

James' Escape

"James, keep this thing running."

The car door closed firmly, and Lily smiled back at him before taking Stephan's arm. He was glad she was the last one out; either of the boys would have slammed the door, and his little roadster was starting to wilt under the pressure of inner-city driving. He watched the trio disappear from his rearview, swallowed up in darkness.

If he was more of a church-going man, he would have said a prayer about now - for Matthew to keep his cool, for the Manessi kid to play it straight, for Lily to make it out safely - but instead he kept quiet and tapped percussive on the steering wheel.

The getaway's anthem.

The truth was, James had never settled comfortably into working for the Scarpaglios. The getaway work made him anxious, and chauffeuring Donny Hallaran felt like driving with a huge bulls-eye marked on the car. There were really only two times he'd felt comfortable behind the driver's seat in the last two decades since he'd left the garage.

The first was the only job he'd worked for Waylan. The man had squeezed himself into the passenger side of the Packard town car he'd boosted two days prior and laid out from top to bottom how the play would go down. The fact that Waylan had planned every moment in the hit, down to which streets to take out of Midtown, gave James a moment of calm he never again experienced working for the family.

The other time he'd felt safe was with the old man. Geraldino Scarpaglio was a calming force on Grand City. While he was alive, everything felt more structured. There was respect and modesty. There weren't surprise attacks between the families, or bloody squabbles over who got to extort which cigar shop. Men from the different families would even sit together, sharing meals and stories.

Of course these moments didn't involve James directly, but the civility between the criminal families had a placating effect across the whole city. At the head of the ballgame was Geraldino, and while James drove the old

man around town, he too huddled under that blanket of complacency.

Sharing a car with Donny was a completely different experience.

It wasn't too dissimilar to how the past few days had been with Matthew. The old wolf was more genial, sure, but there was always the threat of a bite behind the questions and small talk. James remembered how he had opened up to Geraldino about his racing days and the '26 Chevrolet he had been building, eventually even admitted to his ambitions of family; with Donny he had clammed up from the offset, and barely strung more than two sentences together.

And Matthew, well, the kid barely spoke two words to him. He seemed to want Stephan to mediate between them. The two fit each other like a wheel well; brash and young and violent. James could understand, he was their age once. The friction of a son with his father is merit enough to want see the world burn.

Matthew's eyes though, something in there made James think he wanted the destruction despite his father. And young idiots like Stephan, with his slightly-wild west persona and itchy trigger finger, didn't see the difference.

James was startled, but not surprised, when he heard the two gunshots. The silence enveloped the space left by the harsh cracks. James imagined the entire city held its breath, waiting for more. The wait wasn't long, although the shots that followed were quieter, muffled, as if they were playing from a cinema.

"It's not too late." James was surprised to hear himself say that aloud. His fingers rolled staccato across the steering wheel. Did he always talk aloud when he was nervous? It didn't seem like something he was regularly inclined to do. His heart was attempting to keep up with his fingers; his neck and chest strained in dull, painful throbs. "Just ease off the brake. Slip the car into gear. Push her gentle up the street, right onto Hazelwood, swing over onto the Barnes Hill Bridge. Slow roll all the way home. No need for your lights even."

The roadster sat firmly against the curb with its engine idly putting.

James pried his fingers from the steering wheel, but his foot took up the tune.

Tap tap tap.

There wasn't anything to be concerned about. This was Grand City! Guns were fired every night. Even if the police made it in time to nab the crew, they'd walk sooner or later. No one stayed in the Brick for long, especially Donny Hallaran's son. And Matt had them on a strict time limit; Waylan had provided him with that at least.

"You'll have nine minutes between an alarm and the blues showing up." DeMarcio had kept a sombre face, hunched over a plate of oysters. James had been driving him to Bellaforte; Matthew had insisted on talking with the wide man on the way. "Seven if they're on bikes."

"Since when has the Brick had a bike squad?"

"Shipped in last week. Donny knew. You should talk to your father once in a while."

"Fuckin' Donny," said Matthew, sat spread-legged on a wooden crate. The kid really brought out his Sicilian act around DeMarcio.

"You'll need your greaseman already on the in when you get to the vault. Boost what you need, get into your car and head north."

"North? Fuck that, we need to head back here. Hunker down in Forchester."

"We wouldn't make it to the bridge," James had said at this stage. He'd been mapping routes in his head. "They'd pull street patrols from Midtown to cut us off, and bring up the bike squads behind to wrap us up."

Waylan smiled at James at this point. "What comes through those north streets a little after midnight?"

It had taken James a few moments. "Those mail carriages are manned with LaCace goons from Grandway to South Thornett."

"If you're implying we make a drop on a LaCace train..." The kid couldn't help jumping to conclusions.

"Not a drop," reassured Waylan.

"Kiss the engine," said James. He had slowly followed Waylan's trail of breadcrumbs. "Time that crossing right and we'll have fourteen carriages between us and the cops."

"Fifteen - Jeannie's got a new paper concern she's shifting - but you're right; make the crossing and swing north, whoever you don't lose waiting

for the track to clear will think you're heading to the highway and drive straight on past."

