



# Layer Cake

*J. J. Connolly*

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Our narrator's too smart to tell you his name ("if I [did], you'd be as clever as me"), but he's not afraid to tell you everything else about the "layer cake"—London's intricately arranged constellation of underworld fiefdoms. The worst thing about drug dealing—according to our unnamed narrator—whether you're a classy top dealer trading millions or a down-and-out street pusher, is that you have to relate to a lot of total idiots - loudmouths and tough-guy wannabes who aren't afraid to "get nicked by old bill and thrown in the boob" (arrested by police and jailed). Our narrator is a smoothly diplomatic 29-year-old cocaine dealer who has earned a respected place among England's Mafia elite. Speaking in a language rich with drug jargon, vulgarities, British slang, and Cockneyisms, he manages high-level trafficking with a tough old veteran partner, Mister Mortimer, a man who gave the narrator his start in the business, and who has seen his share of prison (five and a half year term) and deadly fights (he owns a porn store, and loves to set up guys looking for child porn by directing them to come back at a special time, then beating the living daylight out of them when they return). Our narrator's goal is to retire at 30 and spend his remaining years far from the danger and double-dealing of London's crime gangs. But like most high rollers, he finds it hard to walk away from "just one more" deal.

Morty rings up our narrator one early Saturday morning with an invitation to an exclusive members only restaurant far off in the English countryside. They're off for "a spot of luncheon" with the Don, Jimmy Price. Jimmy is a legend, a crime boss who's been in the business for years by hiring the best lawyers and keeping a low-key profile. This is a man who is always gets what he wants, and is not used to people refusing him favors. Which is exactly the spot our narrator soon finds himself in when over lunch, Jimmy hands down a tough assignment: find Charlotte Ryder, the missing rich princess daughter of Jimmy's old pal Edward, a powerful construction business player and gossip papers socialite. It's a hard deal to refuse, but Jimmy can spot the edge on our narrator and makes him a deal – if you find Charlotte, you can leave the life for good.

Our narrator sets out to find Billy Bogus, a grifter with a gift for mimicry and ingratiating himself into any area of society he wants. Bank and credit card fraud is his trade, with a healthy dollop of hustling young women out of their trust funds for good measure. On his way to meet Bogus, he runs into a small time punk named Sid in a local nightclub who runs with a band of thugs called "the Yahoos." With him is a stunning woman, a "real love-a-player type" named Tammy. Sid tells our narrator a bloody story about a friend of his named "The Duke" who recently got ambushed by a state of the art crew armed with laser sighted Uzis. Our narrator won't figure out the significance of this story until later as he's too busy checking out Tammy, who flirtatiously gives him her number while Sid is distracted.

Our narrator reports to Jimmy's right hand man, Gene, that he's on the case, but Gene has other business. Turns out that the Yahoos have two million pounds' worth of Grade A ecstasy to sell, and Gene wants our narrator to handle the deal. It's an irresistible deal, just the right amount of money to top off his retirement fund. He sets up a meeting with him, Mort, and the Yahoos kingpins, Big Frankie and JD while finally catching up with Billy Bogus, who agrees to help find our narrator Charlotte by tracking down Charlotte's boyfriend Kinky—for a price, of course.

Big Frankie and JD keep quiet about where they've gotten the tablets, but the "gear" is top quality, confirmed by none other than Sir Alex ("chief chemical taster"). Things are looking up when Mort sets up his gang to meet up with a crew, headed by a man named Trevor, up in Northern England who he thinks will

be perfect to unload the goods on. There's only one problem – they don't want the goods. This crew informs our narrator that an Ecstasy factory has been hijacked—most likely by the Yahoos—and now a brutal neo-Nazi sect wants those pills back. They've already hit up a house that belongs to “the Duke”, and here is where Sid's story from the club all makes sense.

Our narrator drives back to London with Mort in tow and gets a call from Bogus, who tells him he's found Kinky. Dead. In a London housing project. It looks like a typical drug overdose, but a young kid drug dealer who helped Bogus find Kinky says he was murdered.

Meanwhile, our narrator sets up a rendezvous with Tammy in a hotel room. As he steps out of the shower, two toughs ambush him, who roll him up in a carpet, and abduct him in a long box. The toughs take him to a construction site to meet with their boss, Eddie Ryder, Charlotte's father. Eddie tells our narrator that Jimmy Price has pulled a fast one on him – his daughter's isn't missinnnnng. What's worse, Jimmy's made a deal with some renegade Chechens that have swindled him to the tune of thirteen million pounds. To pull himself out of the hole, he set up the narrator to find Eddie's daughter, then hold her for ransom. The double cross, though, turns into a triple cross when Eddie plays our narrator a tape that reveals Jimmy Price is an informer for the police and has set up a sting for our narrator where he plans to send him to jail for long time, and make off with the narrator's retirement fund.

Finding himself undercut, double-crossed, hung out to dry, and struggling to survive, our narrator's survival instincts kick in. He changes from a turn-the-other-cheek diplomat to a revenge-charged hit man overnight, starting by killing Jimmy Price. Next, he agrees to sell the ecstasy tablets to Ryder, who plans to unload them to the Yakuza in Japan, which will put a nice chunk of change in our narrator's pocket. Just before he leaves, our narrator mentions a bit of dirt that Jimmy gave him in passing about Eddie, insuring that Eddie won't kill our narrator—just in case he gets any funny ideas about doing so.

Suddenly, all of the narrator's problems looked solved. Jimmy's dead, and those two million tabs of ecstasy are headed to Japan. Then, Jimmy's right hand man Gene asks for a meeting with Mort and our narrator. Gene accuses our narrator of killing Jimmy and threatens to kill him unless he confesses. Our narrator plays the tape Ryder gave him for Gene and Morty, revealing Jimmy's double-dealings with the police. Gene lets our narrator go and agrees never to discuss the crime again.

All that remains is the little matter of two million tabs of ecstasy. In a flourish of double and triple crosses, our narrator's deal to exchange the tabs for cash at Heathrow Airport falls apart, but ends up with the tabs in Amsterdam. As he prepares to dash off to Amsterdam to collect the loot, he decides to give Tammy a call before he leaves. Unfortunately, Tammy's jealous boyfriend Sidney tailed her, and shot the narrator three times, including twice in the head. The narrator lived, recovered in the hospital, and is ordered into retirement and exile by the cops. He rings Tammy to offer her one more chance to meet, but she tells him “girls like dangerous guys but you're seriously fuckin' life threatening. How many girls do you know end up covered in blood, chief prosecution witness in an attempted murder trial on their first date?” She wishes our narrator well, who has plenty of time to reflect on his life as an ex-pat in Curacao, Brazil. He acknowledges that, in life, you never stop learning, but you never stop forgetting either. He has plenty of time now to ruminate on both, living a life where he can remember why he left the business, but never forget why he can't tell us his name.

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