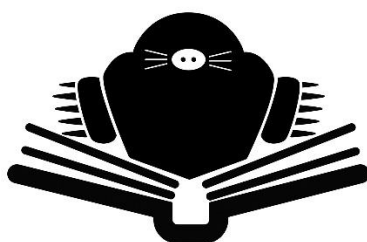
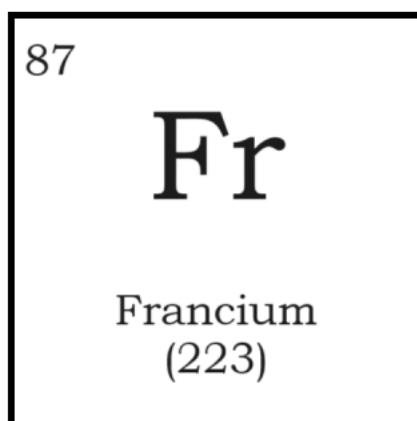
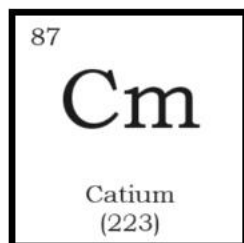


The Chemical Detective

Fiona Erskine



Prelude – Teesside, England



Thursday 24 February, Teesside, England

The trouble with Semtex is the smell. Dogs can sense it. Most humans can't. Boris could. Not the plastic explosive itself, you understand; neither RDX nor PETN – the main components – have much of an odour. The scent comes from the tracers added, to make sure it doesn't fall into the wrong hands. Hands like his. Chemist's hands. Wide hands with long fingers, calloused from handling hot glassware, thickets of black hair curling over the knuckles, little cosses between the joints. Hands now gripping the steering wheel of a five-axled articulated lorry hurtling towards the Zagrovyi factory in Teesside.

Boris only carried a small amount of Semtex these days, just enough for his own personal use. He kept it in a Tupperware container, wrapped in Clingfilm, under his sandwiches. Sentimental value, really. He'd moved on. To some it might look like a backward step, from laboratory shift work to long-distance lorry driving. But only to those who didn't know the tedium of analytical testing. The same samples, the same tests, the same results, hour after hour after hour. Not like the old days, when you had

thorny problems to solve and real fires to fight. Nothing more boring than a well-run factory. He was glad when they sacked him. Glad to be free of the monotony. Glad to be out on the road. These days, his insight into tracers was a key skill for the job.

Boris yanked the wheel to the left and hauled the artic into a lay-by with a view. The chemical plant skulked on the far side of a silver fish-scale fence. One factory was much like another. Plumes of steam billowed into the sky, glowing orange in the sodium lights, bright against a dark winter day. He traced the familiar shapes in the condensation of his side window: an hourglass – the cooling tower curving to a waist and then flaring out again; two thin vertical lines – the nitric acid absorption columns lit up like Christmas trees; three circles – the ammonia storage spheres, massive metal balls trapped by sturdy legs to stop them rolling away; a rectangle – the ammonium nitrate prilling tower looming over the A19, the main road out of Teesside.

The wind whistled up the river, screaming through the gap between the warehouses, bringing with it a faint whiff of sulphur, reminding him of home: Pardubice in the Czech Republic. The Semtex factory where he trained.

He watched the car park from the lay-by, waiting until the last company car roared away, before driving up to the gatehouse and presenting his papers. At the collection bay he plugged a small black box into the vehicle's lighter socket. It beeped and flashed, a red light showing it had located the Zagrovyi computer network. He tucked the jamming device under the passenger seat before turning off the ignition and stepping down from the cab.

'Snow Science, right? Two tonnes?' The bald warehouseman tapped his keyboard. 'Bloody system down again.'

Boris slid his papers through a hatch. 'Twenty tonnes.'

'Fertiliser grade?'

'Explosives grade.' Boris jabbed his finger at the product code on the order.

'You sure?' Baldy frowned and inspected the order line by line. He picked up a phone, running a hand over his eggshell-smooth head as he waited. When there was no response, he shook his head and cursed. 'Lazy tossers, all buggered off early.' He slammed the receiver back into its cradle. 'I'll get you loaded up in a jiffy, mate.'

The metal ramp screeched against the concrete floor as a forklift truck drove into the back of the lorry, delivering the first pallet. Two forklifts worked in tandem, an intricate dance, weaving and turning on a sixpence as they loaded the cargo. Within fifteen minutes it was finished. Fast and skilful, these old men of the north.

Boris secured the load, signed the paperwork and drove out of the factory gate.

Click. Location 54.597255, -1.201133. Intensity 800X

Instead of taking the A19 south, he headed east to Haverton Hill and a decrepit warehouse lying in the shadow of a blue bridge. A damp chill rose from the misty river. Boris shivered as he opened the cab door and scanned the quayside.

