

**THE  
REGULATORS**

**BLACK EYE  
FRIDAY**



**BEN BRUCE**

“Merry Christmas!” Adam launched his oversized stein glass forward into Jack’s, sending beer sloshing as they met.

“You too, mate,” Jack forced a smile back, already acutely aware that Adam was enjoying himself far more than he was.

Adam took a huge swig and looked around as he exhaled contentedly. “This is what it’s all about, you know?”

Jack did not know. They were stood next to a table made out of an upturned barrel, surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands of other people, who had descended on central Birmingham for the annual Frankfurt Christmas Market. Jack had never seen the appeal before. Why would anyone want to drink outside in the middle of December? It made little sense, even with the warmth of the heater and cover of the large umbrella over them. Perhaps with less people he might enjoy it more. A bit of solitude.

“Yeah, it’s not bad,” he lied, as he watched a gaggle of businessmen loudly saunter towards the bar. All terrible banter and over exaggerated laughs, to prove they were enjoying themselves as much as, if not more than everyone else. Even with their array of festive head gear; Santa hats, reindeer horns, optimistic mistletoe to be used as a cover story for some mild cheating, they didn’t conjure up any glad tidings in him. The closest they were to Christmas, was that they all reminded him of the character Ellis from Die Hard. Not that he felt the urge to see them shot in the head. At least, not overwhelmingly.

“Oh, come off it Scrooge. What’s not to love? We’ll have a couple of these, get some bratwurst in you, maybe a cup of glühwein. You’ll soon be in your element.”

“I don’t get what’s wrong with just going to the pub?” Jack looked over his shoulder at the amassed revellers. It all sat uncomfortably with him. Large, crowded spaces like this always did. Far too many ways for someone to approach unnoticed.

“On Black Eye Friday? With all the lightweights out and about? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“The people here don’t look seasoned drinkers,” Jack remarked as he saw a man totter away towards the steps that led down towards New Street.

“They get slowed down here. Too many things to see and do. In a pub, all that lies between them and annihilation is a pack of scampi fries. Believe me, I’m doing you a favour by bringing you here.”

“A favour would have been popping around mine with a big bottle of whiskey.”

“Oh, come off it. That’s depressing. Sitting in, at this time of year. It’s morose.”

“You really love Christmas, don’t you?”

“What’s not to love?”

“People.”

“I don’t mind them.”

“The massively over commercialised nature of the whole thing.”

“Are you kidding? That’s one of the best bits. The indulgence. Buy me some new ear buds. Spend a months’ wages in the supermarket. I don’t care. Fetch me my cheese board, on which only two of the cheeses can I stand and the rest will be in the bin by early January. It’s what it’s all about.”

“Gluttony?”

“Among other things.”

Jack was about to offer a rebuttal when a man laughed behind them, causing them both to turn. He was stood alone by another barrel next to theirs, taking one last large gulp from his stein.

“Oh my,” the man chuckled, wiping his mouth as he pulled his beer away. “You two couldn’t be on more opposite ends of the Christmas spectrum if you tried. I mean, you are both totally wrong of course.”

He smiled disarmingly at them, his eyes twinkling behind round rimmed glasses. His head was balding and short white whiskers crept their way out from his chin as if testing the cold air, before deciding it was better off staying undercover. Fingerless gloved hands cupped his empty oversized glass that looked even more ridiculous in his grasp than it did Jack or Adam’s.

“Wrong? I’m the most Christmassy person in this place,” Adam laughed back, happily joining in with the strangers’ patter.

“If you say so, friend. If you say so. But please, I don’t mean to interrupt your enjoyment.” He spoke with an accent, but not one Jack could place. The man turned his eyes to Jack as he tried to work out where he was from. “Or your misery it seems. I just sometimes forget myself.”

“Happens to us all,” Jack raised his glass in salute. If anything, the old man’s intervention had served to lighten his mood and he was happy to toast that. “A merry Christmas to you.”

“Ah, there you are, joining in at last. Now, I feel like my work here is almost done.”

“Only almost? You just melted the heart of the grinchiest man I ever met. I’d call you Clarence for an act like that,” Adam chuckled.

