

NOBODY CAME

Excerpt from CHAPTER TWO: South America. Now.

It's late.

There's a knock at the door.

He knows who it is; always the same knock: one, two three. One, two.

One, two.

'Hi Johnnie.'

Hey Gene. How's it going?'

'OK.'

'What's happening?' Johnnie, his ridiculous faux-American accent.

Gene doesn't reply.

'Good. Good,' says Johnnie. His thin moustache, the greasy hat with the greasy hatband, hiding his greasy hair, his bald spot. His eyes playing over Gene's face; up and down, over his body.

Gene stands, holding the door. He shifts - uneasy.

'Good. Good,' Johnnie repeats, and flicks his eyes over Gene's shoulder, into the apartment.

'Er - come in,' Gene says, and stands aside.

Johnnie hesitates; looks back along the corridor. Steps inside.

Before closing the door, Gene looks out into the hallway. It's deserted.

Johnnie stands in the small entranceway, looking nervous. Johnnie always looks nervous.

'Go in,' says Gene, pointing.

Johnnie stands aside - gestures for Gene to go first.

Gene steps into the living room. Johnnie, right behind him, close.

'Sit,' says Gene.

Johnnie remains standing.

'Something wrong?' says Gene.

Johnnie doesn't answer. Then he smiles, showing his yellowed teeth. It's not a real smile. His eyes flick around the room. He's agitated, bedraggled, hounded. It looks like he's slept in his clothes. There is a waxy sheen on his face.

'Would you like a drink?'

'Yeah, yeah,' he says. 'What have you got?'

'Coffee. Orange juice?'

Johnnie looks disappointed.

'Er, I've got some tequila.'

'Yeah,' he says, 'sure, tequila, orange juice. Fine.'

There is sweat on Johnnie's brow, dark wet patches under the arms of his maroon shirt.

Gene goes to the kitchen, pours some tequila into a tumbler - adds orange juice. Sensing someone behind him, he turns, and there's Johnnie, in the kitchen doorway, scanning the room.

'Did you get it?' says Gene.

'Yeah, yeah. No problem.' The flicker of a snake smile, and Johnnie reaches into his waistcoat pocket, pulls out a wrap, and then from the pocket of his jeans, a knife - a flick knife. 'It's good stuff. See? See?' And he opens the wrap, and dips in the blade, taps out some of the brown powder

onto the counter surface. 'Try it.' He points at the line of powder with his knife. 'Try it,' he repeats. 'Good stuff.'

Something is not right. Normally Johnnie would bring the gear: a gram, sometimes two. Crap stuff usually. Gene would pay him. Once he had the money, Johnnie would be keen to go, but always Gene insisted that Johnnie waited – waited till Gene had a hit, just to make sure that the product was OK. It was obvious that Johnnie didn't like waiting, but he knew the score.

Something is, very definitely, not right. Johnnie, in Gene's tiny kitchen, pointing with the blade of his flick knife at the line of smack. Johnnie, between Gene and the doorway.

Gene holds out the glass of tequila and orange. 'Here you are,' he says.

Johnnie takes the glass in his left hand; holding the knife in his right.

Gene wants to tell him to back off – put the knife away – go sit down on the couch in the living room. But etiquette demands that, as Johnnie has offered a line, he has to be there when Gene samples it. A two-inch line of brown powder, on the scratched and stained melamine worktop. Crumbs. Food.

Johnnie puts the open knife down, has a slug of his drink, places the tumbler onto the counter, smiles his bad-toothed, snake-eyed smile. He reaches into his jeans and takes out a 10,000 peso note, rolls it into a tube, offers it to Gene.

Gene holds the rolled banknote. 10,000 Chilean pesos is only worth about £10. This isn't like Johnnie. Gene bends to the smack, and quickly snorts it. He straightens up, and turns back to face Johnnie. He sniffs, wipes his fingers across his nose.

Johnnie nods, smiles. A measured smile – a snake's smile. He picks up the knife.

'Hey Johnnie,' Gene says, offering back Johnnie's bank note, 'put the knife away, hey?'

Johnnie's eyes remain fixed on Gene. A long moment passes. Then he smiles his non-smile, slowly folds the blade, slips the knife into his pocket. 'Well,' he says in Spanish. 'Good stuff. No?'

'Yes,' says Gene. But the truth is he can't really tell.

Gene puts out his hand, gesturing towards the living room.

Johnnie begins to move, but then stops in the doorway, his hand in his pocket. 'I need the money. Before you buy. I need the money.'

'What?' says Gene, in Spanish. '¿Qué?'

'I need the money. That was just a little – to try – for you. I need the money to buy the good stuff.'

Johnnie is stood between Gene and the only doorway.

Two men in an apartment block in Neuquén, a small city in Argentina. One a native, a junkie, a hustler. Snake-eye Johnnie. Nobody's called John round here – not really. It'll be Juan, or Jesus. Snake Eye Johnnie. Two men in a tiny kitchen in the capital of the region, the largest city in Patagonia. It's January; mid-summer. Here in the mountains it doesn't get too hot. This small windy city with its tree-lined boulevards.

Two men: one a native, the other a Brit: Gene Campbell, a junkie a hustler. Johnnie has known Gene, how long now? Not long – maybe two

months; three max. Gene had met Johnnie at Sanchez's, a bar in the centre of Neuquén. That was in the spring, shortly after Gene arrived in the city. Gene doesn't really like to score in bars, on the street, but he'd been desperate. Smack is hard to come by. Johnnie can get smack – usually. Smack has been particularly hard to come by of late. Gene is clucking, suffering the onset of heroin withdrawal.

