

**MICHAEL C THOMAS**



**Book Three of  
The Pen Glas Mysteries**

# **IN THE COLDEST DARK**

***The Second Shard***

Also available from Tomser Cat Books

*The Green Eyes of Darkness*

*Into the Shattered Dark*

by Michael C Thomas

*The Extraordinary Happenings of Peter Oddfellow:*

*The Old Umbrella*

by Mark Dorey

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# In the Coldest Dark

The Second Shard



Tomser Cat Books

Big Cats Edition

Dedication

To those we lose on the way

*PROLOGUE*

# PEN GLAS Book Shop

**2016**

**H**ER HAND WAS OLD and deeply scarred from a past burn that had left the skin taut and thin. Slowly, fingers traced the words across the pages of the ancient tome.

"Well, did we do right? Should we have sent them?" James asked as he stood in front of the great desk. It was night and the permanently sub-fusc bookshop was lit by a single shadow-casting light that came from the green teller's lamp. It was angled towards the page the old woman was reading, yet her eyes were closed.

The ink on the page reached out towards her fingers in a Dark mist, mixing with the blood flowing through the capillaries in her skin, before falling back to the page as her hand passed over the text.

In her mind she could see Jake, Megan and Amena enter the Remembrance Garden; she could feel the panic in Jake and Megan as she watched their final moments when the Darkness reached out from the hanging tree. Her voice was distant and hollow as she answered her son's question, "Mind and Soul breathe in the year of loss. They will find the lost, the gathered splinters, but innocence will die."

"So they made it to 1814," James swallowed nervously.

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"They will find the Book but was it right? You sent Luke to 1942, but why? Why didn't you send him with his brother or Lucy? Jake needs their strength."

"The Queen interferes, playing her pieces. A poisoned heart; an angry mind." The old woman was not aware of the room in which she sat with her son. She was with Luke as he fell from a boat on the Manor's lake. She gasped from the cold of the water, she felt the panic in Luke as he fell into the depths, and struggled for breath as the Darkness dragged them down. The hopelessness as his hands struck the cold ice above her, the pressure building in her chest and her ears. She felt a strong hand take hold of her arm.

"Purity is close to the well of Darkness. He is hunted. Hidden in shadow, death stalks in the cold, and innocence will die."

"The map, you sent him for the map, but..." James clutched his hair as paced around the room. "You should not have done that. You were there, you know what happens!"

"Treason cries the Heart," she replied not listening or unable to hear her son's accusations.

"No, no, no," protested her son, "Lucy is still here! She has not passed the Thinness, she is with Lewys, the Gardener's grandson."

"Hearts will sunder as choices are made, and innocence will die," came the reply as his mother slumped forward, her hand dropping away from the book. The wisps of Darkness returned to the page.

James knelt next to his mother, gently hugging and holding her hand like a child, desperate to offer comfort.

She opened her eyes, "History is in flux and it is more unsettled than I have ever felt it before. There are too many outcomes, far more than yesterday, many more than I expected. The truth changes even as it speaks to me."

"What does it all mean? These children are our only hope!" James leaned forward, his hands gripping his mother's armchair. Fear edged into his heart as he searched his

mother's old creased face for any sign that would give him comfort.

There was none.

"They are not alone; none of them are alone. The Board has pieces in play that I was not expecting. They are new pieces that are dark of heart. Even if I had known I would still have sent them, but..." she met his gaze, her eyes moist, "the possibility is high that one or even none of them will ever return."

## ***PROLOGUE***

# ***BRISTOL***

***2016***

**R**EID STOOD AT THE LARGE WINDOW and watched the rain fall, not as a fine mist but as huge droplets that came straight down out of the cold black sky. He was glad that he was no longer trying to sleep outside on the park bench. He still wasn't sure how to handle his unexpected promotion to the Board, but one thing he was sure of; if they wanted him dead he could do nothing to stop it. He hated to admit it, but at the moment he was powerless against them, against her – his new boss. What he hated even more was that she scared him; those abyss-like eyes held a malevolence that terrified him to his very core.