A tall, thin man materialised out of the fog, moving slowly with laboured, jerky movements. He emerged into the sidelights: dark coat, spiky black hair, gaunt white face. The Spider. Christ, this run must be important.

‘So?’ The question came out as a hiss.

‘All good.’ Boris pointed to the trailer. ‘No problems, boss.’

The Spider pressed a button and battered doors began to open, groaning and squealing with neglect.

Boris backed the lorry into the warehouse and hopped down from the cab. ‘How long will it take?’ he asked as he unlocked the back doors and dropped the ramp.

‘Assist,’ The Spider ordered. ‘Time is of the essence.’

Two hours later, Boris’s arms ached as he manoeuvred the artic onto the southbound motorway. Bloody amateurs. Leaving him to do all the heavy work.

Boris made good time to the south coast, skirting London after the rush hour. Transport of explosives was not permitted in the Channel Tunnel, so Boris and his lorry boarded the ferry to France.

Click: Location 51.12646, 1.327162. Intensity 152X, 648C

He stood on deck, sipping at a watery English coffee, as the white cliffs of Dover receded into the mist. Plain sailing from here. He shivered as the towers of the titanium dioxide factory beside the Port de Calais hove into view, and returned to his lorry.

Click. Location 50.96622, 1.86201. Intensity 152X, 648C

The drive through France was uneventful as far as Strasbourg, but a young border guard flagged him down at the crossing into Germany for extra checks. So

much for a borderless Europe. Boris remained calm. It had happened before. Nothing to worry about.

The ginger-haired guard puzzled over the papers, wrinkling his brow. 'You do know what you've got in there?'

'Yes.' Boris lied easily now. After the first few runs he knew how unlikely it was that anyone would check. And even if they did, what would they see?

Ginger picked up a phone and moved out of earshot. After a few minutes he marched back. 'Drive carefully.' He waved him on his way.

Click. Location 48.5857412, 7.7583997. Intensity 152X, 648C

Boris drove on past Baden-Baden. After lunch, near Munich, he took a nap in the back of the cab. When he woke, the stars guided his way to Salzburg and the crossing into Austria.

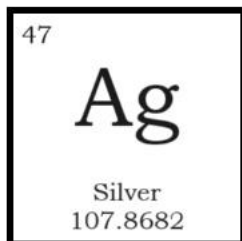
Click. Location 47.7994, 13.0439. Intensity 152X, 648C

As he approached the mountains, snow started falling, wet flakes that melted on impact. A weather report on the radio warned of treacherous conditions and several inches of snow up ahead. Great for the skiers, bad for lorries full of explosives and worse. Best to cross in the morning. He slid into a lay-by. A police car drove towards him, slowing as it passed on the opposite side of the road. Boris stared into the snowstorm, craning his neck to make sure it didn't turn back.

Not that he need worry too much. The dispatch papers matched the Dangerous Goods Note. The bags had the correct hazard warnings. All the papers were faultless. None of the inspections, on any of the runs, had ever uncovered a thing. After all, who wanted to poke around inside bags of explosives?

You could hide anything in there.

Overture – Slovenia



Saturday 26 February, Kranjskabel, Slovenia

A strange bed. A naked man. And a few hours to kill before the explosives arrived. The day was looking up.

Jaq stretched, savouring the smooth cotton sheets against her skin. Snowflakes danced through a web of ice on the sloping attic window. In the dawn glow she could just make out the layout of the unfamiliar room. Two doors: one of solid oak with tongue-and-groove panelling, brass hinges and a sturdy lock; the other a flat, sliding panel leading to a modern shower room carved from a corner of the attic. A pine bed, wardrobe and chest of drawers, a leather sofa and a couple of metal stools tucked under a bench that divided the bedroom and kitchenette. From outside came the faint swishing and rumbling of a distant snowplough. Inside, the gurgle of a fridge, creaks and sighs of an old house waking up and the steady, slow breathing of the man beside her.

Jaq breathed in: musk and liquorice. And a faint whiff of nitroglycerine. Her scent on his body.

She slid backwards across tangled sheets and ran her eyes over the golden curls decorating the pillow, down the ridge of his spine to the curve of his buttocks, sturdy thighs and powerful calves. Definitely a skier. One foot hung over the edge of the bed while the other was tucked under a leg forested in fine bronze hairs. A tall, blond skier. Athletic. And much too young for her.

She grinned as she reached for the quilt – curved appliqué ridges between her fingers, uneven stitching, not machine-made – and gently covered him. He stirred but did not wake.