"What if the train's late?" asked Matthew. "Or the job takes a couple more minutes than we planned?"

"That's why your greaseman has to already be inside. Seven minutes, remember." Waylan had a way of punctuating himself with food; the shucked oyster shells clattered on the floor below. "However, even if the engine kiss doesn't line up, Mr Killinger here still has a better chance at losing any pursuit heading towards Thornett than down here."

James had nodded, mentioned the dirt pits he and some of his racing buddies used to use to give their treads a work-through, and finally felt like a piece of the team. It was experience Matthew lacked, but at least he deferred to the presence of it. The getaway plan was good. Timed right, it was perfect; timed wrong, it was still workable. The roads to South Thornett were pretty long and open, but he knew them well enough that he was certain he could lose the pursuit if needed.

He'd taken Mary and the girls up that way just three weeks ago. Both his wife and little Janie had glossed over when he started recounting a story about his prized racing Chevy, but Bethany had listened. She hung onto every word as they passed the big ditches of open dirt the street racers used to mark the end of the city-cross races; they would start south of the city, lined up below the construction walls of Port (funny even twenty years later, the place still had construction work around it), engines roaring and cars eager to sprint forward. The cars would race towards the dirt basins through the north, the only checkpoint required that they cross one of the city bridges, counted by young riggers paid a penny per car they spotted, waiting high in the metal struts. The street races were always a more strategic challenge than the raceway; from picking your bridge to bribing the car counters, there was more to the race than just driving and pitstops.

Bethany never asked questions when he told her his racing stories. She would watch him intently, and then look out the window with wide eyes and her mouth slightly agape, lost in populating the world around them with the cars and events being retold to her.

Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap.

“No need for lights even,” he repeated to himself, with less certainty this time. He couldn’t leave. Lillian and Matthew would be pinched without a ride out of there and end up at the Brick. Lily would handle herself wherever she ended up, and Lord knows Mary would be glad to have the girl out of their garage; but Matt, he’d wind up dead somehow. Blood stains on his prison suit, headlines that read “Gang boss’ son found facedown in cell”. James would be marked soon after, no doubt. Rosa would see to that. The matriarch was nothing if not vindictive, especially where her son’s well-being was concerned.

All that waited for James at home was the cold bed Mary no longer shared with him, and the gentle breathing of their quiet house on the outskirts of the Spread. There was no release there. There was only more of everything he already had.

He released the hand brake. More of the same sounded good to him right now, when his stomach felt like it was about to boil over. There would be repercussions, sure. But maybe he’d talk with Donny. He wanted the kid gone, right? He’d be doing the guy a favour, be indebted to protect James from whatever harpy schemes Rosa would cook up.

No one else would miss the Scarpaglio son, or that rude son-of-a-bitch with a cowboy hat.

James let the car start to roll, crawling an inch, then two, then more at walking pace. The car slid into a pool of light from a streetlamp, ornate and cold.

The sirens were like a mosquito buzz, quiet and distant with a gradual crescendo that snuck up on the ear. James blinked when he saw the reflections of red and blue bouncing off the glass walled sides of the Financial District buildings. The roar of engines preempted the first wave of bikes that washed past his car. Their engines were bared to the open air, automotive exhibitionists with little regard for the sight or sound they made.

James put his foot on the brake. Cars and bikes continued to swarm past in an orchestra of siren wails and flashing lights. His rearview mirror was filled with colours.

“Just sit tight,” he murmured to himself. The sights and sounds of the police racing past were disorienting. No more than four minutes must have passed since the first gunshot. He was expecting to see police tonight, but not until everyone was already back in the car. Something must have gone wrong.

No; someone had whispered to the cops beforehand.

The last of the cars raced past his stuttering roadster. He checked the rearview once more, and saw the red and blue swarm hovering outside of the bank. It was time to go now. He didn’t want to be around when the others came out. At best, he’d get pulled in as a witness. At worst...

He slowly slid his foot off the brake and let the DeSoto roll forward again. Build up to a respectable speed, wait until Hazelwood to put on the headlights, go home.

No; go tell Rosa what happened.

Or Donny.

Not Donny.

Waylan.

Did the Manessi guys need to know about Mario?

The Manessi.

It clicked for James. He didn’t want to believe it. Mario had seemed like a decent enough kid the few times they talked. Maybe it wasn’t him that ratted the heist plan out. He was already on the bank roof before the others left, after all. Maybe he was a sacrificial lamb, an unfortunate necessity to get Matthew Scarpaglio off the street.

He thumped his wheel. Stupid fucking mobsters playing their stupid games. They’d almost got him caught up in it. What if he had parked closer, like Stephan had wanted? James couldn’t go to prison. What would happen to Mary and the girls? They would have to go back to Mary’s mother in Kansas. There was no life for them here. James anchored them to this city.

He would have missed their graduations. First boyfriends. Their arguments and tantrums and school grades and recitals and first jobs and husbands.

The roar of the engines finally pierced the drama unfolding in his mind.

