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In Cold Daylight

Pauline Rowson

PROLOGUE

If it hadn't been for the break-in on the day of the funeral I might never have got involved. But that and Jack's note urging me to take care of his wife, Rosie, obliged me. I had let him down in life; I wasn't about to let him down in death.

Danger wasn't usually my kind of thing, though. I was just happy to let things be. But the past has a nasty habit of catching up with you and mine had done just that. As I stood around Jack's grave in the bleak Portsmouth cemetery in December the memory of another funeral fifteen years ago had rushed in and almost suffocated me.

I tried to shut out the image but I couldn't. Some things never went away. They just lay in wait for you. I wanted to leave but knew I couldn't.

I had closed my eyes and tried to block out the past but it refused to go. I knew then that it wouldn't. I had run away once. This time I had a feeling that running away wouldn't be an option.

Chapter 1

I woke with the mother of all hangovers. I could hear Faye moving about the house. I groaned and reached for the clock only to find my arm waving in thin air. I peeled open my eyes. The electric light stabbed at me like a laser beam. Of course I was in the lounge. It was the day after Jack's funeral. I hadn't been able to sleep. My mouth felt like sandpaper; my tongue two sizes too big for me.

What on earth was Faye doing? She sounded as if she was trying to break the record for the number of times she could circumnavigate the house wearing hobnailed boots whilst spinning crockery. I guessed she was punishing me for going to Rosie's aid last night, but what was I supposed to do? Rosie had only just buried her husband, and to return home from the wake to find her house ransacked... I couldn't leave her to face that alone. And I couldn't let Jack down. 'Look after Rosie for me, Adam'. The words on Jack's last message to me obliged me, but I would have gone anyway.

I wasn't usually in favour of corporal punishment; last night had changed my mind. I thought hanging was too good for the burglars. The odd thing was though, nothing had been taken, or so Rosie's daughter, Sarah, had said after a quick check round. Rosie's jewellery was still in her bedroom and even I could see, through the chaos of strewn condolence cards and flowers that the TV and hi-fi were in the lounge, and intact. I'd only glimpsed Jack's study but it was enough for me to notice that the computer had been smashed but not the printer. Why that and nothing else? It didn't make any sense, but then neither did Jack's death.

Sarah had taken her mother back to her flat whilst I had stayed behind to talk to the police and arrange for the locksmith to change the busted front door lock. It was the least I could do.

'You're awake then.'

Faye's reproachful tone was like barbed wire in my brain. I opened my eyes again and grunted. Faye was looking at me as if I was something the cat had sicked up on the carpet. Remembering our row last night I wasn't surprised. Faye had wanted me to take her out to celebrate winning her first new client account since her promotion to account director at the London advertising agency where she worked. Instead I had dumped her for Jack's widow. I tried smiling but that must have made me look worse because she tutted and tossed her blonde hair.

'How much did you drink last night, Adam?'

I watched her pick up the television remote control and put it beside the television set. Faye always liked things in their proper place and I wasn't where I should have been. I thought if she could pick me up and tidy me away she'd be happy. Her pretty face was frowning as she lifted the almost empty whisky bottle with thumb and forefinger. I felt a stab of guilt as she carried it as through to the kitchen as if it were contaminated.

'Does it matter?' I heaved myself up on one arm.

'Of course it matters. I don't wish to be married to a drunk.' She returned from the kitchen and stared down at me, her hands on her slender hips. She was dressed for work in a smart black trouser suit.

'What time is it?' I asked.

'Time you did some work. You can't mourn forever. Jack wouldn't want you to.'

Since Rosie had telephoned me to say that Jack was dead I hadn't been able to lift a paintbrush. That was twelve days ago. I was beginning to wonder if I would ever paint again.

'You'll miss your train,' I grunted, standing up and making a valiant attempt not to stagger. The expression on her face told me I'd said the wrong thing.

'I'm taking the car to London and I'm staying in the agency flat until Friday. In case you haven't noticed Christmas is less than three weeks away and I've got a great deal to do.'

'When did you decide this?' I asked surprised, stumbling into the kitchen and almost tripping over Boudicca who give a loud meow and glared at me. Not you too, I thought, flicking on the kettle. I turned to face Faye then wished I hadn't as the movement caused my head to spin.

'Last night, after you rushed out. I called Stewart. He said it was OK.'

Was this my punishment for going to the aid of my best friend's widow? I'd never met Faye's boss, but I didn't much care for him, probably because I was sick of hearing about him.