He looked around his new home. At first glance, it was a flat that had just been refurbished to an unusually high specification. The walls of the apartment were a cool white, while the varnished wooden floor was a deep sandalwood laminate partially covered in a thick pile rug. An ebony coloured leather three-piece suite faced a 72-inch television. The room was open plan with a kitchen and dining area. All appliances and fixtures were expensive high value brands. No cost spared. He smiled at his old revolting hold-all and clothes that he had left on the sofa – a small act of defiance.

In reality, the function of the room was quite different. It took a trained operative to notice the details. The glass in the windows was clear but thicker than normal, and there

were signs of subtle metallic strips in the glass. Not only would it be bullet proof and blast resistant, he knew it would be mirrored on the other side and block thermal imaging. No one would be able to spy into the room or eavesdrop on sound vibrations.

He had taken his small knife and chipped away a little at the paint on the walls; they were equally reinforced and with thermal reflective paint. He could set the room on fire and you wouldn't be able to see it on a scan from outside. Reid smiled; it also kept the heating bills down.

He doubted the rooms in the sixteen floors beneath him had any such security. He also doubted that they had as many hidden security cameras as this flat – he had found ten so far. His instincts said they had been fitted for genuine security of the 'safe house' and not just to spy on him. This was backed up by his discovery in the bedroom of a hidden fingerprint scanner that opened a small secret armoury, complete with firearms, grenades and full tactical gear, which unlocked to his touch.

The sandalwood floor was almost impossible to walk on without making a sound, the sound subtly changing depending on where one stood. With his eyes shut or with the room full of smoke, Reid would be able to tell where someone was in the room.

The leather furniture had a unique chemical smell that he recognised as a solvent used in Kevlar armour; even the furniture could be used as a bullet proof barricade. There was another faint smell he knew as well – an artificial chemical that would damage and confuse the sensitive noses of search dogs.

The front door of course was a disguised reinforced steel security door, it would take an expert in explosives to take it out. All the flat was missing was a generator, extended stores and a rain water collection system; it would not have surprised Reid if they were in the flat next door.

'With those,' he thought, 'you could survive a zombie apocalypse in this place.'

The flat had been built carefully and with the purpose of

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keeping the occupants safe – but safe from whom?

Once he had fully examined his surroundings, Reid showered and changed into the clothes that had been provided. The last item he put on was the dark coiled ring that he had been given. It fitted perfectly.

Reid poured himself a Scotch and stood looking out the window trying to gather his thoughts.

The mysterious woman, his new boss, came into the flat. He stared out of the window, tracking her by her reflection. She was still wearing the sunglasses that hid her monstrous Dark eyes.

“Please don’t jump from *this* window; it is a little higher than the one in the house that you blew up,” she said as she stood next to him. Motioning to the dining table, she sat down. While Reid had been showering, three plates of food had been laid out, each with glass of wine. “Eat. Drink. You will need it.” She picked up a glass.

The front door opened and closed. A large man dressed in a black suit with no tie came into the room. He nodded at Reid and joined them at the table.

The woman introduced him. “This is Smith; he is here to look after you and keep you safe.” Her diction was precise and harsh.

Reid had to stop himself from laughing. “To keep me safe?”

She nodded. “Yes, to keep you safe. You will need him to watch over you for your next project. Please do not kill him, it would be no challenge for you and it would be a terrible waste as he is an excellent cook.”

Smith passed Reid a thin black folder.

The woman raised her wine glass towards the folder. “You need to study this target. Your mission will be to execute him and take his place.”

Reid read the folder while he ate. If Smith had made this meal then he was indeed an excellent cook; it was delicious, *chipirones et su tinta*. He almost choked on the food as he turned the page.

“*This* is the man you want me to *kill*? *This* man, and then

take *his* place?"

"Oh yes, and then you will carry out my instructions on the last page to the letter, not a single deviation, no personal style, exactly as instructed."

