

11.30am 1st March

I put my hand against the old oak and feel its energy rising from the earth.

Kip, on the other hand, sniffs the ridged bark of the massive tree, and with no respect at all, cocks his leg and pees on it, leaving his message for any other dog or fox. Then he potters off into the reeds following a scent that I have no chance of understanding with my human nose.

I look out down the sloping meadow to a valley below – whitewashed farm buildings that could have been there hundreds of years ago snuggle at the bottom, drawing my eye away from the larger steely modern barns that will house the ever-increasing numbers of sheep necessary to keep a farmer's business afloat.

My life has come to a halt, and I'm waiting. Somewhere, between America and England, between London and Pontfrics, there's a letter telling me the results of tests that I had done months ago. Tests to do with one word:

Dementia.

I feel alright. Honestly. I'm fine.

But then there are the... episodes. I kept them hidden from everyone except Peggy and her friend Hannah. But now my former colleague and police boss,

Grimwode, knows. He said I was a fool to keep it hidden, that the force looks after its own, but I'm still waiting to find out how that will be.

Waiting.

I feel something warm at my feet. Kip has returned to take his customary place – sitting on my foot. It makes me feel warm, and it keeps his bum off the damp grass.

The oak stands by us, thrusting up into the sky. Three hundred years of living and of slow wisdom. Touching it puts me in contact with the flow of life. Steadies me as I contemplate my future in this unfathomable world.

The three of us:

Tree.

Me.

Dog.

Waiting to see what will happen next.

My mobile phone shatters our quiet contemplation. I pull it out of my jacket pocket. *G-force*, it says. I press accept and put it up to my ear.

“Rackham?” Grimwode’s voice grates down the line like fingernails on a blackboard.

“Dick...”

There’s a pause while he wonders whether to tell me off for calling him Dick. “I’d like you to come up to London. My office. Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I rack my brains to see if there’s anything I’m meant to be doing tomorrow. Peggy keeps the diary and remembers everything.

“Yes. Eleven thirty, and by the way, have you heard anything yet?”

“Still waiting,” I say, warming to his unexpected concern.

“Ah...” He sounds disappointed. “It would be good to know. Might affect things.”

What things? I wonder. Is he going to talk about me having a handsome pension in recognition of services rendered to Queen and country?

“I want you to do something for me.”

“What?” I ask. Not the pension, then.

“So, see you at my office, tomorrow, eleven thirty?”
He’s not telling me anything over the phone.

“Er... yes.”

“You don’t sound very sure Rackham. Is there someone with you?”

“Just a dog and a tree.”

“Tree? What are you rambling on about?”

“Er... sorry D... sir. I’ll be there.”

“Don’t be late.”

“No.” The phone goes dead. “Sir.”

So that’s it. That’s what happens next.

12.15am 1st March

“Talk about restricted duties,” says Peggy as I walk through the door, with Kip trailing behind me. “They will only let me do a few hours a week. How’s a member of the police force supposed to live? We went to all the trouble of moving to a different part of Wales because of the job. If I hadn’t rented out my flat...”

“They expect you to go on the dole, I suppose,” I say, as I get my muddy boots off.

“But how demeaning is that? You work your socks off for the great British public, and what do you get in return?”

“The police are starved of money...”

“Like every other public service. Does this country value anything we do?”

“That country, don’t you mean? England holds the purse-strings...”

“And all because of a bunch of selfish bankers,” Peggy continues. “And as to what they’re doing to the environment... stop looking like that, Arne. You always...”

“Look like what?”

“Bored. You always switch off when I talk about the environment.”

“No I don’t. It just makes me nervous... the future...”

“You don’t look nervous, you look...”

“So they told you, only a few hours?” I say to change the subject, as I go to the sink to fill the kettle.

“Yes. It’s hardly worth it.” Peggy eases herself down onto the sofa.

“Anyway, we’ve got the money from our rentals, and Grimwode’s lot still seem to be putting money into my account.”

“That’s not the point. No, Kip, you can’t get up on the sofa.” Peggy pushes him off, and he comes over to me with ears back and tail wagging hopefully. “What am I supposed to do, Arne? I’ve got all this experience and I’m going stir crazy, and they don’t need me.”