She continued, 'I thought it would give you time to do some work and prepare for the exhibition on Saturday. I've gone to a great deal of trouble to get a top London gallery owner down for it, not to mention the Lord Mayor of Portsmouth and our MP.'

'I know. I haven't forgotten,' I only wished I could. Faye was determined to make me into a household name. Me? I wouldn't even have bothered to have an exhibition. Or if I had to, I would have preferred to absent myself. I find showing off my work excruciatingly embarrassing. A decided drawback for an artist.

I reached for a mug and spooned in some coffee. I opened my mouth to talk about Rosie but Faye got there first.

'Are you even going to try and paint today?' Faye eyed me with contempt.

'You'll miss your car.' Further discussion was pointless.

She snatched up her briefcase and car keys, glared at me and stomped out. 'And that is that,' I said to the cat who lifted her head as if to say what did you expect, then turned tail on me and hopped through the cat flap.

I drank my coffee slumped on the sofa. I'm not very good at arguing. Giving in is more my speciality. Faye was understandably peeved that I had deserted her in her hour of glory. Perhaps I should call her and apologise? I hate an atmosphere. Maybe later.

I closed my eyes but couldn't blot out the events of the previous night. The police had said drug addicts were probably to blame for the break-in, but what sort of drug addicts would leave jewellery and other items that could have been sold for a quick buck? I had voiced my opinion to the younger, stouter police officer. He'd said, 'If they're drugged up, sir, who knows what is going through their mind.' I thought his reply a cop-out but then he didn't know about my last conversation with Jack.

'I'm being followed,' Jack had said when I had telephoned him two weeks ago. I had laughed and told him he was being paranoid.

'Why would anyone want to follow you?' I had teased.

'I can't tell you yet, Adam, it's too dangerous, but I'm almost there.'

'Where?'

'At the truth, give me a few more days.'

Only Jack hadn't had a few more days. The day after he had entered a derelict burning building. It was his job putting out fires. It could have happened to any fire fighter. But it hadn't. It had happened to Jack. I wasn't laughing now.

I poured the remainder of my coffee down the sink staring out across the windswept garden to the rising slopes of Portsdown Hill. Two forlorn-looking ponies shivered in the cold. Jack wasn't given to hallucinations. If he said someone was following him then they were, but who and why? What was he doing that was dangerous? And why send me the postcard? I wasn't going to get the answers by staring out of windows.

I threw on some old clothes and trekked across the garden to my studio. The smattering of snow that had covered that hummock of earth in the bleak cemetery yesterday had vanished overnight leaving in its wake a chill grey day, damp and miserable.

I gazed at the canvasses of seascapes hating them all, seeing nothing but mediocrity before my eyes travelled to Jack's postcard. I had only received it yesterday even though it had been posted the day Jack had died. I guessed it had got caught up in the Christmas mail. It had been a shock seeing his handwriting, and a puzzle as to why he had written it and what he had written. I didn't need to read it again because every word was etched on my mind but I unpinned it and turned over the picture of Turner's 'The Fighting Temeraire'.

Look after 'Rosie' for me, Adam. You're an accomplished artist and a good friend. Happy Sailing!

Best Jack

4 July 1994

Why date it July when he had sent it in December? Why put the year as 1994 when it was 2006? And why had he underlined certain letters? S I E D N G O. It was some sort of code. I wasn't good at word puzzles like Jack had been. The only words that leapt out at me were DIES, ENDS and GOD. It was as if Jack knew he was going to die. But that was ridiculous; how could he have known that a gas cylinder would explode the moment he rushed in?

I recalled my conversation with Steve Langton, at the wake. He was a friend and a DI at the city police station. I hadn't told him about the postcard or my last conversation with Jack.

'Any more news on the fire?' I had asked him.

'Nothing. We've questioned the local kids and carried out a house to house but you know that area, they'd rather shield a murderer than co-operate with the police.'

'Do you think it was intentional?'

'You mean that gas cylinder placed inside deliberately and the building flashed up? It looks like it to me and to fire investigations; they found traces of an accelerant. Whether it was kids larking around or some nutter who gets his sexual jollies from setting fire to things and then watching big red fire engines turn up I don't know. But we're still on the case; I'll get to the truth.'

And there was that word again: truth. What was the truth? And had kids or a nutcase really caused Jack's death? Could someone have planted that gas cylinder knowing that Jack would be the first to enter that burning building? If so, how? There was only one way to find out and that was to ask Jack's colleagues. I hadn't liked to yesterday, since the wake was hardly the appropriate place, but this morning was different.

I climbed on my motorbike and headed down into the city, diverting to Rosie's on the way. If I could just get into Jack's study I might find something that could give me some idea of what he had been doing. I was disappointed to find no one in but not surprised. I was about to leave when a window screeched open to my right.