The room smelt of pine resin with a hint of lemon. Clean and tidy. Well, at least it had been before last night. Her eyes followed the trail of clothes across the oak floorboards. Her coat and hat hung on a wooden peg near the entrance door, but her long boots had toppled over and lay at angles to the pashmina snaking across the floor, coiled around a scarlet bra and matching thong. There was no sign of her dress, but on the chest of drawers in the corner she could see his clothes, neatly folded on top. When had he folded his clothes? While she was asleep? Certainly not as she was undressing him.

The guy from the karaoke bar. *Nossa*. What had he done to her brains last night? She'd known he was trouble the moment she heard him sing.

Karaoke. What had she been thinking of? She loathed office parties, but her boss at Snow Science had insisted on it. Team building, Laurent said, a bit of fun. Laurent was a pillock.

She slid down the bed, covering her head at the memory of Laurent's excruciating impersonation of Charles Aznavour. *Carapau de corrida*. He'd insisted on the drinking games afterwards. Sheila and Rita had the sense to refuse but Jaq could never resist a challenge.

And then the man with the golden curls took to the floor.

The moment he opened his mouth, Jaq was hooked. His voice emerged an octave deeper than she expected. He sang with authority and passion, the pitch and cadence perfectly controlled. His voice rumbled right down the small stage, across the wooden floor, up through the soles of her feet, tugging at the tight knots that held her together, unravelling all the cords of restraint with the song. An old Russian lullaby. One she knew so well.

Had she stared too hard? Clapped too loudly? Was that why the singer with the deep voice and lopsided smile singled her out afterwards? She wouldn't have danced

at all if Laurent hadn't made such an arse of himself. Sitting too close. Breathing too hard. Whispering in her ear. Escaping to the dance floor was intended to put some distance between them; Jaq always danced alone. Laurent followed her, his manbag on one shoulder, lurching and gyrating, arms outstretched in invitation to an inappropriate waltz.

The stranger interposed himself, moving between Jaq and Laurent, a subtle, sinuous barrier, increasing the separation until the drunken Frenchman found another target for his amorous attentions. Jaq danced on for a few tracks, just for the joy of the music, and then made her escape.

And there he was, outside the bar ahead of her. Waiting. Something in his eyes gave her pause, drew her in. She could have walked straight past. What was it that held her? Made her stop? The gentleness of his touch as he helped her with her coat? The deep voice bidding her *lahko noč*, goodnight? Had she imagined an inflection, an upturn, a question? There was no mistaking the smouldering fire she glimpsed before he hooded his eyes and turned away. It had been a long time since a man had looked at her with such honest desire. A very long time. And, oh, *amor de Deus*, how she had missed it.

'Wait!' Her lips found his, and there was no mistaking the interest with which he returned her kiss. Gentle, searching, increasingly confident. Hot lips and strong arms. She remembered him asking but had no memory of her reply, or how they ended up at his place.

Time to face the morning after the night before. Careful not to touch him, her detailed inspection must have registered. He brushed the curls from his face and wrinkled his nose. His eyelashes fluttered, and his breath became shorter, shallower.

She slipped out of bed and wrapped the pashmina around her. Where was her bag? Dropping to her hands and knees, she spotted it under the bed frame and took it to the bathroom. The scent of lemon behind the sliding door hit her like a wave. She sat on the toilet and grasped the edge of the sink. How much had she drunk last night? When the dizziness passed, she took stock. Clean towels neatly folded on a rail, a shower, sink and toilet spotlessly clean. Had he expected company? She opened the glass cabinet above the sink. Soap, cut-throat razor, shaving mirror, shampoo, cotton buds, toothpaste, one toothbrush, dental floss. A large box of condoms, somewhat depleted after last night, but no sign of a permanent female presence. Just one tidy man.

Jaqu reached for her bag. Despite her love-hate relationship with handbags, her party clothes lacked sensible pockets, and this was the least-bad option. Black with silver buckles, the fabric was lighter and thinner than leather but textured, tough and waterproof. It could be carried by the arched handle like a briefcase or, releasing three ingenious hooks, clipped onto a bike as a pannier. When carrying a laptop or other heavy tools, two wide adjustable back-straps unfurled so that she could take advantage of the padded, contoured panel for extra comfort against the spine. The pleated sides, held in shape by concealed Velcro strips, made it capacious enough for most outings. It even had two parallel zips, designed to slot over the handle of a rolling suitcase, but also perfect for carrying a snowboard.

She rummaged inside the bag for her phone, encountering ticket stubs, café receipts, coins, a set of Allen keys, a socket wrench, Maglite torch, penknife, comb, sachets of hot chocolate. Ouch! She caught her finger between the pincers of a Vernier calliper. No blood, just a scratch, but she continued her search more cautiously: hydrogel plaster, crêpe bandage, latex gloves, paracetamol, ibuprofen, neodymium magnet hook, PTFE tape, thermos flask, duct tape, ball of hairy string, condoms, fuse wire, superglue, paper clip, Blu Tack, ball of rubber bands, sandpaper, a fold-up kite, Slovenian–English dictionary, an unposted letter, multiplug, catapult, USB stick, fluorescent highlighter pens, snow goggles, earplugs, spare socks, tissues, tampons, a silver propelling pencil, tube of mints, a packet of dried apricots, a tuning fork and a green marble.