"Sure, but surely you know this man is dead? Looks like someone got to him before us... some two hundred years before us!"

"Nevertheless, you will learn everything in this folder in the next six hours."

She wasn't joking. For six hours he read and she questioned him, back and forth, non-stop, until every detail in the folder was so stuck in his head that his replies were automatic: from his date of birth to how the target ate his food; from how he felt about his parents to how he wanted his garden landscaped. Reid was getting dizzy and needed a break. He stood up and leaned on the back of his chair, his legs unsteady. They gave way. Smith caught him before he hit the floor.

"Perfectly on time," said the woman, pouring herself another glass of wine.

Smith carried Reid and carefully laid him on the bedroom floor in the recovery position. Reid was helpless, the muscle relaxant that had been mixed in his food had spread throughout his entire body.

"You... drugged me... Why?"

"Oh, there is nothing to worry about. It is just easier to go through the next stage of training if you are... how shall we say, compliant. Less struggling and a lot less mess. With the drug in your system you won't be able to feel panic and hurt yourself."

She motioned Smith to leave and then she knelt down next to Reid, studying his face through her sunglasses. All Reid could move now were his eyes and mouth, but even his mouth felt wrong. His mind was racing to find a way out, but eager as he was to escape the situation there was no feeling of panic. The room began to grow darker as the ring on his finger started to glow.

"I don't even know your name," Reid said, his lips numb,

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his voice slurred.

She smiled and paused, thinking for a second, "You can call me... Rayne."

"Rayne, makes you sound like a Queen. Is that what you are, the Dark Queen?"

Laughing, she shook her head, "Oh you sweet, stupid little thing. I am just a Bishop. You may be my Knight now, but pray you never meet our Queen." She continued to laugh as she took off her glasses and leant over him.

Darkness poured out of her eyes and flooded the room.

## *PROLOGUE*

# **PEN GLAS**

**2016**

**M**ILLER PULLED THE VAN OVER to the side of the road and got out. The man in the passenger seat did likewise. Together they opened the rear doors of the vehicle. Two other men sat in the back with three unconscious children.

“Make sure you have their phones, and then cable tie them,” said Miller to his men. Kidnapping children wasn’t something that bothered Miller, so long as the price was right. He didn’t like the fact that they were already unconscious when they had reached the target location, but he wasn’t one to look too closely at a gift horse.

He walked over to where Creed stood leaning against a car.

“All done?” she asked without looking up, her voice had a very slight southern American accent.

He snorted. “Simple. What’s next?”

Creed motioned to the other three men. “They stay here, and babysit until we are told to move out. This place is a nice little black spot for phone and radio signals, so if anyone pokes their nose in they won’t be able to call for help. You and I are in a holding pattern by the Activity Centre. If Tod’s young wolf fails, and the princess shows up at the Centre, then we are to intercept and pick her up. Strict rules of engagement: tranq from a distance without her seeing.”

Miller tapped her shoulder. The solid sound proved his suspicion that Creed was wearing body armour under her

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jacket.

“That’s a bit OTT don’t you think?” he said with a teasing smile.

Creed shot him an angry glance, “Just in case she has company is all.”

Miller got into the driver’s side of the car, “You’ll be telling me next that you have a fifty cal in the boot, you know, just in case.”

Creed angrily slammed the car door as she got in. “Jokes and orders aside, Miller, if that Rose girl resists, I am putting her down. Permanently!”

## **CHAPTER ONE**

# **STAND AND DELIVER**

**“WAKE UP! WAKE UP!”**

The voice sounded urgent to Jake but he lost it somewhere in the dark.

A different voice came towards him. “Try slapping him.”

Someone shook him hard by the shoulders. The black began to give way to a slowly brightening grey.

“Open your eyes, Jake. Come on!”

“Megan?” thought Jake, fighting to regain consciousness. Shaking his head clear, he took in a deep breath.

