

*Tuesday 6th December*

**8:45 - Incident Briefing Room, Consett Police Station**

“OK. See you all back here at 6:30pm please. Remember, any developments no matter how insignificant you think they are, **MUST** be reported in and uploaded into the crime-detection database. We’re clearly missing something.”

Grahams looked around the room. Nobody responded. Six days since Boz met his grizzly end, two for Johnny and they were no further forward. The main points of the update had been simple:

- Both autopsy reports had confirmed all suspicions: the victims were stunned with a taser, before having their throats slit. Taser supplier unknown;
- Northumbria’s Police knew of a couple of taser-assaults, but this two-weapon attack was a new style of crime, at least up here;
- The main job of the day was to track down the final journeys of both men to where they’d been killed and from that, find a link to why they met the same fate;
- Oh and ... Robbo-knobbo was officially demoted to sergeant again; which wasn’t a shocker, but the guy looked so deflated that no-one had the heart to take the piss.

“Right, that’s it. See you all tonight.” Grahams dropped his paperwork on the desk, turning back to the whiteboard. The briefing closed, members of the team started drifting away.

Eventually, it was just Dan and beside him, three of the longest-serving

tech's on the squad: Jim, Tony and Ian chuckling amongst themselves about a private joke. Dan looked out of the window, the weather was wicked, sleety-rain bashed against the window, and his suit was as waterproof use as a paper bag.

*"I've got to order a jacket today: what to get?"*

Preparing to stand up, Dan felt the folded note in his suit jacket pocket and a shot of alarm constricted his insides. The men beside him stopped speaking and exchanged a look. Jim turned towards Dan.

*"So, young Dan, we hear that you've upset the locals. Parking so as to cause offence. Really inconsiderate behaviour."*

Dan's alarm bloomed into full-force panic, his hand instinctively flew to the note tugging it out, spreading it flat on the table, using it toward the ring leader.

*"I don't get it Jim, I'm a good driver, came first on my advanced driving course. Who would write this?"* Dan gabbled, looking down at the female-styled writing on the page. He turned to Tony and Ian, who shook their heads in disbelief, shrugging their shoulders.

*"But why leave it on my windscreen? It was sellotaped to the wiper. If I've upset someone, why wouldn't she just come and talk to me?"*

Dan looked at Jim, who raised his eyebrows with a straight face and gave a look of puzzled wonder.

*"Is it someone disabled? I've never used the disabled spaces, but is it someone who needs extra room? I'm so confused."*

It finally dawned on the young DC that no-one else was saying anything. He looked up from the note into Jim's grinning face, then across to Tony who just about kept it together and then at Ian who had lost that battle with shoulders heaving in laughter. Dan looked back down at the note.

Realisation struck.

\* \* \*

"You bastards. You..." he pointed at Jim, "this was You wasn't it?" Dan prodded the paper, "you put this on my windscreen."

The techs were now laughing uncontrollably. Dan stood and the senior men rose with him, Jim reaching across and slapping the young DC on the back.

"We've got a new name for you my lad..."

"D.D." chimed in Tony.

"Stands for Dangerous Dan!" The three broke into laughter again, and picked up their things ready to leave.

Dan saw the joke, laughed with them. It was funny. But then he noticed the padded, apparently waterproof overcoat that Jim was pulling over his suit.

*"I want a jacket like that,"* he thought picking up his things, *"I'm sick of freezing,"* but the colleagues were out the door and off to their duties, and anyway, Dan would never have had the courage to ask Jim where he got it. *"Lunchtime, I'll go on line at lunch and see what I can find."*

### **11:15am - The Coffee Shop, Shotley Bridge**

Eric was bored. The flat took no time to clean, his bar-related jobs were finished too.

The Bar Manager gazed out of his five-foot wide, east-facing kitchen window.