Like the Tardis, the bag was bigger on the inside.

A bunch of keys fell out, clinking against the tiled floor. Odd. She unzipped the secure inside pocket where she normally kept them and, at last! there was the phone. One missed call she had no intention of returning. Amid the dross of email, a single pearl from Emma with a long, chatty message about Johan and the kids. Not now, save for later, only one bar of battery left. No message from Snow Science. She put the phone back and zipped up the keys before dragging a comb through her hair.

As she emerged from the bathroom, the naked man sat up in bed, blue eyes fixed on her face.

‘Dobro jutro!’ He switched to English. ‘Good morning.’

Now that he viewed her in the daylight, was there a shadow of surprise? If so, he hid it well. What did he see? An athletic woman, naked except for a brightly coloured pashmina and a large shoulder bag. Tall, 1.75m in bare feet with a Mediterranean

complexion – brown eyes, olive skin and shoulder-length hair, dark brown, almost black, except for the hints of russet fire. Well proportioned, curvy even. His smile appeared uncomplicated, no hint of embarrassment or regret, only pleasure at finding her still there. ‘I don’t think we were properly introduced last night.’ He held out a hand. ‘Karel.’

She took his hand, smiling at the absurd formality. There was hardly an inch of each other’s bodies that hadn’t been stroked or kissed or explored last night, and yet the contact with his hand felt deeply intimate, sending a tingle straight to her core. Careful.

‘Jaq,’ she said. No second names. Polite but no promises. Civilised without commitment. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘The pleasure was all mine.’ He raised the quilt in invitation.

So tempting. She hesitated and was gratified by the flicker of disappointment that rippled across his brow when she shook her head.

‘Breakfast, then.’ He sprang out of bed, bringing the sheet with him, wrapping it around his hips. He handed her a robe. The faint hint of musk was his. She let it envelop her and perched on a stool as he got to work in the kitchen.

‘A quick cup of tea, or whatever you are making,’ she said.

‘Scrambled eggs and smoked salmon.’

She started to protest, but the smell of butter melting in a pan made her stomach rumble. He heard it and laughed, breaking eggs into a bowl, many more than he could possibly eat alone. When had she last eaten? She’d gone straight from work to the karaoke bar, changing from boiler suit to party dress in the lab toilets. There was no reason not to eat breakfast. No reason a one-night stand couldn’t be civilised.

‘Nice flat,’ she said.

‘Belongs to a friend. But he’s working abroad.’ He grinned. ‘I keep an eye on things when he’s away.’

He served the scrambled eggs on toasted crumpets, a thin sliver of pink salmon sandwiched above the little craters of butter, turning opaque where it touched the hot egg piled in a pyramid and topped with a sprinkle of freshly ground black pepper and a sprig of parsley from a plant by the sink. A small glass of orange juice and a bowl of tea served black, fragrant with bergamot and dark tannin. The speed and ease with which he presented two perfect covers made her curious. A singer, a skier, a chef. What else could this man do? Her eyes travelled around the room and paused at the

bed. Amid the otherwise orderly space it stood out, an explosion of disarray. A surge of warmth rose through her body, and she turned her attention back to the food.

‘Mmmm.’ Jaq wiped her lips with a napkin. ‘Very good.’

Karel bowed his head to acknowledge the compliment. ‘More tea?’

Jaq shook her head. Had she overstayed her welcome? He was a young man with impeccable manners, but some awkwardness was only to be expected now. She would spare him the brush-off. He would have things to do, people to see, places to go. ‘Time for me to leave.’ She put a finger to her lips at his polite assurances. ‘My clothes?’

‘I hung your dress up,’ he said and pointed to the wardrobe. ‘But—’

‘I should go.’

‘Should you?’ He moved towards her.

The glass rattled in the window above, and a flurry of hail blasted the ice clear enough to reveal a storm-dark sky. No skiing today. No message from Snow Science about the delivery. Time to kill.

Karel laid a hand on her shoulder. Warm, gentle, no hint of coercion. Only invitation. Promise. He ran a finger up the side of her neck and whispered, ‘Come back to bed first.’

Her skin tingled under his warm breath. When his lips nibbled her earlobe, she had to fight the urge to grin inanely. The good food, the cosy little attic, the storm outside, the gorgeous man, the firm bed. She might regret this, but . . .

Last night she’d taken a risk, let herself go with the flow, to see where it led her. What did she have to lose? Things could hardly get any worse. Forget about the past. Forget about the future. Focus on the moment.

Focus on the pleasure.