

## Chapter one – The last man?

Pungent smoke brought him around – something tobacco-rich, heavy, but not familiar. He tried to turn around and was surprised by the leafmould carpet – this was not his apartment furnishing. It was sopping – he was sopping. He swore, tried to get up – couldn't without support. An arm, not his own, hauled him up, button branding and blistering his stomach. Instinctively, he reached around to the shoulder and felt tattered cotton.

“Can you rise?” The voice of this gentleman kept asking, cracking. “Can you rise? Yes, I have your arm.” It was edgeless – distinctly English – with a slight continental twinge. From groin to toe was all pins and needles, above the sternum in the throes of a migraine. Another hand went under his armpit and, with difficult trepidation, hoisted him to be seated – a sharp twinge of wood grain bit into his arse and he nearly lost balance again. “You must hold still for a moment. I must make a dressing for your crown.” He looked up into the sloshy, sentimental eyes of a living portrait – it was cookie cutter Victorian portraiture. No sign of a stubble, not a pimple; creases that seemed like dimpled ivory. Even his frock cuffs, tattered and stained with god-knows-what, was stiffly turned out and greasy black hair properly combed. There'd even be a corset under all that, he knew it – he had an almost wineglass figure.

He felt a length of fabric tickle his forehead. The bandages in the mans hand had more creases than his coat – no, his entire body – and they bound round peevishly tight. Something licked his hand – of course, a spaniel. It couldn't be more thematic.

“Can you walk?”

“Where in gods name am I?” He, the injured, looked at his stained shirt-cuff. There was a prick of rust up the arm. “What year do you think we're in, lad?”

“You are in no state to discuss such insoluble matters at present. We must move.” He was only asking the bloody time – in what world is the time an insoluble problem?

“I have an important call to make, right now! Where's my phone?” There wouldn't even be connection out here, anyway, but he didn't intend to stay. He rummaged through his pockets and flinched back from the broken glass. “Son of a-!”

“It is not my wish, squire, to startle you, but we are in place to linger. It's fortunate I found you first.” First? A first prickle of fear came from within the bulk of frustration and caused him to notice the hunting rifle slung over the gentleman's back. “Pray, I wholly get your predicament!” He remembered the 2 caps in the other pocket. He wrenched out a handful of captain cody to numb the world. Even the autumn leaves were burning fever bright. Autumn...the calendar said march seventeen! The missus birthday was in a week! Was he off his head? Had he

taken too much this time? The gentleman tugged him on, but not before a few practise strides where the injured nearly fell over.

“I’m out of my depth, aint I? Tell me you’re some careworker whisking me off to a clinic to fix me up and that this is all a bad trip.” No. He felt sober, far too sober, and that smell of tobacco and damp woody breeze was too vivid. Besides, he knew he was peachy clean when he made that revelation. He was clean when he slunk off to phone the police. He was...didn’t they whack him on the noggin with something? Something clicked within him – certainly wasn’t his knackered ankles. “Am I dead?” The gentleman laughed – an archaic “Ah ha! Huh-ha!” that only a man repressed or depressed could articulate.

“I wondered the same when I came upon you this morning.” Of course – this man was a bloody Victorian! They were long snuffed by a combination of “consumption”, bad sewage maintenance and, ultimately, World War One. Grief sets in slowly – it would take him a while to tally up everything he was now missing. It all began there, with the missus. “I cannot provide a definitive answer to your request, I’m afraid – it’s forever been eluding me. However, I can tell you mine – and his – name, if that would suffice. The dog’s a Toby and I’m a Verne. And you?”

“They smashed me noggin then! I’m a goner!”

“Is it Percy Goner or Peter Goner, then?”

“What Goner?!”

“Ah, Watt Goner!” The newly christened ‘Watt’ responded the only way he could.

Verne, the dishevelled gentleman, staunched the impact zone with his makeshift cravat.

“I am so sorry.” Pleaded the so-called Watt Goner, back up from the forest floor. “I thought you were taking the piss!”

“You din’t mean to - Hea’ ob the moment! I habn’t meant to cau’j offen’.” Verne wasn’t a man of paint after all, or at least that red coat on Goner’s fist smelled convincingly metallic. “Bray accep’ my apologiej. I mysel’ was a bit of a wolf like you oncje.”

“I self-medicate, I take therapy, I should’ve stopped meself!” Pills, he knew, were likely making it worse. Or at least the troubles of getting them. “Damn, I’m going to pot!” You wake up groggy in a forest from the wrong season with a man from the past and your mobile is smashed. How else do you take the news? The more goner woke up to this impossible situation, the worse he felt. Roll on, pain relief! He might need the full cannister of the other stuff before the day was gone. He wanted to forget this – the concussion hadn’t knocked the past out, Hollywood amnesia style.

It would be easier to travel through this forested purgatory without knowing he left his already estranged family behind. Banal plot conventions felt like an impossible luxury. "I'm going to pot." He repeated mournfully, shame shaking the sore thoughts about his broken head.

"That'j," Verne blew some clot into his hankey, "a very sorry state for a man to be preoccupied with here, mister...?"

"Stout..." Verne hoped the stranger had supplied the right name this time. "Peter Stout. I'm ashamed t'be him."

