

PART ONE

LAND OF THE BLIND

The soul's dark cottage, batter'd and decay'd
Lets in new light through chinks that time has made;
Stronger by weakness, wiser men become,
As they draw nearer to their eternal home.
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,
That stand upon the threshold of the new.

- Edmund Wallace

CHAPTER ONE

The cold wind cut like a scalpel as Theo reached up into the darkness for the balcony rail. Seven floors down, night blanked out the swathe of industrial wasteland, a black carpet of tangled metal and dusty masonry. Only the gaily coloured light of Carl Stensel's barbershop sign showed in the distance.

Everything else. Nothingness. He could be looking out across a hole cut in the fabric of the universe, only the stars above and the red and green "Gents Hairdresser" sign below shedding any light on the world. Nothing else existed.

Except the balcony rail.

A crash came from inside the flat as the bookcase was thrown free. No time. Theo stood on the rickety pigeon loft in the corner of the veranda and thrust upwards. His aging joints complained. Pain flared in his left arm and fresh blood began to flow. The ten-storey block of flats seemed to be a mile high. Bing Crosby crooned about a White Christmas on The Major's new CD player in the flat, then that too was sent crashing as a twisted shadow lurched towards the balcony.

The pigeon loft shifted under Theo's weight as the shattering of a coffee table sounded inside. The shadow made a beeline for the veranda door. Theo's good hand reached up as dried wood splintered underfoot, the pigeons fluttering restlessly.

Balcony rail. Where's the bloody balcony rail?

The door trembled with His approach.

Got it. Theo grasped tight on the cold hard metal and shoved off with his foot. The pigeon loft leaned over, its sides splitting with a crack, and then Theo lunged out into the clear blackness of the night. He hung for a second then grabbed with his other hand, ignoring the pain, swinging up with the momentum from the loft.

Darkwater Towers

Pigeons exploded into the cramped space of the veranda.

Theo's legs hooked over the next balcony's floor and he pulled himself up. Sweat broke out on his face despite the cold wind. "Aaargh..." He banged his arm as he landed on the disused veranda. Below him the door burst open.

No thought, just action. Theo was up and moving before the pigeons cleared the pigeon loft. The door in front of him was frosted with starlight. He twisted the handle but his hand had lost all its strength.

He tried again.

Locked.

There were curses from below then the pigeon loft was kicked aside.

The bloody doors don't lock, Theo chided himself. *Wrong way.* He quickly turned the handle the other way and pulled the door open. Then he was inside, away from the bitter wind, and into the eighth floor apartment. Outside, there was a scrabbling noise as eager hands tried to follow suit then more curses when they couldn't reach without the pigeon loft. Now banging sounded inside the flat indicating a new course through the carnage towards the landing.

And the stairs.

Blood soaked through Theo's sleeve. He felt faint. The empty flat, like the rest of the top three floors, was dusty and cold, but not as cold as outside, and nowhere near as cold as Theo's heart. Shock was beginning to set in. Not just from the arm, but from...

...everything else.

Where to hide? That was the immediate problem. Where to hide and get his bearings? Regroup and make some sense of all this. If ever there was a time that Theobald Wolff wished he'd planned his retirement better it was now. The exertion of climbing over the balcony was beginning to tell on his sixty-nine year old muscles. His hands were shaking.

Not here. Can't afford to wait here. With an effort he forced himself up and through the living room door into the equally blank kitchen. Another door - into the hallway - and another.

Too late he realised he'd boxed himself in. This was one of the two bedroom flats and instead of heading out onto the landing near the lift he'd come into the second bedroom. No time. There never seemed to be any time. Up until now he'd had nothing but. Not any more...

Darkwater Towers

Heavy footsteps came from outside. Shuffling footsteps. They were on the stairs. No escape. Not at his age. No good trying to run for it, Theo hadn't run anywhere in fifteen years. He stared round the gloom, panic shortening his breath. That pretty blue frosted light reminded him this was Christmas Eve. Bing Crosby had given way to Nat King Cole and "The Little Boy Who Santa Claus Forgot." The music drifted up the stairwell.