'Can I help?'

I craned my neck to the first floor bay window of the house next door. A woman with short spiky brown hair was eyeing me curiously.

I was about to politely refuse when I had second thoughts. 'You might be able to.'

'Hang on. I'll come down.'

She was in her early thirties and dressed scruffily in faded jeans and a T-shirt that Faye wouldn't even have done the housework in. I hadn't seen her at the funeral. I would have remembered those olive-green eyes and that elfin face.

'I'm Adam Greene, a friend of Rosie's,' I introduced myself.

'How is she? I must call round.'

'She's at her daughter's, but she'll be back later. Did you hear about the break-in, yesterday?'

'No! How awful. The bastards.'

'My sentiments exactly. I was wondering if you saw or heard anything suspicious between three and seven o'clock.'

'No. I had an appointment in London, which was why I couldn't make the funeral. I can ask my landlady, Sharon. I'm only the lodger: Jody Piers.'

'If she remembers anything perhaps you'd ask her to give me a call.' I handed her my card.

'Marine artist,' she said, studying it. 'We have something in common. I'm a marine biologist.'

My eyes connected with hers for a fleeting moment. I liked what I saw. I liked even more how I felt before I told myself that I was married.

She said, 'Shouldn't the police be doing this, asking questions?'

I pulled myself together and said, 'They probably will.' I saw her sceptical look. It made me smile.

'Was Jack your friend?'

'Yes.'

'You must be feeling like shit.'

That was putting it mildly. A woman I didn't know had summed up my emotions more completely than my wife.

I had trouble getting those olive-green eyes out of my mind as I weaved my way through the heavy pre-Christmas traffic to the fire station. I didn't mind. They were nice eyes and they helped to replace that picture of Jack's coffin. But not Jack or my feelings of guilt. Why hadn't I seen more of him over the last couple of months? I might then have discovered what the devil he'd been up to. But I'd been too intent on finishing off the paintings for the exhibition. I cursed myself, and Faye, for that. Jack was one of the most laid back men I had ever known and yet his voice had sounded urgent and troubled in that last conversation. And I'd ignored it.

I was told that Red Watch weren't on duty again until Friday, three days away. Damn. I would have to wait until then because I didn't know any of them personally apart from Des Brookfield who had come sailing with us a few times in the past before buying his own boat. He was no longer on the watch but stationed at headquarters. I had never really liked him. He was too flash, too ambitious, too everything for me. He had been at the funeral looking important in his uniform, a distraught expression on his swarthy features. Of course he was upset, I told myself, but with Brookfield it always looked like an act rather than the genuine article. I was probably doing him a disservice. Anyway he would hardly know what Jack had

been doing. There seemed little I could do until Friday unless Rosie returned home soon and I could ask her. She might know.

I swung into one of the parking bays along the seafront, as far away from the fun fair as I could get and pulled off my helmet. As I sniffed the salt air and stared across the grey turbulent sea to the Isle of Wight, Jack's words came back to me: 'Listen to the sea, Adam. She has all the answers.' Answers to what, I thought, when I hardly knew the questions!

Jack's message flashed into my mind: Happy Sailing! A reference, I guessed, to the fact that in October I had bought his yacht. How could I be happy sailing her now when every moment aboard would remind me of those happier times with Jack: the laughs and the drinks, the serious conversations and the companionable silences. God, I would miss him. Just as I had missed Alison. I tensed. I had tried to forget her. I thought I had succeeded until yesterday when Jack's funeral had pulled me back. Now I knew the memory of my former girlfriend – though that word hardly expressed how much she'd meant to me – would never leave me. Nor would that of her violent and unexpected death. I had come to Portsmouth twelve years ago to forget. It wasn't far enough. Nowhere ever would be.

I didn't want to think of her. Jack. Think of Jack. But somehow I knew Alison would continue to intrude on my thoughts. She wasn't going to go away, just as the puzzle over Jack's death wasn't going to until I solved it.

Action was what I needed. I started the bike and swung it round as another motorbike drew up a few yards from me. The driver removed his helmet. He looked vaguely familiar but I couldn't place him. I nodded at him but got no response. Perhaps I was mistaken.

I returned home and had another stab at the coded message. I got a further half a dozen words from the letters that Jack had underlined; including SINGED. It wasn't much help.

'What was Jack doing, Boudicca?' I asked the cat who opened one lazy eye at me as if to say how the devil should I know?

'No, me neither.'

I wondered if I would ever know, but I knew I had to try and find out.