"I am," Verne spoke in stilted pauses, "most glad to have been better acquainted with you, Mister Stout, and am profusely sorry for your present paroxysm of melancholia," Verne looked about himself uneasily, then pressed to usher Stout on. "but we shan't linger. I have seen less fortunate remains under this very closure and my ammunition is near spent." Toby Spaniel was prickling and growling. Maybe because of the socking Stout gave his companion, maybe because there was something a-lurking out in the clementine foliage. There was certainly the suggestion of noise far off.

"What? Are there more poor sods like me bemoanin' their missus and drug dependencies?"

"My dear Peter, they are in no state to lament their ruination, for they've been picked clean!"

Peter Stout knitted his gappy black brows. A festive image flew to mind – an assorted skeleton of a finished turkey, lying atop a blanket of not-really-red-anymore cabbage and pukey bread sauce mush in the kitchen bin. It couldn't have given him a more appropriate thrill of horror. This forest wasn't right, he knew. The leaves scuttling beneath his leaky timberland boots were predominantly maple. The sort of rustic adornment you get on a Sainsbury's "taste the difference" syrup bottle. Well, Stout didn't know smack about forestry, but the trees here didn't look like maples. Around, there was an uneven rash of mounds and headstone stumps under this dripping, patchwork canopy, and a great sinister frame rising ahead – an indecisive sculpture with tarnished rungs, about twice an adult's stature. Like with Verne, the textures and colours didn't feel lucid – the air smelt of smoke and buttered popcorn. They were hardly consistent, either – some trees seemed plasticine smooth to touch; others contour-scarred and flaking, shadows stuttering within their gashes. This environment felt just right for uncanny valley. Stout shuddered – his sodden clothes were only making the chills worse.

"God... you got a towel about you?"

"I should grant you my bedroll to dry yourself should we reach a safer glade. I have been wanting such a privilege for nigh a month myself!"

"You-how long've you been here for?"

“Why...unlike you, my transition into this pickle was not so clean-cut you see. I dare say for a while, I considered myself the last man alive! I shall tell you about it when we settle down.” Verne’s voice gradually dropped to a theatric whisper – the dog continued to bristle at the stuttering shadows. “Tread lightly...they’ve even been laying traps.”

“Who?”

“Hush! There’s something above!” Stout dropped to the floor like a startled blanket and Verne cocked his rifle at the ceiling. There came a high pitched, inhuman chuckle. “Binturong.”

“What the hell is a...-mother of god, what’s that?!” Suspended by tail, some fat raccoon-shaped beastie pawed at them from a branch 2 ft over. It had murky eyes, a vaguely malicious grin and a voice like a demonic baby, albeit a self-conceited one. It seemed perfectly natural to this skewed environment. The spaniel reared at it stropily. “Vicious looking sap!”

“More inclined to affectionate disposition, in truth. Get well acquainted with these chaps, for you’ll be seeing much of them – they are highly endemic in this region.” The creature made peculiar hissing sounds as it swayed awkwardly above the barking dog, as if teasing them. The corny tones seemed to be oozing from its body. False alarm? “Let her be, Toby. Toby! Leave off your barking, now! Come along!” The binturong flicked its tongue, made a sound like a raspberry, and made its retreat. Verne helped the injured up from the ground – he was shivering worse now – and they pressed on through the uneasy woods, with the binturong’s Cheshire cat grin beaming at their departing figure.

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Fifty minutes later, a comfortably delirious Peter was trying to explain his wonderland analogy to a puzzled stranger.

“So she falls into a hole and falls for ages until she lands in a forest jus’ like this, with squiffy hatters an’ grinning cat things an’ the queen of hearts choppin’ off everyone’s head!”

“Upon my soul!” Cried Verne, “That would make a light pantomime!”

“Disney made a film on it – three films!” He wagged three fingers, index to beringed, in Verne’s face. “It’s one of the bloody classics, you’ve got to have read it somewhere.”

“My friend, the closest I’ve read is the fairy tale of Childe Rowland in *fairy* land, which I recall entailed some beheadings and an assortment of mischief.”

“Come away – you’ve read original Grimm? Proper edgy, eh? They knacker Cinderella’s feet with a knife in it, aye?” Verne nodded reassuringly, not resolutely. “Ah-yeah! God, they bowdlerised it to crap by my time. Absolute tosh.” Stout shivered through, again, and kept on rambling. He was feverish, making absolutely no sense to the gentleman. He knew Peter mayn’t handle a request to pack it in very well, though. Generous soul incapable, his companion dared not betray his unease – this man was already unstable, suppose the revelations made him worse? It had taken Verne a long, long time to process it himself. If he survived long enough, someone would inevitably point it out...but at least Verne wouldn’t be the bearer of the bad news then. Besides, he might not be taken seriously. If Peter Stout saw this ‘Alice’ character step out in front of him in the woods, then he’d truly know what his situation was, and indeed had been.

“I fear that you may be hypothermic, my man-”

“S’very bloody likely, Verne. Very bloody likely.”

“-And I should like to find a sunny glade for you to dry in before sunset.” Verne smacked his lips at that prickly word, sunset. He glanced up at the light through the branches; up past the fleeting jays towards the suggestion of the seething, fractured mess he’d grown accustomed to ignoring. Surely Peter had seen the shadow’s missteps and wondered about the source? That was a great expectation for a man currently off his scone on contraband co-codamol, but still. Peter was lucky to spawn in an enclosure – entitled to a little puzzled bliss before he realised just how skewed the heavens had become. “It is a great regret to have to impose upon an ailing soul’s wishes, but I would strongly advise against stargazing tonight. I have some matters worth discussing.”