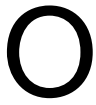


Northern Ex
ONE



nce a cop always a cop. Vince McNulty thought about that as the woman massaged scented oil into his shoulders, leaning so close that her naked breasts teased his shoulder blades. Once a cop always a cop. Except this was the UK not the USA, so for cop you'd have to read policeman. Or, more accurately, this was Yorkshire not the UK, so maybe it should be copper instead of policeman. Copper, or any number of other, more colourful things that McNulty had been called during the last eighteen years. But somehow the phrase only worked with cop. Had a certain rhythm to it. Rolled off the tongue. So, whenever it crossed his mind, it was always once a cop always a cop.

Something else rolled off the tongue briefly as he lay face down on the massage table. The woman leaned over him and flicked her tongue up the side of his neck and jiggled it behind his left ear. Her breasts flattened against his back. He felt a familiar pulse way down in the engine room. And then she was up and massaging his shoulders again. Teasing over for now. Strong hands kneaded the muscles across his back and squeezed up either side of his neck. A knot in his spine cracked. He shifted his head on his folded hands, defining the shape of his upper arms as the elbows jutted out from the bed. The woman's hands moved from his neck to his right arm as if drawn by the tightened bicep. It was the arm nearest to her. Her fingers first squeezed then caressed the muscle, the oil preventing the friction from being uncomfortable.

McNulty closed his eyes. Even lying naked except for a white towel draped strategically across his buttocks he retained a certain poise. An animal thing that had alpha male written all over it. Self confidence oozed out of him like sweat and he was surprised nobody ever realized he was a copper when he went undercover. The grey sweatshirt and faded blue jeans thrown carelessly on the floor in the corner might have something to do with it. That and the gothic house tattoo up the side of his neck. Branches of a long-dead tree climbed like witch's fingers, stopping just short of his left ear.

Natasha – that was the woman's name, according to the badge pinned to the white smock she no longer wore – changed her attention to his left arm. She followed the same routine of squeezing and caressing, leaning across the table so her hands could reach down his arm. Her breasts touched his back just enough to send tiny sparks of electricity through his body. Too much contact would have dissipated the effect. The engine-room pulse grew stronger and he had to shift position to accommodate the bulge. Natasha's eyes caught the movement but she said nothing. That was how he liked it. Too much talk dissipated the effect as well.

With his eyes still closed, he mapped the layout of the building in his mind. Important for future operations and for any report submitted later. Professional. Only way to do the job proper. Remain detached and don't get too involved. Something under the towel was struggling to stay detached. He concentrated on the layout instead, helped by the subtle odour of damp carpet and talcum powder.

Main entrance at the front of the two-storey terraced house. Up a short flight of external stone steps to the heavily studded wooden door. This opened into a small reception area complete with counter, porter's bell and a telephone. A single doorway stood open beside the counter with multicoloured plastic strips dangling from the top to obstruct the view. A narrow corridor led from the doorway to the bottom of the main stairs and just beyond, two stripped pine doors into the ground floor massage rooms. The stairs led up to a first floor lounge decorated in dark red and furnished with three leather settees. A corner bar offered non-alcoholic refreshments. Two more massage rooms to the rear. Fire exit.

The damp-carpet smell came from downstairs. Beyond the two ground floor rooms, carpeted steps descended to the cellar. Again with dark red wallpaper. A large pine cabin took up half the room, the sauna blasting heat into the cellar that could not overcome the damp from the Jacuzzi sunk into the floor. White towels were laid around the bubble bath for customers climbing out, but the carpet was still damp. Still smelled. It was mildly off-putting, but McNulty liked to relax in the Jacuzzi before getting down to business. Not the sauna. Always gave him a headache.