“See, I told you we didn't have to slap him,” Megan said scornfully to Amena.

“It would have been quicker,” replied Amena with a shrug.

Megan focused on Jake. “You okay? You were out for ages.”

“Yeah, I think so. Where are we?” asked Jake looking around.

They were in a small wooden room with dark red velvet upholstered seats; the sides were curtained in a matching fabric. The room shook slightly and Jake realised he hadn't been shaken awake by Megan, but by the movement of the room they were in, except it wasn't room – they were in some kind of coach or carriage.

“Have you looked outside?” he asked.

“We looked a little...” said Amena, “We are in the countryside somewhere. We were careful not to be seen by the kidnappers, but now you are awake we can try and escape.”

“Kidnappers?” quizzed Jake.

“Amena thinks we've been drugged and kidnapped,” explained Megan.

“Right...” said Jake slowly. ‘Oh was Amena in for a shock,’

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he thought to himself.

He took a peek through the curtain. They were in an old horse drawn carriage travelling down a fairly open road. The countryside looked a bit like the land around Pen Glas, but the hills were further away. They could have been anywhere.

Jake turned to Megan. “Look, don’t worry; when Luke finds out we’re missing, he’ll use his ring and come and find us, and I am sure he will bring Lucy too.”

“But how will they know where we are?” replied Megan.

“The ring will lead him to us. It won’t be a problem, it’ll be like last time. All we have to do is keep our heads down and be safe.”

“What is this ring?” asked Amena, “Is it a type of GPS tracker?”

Jake smiled. “Yeah, something like that.”

A gunshot shattered the air, echoing around the valley. It was followed by two further rapid shots, one from in front of the carriage. The carriage stopped abruptly.

“Stand and deliver!” bellowed a deep voice.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” breathed Megan.

“Come out of the carriage if you value your life.”

“Well, let’s go,” said Amena.

“Out there?” asked Megan, fear edging her voice.

“Better than them shooting into the carriage.” Amena opened the door and stepped out. Megan and Jake followed her.

An early autumn afternoon, the day had been warm, but the chill of approaching night was in the air. The road was between two fields. The leaves were beginning to fade on the few trees around.

A man with a scarf drawn across the bottom half of his face and wearing a black tricorn hat, was sitting on large brown mare. He had his weapons drawn – a pair of long flintlock pistols, one pointed at the children, the other trained on the coach driver.

Jake flinched when he saw the body of another coachman slumped on the ground: a smoking gun still gripped in his dead hand.

Amena’s eyes were wide, her early confidence dissolving in the strangeness of the world that she now found herself in. Megan

## STAND AND DELIVER

squeezed her hand.

“Well, I’ll be...” said the highwayman. “I came here for the man, Stone, and who do I find? Jacob and Megan Whitlock. It has been awhile, Jake.”

The mix of their real and civil war names caught them by surprise.

The coach driver jumped from the carriage, and with the coach horses between him and the highwayman he ran into the field. The brigand raised his long barrow pistol and took careful aim.

“No!” screamed Jake running towards the highwayman. The man’s horse moved just as the pistol fired, sending the shot wild.

“Jake!” the man snapped. “He will raise the alarm. We will have to move away from here quickly. Is she to be trusted?” he pointed towards Amena as he primed his flintlocks again.

“Of course, who are...” began Megan.

The highwayman removed his scarf. “Master Whitlock, I thought you, at least, would recognise me. It has only been a year or so since we met in the New World. Well... a year or so to me. I guess it has been over a hundred years for you.” A wide, jagged scar ran down his face.

“Captain Emrys!” exclaimed Jake.

“It has not been Captain for a while now,” Emrys replied.

“But we’ve never been to the New World!” said Megan.

Emrys dismounted and walked over to the children. “Last time I met you was in the wilds outside of New London with Philippe and Daniel. You were just as surprised to see me then as you are now. All I know is that we are all Living Ghosts but, if we don’t leave soon, and Stone’s men return... then we will all be dead ghosts.” Emrys started to unhitch the carriage horses.