“Well, I didn’t hear any bells ringing, so I think we can safely assume I’m no angel. Gentlemen, a very merry Christmas to you.” The stranger placed a woollen hat on his head, then nodded. “Be good.”

“And you,” Adam smiled.

“We’ll try,” Jack added.

The man turned and shuffled away from his barrel. When he was gone, Adam turned back to Jack.

“See, I told you, Black Eye Friday brings out all the light weights.”

“He was certainly a character.” Jack looked back at the barrel. Something had caught his eye.

“What is it?” Adam asked.

Jack stepped past his partner. “He left his wallet,” he said, retrieving it before anyone else approached the table and decided to pocket it.

Adam spun around and joined Jack in scanning the crowd for the man. “He’s far too small, we’ll never spot him from here.”

“We could go after him.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Adam was already pulling out his phone.

“You’re going to massively abuse your power aren’t you?” Jack groaned.

“I am. It’s Christmas.”

It took thirty seconds from the call being placed and them being connected to Raf, before he was able to access the CCTV feed from the area. Another thirty seconds later, Jack and Adam were following the instructions recounted down the line to them, as they made their way after the old man. Both of them had tuned into the call through their ear pieces.

“Looks like he’s headed towards New Street Station,” Raf said. “Hard to be sure. I keep losing him in the crowds.”

“Just keep doing what you can.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to just look up his details? Get someone to drop his wallet around later?” Raf didn’t sound annoyed. But he was definitely questioning why he was wasting his time on a Friday afternoon doing something like this.

Adam was nosing through the wallet. “No bank cards, nothing of real note. A couple of loyalty things with just initials. S Real.”

“S Real?” Raf repeated.

“Yeah, hold on.” Adam stopped, pulling a card from the wallet. “We’ve got a pilot’s licence here.”

“What? Let me see?” Jack reached out. “The CAA isn’t in the habit of handing out plastic card licences. It’s got to be a fake.”

He took it off Adam and turned it around. There was no issuing body written anywhere that he could see. Just a photo of the man they’d just met and the name.

“Santos Real. Sounds Spanish or something.”

“He had an accent. I didn’t think it was Spanish.”

“Listen you two,” Raf butted in. “He’s just entered the main concourse at the station. If you want to catch him before he gets on a train, I suggest you get a wiggle on.”

Jack passed the wallet back to Adam and they broke into a jog, dodging between the throngs of people that had gathered in the city centre, heading off to the market, the pubs, or even for some late afternoon, early evening shopping. The city was chaotic and their progress was anything but linear. Finally they bundled in through the doors of New Street Station, down the concourse into the plaza that merged the station with the Grand Central shopping mall that had been built above it.

“Where’d he go?” Adam asked as people surged this way and that in front of them, boarding and leaving trains, their Christmas holidays now underway.

“Up the escalators, into a coffee shop.”

Bounding up the escalator wasn’t possible. Shoppers and commuters idled on both sides. The London practice of standing to the right hadn’t caught on elsewhere. It was perhaps the only bit of civility London had over the rest of the nation in Jack’s eyes. So they stood in line, waiting as patiently as they could. Which for Jack, wasn’t very patiently. His fingers drummed on the handrail as they moved.

“What’s up with you? You look tense. More than normal I mean,” Adam nodded down to where Jack’s fingers played their staccato performance.

“I don’t know.”

“You look like you’re on a job.”

“I know.”

“You’re not.”

Jack didn't answer. They reached the top of the escalator, stepping off with the rest of the herd.

"Where now?" Adam asked.

"Straight ahead. Third shop on the left. The little one. He just walked in," Raf replied.

"Thanks Raf."

"Can I go now?"

"Yeah mate. Get off and get some glühwein in you."

"I'll pass."

The line went dead as Adam and Jack stepped inside a small coffee shop. Inside it was quiet. The lights were turned down low, which made both of them think for a moment it was closed. Then they saw the man. He was already sat at a table, a mug in his hand. He looked up and saw them.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, smiling. "There you are."

Adam and Jack walked over to him, taking their seats opposite.

"What do you mean, there we are?" Jack asked.

"You took longer than I expected. I guess even modern technology has its limits."