A cold line of scented oil ran down the base of his spine and put paid to his mapping of the layout. Natasha had finished with his shoulders and was recharging the oil in the small of his back. She moved halfway down the table and placed both hands at the base of his spine, thumbs in the middle and fingers fanning out so they looked like a butterfly. She leaned forward and pushed her hands all the way up his spine to the shoulders. Her weight forced the air out of his lungs in a gentle sigh. Coming back down his spine, she worked her thumbs into each vertebra one at a time. Then she repeated the process, crushing his

lungs and tightening his skin. He twisted his neck so he could look along the table to where she stood. When she leaned forward this time, he watched her breasts sway above him.

Once a cop always a cop. Had there ever been a better assignment in the police force? Not bloody likely. True, it didn't have the benefit of team spirit he'd enjoyed as a uniformed officer, sitting in the back of a police van swapping jokes or kicking in doors to make an arrest. And there was a definite excitement at murder scenes and serious crimes that the man on the street would never experience. But for sheer hands-on perks of the job this had them all beat.

Silky hands slid from working his spine to massaging his left side. Natasha moved up the table to McNulty's right and leaned forward. Her hands built up a rhythm, one hand sliding forward and then pulling back, drawing the skin tight over his rib cage, sliding forward again as the other hand pulled back. Forward and back. Forward and back. Moving down his body from ribs to hip. The force of her pull back raised his left side off the table slightly with each stroke. The rocking motion teased the pulse throbbing beneath him. Three more circuits and then she turned her hands on their sides, performing gentle karate chops along the area she'd just worked. The pounding brought blood to the surface like an embarrassed blush. She moved round the table and did the same along his right side.

Somewhere in the background he heard the front door close. A few minutes later a female voice escorted another punter upstairs to the lounge. McNulty could picture him being offered tea or coffee or a soft drink; alcohol wasn't encouraged, since it could lead to problems later. The remaining girls would make small talk as the punter took his time drinking whatever he chose to drink. The delay was built into the service. It allowed the customer to choose his masseuse without being so obvious. None of that line-'em-up-like-a-cattle-market stuff while you made your selection at the Sauna Kabin. That was for the more low-rent establishments. Not for the Northern X chain.

A deep voice sounded from the lounge above him.

The downside of having a communal lounge was that you sometimes came face to face with the next customer. That didn't bother McNulty, but some punters found it intimidating. The shy type of punter. The cheating-on-their-wives type of customer. Single men on the prowl didn't mind. It was no more embarrassing than taking a leak at the next stall. All part of being a man.

Natasha finished his right side and went to the foot of the table. McNulty forgot about the lounge as she spread his legs, carefully moving his feet to the corners. More oil dribbled along the back of each leg. Cold and sensual. Firm hands worked his right foot, careful not to tickle. They did each toe and then slid up the back of his calf muscle. She kneaded and caressed it half a dozen times. Same with the left foot and calf. She was dragging this out. As her hands reached the back of his knee, McNulty felt a surge of electricity run up his thighs.

Muffled words from upstairs. Something banged on the bar.

The woman known as Natasha, although her name almost certainly wasn't Natasha, moved into the closing stages of the massage's first half. The half that involved lying on your front. She drizzled more oil along the back of each thigh. The cool liquid sparked extra senses right up the top of his legs. The towel was gently raised a couple of inches so the oil didn't stain it. Now the hands worked the right thigh. Thumbs together and fingers down either side. They pushed up the muscle all the way to the top and then slid back down. Push to the top. Slide back down. With each stroke the fingers of her inner hand touched forbidden fruit, then came away.

McNulty glanced at the crumpled jeans on the floor. Focused on the back pocket where his wallet protruded slightly. His other wallet was hidden in the left training shoe.

His badge wallet.

Soon.

The hands switched to his left leg. The same motion. Push to the top. Slide back down. Push to the top. Slide back down. Her right hand was on the inside this time and its fingers touched what they intended to touch. Briefly. Almost a butterfly kiss, it was so gentle. The butterfly kissing his balls, no matter how briefly, sent the engineroom pulse into overdrive. It throbbed so hard he could barely lie flat on it. Now she switched to one hand per leg, thumbs running up the inside of his thighs while her fingers caressed his buttocks on the upstroke. Her breasts brushed his calves as she leaned forward to reach. Once. Twice. Three times a lady.

