had Ratty and Lurch in cells, along with twenty-three carrier bags of various European cheese tagged and stored in the walk-in fridge. It had been a productive night. We decided to celebrate with and a mug of tea in the

cafeteria. Wilf was almost sober and had approached levels of casual amiability.

That all changed when Chief Superintendent Crick arrived, perfectly appointed in uniform, toupee and new dentures.

‘Lads!’ he said as he slapped us heartily on our shoulders.

Wilf bristled and I nudged his knee under the table as a reminder for restraint.

‘Good job on the haul tonight. There’s a few thousand quid’s worth there. A good way to go out.’

We both looked up at him, warily. We’d been in HMRC long enough to expect the worst when you heard those words. It meant another political initiative. Our new Home Secretary, Russell Brand, must have had another idea I assume.

‘I met with the Home Secretary this afternoon...’

I caught Wilf’s eyes and rolled mine.

‘There’s talk that the economy is in such a lousy state that we might need to start trading with our European neighbours.’

Wilf and I raised astonished eyebrows.

‘All of this is on the QT, so don’t say anything for now. But we’re fighting a losing battle against the smugglers. The cost of catching them is greater than the amount we make in fines and tax revenue, significantly greater. Besides...’



He lowered his voice, even though the cafeteria is empty.

‘... the interest in European goods is so great we can’t compete. British stuff is rubbish and no one wants it. There’s a rumour that even His Royal Highness David Beckham runs a Mercedes on his Sandringham estate, can you believe it?’

‘So, what’s going to happen?’ I asked.

His voice dropped to a low whisper, Wilf and I leaned forward.

‘The Prime Minister is going to Brussels to meet with the other twenty-seven members of the Common Market to express interest in joining. She’s going secretly, all very hush-hush.’

Wilf snorted loudly and made me jump.

‘I knew that bloody woman was a secret Europhile, ever since she represented us in the Eurovision Song Contest.’

The superintendent nodded his agreement.

‘So, what do we do? Are we out of work?’ I asked.

His dentures flashed, courtesy of the neon strip lights above us.



‘Oh no lads. No! Now that President Schwarzenegger has placed tariffs on our exports, we’re going to make American goods illegal.’

My eyes widened almost to the point of hurting.

‘What? No more MacDonalds, Burger King, KFC, Coca-Cola, Dunkin’ Doughnuts...’ My mind reeled as the list expanded in my head exponentially.

The chief superintendent’s new dentures sparkled happily.

‘I know! We’re going to be such a healthy nation, aren’t we?’