“I’m sure they need you. It’s the regulations. That’s all,” I reply, carefully putting Peggy’s latest favourite herbal teabag in her mug and regulation builder’s in mine.

“And anyway, the Grimwode slush-fund is going to come to an end. I’m surprised it hasn’t already. And what has happened with your pension?”

My pension, I reflect – still a mystery.

“Listen, about the Grimwode money,” I say, deflecting the pension question. “Grimwode wants to see me about something.”

“Well, he’s kept you dangling on a string for long enough.”

“Yes, I should probably tell him to bugger off, but...”

“You never can resist a challenge – especially if it’s life-threatening. I know you, Arnold Rackham – ‘once a cop, always a cop’, didn’t you say?”

The kettle’s boiled and I pour steaming water into our mugs and stir.

“So anyway, it probably means they’re not going to cut my funds just yet. And Betty’s probate should come through any time now, and I can sell her cottage.” What’s left of it after it’s been dismantled by Grimwode’s men, I reflect as I take the teabags out and pop some milk in my mug.

“So what’s Grimwode wanting? Or is it all top secret so you can’t tell me?” Peggy asks, and I notice a bitter edge to her tone.

“I have no idea,” I say, bringing our mugs of tea over to the sofa, and sitting down next to her. I hand her her mug, and as I do so, I feel a strange bubbling sensation in my chest – like my heart’s racing. It makes me want to cough and I just sit there trying to slow my breathing down. My mind goes back to finding that wallet on a Pembrokeshire beach. A wallet that caused so much trouble. But this is different – there isn’t really any reason to find that my heart is racing just because I’ve sat down on the sofa.

“Arne, what is it?” Peggy’s voice breaks in on my internal struggle.

“Oh nothing, just a bit of indigestion, probably. It will go away in a minute.” I cough.

“But why are you coughing?” She looks at me.

“I’m just a bit...” the bubbling continues.

“Arne, look at me.” Peggy puts her tea down and places her hand on my chest. I can feel my heart beating against it in a lumpy sort of way. Then it slows down, as though some magic in Peggy’s hand has sent a calming message through my sternum. I look into her eyes and I see tears. I want to kiss her then, but she holds me back with her hand.

“Listen, Arne. John... er... my Dad, used to let me feel his heart when he was having what he called ‘one of his funny bubbly turns’. He always made a joke of

it, but it turned out to be a serious heart condition, and he died of it. Arne..?” She looks me full in the face and I shake my head. “Listen to me, you should get it checked.”

“But...”

“No buts, you’re calling the doctor.” Peggy gets up off the sofa and fetches the phone.

“But it’s just a little palpitation – all this talk about money upsets me. I’ll be alright in a minute.” But as I say this it starts again. Not unpleasant. No pain. But unsettling.

“Here you are, the surgery number is...”

“I can’t do it. They’ll think I’m just making a fuss about a little panic attack.” Actually, I’m feeling so odd I don’t want to speak to anyone.

Peggy keys in the number, waits for a while, then presses a key. “Yes, hello... my husband has just had a problem with his heart, a lumpy bubbling feeling... yes here he is...”

Husband? What? “Hello... yes it’s Arnold Rackham,” I say, trying to calm down the bubbly feeling in my chest. “... yes just now” – I should’ve said ‘right now’ – “... this afternoon with Dr Good... no... thank you, that’s so quick.” Then, as quickly as it started, it’s gone, and I’m feeling fine.

“What time did she say?” Peggy takes the phone back.

“Four thirty. But look, I’m feeling fine now. We could cancel it and then someone else who needs it could have the appointment.”

“You’re going. I’ll take you, and then I’ll pop into the station to see if I can talk to somebody about my hours.” Peggy gets up stiffly and walks to the Welsh dresser. I see her hold on to it to support herself as she

puts the phone back in its holder. She's the one who should get all the attention, not me.

"It's just about the money, you know, it just upsets me," I say, weakly.

"You've had much more stress than that in the last few months," Peggy replies. "You weren't having palpitations then."

"Perhaps it's all caught up with me."

"Perhaps it has." Peggy sits down on the sofa, turns, and gives me a hug. "You know, these police hours, it's not about the money, we are all right for now, especially if Grimwode's going to send you off on some job or other. So don't get stressed about that... No, it's about being valued. I want to do something that matters."