Then she stopped.

'Turn over please.'

It was the first time she'd spoken since instructing him to lie on his stomach. No matter how hard she tried, Natasha, or whatever her real name was, could never be described as posh totty. Polite, yes. Posh, no. She sounded like she should be working down the pits, if there'd been any pits left to work

down. Rough as a bear's arse, with short, clipped vowels that definitely didn't roll off the tongue. He took a deep breath and rose up onto his elbows. Natasha moved to his side and gripped the towel so it wouldn't slip off. McNulty spun expertly onto his back and she laid the towel across him again. It wouldn't lie down but she knew that anyway. She was good at this.

The room felt very warm, and it had nothing to do with the sauna in the basement or the steam from the Jacuzzi. Even the woman was sweating, her flat stomach and swaying breasts glistening under the dim wall light. She drizzled oil onto his chest and the liquid cooled him. Her fingers worked harder now they were into the second half. They kneaded his shoulders and neck. They massaged his chest and stomach. They karate-chopped gently down both sides of his torso and with each change of technique they came closer to the meat of the massage.

But never quite reached the towel.

McNulty thought he would explode. If he wasn't careful, part of him probably would. Into the endgame. At the foot of the bed and oiling his thighs. This time when she raised the towel a couple of inches, what she was staring at wasn't McNulty's buttocks. He glanced over his shoulder at the training shoe on the floor.

Soon. Wait for the offer and price.

Natasha gave his shins a cursory rub and then proceeded to the thighs. Right leg first. Thumbs together, fingers on either side. McNulty could feel the pressure building inside him. The fingers working along his inner thigh slid all the way to the top. They accidentally-on-purpose brushed hot flesh. Electric. Left leg now. The fingers did the same again. Barely a touch, but enough contact to suggest what was to come. At a price.

Offer and price. Nearly there. The point where he would reach down and flick open his badge wallet and hold the warrant card in her face. Make the arrest. There was never any trouble. Working girls were aware of the risks and knew if there was an undercover on scene then backup was covering the exits. No one had ever made a run for it. No half-naked female wearing high heels being chased down the high street. This was where elation and frustration met. The buzz of the arrest followed by deflation at missing the best part of the massage.

But it was different now.

McNulty closed his eyes and waited. Slick hands squeezed twice more along his thigh and then the inner hand slid right under the towel and oiled his shaft. Just once. Soft and gentle, but a firm grip. The shock, even though he'd been expecting it, almost sent him over the edge. He was rock hard and hot to trot. The thing that held him back was the depression that usually set in at this point. The realization that things would never be the same again.

The badge wallet wasn't in the training shoe. His warrant card was no longer valid. The team spirit enjoyed by the brotherhood of blue didn't embrace him any more. He was an outsider. Alone. An ex-cop. Ex-policeman. Ex-copper. Worse, he was a disgraced ex-copper. He squeezed his eyes tight shut and hoped Natasha would mistake the moisture for excitement. He forced a positive slant on the situation. At least when the offer came this time he could accept. He could fulfil his potential in that regard at least. The woman withdrew her hand as quickly as she'd slipped it along his shaft and stood back. Offer and price would come now.

Shouting from upstairs. A deep voice followed by a stifled female scream. A very young scream. The worst possible timing. He might not have the badge any more, but eighteen years of service didn't just evaporate overnight. Before the offer was even made he was off the table and pulling his jeans on.

McNulty was slightly out of breath when he reached the lounge. Taking two steps at a time while fastening his jeans was more difficult than a straight foot chase. Factor in the energy he'd expended on the table and it wasn't something you trained for. When McNulty entered, slowing down so as not to burst in, the man had his back to him. First rule of a potential violent encounter was, defuse it as much as you can. Fast movement and aggression caused more injuries on duty than anything else. Standing back and taking stock worked every time. Even when he'd been in uniform he used to talk his way out of more trouble than he got into.