“Who is Stone?” asked Megan.

“The current owner of Pen Glas Manor... but there is something wrong about him. He is bad. I cannot believe he is of the line of Morcant even if he does carry a spiral ring. Stone should have been in this carriage,” Emrys frowned. “Come on, I hope you can at least remember how to sit on a horse. I can lead it.” He motioned to Amena. “You, girl, you can ride with me.”

They rode down the road for a half mile before striking out

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across one of the neighbouring fields and down a shallow stream, before eventually crossing it to take a narrow path that led deep into the wooded hills.

\*

Thompson wasn't happy.

Most of the cottage owners had left, some taking the money, some taking a beating instead. However, one old man refused to leave. He had screamed at Thompson in Welsh that this was his father's *ty unnos* and he was never going to leave. The wicked sickle that the man wielded wildly in one hand had made them think twice about forcing him. Now the old fool had barricaded himself inside his cottage. Thompson had over fifty workers digging up the land around the Folly where the Master wanted his new lake, but the earth had to go somewhere, so the Master had decided to evict all the people in this small hamlet and bury it.

To Thompson it seemed like a waste of money, but so long as he was being paid, he didn't much care. Thompson was ex-military, 77th Foot, Third Division. He had served in Spain and France under the Welsh General, Picton. Thomas Picton had been tough to serve under. Uncompromising and demanding, the General kept strict order – it was rumoured that he had hanged more men under his command for breaking regs than any other British officer. That seemed like a long time ago now, although it had been less than a year since the Allies took Paris and Napoleon had been defeated. Thompson had seen and done a lot of bad things in that war and served with some really nasty people, but none of them were a patch on his new employer.

Thompson worked for Lord Stone, the owner of Pen Glas Manor. Stone was one of the new breed of rich industrialists, and had married into the Morcant family to get the land and title to go with his wealth. Stone scared Thompson more than anything he had experienced in the war; the man had a heart as cold as his name.

One of his men gave a cry and pointed in the direction of the Manor. Three riders were approaching. Even at this distance he

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could make out Stone; always dressed in a long black rider's coat and never wearing a hat, unlike most men of his station.

Stone rode up to Thompson. His voice had an element to it that made one shudder. "You still have an old man to evict, I hear."

Thompson looked at the man they called Switch, who sat on a horse next to Stone. Switch was a nasty piece of work, always snitching people out to Stone. When he could get him alone, Thompson was going to have to beat Switch back into his place.

"Yes sir!" Thompson replied. "We were just about to drag him out."

"No need, I will see to it myself," Stone dismounted and called over to a large worker who was watching with the rest of the men. "Cartwright! Go back to the Folly and start moving the soil, we have to finish the landscaping. I will not let my timetable be interrupted."

Cartwright lifted his hand to his forelock and headed off in the direction of the Folly.

Stone walked over to the window of the cottage where the old man had barricaded himself. The building was simple and poor. He called inside. "Man, do you know who I am?"

"Yes," came a hesitant voice, old and heavy with Welsh accent.

"Well, as you know, this is my land and I need to build a hill here, but as I understand it you won't leave."

The old man came closer to the window. "My ty unnos!"

"Yes, yes, I heard you won't leave your precious hovel. That's fine by me, but you see, and I don't expect you to understand this, if I don't build this hill then I will not be able to stand on it in four hundred years' time and use ground penetrating radar... so..." Stone casually drew a short barrelled pistol and fired its single shot through the small window. His men flinched at the sudden gunshot.

Stone walked back over to Switch and Thompson. "You two, assemble a party of armed men. Apparently someone has attacked my carriage and kidnapped my so-called offspring."

"Your children, Sir?" Thompson was confused. This man had just murdered someone in cold blood while his children had been

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kidnapped, and they were but an afterthought to him?

"Yes, now go! I have more important things to do," snapped Stone.