4.40pm 1st March

“Roll your sleeve up and I’ll take your blood pressure.”

There’s no arguing with Dr Good. I think she might have been a headmistress in a previous life. Short. Indomitable. No nonsense.

“Hmm. Not bad for your age. Now lift your shirt. I’m going to listen to your heart.”

Cold stethoscope head is pressed against my chest.

“Breathe normally,” Dr Good commands. And I wonder what breathing normally is. I seem to have forgotten, due to the stress of being in this clinical environment, but it seems to work as she says no more.

“Deep breaths now.” Dr Good is listening to the back of my chest. I can manage deep breaths – I know what they are.

“Now the front.” I’ve forgotten how to breathe again, but it doesn’t seem to matter.

“Hmm.” She sits back in her chair, and for a moment I get a picture of Grimwode sitting there, twiddling one of my pens.

The image vanishes, and there is Dr Good with a concerned look on her face.

“I heard a murmur. May be nothing. But we should get it checked. You need an ECG and a blood test.

Then, because of the murmur, I want you to have a scan,” Dr Good sighs, “when they can fit it in.”

“You can make an appointment for the blood test and ECG as you leave, and then I’d like to see you after that. Shouldn’t take long... hopefully.”

“Thank you, Dr Good,” I say, standing up and tucking in my shirt. “Is there anything I should be careful about?”

“Watch the caffeine, go carefully, but take exercise. Goodbye.”

I walk out of the surgery, having made appointments to go back for an ECG and also to see Dr Good, and text Peggy to find out what she’s up to.

Fancy a cup of tea before we go back?

Peggy’s text comes back.

I’m at the Mountain View café. Met someone interesting.

Interesting? I reflect, as I walk along the High Street to the Mountain View, which has a view of the shops opposite. Not a mountain, or even a hill in sight. And anyway, isn’t tea caffeine? Careful of caffeine, Dr Good said. Maybe I can divert her to the Pontfrics Bar – a nice little place that serves local ales. Much more healthy.

I walk through the café door and spy Peggy sitting at a table, deep in conversation with a young man who has dreadlocks and a beard. Now, I’m not a man to be prejudiced about young men with dreadlocks. Each to his own, I say; besides, I’m a bit of a folky myself, and long hair and earrings go with the territory.

But... Peggy and a young man?

You're jealous, one part of me says.

No I'm not, says the other, I'm just protective of Peggy.

Not protective, possessive, says the other.

This internal argument continues in my head until I reach the table. I clear my throat to attract Peggy's attention, and they both turn and look at me as if I'm some sort of relic from the past.

"Arne, this is Sam."

"Hello," I say, putting out my hand.

"Hello," says Sam, not putting out his hand.

"Sam's into farming hemp," says Peggy.

"Hemp?" My mind is filled with images of rows of cannabis plants in a polytunnel, the gardeners off their heads with smoking weed. White vans pulling up to receive their precious cargo of illegal drugs – though I always had my doubts as to whether the police should be spending their time chasing after young pot smokers, when they could be...

Suddenly, I'm walking down the gravel driveway to a big Victorian house, thinking what a waste of time it is raiding a house full of bleary-eyed students who may have smoked a bit of ganja the night before.

Then:

Boom – a severed hand floating in a jar of formaldehyde.

Boom – Peggy being shot in the stomach by a young man in jeans and a leather jacket.

"Arne? Are you alright? Peggy's voice wakes me up. I'm standing in the café with my head in my hands and people are looking at me. A gentle hand steers me to a chair and I sit down opposite Peggy. Sam, who'd got

up to help me, stands looking down at me, his face full of concern.

“Sorry. Yes. No. I’m OK. Just had a bit of a shock.”

“Is it...?” Peggy’s about to say, ‘an episode’.

“No. The doctor said I need some checks. Wasn’t expecting it, that’s all.”

“Do you need any help?” Sam asks. His voice is surprisingly gentle.

“No thanks, Sam, we’re fine,” says Peggy.

“I’ll be off then. See you at the meeting. Hope you’re OK, Arne.” He puts his hand on my shoulder for a moment, and then turns and walks out of the café.

Peggy reaches out over the table and holds my hands.

“What meeting?” I ask.

“I’ll tell you, but what happened at the doctor’s?”