'Any chance of a cold drink? Hot as fuck in here.'

No point being too polite. This fella needed to know that McNulty wasn't a cheating-on-his-wife type of customer. The shy type of punter, afraid to get involved in case his wife found out. McNulty asked the question but the girl didn't answer. Fear robbed her of speech. The look in her eyes made that clear. And the grip the man had on her wrist.

A middle-aged woman in a white smock stood near the corner bar. McNulty couldn't read the name badge. Natasha came in behind him. The young girl and the bullying man were standing in front of the hallway to the massage rooms and the fire exit. The fire door was partly open for fresh air and McNulty could just make out the rusting metal of the outside stairs. He'd scouted them out as well. Never go in undercover unless you know your exits. The fire escape zigzagged up the rear of the house with a door on each floor. The basement had its own door, since it was one floor lower than the front of the house. The small paved yard backed onto a cobbled back street giving access to the entire row. It looked like that was where the bully intended to go.

'Orange'll be fine. Still, not fizzy. Fuckin' bubbles get up me nose.'

Again the rough edges to his speech. McNulty was sending a message. The man glanced over his shoulder to gauge the threat level. The alpha male thing. The pissing contest kind of thing to see who was hardest. Seeing McNulty, six foot three of tattooed muscle, gave him pause but didn't appear to scare him. He was shorter but broader, and McNulty could sense bodybuilder muscle beneath the threadbare rugby shirt. His scruffy jeans should have been baggy but seemed tight over strong legs. The ripped knees went one better than McNulty's casual look. McNulty smiled at him.

'Pardon my fuckin' French.'

The man smiled back. With his mouth. The smile didn't go anywhere near his eyes, which remained cold and hard and wary. The girl's eyes pleaded for help but she said nothing. She was thin and pale and very, very young. Early teens, McNulty would guess. Although it was hard to tell these days. She had the breasts and white smock of the other staff, but if she was legal age McNulty would show his arse on the town hall steps. Not that anything about the Sauna Kabin was legal, but in McNulty's eyes some things were more illegal than others. And he'd detested bullies right back to Crag View. He adopted the handsin-pockets pose, partly to appear unthreatening but mainly to hide his hands balling into fists.

The woman nearest the bar stepped behind it to pour the drink. Tension hung in the air thicker than the damp towel and talcum powder smell. The bottle rattled the glass as she poured Robinson's orange barley water and ran the cold tap. McNulty reckoned all he had to do was be in the room to prevent the situation escalating. A few more minutes at most before the bouncer came out of his back room and ejected Mr Muscles from the premises for manhandling the staff.

McNulty accepted the drink but stayed away from the bar. The woman brought it over. Her hand was shaking. The shouting must have been pretty explosive for McNulty to hear it downstairs. Explosive enough to stun the woman into silence. Even Natasha kept her distance. McNulty swigged half a glass of orange and felt the cold drink refresh him to the core. It was warm in here even with the fire escape door open. Normally he would sit down for his post-massage drink, but he didn't want to surrender the high ground. To avoid appearing threatening, he faced the open door and closed his eyes. Took a deep breath.

'Boy. Fresh air'd be better with some breeze.'

He was acutely aware of being alone. No police radio. No backup. Not even a badge he could flash to back the man down. Taking another swig of orange, he glanced at the wall clock. Ten minutes since he'd come up here. Where the hell was the heavy mob? The hired muscle that every parlour employed to stop young tearaways getting too excited on the late shift. A few beers before the massage. A big mouth after.

Well, Mr Big Mouth had one of the girls in his grip and the bouncer needed to pull his finger out. Right now. The situation was beginning to bubble again. McNulty could sense it like static before a storm. The man tightened his grip and the girl winced. Her eyes watered but she gritted her teeth. Refusing to cry in front of strangers. McNulty admired her for that. Hated the man even more. A jerk of her wrist and the man propelled the girl towards the fire escape.