Thompson nodded and rode off. Glancing at Switch, he saw that he was equally unnerved by the coldness of their employer.

The man they thought of as Stone watched as the two men rode off and smiled as he reloaded his gun. It was an old Queen Anne style pistol so he removed the barrel to replace the ball and charge. The gun was small and ornate, a gentleman's weapon, built more for looks than actual use.

When he first arrived in this time, he had contacted an inventor and gunsmith in America called Collier. The man must have been surprised to discover his fame had already travelled to Britain and he had written back almost at once (although at once in this world took months). Collier had been delighted by the offer of patronage and soon, a pair of the first ever custom made Collier flintlock revolving pistols, were on their way. There would not be a better handgun until Colt took the design a step further. In fact, Collier's guns should have been on the coach arriving today.

Stone sighed, 'Blast, the guns would have been on the coach and they were probably lost.'

He guessed that he should be showing more concern for Stone's missing children, but it was difficult for him as he couldn't care less about them.

The spiral ring was heavy on his finger.

Time travel and being able to possess another man had been difficult to accept, but now he was here, Reid was enjoying the game.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

# **A COLD UNWELCOME**

**L**UKE'S TEETH CHATTERED as he sat in the old tin bath. After drying him off and wrapping him in blankets, the Gardener had thrown him into a wheelbarrow and then ran him all the way to the Manor, where he had been carried into the kitchen before being dumped into a tin bath of warm water. Every now and again, the Housekeeper, Mrs Williams, had arrived and dumped in a kettle of hot water. Mrs Williams looked like the younger twin of Mrs Sterling but her face and tone were even harder, as if they had been carved out of flint.

She had stared hard at Luke when they first met, her blue eyes so pale, they were almost white. Luke had been shivering so hard that it had been difficult to talk, but he thought he understood what her deep contemplative stare meant.

"Tomorrow..." he had stuttered. "I am from tomorrow to yest... tester... yesterday..."

Her ice-like eyes had locked onto his and he shivered. "That is not my concern, boy," she whispered, her voice like steel, "I am trying to work out if you are going to go home or if you are going to die here." She turned to the Gardener. "He cannot stay at the Manor. He can stay in the cottage with you if you like, but he cannot stay here."

The Gardener nodded and the Housekeeper left them to it. As she opened the door to leave the kitchen, there was a young girl on the other side. She looked a little younger than Megan and was dressed in the same black uniform as the Housekeeper. The girl's head bobbed from side to side as she tried to get a look at the newcomer in the tin bath.

"Nothing for you to see here, Agatha," said the Housekeeper sternly, and leaving no opening for any objections, she closed the

## CHAPTER 2

door to the kitchen and swept the girl away.

Luke was beginning to feel better as his internal temperature began to settle. He had never felt so cold before; whether it was the ice lake or perhaps the time travel, it had almost leeched all the heat from his body. He washed the mud from the lake off his body with a pink stinging, strange-smelling soap.

The Gardener settled on a kitchen chair as he stirred a pot of tea that the Housekeeper had made. He poured the golden liquid through a small sieve to stop the loose tea leaves from going into his cup.

"Tea is good for the soul, yet it is more difficult to get with the rationing. So tell me, boy, why should we be sharing our ration book with you?"

'Ration book?' thought Luke. 'I must be in the 1940s; maybe the war is still going on?' He looked around the kitchen. The stove was a wood burner and although the main lights seemed to be electric, they held large incandescent bulbs. On the table was an oil lamp.

The Gardener regarded Luke carefully. "My guess is that you're a runaway. Either running away from evacuation and trying to get home, or running away from call up, or maybe underage and trying to get called up. So which one is it?"

An answer flashed into Luke's head. "I am seventeen, sir. I am trying to get home to Cardiff."

"Hmmm, I can tell a lie, boy, it is one of my many gifts and I don't think you're lying, but then I don't think you're giving me all the truth. I accept that trust has to be earned, but we at least need a name to call you by."