“Dr Good listened to my heart and heard a murmur. I’m having an ECG in a couple of weeks, and then we’ll see where we go from there. I’m seeing her again after that.”

“Was she worried?”

Worried? I couldn’t imagine Dr Good looking worried. “No, she just wants to check things – it’s obviously not urgent. She said to watch the caffeine and take exercise. So about this meeting and Sam...”

“Well, Sam’s a green activist. He’s actually trying to do something about the mess this world’s in. He grows hemp.”

“Hemp?” I said that before.

“Yes, listen. Hemp is a really useful plant.”

“But...”

“No, he’s not growing it to sell cannabis as a drug. It’s all above board and legal. You know, sometimes I wonder which century you’re living in...”

“But I...”

“Cannabis oil is really useful. It helps with sleep and anxiety. But not just that: the plant can be used to make clothes. It was commonly used before cotton came in. And you can make bricks out of it.”

“A hemp house?” I say, imagining a twenty-first century version of the gingerbread house.

“Yes, a hemp house. We could go and see one if you want.”

“You’re really fired up about this, Peggy, and for the record, I was never in favour of the amount of police time spent chasing after a fairly innocuous recreational drug...”

“It’s not about the drugs, Arne,” says Peggy impatiently. “And for the record, I thought the police really needed to clamp down on skunk and those supercharged versions of cannabis – they were dangerous and caused psychotic episodes. Anyway, I think it’s a good thing that Sam is doing, and I’m going to a green activist meeting this evening.”

“Green activist? Where’s this all come from?”

“Arne, you know I’ve been talking about this for ages. Do you ever listen to a word I say?”

“No, that’s not fair. I *do* listen and I’m also concerned.”

“Well, I’ve got to do something with my life. The police won’t give me more than a few hours, and this world is in crisis... What’s the matter, Arne? You’ve gone a funny colour.”

“My heart’s pounding again.”

“Just sit there and I’ll get you a warm drink to calm you down.”

“Have they got any hemp tea?” I ask, joking.

“I’ll check.” She’s serious, and she eases herself out of her chair, while I imagine being at the Pontfries Bar sipping a nice pint of calming local beer.

By the time she returns with a cup of camomile tea, my heart has resumed its normal rhythm.

“Thanks Peggy. Sorry about all this.”

“You shouldn’t be. You need taking care of.” She reaches her hand across the table and I feel her warmth surge into my wrist like a healing power. Then I remember the feeling of Sam’s hand on my shoulder like he was still there.

10.25pm 1st March

“He didn’t turn up.”

“Wah?” I must have dozed off on the sofa, and I wake up to find Kip snuggled into my side, and Peggy framed in the front door.

“Sam – he didn’t turn up. He was one of the speakers at the meeting.” Peggy closes the door and takes off her coat. “And what’s Kip doing on the sofa?”

“Oh, sorry. He must’ve crept on while I was asleep.” I gently lift his relaxed soft body off the sofa and lay him on the rug at my feet. “So how was your meeting?”

“Great. There was a lot about how big business don’t want to know about green issues. From the point of view of the world economy, it would be catastrophic for the big companies if suddenly everything went carbon neutral. They rely on consumption to make their profits. Take that away and they’ve got nothing to sell.”

“But couldn’t they start making wind turbines and electric cars and things like that?” I can’t help yawning at this point.

“No, the point is we just have to use less... of everything. Anyway, I am worried that Sam didn’t turn up. He was going to talk about Permaculture...”

“Perma-whatah?”

“Permaculture. You know, how everything in nature relies on everything else, and if you take one part of the equation out, it all starts to collapse.”

I can’t get my head around this, so I ask, “So what do you think happened to Sam, then?”

“He’s got a small farm just south of Pontfries. He would have cycled in to the meeting. I’m worried he could have got knocked off his bike. There’s a nasty bit as you come into Pontfries on the dual carriageway.”

“Are you sure that he’s reliable? Could he have just not bothered to turn up?” I ask, imagining his hippy-culture attitude, and the possible effects of too much cannabis on his memory.

“He’s totally committed. He was one of the people organising the meeting, not just some flaky hippy. Is that what you’re thinking?”

Then I remember the feel of his hand – his immediate reaction to my funny turn. “Look, why don’t we phone the local A&E to check?”