For one breathtakingly beautiful moment, the bulbous grey clouds parted, a shaft of golden light illuminated Muggleswick's russet brown fell, highlighting a patch of faded purple heather, smattered with a white dusting of last night's snow. Eric stood mesmerised, then the clouds crashed back across the sky, taking with them the magic. Eric sighed. The view might be great, but he was still alone; he needed conversation.

\* \* \*

Tapping the work surface with his fingernails.

*"Coffee."* he thought, *"And conversation,"* he decided, reaching for coat and keys, heading out the door.

On Shotley Bridge Front Street the wind picked up an abandoned polystyrene chip tray, whipped it into the air like its favourite new toy, then abruptly abandoned it outside the coffee shop door. Inside the shop, Steph busily baked for the week ahead, hoping that a customer would turn up soon. And then Eric fulfilled that wish, bringing a gust of wet, icy rain in with him as he entered. He leant forward on the counter watching as Steph put three more tray bakes in the oven, noting that the Scottish baker was on her own.

*"No sign of Isla-Jane,"* Eric's mood sank in disappointment.

*"Get a grip, for God's sake, man."* He thought as he waited for Steph to turn back around from the industrial cooker.

"Oh, Eric, lovely to see you. Will you have your usual hen?"

"Aye, thanks Steph." He paused, willing himself to leave it there, not to ask the obvious question, but before he knew it, the words were out of his mouth:

"You in on your own this morning?"

"Oh, no. Isla-Jane's just nipped to the cash and carry for some bits and pieces, she should be back in a jiffy," smiled Steph, noticing the hopeful look that Eric couldn't conceal.

*"This man has it bad,"* she laughed to herself, *"poor sod. He's no poker face when it comes to our Isla-Jane."*

"You grab a seat, I'll bring it over in a moment."

Steph set away a grinding the beans for a double espresso whilst Eric went to his favourite seat in the window. From there he could see the comings and goings of the village, he might see the comings of Isla-Jane when she finally arrived.

\* \* \*

Isla-Jane, was half a mile away with a car full of supplies. She'd taken a detour, past a certain bar manager's flat, thinking she'd just pop in to say Hi. When she saw his empty car parking space, her mood sagged a little.

*"Oh well. Don't know what I was thinking, anyway. He's probably been entertaining or entertained elsewhere. I have got to get a grip of this. It's no good."*

Back in the coffee shop, Steph determined to make the slowest coffee possible, she dragged out heating the small jug of milk, knowing that if Eric finished his coffee before Isla Jane arrived, he'd up and leave, which would be a pity.

"Would you like something sweet, Eric?" She called across the shop, "I made ginger cake this morning."

"Sounds wonderful." He agreed, delighted at the pretext for sitting there longer.

*"I'm gonna have to take this over now or his coffee'll be stone cold."* Thought Steph five minutes later, loading the tray with an enormous slice of treacle-sticky ginger cake, topped with lemon frosting.

*"No-one can get through that lot in less than half-an-hour."* She chuckled, as she put the wedge of cake down and took a seat beside him in the window. They chatted for a few minutes, while Eric sugared his coffee without starting to drink it. Finally, the back door flew open and in came Isla Jane carrying bags of flour, sugar, milk and other supplies. Steph jumped up to help.

"Is there more out in the car?"

"Aye, I got three boxes of napkins, so we're sorted till after Christmas, there's some other bits and pieces in there too."

"Righto. I'll get them. We have a visitor, by the way."

From behind the cafe counter, Isla-Jane looked into Eric's eyes. Eric

looked into Isla-Jane's. Neither moved. Her heart skipped a beat and then beat double time in her chest. Eric's stomach flipped and he gripped the table-edge rather than get up, go over, wrap his arms around her and tell her how glad he was to see her.

"Oh, Hi." Was the best the coffee-shop owner could manage. "You've got a coffee, good. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"I'm all good." Replied Eric, recovering quicker than she did. "Can I give you a hand?"