"What?" Jack peered at the man. His smile was still there. Still genuine. Unthreatening. He knew the situation should have been setting off some of his usual triggers. This guy had tactical info on them. Yet he didn't feel threatened. He felt safe. So much so, that he didn't even see the waitress come over and place two black coffees down in front of them, that neither he nor Adam had ordered. He picked it up and took a sip. It tasted great.

"Drink up. You need clear heads."

Adam placed the wallet on the table.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Language, Adam." The man, Santos, shook his head. "It's getting a bit too close to Christmas to be misbehaving."

"Who are you?" Adam went on.

Santos closed his eyes, shook his head, his hand raised dismissively. "That's the wrong question. What do I represent is better. And I'll tell you." He leaned forward, his voice hushed. "I represent opportunity to many, but a threat to some. There's a fellow, just got a brand new job over the pond. He doesn't like to play by the rules. It doesn't matter to

him that everyone else has for generations before hand. Even the idiot over that way,” he nodded his head to his right, which Jack’s internal compass told him was east. “It doesn’t matter at all. I have something he wants. And tonight, he’s coming to get it. You need to help me stop him.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Jack didn’t understand a word of what had just been said. It appeared, however, that Adam had.

“Are you saying?”

“Yes.”

“That you’re?”

“Yes.”

“And that...?”

“Yes.”

“Tonight?”

“In a few minutes time.”

“What are you doing here?”

“It was my shift in the Bull Ring.”

“Your shift?”

“Look, I know what you’re brought up to believe. That the Santa you see in these shopping centres and malls and wherever else, that it’s just some silly fat man in a suit. But I can’t not do some appearances can I? So, every year I make a point of getting out there and seeing the people. Because that’s what it’s all about. What sort of Father would I be, if I didn’t actually spend any time with my children?”

The penny dropped for Jack. “You’re...?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I would love to give you a lesson in thousands of years of Sinterklaas history and tradition, however, that one will have to wait. Right now, there’s a group of well trained, well-armed mercenaries about to make their move and gentlemen, your help is requested. That is, if you don’t have something better to do.”

“I’m in.” Adam said almost before Santos had finished speaking.

Jack turned his head slowly towards his partner. “What?”

“What do you need?” Adam didn’t even look at Jack. Whatever spell Santos was casting, he was completely under it.

“Mr. Quinn?” Santos cocked his head, as if he believed there might be a different outcome to the one that happened.

“Fine. Whatever.”

Santos didn’t explain much more. Jack and Adam didn’t ask. They finished their coffees, then they were walking back through the station, out the doors they’d entered. Bollards separated them from a small street. Tramlines ran along it in both directions, before it curled away and up to their right, and disappeared into the distance on their left. Night had fallen since they went inside.

“What time is it?” Jack wondered out loud.

“Yeah, more to the point, where is everyone?” Adam asked.

He was right. The street that just a few minutes earlier they’d found crammed with people was now deserted. Not a soul in sight.

“I told you,” Santos explained, “I represent opportunity.”

“This is not what I’d call opportunity,” Adam said quietly. Jack wasn’t sure he agreed. He was beginning to like this side of the city.

“They’ll be here in a second,” Santos said. His voice still sounded warm. Like he was waiting for the arrival of loved ones.

“Who?” Jack asked.

“Well, technically they don’t have a name. Some sort of black ops group. Probably CIA backed or something. Or NSA. All freelance.”

Then they were there. Ten men. All dressed in black combat fatigues. Body armour. Helmets. Night Vision. Heckler & Kock HK416 automatic rifles. Five coming down the slope to their right. Five round the corner of a building to their left. Both sets approximately fifty yards away and closing.

“You know we’re not armed?” Jack felt his body tense. This wasn’t good. Twelve highly trained, highly motivated, well-armed men against three, maybe really two and a half, unarmed, unprepared, mildly drunk men.

“Yes, but we’ve got air support,” Santos was positively beaming now as he tilted his head towards the night sky. Jack and Adam followed his gaze. A starless sky hung above them. Nothing moved.



“I don’t see...” Jack began. He was cut short by the sight of a single, solitary snow-flake, dancing slowly and elegantly towards the ground, gliding from side to side. Just as it seemed set to land on Jack, it stopped. Caught in a sudden gust of wind. The air around them swirled as something rushed through the sky above. Jack didn’t see it, but he sure heard it. He was about to ask what it was, when the first explosion hit.