Johnnie is standing there; he looks anxious. It's not that hot, but Johnnie is sweating, a bead of perspiration leaves his brow and trails around his right eye. His hand in his pocket, his hunched posture. Quickly, in his broken American-English, Johnnie explains how he needs the money up front. The small line on the worktop was just a taster. 'Good stuff,' he says. 'Good dope. Good guy dealer. No problems. Todo es bueno.'

Two men, in this tiny kitchen. Johnnie sweating, a plead in his voice. 'I need the money, for the big, good stuff. OK?'

'No way,' says Gene, shaking his head. Says he's not going to give Johnnie the money, tells him to forget it. Tells him to go: 'Desaparcer!' His hand raised, pointing towards the exit. 'I mean it. Go! I'm not giving you the money, not unless I come with you.'

A long moment passes. Johnnie too close. Gene steadfast.

Johnnie narrows his eyes – he moves his head: an ever so slight, somewhat hypnotic, fluid back and forth. Weighing something up. Then, 'OK,' he says. 'Yes.' He points at Gene. 'You come.' And he sticks his thumb out, flicks his head.

'Yeah?' says Gene, wariness in his voice.

'Yeah. OK, bro?' Jonnie says; the ridiculous American twang.

Two men, too close, in Gene's tiny kitchen. Johnnie, barring the doorway; his hand in the pocket, where the knife is.

'All right then. Let's go.' Gene gestures with his hand. 'After you.'

Johnnie stands there – hand still in his pocket.

Gene glances around; the heavy cast iron frying pan, on the stove, just out of reach.

Then Johnnie picks up his tequila and orange, downs it in one; wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, puts the empty glass onto the counter, turns and walks into the lounge.

Gene follows.

Johnnie stands on the rug in the centre of the room. Once more, his eyes narrow, weighing something up. He takes out a cigarette, lights it, rubs his chin. 'OK,' he says, 'let's go.'

Away from the wide, tree-lined boulevards of the city centre, in the neighbourhood where all the boarding houses are, Johnnie and Gene in an alleyway, down the side of an apartment block. It's about 2am.

'OK,' says Johnnie, 'I go get the stuff. You wait here. Give me the money.'

'No way.' Gene pulls away, shrugs, shakes his head.

Johnnie's sweating. He stands there gesticulating wildly. Talking fast; some English, some Spanish. 'You give me money. No hay problema. You wait here. See?' and he points down the alley, to a small hotel across the road in the main street. 'Sí?'

Gene looks. 'No.' Turns his head.

Johnnie is really close. So close that Gene can smell him: cigarettes, tequila, sweat. He's talking fast, in Spanish, too fast for Gene to understand. Desperation in his face, his staccato gestures. His chin thrust forward: words, hands, close, too close.

'No,' Gene says.

Johnnie takes another step forward.

Gene puts out a hand. 'No!' He pushes Johnnie's shoulder; is about to turn, get back onto the main road.

Then he sees the knife.

Gene stops, both hands raised.

Johnnie standing, legs akimbo, brandishing the knife, jabbing the air. 'Give me the money. I must have the money.'

'Hey,' Gene holds his hands up, 'calm down, Johnnie.' Then, slowly, one hand still raised, the other in his trousers' back pocket. 'Easy, easy.' He pulls out his wallet, holds it out. 'Look.'

Johnnie steps forward. Grabs the wallet. Then – fast and silent – he slashes at Gene, catches his arm, just above the elbow.

Seconds. Micro seconds. The tight, warm of a narrow alleyway. The attacker. The attacked...

Gene grabs Johnnie's wrist. With his other hand, he lashes out, fist clenched. He catches Johnnie behind the ear. Johnnie's head whiplashes. He grunts. His hat falls off. He staggers slightly. Gene twists Johnnie's arm. The knife clatters to the floor. Gene punches again, connects with Johnnie's jaw. Johnnie stumbles, falls against the brickwork. Gene picks up the knife. Waves it. 'Keep away.' The knife, pointed at Johnnie. 'Keep away.'

Johnnie, shakes his head, gets to his feet, then – lunges.

Seconds. Micro seconds. The night. The alleyway. A knife held out (Keep away)...

With his head down, Johnnie launches himself towards Gene.

The blade penetrates his shoulder, easy, soft.

Johnnie screams. For a moment, he wavers. But then he throws a punch.

Gene ducks to the side. Johnnie's blow fails to connect. The momentum pushing him forward.

Gene jabs again with the knife. It goes into Johnnie's neck. Blood sprays out.

Seconds. Micro seconds. A moment, suspended in time:

Gene – eyes wide – the knife in his hand.

Johnnie's hand goes up to his neck. He staggers. He pulls his hand away. It's covered in his blood. He speaks in Spanish. 'Look,' he says. '*Mira.*' He holds his hand out, palm up. 'You ... (*Tú ...*)' His eyes roll in his head. He falls to his knees. Then in English he says, 'Help me.'

Gene, Johnnie: a moment, suspended in time. A car passes by the entrance to the alley.

Johnnie, on his knees. His hand clenched to his neck; the blood seeping through his fingers, pouring down his shirt collar. His shirt is soaked; his trousers are soaked. The blood is pooling on the ground.

Gene stands – a frozen moment in time.

Johnnie makes a gargling noise. Then, blood bubbling from his mouth, he falls – forward, face down.

Silence.

Then—

A voice. A woman's voice. Laughing. A couple walking past the end of the alleyway.

Gene drops the knife, turns and runs.

As he runs, he hears the woman scream.

Gene runs.