Pain. Cold and pain.

The footsteps were outside the door now.

Only one place left. In the corner of the room was the airing cupboard, long since stripped of its boiler. Mick McCracken - the caretaker - had seen to that. Once he'd realised the flats were never going to be filled, he'd sold off anything that wasn't nailed down and painted, and some things that were. What had they said when he was in the Army? "If it moves, salute it. If it doesn't, paint it."

Theo yanked the cupboard door open, and shuffled in. With his knees drawn up to his chest he just had enough room. He gently pulled the door shut behind him, and waited.

It seemed like an age before the footsteps retreated but in fact it was only twenty minutes. Theo's legs began to cramp. No, didn't begin to cramped, cramped solid right there and then. He could hardly move them. He nudged the cupboard door open with his shoulder and swung his legs out as best he could. His best wasn't very good. They swivelled round like a rusty dockside crane, but they felt better once out of the confines of the cupboard. A little.

Theo waited for the circulation to return, and with it pain slammed into his thighs and calves. Body shaking pain at first, then that tingly pain that's almost pleasant. He felt that if he put his feet to the ground they would bounce right back up again. Pins and needles. Much underrated.

Light flooded the empty bedroom. After the total blackout of the airing cupboard, the stars shone through the window like a thousand tiny beacons, their frosty blue light picking out every knot in the floorboards, and every grain of dust and plaster. Theo got as far as the window before his legs decided they'd had enough. He sat unceremoniously on the floor, and leaned against the wall under the starlight.

Darkwater Towers

Images flooded through his tired brain. Questions. Where were they? All the others? What had happened to them? What had driven Mick McCracken - because he was certain that's who was stalking him now - over the edge? Was it the rat in the basement?

What had he done to the others? Uriah Lovelycolors he knew about, poor old Uriah. Theo tightened the old man's home-knitted scarf around his wounded arm. But what of Charlie Brewer and the other residents?

And Delia?

Theo felt a pain that was nothing to do with the cramps or the wounded left arm. A pain he hadn't felt since his wife died. His heart ached. What of Delia?

His head couldn't hold onto the thought. His mind seemed to be slowing down and the faces that drifted before him began to fade. Even the pain began to fade.

It's getting bright in here, he thought. Not dawn already is it? Not Christmas Day already?

He shuffled round the wall on his bottom so he faced the window. The stars were indeed brighter. They threatened to whiteout the night sky. Then Theo realised it wasn't the stars. It was everything. Everything was getting brighter. It was like turning the brightness up on his old Phillips TV. The picture was still there, but less distinct. Merging with all around it.

"Jingle Bells" sounded gaily from afar. A man was hiding under the covers of a huge four-poster bed, his head poking out to see who was knocking on the door. The man was Alistair Sim, Theo was sure it was. *What's he doing in my dream?* But it was all blending together. The light made it difficult to tell what was happening.

Rattling chains. Theo heard them, plain as day. Of course. Jacob Marley's ghost. Or was it? He wasn't sure. Alistair Sim's Scrooge wasn't sitting up in bed any more, it was Theobald Wolff. Only he wasn't hiding in a Victorian four-poster bed, he was hiding in a dusty apartment on Christmas Eve. Swirling. Spinning.

The pain had gone. The empty flat on the eighth floor of Darkwater Towers had gone. Theo knew he was passing out, and he tried to fight it, but it was no use. His head swam dreamily as he canted to one side against the

Darkwater Towers

wall. Nothing mattered any more. Not the pain. Not the questions. Not anything.

Then the ghost of Christmas past visited through the light, its hearty laugh booming inside Theo's head. It took him back to the day of the letter. The day the bottom fell out of Theo's world. A world already devoid of any hope, or happiness, or peace.