Jack saw the flash. He heard the sound of air expanding. The familiar whump that came from being stood too close to something detonating. He didn’t have time to throw himself to the ground. He knew that. The blast had been too close. He was caught in it.

Only he wasn’t. The air seemed to pass through him. Then a second flash, this time on his left. Another whump. Again the air passed through. The snowflake spun about, caught on the eddies of the wind, before breaking free. It fluttered down, landing delicately on Jack’s nose.

“What just happened?” he said quietly.

“No time. Let’s go!” Santos called out, his voice raised in a cry. Jack snapped out of the trance as the snowflake melted. He looked around. In front of them now was a box no more than three feet wide and deep. The parachute it had just been dropped in with was folding around it. It looked just like a giant present. Wrapped in red paper with silver ribbon around it, tied in a perfect bow. Santos was already there, pulling at the ribbon. Jack looked at Adam, who was looking at him. They shrugged at each other then ran to Santos.

“Where are they?” Adam asked as they reached the box.

Jack looked around. At the foot of the ramp on their right, the five men had stalled. Two of them were on lying the floor. Two more were on their knees, whilst the final man staggered around. All were clutching at a bright shiny material that seemed to have been caked onto them. It covered their body armour, their helmets. Their night vision goggles were completely redundant. The lenses were covered. Whatever it was, was sticky. All of them were trying to get it off. None were succeeding. It was a scene played out on the other side of the road.

“What happened to them?”

“Tinsel bombs. A variation on your flash bangs. A non-lethal weapon. Disorientates with the noise, the pressure, the light. The tinsel just makes them look all wonderfully seasonal, don’t you think?” Santos explained as he opened the box.

“It’s, uh, something,” Adam agreed.

“Wait till you see what’s in here,” Santos smiled.

Jack looked. He wasn’t really sure what he was seeing.

“Candy canes?”

Santos pulled one of the red and white canes from the box. Larger than the ones you might eat or hang on a tree. More like the illuminated ones people had in gardens. Santos took a hold of the curled end and twisted it. Two prongs extended from the opposite tip.

“Shock sticks. And that’s not all.” He dived back into the box, handing each of them a candy cane shock stick as he did so. “We also have these.”

Jack took the candy cane. Before he’d had time to even gauge it’s weight, Santos was handing him something else. It looked like a bandolier full of Christmas decorations. “Smoke grenades,” Santos explained. “They smell like cinnamon.”

Jack was beyond the point of questioning what was going on now. There was a threat and they had to eliminate it.

“Got anything a bit more lethal?”

Santos snapped upright. His face dropped. “There’s no killing. It’s Christmas.”

“No killing? You want to tell that to our friends?”

“I would love to, but alas, they’re not going to listen. But you will.” He jabbed a finger into Jack’s chest. The sort of thing no one dared to do normally. Certainly not someone of Santos stature. But Jack did nothing. He didn’t argue. It was time to act.

“Fine.”

Then he was turning. Closing on the enemy. Engaging them. Adam headed in the opposite direction. Five targets for each of them. He launched a couple of the smoke grenades in their direction. Red and green mists quickly enveloped the attackers. Jack took a mental note of the last things he’d seen, then moved in.

There was only one man still writhing on the floor now. Jack left him. The more important targets were the ones getting ready to fight. Two were seconds away from reengaging. The first one didn’t see him coming. Jack rammed the candy cane under the man’s jaw. The shock hit instantly, his body convulsing. Then he was down. Jack spun. The second saw what happened to his colleague. The butt of a gun bore down on Jack. He ducked, letting the weapon sail over his head, continuing his spin, letting his opponent’s momentum come at him. He rammed the candy cane into his side. More convulsions. Another one down. Three to go.

Looking down to his left, he saw the grounded guy still wriggling on the floor. Strands of the tinsel bomb had snared his legs. He was in touching distance, so it seemed only right that he put him out of his misery. He jabbed the candy cane down. Halfway there.

“You scumbag!” Jack heard the call and looked. The smoke was dissipating now.