"Thomas, Thomas Forest," the name came unbidden into Luke's head and he said the words before he could stop himself.

The Gardener nodded, "Thomas Forest it is then. I am Mr Owen, Head Groundskeeper of Pen Glas Manor. We will have to inform the police of your arrival." The Gardener sighed. "Although, if we are to be honest with each other, I doubt you will be going anywhere soon. And you never know, if we officially take in the evacuee *Thomas Forest*, we may well pick up some extra rations."

The Gardener's son, Edgar, came in through the back door. Carefully, but awkwardly, he cleaned and took off his boots. "I got some spare clothes like you asked, Da, but they may be a bit small."

"They will do, beggars and runaways cannot be choosers,"

## A COLD UNWELCOME

replied his father.

The Gardener caught Luke staring at Edgar's right arm. It was twisted with the fingers on his hand locked into a fist.

"Measles," the Gardener said answering Luke's unspoken question. "Took his mother and his younger brother and gave him a lifelong reminder."

Luke nodded, feeling a little guilty for staring, and drank the tea he was offered by Edgar.

The towel that Luke had been given to dry himself with was rough and well worn, as were the clothes that he had been given by Edgar, but at least they were warm. After dressing, he sat at the kitchen table and ate the bowl of thin vegetable soup that the Gardener had dished up from a large saucepan simmering on the wood burning stove.

The Gardener looked him over. "Well, you look like you're back to normal, so you can help empty that bath into the water trough. We'll go to the cottage and you can bunk in with Edgar for tonight. Then we'll see what tomorrow brings, and if you have earned trust."

\*

It was dark, but the thin crescent moon gave enough light to see by as it reflected off the white snow. The Groundskeeper's cottage was just slightly too practical to be called picturesque, with a low stone wall which ran around the outside of the small front garden. Even with the layer of snow, Luke could tell that the garden had been entirely converted to grow vegetables. Rows of beanpoles came up through the snow, waiting for the spring and for the Gardener to plant next year's crops. The cottage itself was tiny but as Luke would find out, it was attached to the old stable block.

As soon as they entered the cottage, the Gardener tended to the fire in the front room, breathing life into the old embers and slowly feeding it until there was a warm blaze in the hearth. From the hallway, Luke could see the front room and beyond it the kitchen. A small stone staircase led up from the hallway to the rooms upstairs. Once the fire was burning in the front room, the Gardener headed out to the stables to care for the solitary horse that the Manor still kept.

Taking an oil lamp, Edgar took Luke to the bedroom where they

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would be sleeping that night. It was small and cramped, with a bunk bed and a chest of drawers crammed into it, and the little space that was left was taken up by a painter's easel and two canvas paintings.

The first was an oil painting of a winter scene; a snow encrusted village seen from high up on a hill. From the church, Luke guessed it was of Pen Glas itself. It was entirely painted in shades of blue and white. The feeling of cold it gave Luke was undeniable. A harsh frozen world that was beautiful.

"That painting is amazing," breathed Luke.

Edgar smiled. "Thanks, I painted it in the autumn, when Da told me that the winter was going to be bad this year."

"How did he know?" asked Luke.

"Oh, Da says a Gardener has to know these things; same way that the bushes grow more berries before a bad one, you have to learn to feel it in your bones."

"Well, you're an amazing artist. This should be in an art gallery somewhere."

"Thanks, but it's pretty useless really. Paintbrushes don't win wars, and they wouldn't let me sign up."

"Did you try to?"

"Yes, I turned eighteen last September. Da didn't stop me even though he knew they wouldn't let me join up with this arm."

"But even so, your art is of use. I thought war art was a big thing?"

"*Was?*" questioned Edgar picking up on the past tense reference.

"Yeah, well you know, is. They put up loads of posters and stuff in Cardiff to boost morale, that kind of thing. Hey, what's this other painting?" Eager to move the conversation on, Luke moved to take a closer look at the unpainted white canvas. A pencil sketch had been drawn on to it, outlining where the paint was going to go. It showed a large twin-engined aircraft flying over hills and valleys, as a large moon hung in the sky. Apart from the different tail number and the engine not being on fire, this was the painting that hung over the desk in the tower room of the future Manor. Edgar must be *his* Gardener's father.