"No, no. You're fine, enjoy your coffee."

Steph came in from the car with the last bits of shopping, putting them on the counter. She looked from one to the other.

*"Hopeless. They're hopeless."*

"I'm putting these away, Isla-Jane. You go and sit, I'll bring you a tea over just now."

Steph pulled a last bag out of her colleague's grasp and gave her a gentle shove towards the window table where Eric's coffee and ginger cake were still untouched. Without argument, Isla-Jane went and sat.

"So," she asked with more composure, now that she'd got over the rollercoaster of disappointment-turned-to-pleasure of the last ten minutes, "what's the latest then? What's been going on?"

"All quiet on the Western Front." Chuckled Eric, feeling warmed just by this woman's proximity.

"Any news of poor Boz or Johnny? Any clues about who did it?"

Eric picked up his fork and cut off a small corner of the cake and frosting. Smooth, lemon icing melted on his tongue, tangy, sweet, followed by the mild ginger heat of the cake. Man, that tasted good.

*"Is it just the cake, or...?"*

\* \* \*

Steph arrived at the table with a mug of tea for Isla-Jane and a second fork and napkin.

"How's the cake."

"Amazing, really. One of your best, I think."

"Ooh. Thank you."

"Come on Eric. You know something. I can tell. What's on the wire?"

"No, wait, let me get a drink and join you if there's news," Steph interrupted, returning to the table with a glass of water and a third fork and napkin. Eric was going to have to share more than just the gossip this morning.

"My pleasure..." he said looking down at his plate as both women took healthy chunks of cake, making Isla-Jane laugh out loud.

"Talk." She giggled through a mouthful of lemon frosting.

"Ok. Well. The autopsy for poor Boz has come back. It's been delayed with staff shortages."

*"How does he find these things out?"* Thought Isla-Jane, avidly watching Eric's every facial movement.

"So..." nudged Steph, "Were you right then....?"

"Yup. Taser. To the temple. Poor Boz. Then someone who knew how to use a knife finished him off with that. Johnny the same."

"Poor sods." Said both women together.

"I know." Eric took advantage of their thoughtful pause to get a corner piece of the cake where the frosting was thickest. "Apparently, a taser can't kill, which is why they bled out so quickly from the knife."

"A taser?" Whispered Stephanie, going pale. Her eyes shot over to her handbag hung up in the corner of the till.

\* \* \*

“Apparently,” continued Eric, looking at Isla-Jane, neither of them noticing that Steph wasn’t paying attention, “they’re not that hard to get hold of. And, it seems that despite shooting 50,000 volts into the side of someone’s brain, the damage doesn’t show up on MRI scans or after death. There’s nothing to see.”

“But it doesn’t make sense. If you’re going to kill someone, why do it like that?”

“Doesn’t make sense if you’re a burly six-foot bloke who can swing a baseball bat. But if you’re smaller than your victim and need to put them on the ground first, it makes a lot of sense.”

“So, they’re either looking for a small bloke, or...”

“Or a woman. Yup.”

“That’s mad. Why would any woman kill those two. I mean, it’s not like they’ve got a string of kids behind them or a list of thwarted lovers. Is it?”

Eric laughed. “Well, I doubt it, although you never know in Consett. But, no, the police know more about “how” each murder was done now. Which is a start. They just have no idea of who or why.”

“You Ok Steph?” Asked her colleague, noticing that she was very quiet and looked uncomfortable.

“Why, yes, of course. You sit here and finish off the cake, I’m going to potter on in the kitchen.”

Steph left the not-love-birds at the table and walked to where her things were hung up. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a small black pouch. Inside was a device that like a cross between a cheap plastic torch and a potato peeler. Except that the potato-peeler bit was actually the prongs that shot out fifteen feet and lodged in someone’s skin to deliver an electric shock.