“I did that before I set out to come back – total chaos – couldn’t find out anything.”

“You’ll have tried his mobile phone.”

“Straight to answerphone.”

“Well,” I get up off the sofa, nearly tripping over Kip, who wakes with a start. “We’d better go and look for him.”

“But it’s totally dark – we could miss him if he...”

“Got knocked off and is lying unconscious by the side of the road? We’ll take Kip. Use his nose.”

The drive to the dual carriageway takes twenty minutes. Then we have to go down the opposite side of the carriageway to cross under the road and slowly drive back towards Pontfries, flashers on and full beam headlights. Peggy’s driving, I’m scanning the side of

the road and Kip's on the back seat standing up and wagging his tail. A car goes past us at high speed, sounding its horn.

"Idiot," Peggy mutters.

There's no sign of anyone as far as I can see, so we go round the roundabout, back under the road again and head down towards Sam's farm.

"There's a patch there where he might be," I say, pointing to the other side of the road.

"I'll go up and turn round when I can." Peggy scans her side of the road for a suitable turning place. We have to go a long way down before she can turn, and the opposite side of the road is a tangle of verge, trees and undergrowth.

"Take Kip and walk along the verge while I follow in the car," Peggy says.

"It'll be his first chance to track something down, follow in the footsteps of..." I can't go on. I still miss my old dog so much.

We trawl along the road. I trip over the odd lump of soil, but Kip keeps tugging me on. I just hope he knows what he's meant to be doing. After what seems like hours, but is probably minutes, the car's headlights pick up something glinting in the grass. A buckled bicycle wheel is stuck up at an odd angle. The rest of the bike lies flat in the darkness. Peggy stops and winds down her window.

"Can you see him?"

"No, just the bike."

Kip tugs at his lead and pulls me in the direction of some trees.

"There's something here," I shout to Peggy.

A shoe. There's a foot in it attached to a leg. I get my mobile out and put the torch on. A crumpled body lies under a clump of blackthorn. I feel along the back.

The figure is still breathing. Then it moves. I can see its face – it's Sam, alright.

"Sam's here," I turn round and shout to Peggy.

I look down at Sam who's trying to pull himself up. "Careful," I say gently. "You've been knocked off your bike. Let me help you out of there."

With a groan, he struggles out from under the bush.

"How did I get here?" Sam asks. "How long...?"

"You must have been knocked off your bike on the way to the meeting. Peggy was worried so we came looking for you."

"But how did I get this far?" Sam sits up and rubs his head.

"What do you mean?"

"I remember being knocked off my bike by an idiot in a white van. I hit my head on something and everything went black – I can't remember anything else, 'til you, 'til you..."

He falls back onto the grass and starts to shiver violently.

"Peggy," I shout. "I think Sam's passed out again. He's in shock and he's been out in the cold. Can you get the blanket?"

Peggy staggers on the uneven ground as she tries to keep her balance while carrying a blanket. I get up to help her, but she shakes her head. "God, he looks terrible. We'd better get him to A&E. I'll phone..."

I wrap Sam as best I can in the blanket and lift him carefully to the car. He's surprisingly light for a tall man, and I manage to get him onto the back seat of the car. He groans as I tuck his legs in and close the car door.

Peggy's on the phone: "Yes, knocked down by a car... no we'll bring him in... just off the dual

carriageway... before Pontfries... won't take long... thank you."

She gets round to the driver's side; I pick up Kip and sit down with him on my lap. As we drive off towards the hospital I wonder how Sam ended up under that bush. It didn't look like a normal hit-and-run.

10.29am 2nd March

My train reaches London on time and I get out of my carriage and into a cloud of diesel fumes. 'Cleaner travel', it says. Well if this is cleaner, I wonder what I've been breathing in for all these years of travelling by diesel train. London has a secret smog these days: you can't see it, but you can still smell it. The clean air of Wales has sensitised me to the pollution that is part and parcel of living in a city.

I walk under the great arched roof of Paddington station with a sense of hundreds of people all walking in different directions, all missing each other by inches, and I feel like an ant.

As I walk down into the Underground, I look round to check and see if I'm being followed. It has become instinctive in the last few months. There was a time when I was being followed, and with deadly intent. But now, even though the threat has gone, the feeling still remains. There are plenty of people coming down into the Underground, so I have no idea whether one of them has me in their sights.