"That's brother Owen's plane," explained Edgar. "He was shot down somewhere over Europe last year. I guess that's why I tried to join up. I had to do something. I tried to get the plane as real as I could. His Wing Leader came all the way here to let us know that

## A COLD UNWELCOME

they saw the crew bail out and he told me the tail number so I could get it right." Edgar's voice grew more serious. "When I finish it, he'll come back. I know him, he'll escape and come home. Just as long as I can get some more white for the moon. I ran out after the winter painting. I'm saving up. There's some more in the village shop, but I don't have enough yet."

Edgar strongly reminded Luke of Jake. He must be just as close to his brother as Luke was to his.

"You're one of them aren't you?" Edgar's sudden question was direct and caught Luke off guard. "I mean, you're a Keeper like my Da and my brother. They don't talk to me about it much as I... I'm not gifted, or *cursed* as the Housekeeper says. The Darkness hasn't touched me, and if it ever does, I don't have the blood like you." He looked away from Luke and back at the unfinished painting. "My eyes may be green, but that's it. I won't be a Groundskeeper, that's why my brother must come back."

Luke didn't know what to say. Edgar knew a lot but he was obviously fragile since losing his brother. Luke felt instantly protective of him. He could get answers from him, but he would have to be careful.

"If you like art, look at these," said Edgar, suddenly in a better mood.

He pulled an album book out of the chest of drawers. "This is my collection of cigarette cards. I only have a few left to get. I have all the home defence cards; I just need a couple more from the RAF."

"How much does your dad smoke to get all these?"

"He smokes a few, although mainly he smokes a pipe. It's my brother's squadron. When the Wing Leader saw I collected them, they started sending whole bunches of them to me."

"Lads!" the Gardener's voice bellowed up from downstairs. "Get that blackout curtain in place. We may be miles from anywhere, but I don't want that warden up here complaining. And then down for the night, it'll be an early one tomorrow if we are heading into the village."

Edgar adjusted the heavy curtain before showing Luke to the outdoor toilet, which was freezing, damp and dark. Then he took Luke to the small washroom. The water was ice-cold and Luke tried not to stare as Edgar cleaned his teeth with a small brush and what appeared to be coal dust. Luke wasn't sure if the lack of toothpaste

## CHAPTER 2

was due to war rationing or if the coal dust is what they normally used.

After changing into some of Edgar's thick winter pyjamas, Luke buried himself under the heavy quilt on the top bunk.

Edgar yawned as he put out the oil lamp. "Da won't come upstairs; he sleeps in the front room. Owen says he's done that since Ma died. I'm too young to remember anything else, I guess."

Luke listened to Edgar's breathing become slow and regular as he drifted off. Luke's mind turned over and over the events of the day. He was sure he had been dragged back here for a reason. It reminded him of the story he had read from the bookshop, '*Murder in the Boat House*'. Was he here to help Anne Mayflower? There was the ghostly soldier he had met in the graveyard that had told him to save them all, but there was no-one called Anne here and no soldiers.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he was meant to help Edgar?

Anyhow, Luke had to find a way home. He had lost his ring, but hopefully Lucy would find out he was missing when he didn't show at the village to meet Jake, and then she could come and get him. Meanwhile, he would find out as much as he could about why he was here and more about the Keeper's that Edgar mentioned.

He thought of the painting Edgar was working on that would one day hang in the tower room.

*Why did he change the tail number and paint the engine on fire?*

Then he remembered the stained glass window. The Gardener had told him they were to remember people who had given their lives, and that his uncle had been shot down.

Luke's stomach lurched as he realised that Edgar's brother was never coming home, but then the window had depicted a German plane. Confused in thought, he fell asleep.

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