“You maggot.” Two men advanced on him, their guns raised. Pointing straight at him. Watching him take out their downed teammate was clearly a bridge too far.

They both went to pull the trigger at the same time.

Jack ducked. He didn’t need to. Muffled clicks replaced gunshots as the gas pistons in the guns failed. It didn’t take a genius to work out why. More tinsel oozed from the weapons. Both the men glanced down at their guns in confusion. It was all the gap Jack needed.

“I’m going to stop you both before you say something homophobic and completely not cool,” he growled.

The pin slipped out of the smoke grenade easily. A cascade of smoke engulfed them, a red tint staining the light. Santos was right. It smelt of cinnamon. The two men spluttered as the thick smoke swirled around them, seeking out the cracks in their face masks, stinging at their eyes. It wasn’t irritating Jack. He didn’t have time to question why.

“Jack!”

Santos voice rang out through the hiss of escaping cinnamon and smoke. Jack ignored it. Or at least he thought he did. He found himself turning towards the sound, rather than engaging his foes. The anger he thought he’d feel didn’t materialise. He *needed* to turn around.

“Catch.”

Something span through the darkness. He stretched out an arm, catching it before spinning back around to his opponents.

“Cracking,” he said, looking at the giant wooden soldier. Wielding it by the feet, he swung it at the man to his left. The heavy wood crashed into the side of the man’s head, sending him tumbling. Jack continued to spin, ducking down as he did, then coming back up as he came about face. The soldier followed his trajectory, rushing upwards until it met something. In this case, the second man’s groin. He too tumbled, this time with a broken sounding squeal.

Jack stood, looking at the wooden soldier in his hand. “Nominative determinism in full effect,” he remarked.

“You all good?” Adam called from behind him. The mercenaries he’d been dealing with had also been summarily despatched.

“If you are, I’m bound to have been,” Jack laughed.

“Gentlemen!” Santos clapped his hands together. “I must say, I am impressed. Your reputations are well deserved.”

“Feels like we may have ended up on the naughty list,” Adam said looking at the wounded men all around them.

“Let me tell you all about these so-called lists,” Santos stepped between the two of them, wrapping his hands up and onto their shoulders and walking them away from the scene, back towards the station. “No one is ever really one thing, are they? Even the people we call evil, they have moments of levity.”

“Everyone?”

“Well, maybe not everyone. There are one or two extremes on any scale,” Santos backtracked. “But for billions of people in the world, there is naughty and there is nice and they exist somewhere between the two. And most people are nice, do you know how I know that?”

“Because you have a magic list?”

“Ah, well, there is that. But also, because you built all of this.” He gestured to the buildings surrounding them as they walked back onto the concourse. “This world that you’ve created. That you cherish, yet you let your fear of it being changed or fall apart in turn divide you. You see, people are not all that different. We all want to thrive and survive and deep down inside us, we know that we are better as a part of a herd. That’s why you gather in places like the market I found you in earlier. Because that is where you feel safest and so that is where you feel happiest. With each other. Just like you two. You are at your best when you are with each other. It’s something I want you to try and remember. For the future, you know.”

“What’s going to happen in the future?”

Santos shrugged. “Not my department. I deal with one day a year. And maybe a couple of other odds and ends. But gentlemen, now I must fly. I have work to be done.”

“Back to the North Pole?”

Santos laughed. “I love that became a thing. Why on earth would anyone choose to live somewhere so cold. No, there’s a lovely island, somewhere warm, sometimes shrouded in cloud. Though you wouldn’t know it from my pool. Good night gentlemen. Go get that bratwurst you’ve been after. I think they sell them over there.”

Jack and Adam looked behind them to where he pointed. The crowds were moving in the station again. When they looked back, it was the same and Santos was gone.

“That was...” Jack began.

“Weird as hell?” Adam offered.

“Very.”

“Have we drank too much?”

“Maybe.”

“Want to drink some more?”

“Go on then. But I suppose we ought to get a bratwurst as well.”

“There you go, I knew I’d get you into the spirit sooner rather than later.”

“You? How do you figure you convinced me?” Jack asked as the two of them headed to the exit, but with every footstep, he began to wonder why he thought Adam hadn’t convinced him. After all, it had only been the pair of them all evening.