She’d bought it for self-defence. Her brain helpfully flashed memories



of being flung against at wall, receiving blows where they wouldn't show: across her back, her stomach, legs. The stiff-pain next morning, getting up for work, trying to move normally so that no-one would look, or guess, or ask awkward questions.

But that was another world, a past life, an ex husband, a different Steph, a resolution that she'd never let any of that happen again. So much bound up in a tiny black package. Now, it lived in her bag, in the middle zip section, that she left permanently open, like a secret security blanket for Steph's peace of mind. She charged it once a week, practised on the trees in her garden from time to time, felt for it instinctively each time she went anywhere. The constant companion of safety.

Steph thought how she'd bought it; a few cogs turned, clicking into place with an uncomfortable jolt: the J-C house and garage, encased by a six-foot black fence to keep out prying eyes; the men who'd worked on that fence, who maybe saw boxes stacked in the garage, labelled with Chinese script; bodies of two of the workmen now lying in a morgue.

*"Surely not?"*

She had a vague recollection of the most recent scrabble night, buying a round at the bar. Beside her, perched on a bar stool, Johnny regaled tales of the Jackson-Chamber's house, how fancy it was.

Steph shook her head, really not wanting to think about it. Shoving the taser back to the centre section of her bag, she upped the busy-ness. Her tray-bakes were nearly done, she needed to put the shopping away and make lemon frosting for the ginger cake.

Six hours later, coffee shop cleaned, cashed up and ready to leave, Steph picked her bag off its hook on the wall. Feeling its weight on her shoulder she wondered: how many women across the whole North East had bought one of those babies from Shotley Bridge's Church Hall? Each customer incriminated by possession and too grateful for the reassurance to ever consider telling the authorities. Steph was in that club. She'd avoided asking where those packages came from, or who was supplying the supplier?

**8:49pm - Walker Riverside Car Park, Newcastle**

Amelia Jackson-Chambers hated to be kept waiting. He was late. Nineteen minutes late, to be exact.

*“Unusual, I wonder if he’s not coming.”*

Her belly churned with irritation and frustration. Flipping open a cheap mobile phone that she only used for these transactions, Mrs J-C checked her texts.

“8:30. Usual place.  
Normal consignment.”

“OK.”

That was it; this wasn’t a chatty relationship. She closed the phone and tossed it onto the passenger seat.

*“Sometimes, I wonder if I should give all this up. What’s the point?”*

But Mrs JC knew what the point was. The points, really. Yes, she wanted the cash, an independent means of income. More to the point, though, she needed to help women stay safe, be protected. Not all men were as... malleable as Don. Amelia Jackson-Chambers needed to feel private and protected, which meant taking control. One way of maintaining her power was through knowing she had the upper hand in any situation.

By 9:01 the supplier hadn’t shown up. Amelia considered texting him again, but what was the point? This was irritating. She had customers waiting. Customers she didn’t want to disappoint. Not everyone is understanding when they’ve paid £300 a pop for something they know they shouldn’t have but feel is essential. Once her customers decided to commit to a purchase, they liked to complete the transaction quickly.

Doing a mental stock-take, Amelia reckoned she had enough to satisfy this week’s clientele. Definitely not enough for the rest of the month.

Thankfully, most people concentrated on happier topics over Christmas, so demand would probably drop until the 27<sup>th</sup> of December. But in the three years she'd been conducting this trade, the week before New Year's Eve was her busiest. All those parties.

Picking up the phone again, she composed a message:

"You didn't show. I need my consignment."

"When's the next delivery?"

"I have the cash."

By 9:07 he still hadn't shown up, or responded to her texts.

*"Time to go, Amelia."*

Yoga was due to have finished half an hour ago and she had a 40 minute drive to get home. Don probably wouldn't notice, but there was no point taking risks.

She retrieved her handbag from the passenger well, found her phone and sent her husband a text:

"Gone for a drink after the class,  
back by 10:30 at the latest."

Then, as an afterthought she added:

"Xxx"