He wasn't sure when he'd pressed the brake again. Two officers clambered off their bikes and approached. They were parked close enough that James could see the exposed spring valves leering out from under the bike frames.

"Sir."

James stared straight ahead and felt his mouth dry up.

"Sir, your headlights are off."

James managed a grunt, and flicked his headlights. The clean-shaven face of the policeman remained peering through his open-air window.

"What are you doing out here at this time of night, buddy?" asked the officer. His backup was standing a little way away, watching the primary-coloured swarm at the bank.

"I, uh... I was going to--"

"Shit, look at that," said the second officer, hooting at the scene playing out at the bank. "We've got that place locked down tighter than a monkey knot. That kid isn't going to see daylight tomorrow and the years following."

"I was going for a drive," continued James. "Because of... my daughter. I--"

"Do you know what's happening here, sir?" asked the first officer. His tie dangled low, the end falling out of James' sight.

"It's a... it's your--"

"We're locking this place down," said the second, turning his attention to the roadster. "Some big crime we're stopping here."

"We're going to have to ask you some questions."

"I don't know what's going on at the bank, I was just--"

"Hey, who said anything about the bank?" said the perky backup. He turned his eager stare over James and the inside of the roadster.

"Well, it's just, I assumed--"

"You know, Francis, we haven't seen a getaway yet. Could be this sweaty fella here is in on the action."

"No one said anything about a getaway," said the first officer. Despite their identical uniforms, the first stood up straighter, looked broader. "All the devils said was a bank robbery going down."

“And how were they going to get away? Leg it across town on foot?”

A cough interrupted the banter. “Were that the case, you two would still be the stupidest thing I’ve seen today.”

If the backup was untidy, the man that approached James’ car now was a slob. His hat was scuffed, his tie was loose about his neck, even the buttons of his shirt managed to be mismatched. He waddled up to the scene, an unlikely straggler to the fleet that had rolled past.

“Hey look, they even dragged Oney out of bed for this bust!” said the backup.

“Well, they needed someone here to do the hard work, right?” The man grinned at everyone.

“What do you want, Edgar?” asked the first officer, finally taking his attention away from James.

“The d’s want you up front, told me to come see what you were up to over here.”

“You can tell Detective Harbon we’ve apprehended another suspect, potentially the crew’s getaway driver.”

The plump and shiny face peered into the car at James, then smirked. “What, this guy? They forget to teach you how to use your eyes at the academy?”

“He was idling here wi-“

“Look at him; he’s a family man! The poor guy is about to mess himself out of nerves.”

“We should at lea-“

“You just leave him with me, I’ll check out his story. If we need to bring him in, I’ll let Harbon and Deeks know you brave lads brought the miscreant to my attention, alright?”

“Don’t you snipe our lead, Oney,” said the backup as he got back onto his bike.

“Go be a damn hero,” said Edgar with a grin. The two motorbikes growled and took off to join the flashing fortifications at the bank.

James looked at the officer and waited. Maybe he’ll be able to talk his way around this one. The guy looked like he was sweating just from the exertion of walking over here. Maybe he could just drive off...

“So, Mr Killinger, got yourself in a predicament here I see.”

James’ jaw locked at the mention of his name.

“Now now, don’t you stress. Our mutual pal asked me to keep an eye out for you here, just in case.”

“Mutual pal?”

“Sure. You know, the guy you drive down to the pub every once in a while. We know each other a little. Shared a scotch, maybe. Anyway, looks like I got here at a good time. Dyers wouldn’t have given you any issue, but Francis is a bit of a pencil-pusher. He’d bring in his own granny if he found her on the street tonight.”

James wasn’t sure what to say. Edgar leaned in closer, resting an elbow on the window sill.

“Our pal, he says to me, he’s got a good friend that is perhaps falling in with the wrong type of people. Could be he said to me, if I find myself out on the streets tonight instead of tucked up tight in bed with me whiskey and page three lovely, I should keep an eye out for you. And here you are, minding your own business and getting harassed here by these recruits. They’re green around the gills, don’t know how to talk to a man properly.”

Something had been bugging James, what one of the other officers had said. “They said something about devils telling them about all this?”

“Recruit talk for detectives. Harbon and Deeks at the charge over there.” Edgar shook his head with a laugh to himself. “Fuckin’ Harbon; he’s an accountant, not a copper! Somehow convinced the captain the bank fell under financial crime and ran with it. Makes sense I guess, but I figure Harbon just wants a chance to get up from his desk and whip his pistol out a little. Got the whole department frothing at the chance to pinch young Matty. Whoever dialled in this tip-off did our mutual pal a hell of a favour, huh.”

“Ratting his son out to the GCPD?”

“Yeah, well, we all know there ain’t love lost between father and son there, right? Anyway, not our concern. You just roll on along and back home, Mr Killinger.”

“Right. Uh, thankyou.”

“Just pass on my top of the morning to our mutual pal, alright? Bye bye

now.”

James eased off the brake of the DeSoto. By the time he got home, the idea of visiting his mother-in-law in Kansas didn't seem so bad.