I board the train at one end of the carriage so that I can look along the seats to see if anyone suspicious has got on after me. I catch the eye of a black woman who stares back at me, before turning away and sitting

down. I don't think she liked the look of me – probably thought I was hostile because of the way I was looking at her. I'm not surprised – I shudder as I remember the racism that I saw when I was in the Met.

The train rattles along the dark tunnels. It seems fast, but I know that it is just the sensation of passing walls that are so close. We grind to a halt, but there's nothing to see outside our lighted carriage except a dark grimy wall with thick wires running along it caught in the light projected from the windows. I look at my watch. 11.05. Shit, I'll never get to Grimwode's office on time if we don't get going. I look at my phone. No signal, of course. The lights flicker and then go off, leaving us in complete darkness. That odd feeling in my heart starts up again. Maybe it's because I'm caught in this claustrophobic atmosphere – trapped in the gloomy endless tunnels. The lights flicker back on and then I hear it: the clatter of a train coming towards us. Louder and louder, until with a swish it passes by with a stream of lighted windows like film on a spool. The lights go back on. We grind into motion, agonizingly slowly. Then stop with a jerk. Then start again.

We reach the station and I get out quickly, intending to run the last bit.

Up the stairs.

Up the elevator.

Through the barrier.

Along the street.

Up the steps.

Through the doors.

And arrive hot and flustered at the security counter – but at least my heart seems okay.

“Rackham,” I pant. “For Grimwode. Expecting me.” I look at my watch. 11.40. “I'm late.”

“You’re late,” says Grimwode when I finally reach his office.

“Yes,” I yawn. The night before is beginning to catch up on me.

“Rackham, will you ever do what I want, when I want?”

“I...” I slump into silence. Probably not, I think. I look at him, waiting for the next jibe. He looks even more deathly than usual. His skin has a greasy, sweaty, unhealthy look, he has lost weight in spite of there being none to lose, and I realise with a shock that he’s lost his eyebrows.

“Are you alright?” I can’t resist asking.

“No.” He glowers back at me, daring me to ask more.

“What...?”

“Now, Rackham, there is very little time. We sorted out a lot before Christmas, but there is the unfinished business of O’Connell.”

“Brian...”

“You were very... harrumph... helpful in putting a halt to that faction that seemed intent upon stopping the natural process of things.”

Sorted, Christmas, faction, natural process? This isn’t normal Grimwode-speak.

“But there are still two priceless paintings out there, and we want them back. I know you want to retire and hug trees and waste your time till you...” he shifts uncomfortably in his chair, “... shuffle off this mortal coil, but I’m not ready to let go of you just yet.”

“But...”

“No buts, Rackham. You were the one who bungled things and lost the paintings in the first place...”

“Yes I...”

“So it seems fitting...”

“But why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?” I feel my hackles rising. “I’ve been hanging around for the last couple of months worrying about my pension and my test results, and you’ve just been sitting on your hands...”

“Rackham!” He still has the shout that can kill at ten paces, but I can see it has cost him – he winces. “I was unavoidably detained. The world doesn’t revolve around you, you know. Some of us have our lives to attend to as well.”

The way he says that makes me realise that his life has been seriously detained.

“Okay, sorry, but what...?”

“We have reported sightings of O’Connell on the south-east coast of Scotland. Why he thinks he can sell to the Scottish, I don’t know. But there it is. A walking holiday for you, Rackham. I hear you have a new dog – you could take him with you. Obedient, is he? Or is he just like his master? A great nose for getting into trouble. Anyway, as long as you both get into the right trouble...” I can’t believe it, Grimwode’s smiling at his own jokes. “And you’ll need to be armed.”

“No way. I’m not playing that game anymore...”

“You’ll need to be armed. O’Connell could be very dangerous. We want the paintings back, not your corpse in a body bag...”

“But O’Connell isn’t part of a terrorist org...”

Grimwode carefully puts his finger to his lips, and it dawns on me that his side of the conversation has been for the people he doesn’t trust. People who are probably listening in on our briefing.

“You carry a gun. Here’s the form.” He slips an A4 envelope over to me. “And here’s the report about O’Connell. Don’t lose this one.”