'Come on.'

'No. Please.'

Her voice was small. Pleading but without any strength in the plea. Not really believing it would make any difference. McNulty felt heat flush his neck. Anger fuelled the pressure building inside him. Different pressure than before. More destructive pressure. A short temper that had dogged him from Crag View to Mean Wood. And a sense of injustice that had haunted him before that. He despised bullies of any description. Big men who picked on young defenceless girls even more.

The bouncer. Where was he?

Neither of the women said anything. Natasha hung around at the top of the stairs. The other woman retreated behind the bar. The girl knew there would be no help from her colleagues. Didn't look like

there was much help from the customer with the tattoo up his neck either. McNulty could sense her resolve vanish. The acceptance of her fate. The look in her eyes as the man guided her away tore McNulty apart. Once a cop always a cop.

Time to act. Keeping his voice low key and friendly, McNulty stepped towards the bar and passed the empty glass over. He nodded for a refill. The woman began to pour. He looked at the girl and then her captor.

‘Is she goin’ to be free anytime soon?’

Enough orange. Now running the tap.

‘I mean. How long you goin’ to be?’

The man turned away from the fire escape as if he couldn’t believe this idiot was even talking to him. The level of his arrogance edged the odds in McNulty’s favour. The glass of orange squash slid across the bar and McNulty picked it up. The drink had become a non-drink. Something so inoffensive it didn’t even register as the man glared at McNulty.

‘She isn’t ever going to be free.’

McNulty took a mouthful of cool orange and flapped his free hand.

‘Sorry. Didn’t mean free, like gratis.’ The flapping hand indicated apology. ‘I know there’s a price.’

It distracted the man’s attention from the glass.

‘You do know what gratis means, don’t you?’

McNulty gripped the glass tight. His free hand flapped again and the bully’s eyes followed the more obvious threat. He was getting annoyed, but his eyes dulled as he tried to think of a witty retort. McNulty didn’t think he did know what gratis meant. There was a slight lull in the tension as the man decided what to do next. And then McNulty lunged at his face with the glass.

The man was quick. He let go of the girl’s arm and brought both hands up to deflect the glass attack, and it was only then that he realized the glass wasn’t in McNulty’s hand any more. Ice-cold orange splashed in his eyes but the glass dropped harmlessly to the floor. His eyes stung and he blinked them clear. The man was quick but McNulty was quicker. He grabbed the man’s lead hand below the wrist, yanking it towards him and up. He bent the joint down into a gooseneck and the man had no choice but to follow or get a broken wrist. He lost his balance and toppled forward. McNulty slammed the heel of his free hand into the exposed throat.

And that was it. Game over. The man hit the ground like a sack of potatoes, both hands gripping his throat. Unable to breathe. McNulty dropped to his knees beside him and moved the man’s hands away.

‘Slow down. Shallow breaths. You’ll be all right.’

The man did as he was told. Shorter breaths helped but he was still struggling against the fire in his throat. His eyes were watering. All the fight had gone out of him. McNulty used his other get-out-of-trouble technique. He talked to the man.

‘You know, if this was a film I’d be asking what movies you’d been in. Like in *Get Shorty*. Remember? After Travolta gut-punched Gandolfini – before he did the *Sopranos* – and asked what movies he did? ‘Cos Gandolfini’s character had been a stunt man.’

The man was breathing better now. McNulty looked into his eyes.

‘You aren’t a stunt man are you?’

The man shook his head. McNulty stood up and helped the man onto the nearest settee. Asked for another drink. The aftermath of violence always made him thirsty. His hands shook with adrenaline dump. The anger had gone and for a moment he struggled to remember what had set him off. When he did, he looked around for the girl to see if she was OK.

She had disappeared.

A waft of cool breeze came in through the fire exit door. It was wide open. He tried to remember in which films the hero had rescued the girl from thugs only for her to run away. And couldn’t come up with any.