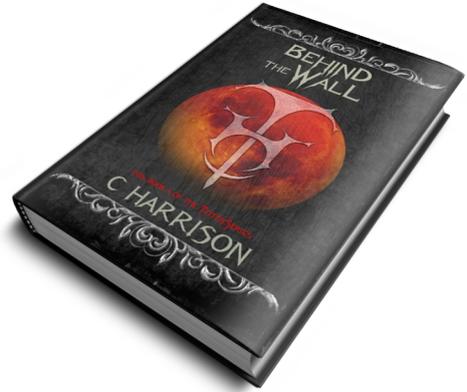


## BEHIND THE WALL - sample chapter

### *An important announcement*

Several months had passed since four desiccated corpses turned up in a basement in London. Three females and a male, their skulls grinning like delighted tourists, lay in wait for a small team of builders who dropped their lump hammers and scrambled for fresh air and cigarettes. And when the hole in the breeze block wall was enlarged by a forensics team and the vomit washed away from the pavement and the traumatised plasterer told he couldn't claim sick pay because his condition was exaggerated (playing golf every week gave the game away for him) the Metropolitan Police arrived at an investigatory dead end.



They called in the experts MI5, but their expertise was limited. They turned to the specialists MI6, but there was nothing special about the help they offered. Instead, the Met, under pressure and under staffed, received help from a group of men and women dressed for a paintballing session.

"Don't take the piss out of these clothes." Pierre Dremba marched down a corridor ahead of his colleague Nadine Cloesters. Trying to keep up, two assistant commissioners and a detective inspector. Almost a full pack.

"I still don't know why Cressida wasn't invited," said one of the assistant commissioners. "It looks like a snub."

"It looks suspicious," muttered his colleague.

And that was exactly the point. Split 'em up, set the top dogs on each other. Stir up a bit of rancour. Dremba took his phone out of a thigh pocket and asked the uniformed officer next to him what the words meant. "That one. Plod."

"Very funny."

"Who is Old Bill?"

"I've no idea. Maybe it's the brand of clothing behind your clown outfit."

"Boys, boys." Nadine kept the chastising to a minimum.

There was a long walk to the press conference and the lifts weren't working. Dremba needed a distraction to take his mind off the smoking ban. "Someone once told me there was a handbook for new recruits."

"I didn't know that." Nadine played along.

"Given to new recruits at Henley." He checked his phone again. "It had all the safe legal phrases the rozzers could use without jeopardising an arrest. Halt in the name of the law, you're coming with me, my lad, I want a word with you, that sort of thing."

They hit a bottleneck at the top of a flight of steps. "Now I know why the French hate their own police force," said the uniformed officer.

"Well, at least they don't call us," Dremba chose another word, "filth? Look at these." He shared the information with Nadine. "Woodentops. Bizzies."

"That's from Liverpool," said Nadine.

"How do you know that?"

"Some random fact I picked up long ago."

"She's full of random facts," said Dremba to one of the assistant commissioners trying to push ahead. "Most of it from other people's heads. Rozzers. That sounds a bit upper class." Dremba switched to his upper class voice. "I say boys, better leg it before the rozzers get here, what."

He didn't mean to cause a scuffle in a busy police station, but the detective inspector was up for it. Highly strung, tense, the one handed the poisoned chalice of fronting the press conference and now it was getting to him. He grabbed Dremba's arm and found himself with a fistful of hermetic symbolism.

"None of this shit is gonna help, mate."

"Tell me about it."

Nadine ignored Dremba's grimace.

"It's the one thing he's said that's correct."

"We don't know that."

"What's the matter, Pierre? You worried these badges won't keep the devils away?"

"Shut the fuck up, woodentop."

Detective Inspector Lovelace paused at the door of the press room and considered the set up: three chairs but only one microphone. He glanced at Nadine and Dremba, waited for the assistant commissioners to join him, but not being privy to higher level conversations he was forced to enter the press room alone. He made a hash of adjusting the microphone and handled the chair like an unconscious drunkard.

"You gonna let him sink on his own?" said Dremba.

"I understand operational secrecy, but this is a silence too far. You have to give us some indication of what this press conference is about." Assistant Commissioner one offered the press enough concerned body language for them to start all sorts of rumours without a word being spoken, and if the press could see the sweat on his colleague's forehead, well. . . .

"We've told you why," said Dremba. "Are you deaf?"

"You have a script," said Nadine. "Stick to it."

Both commissioners paused, ran their gaze up and down the sleeve of Nadine's coveralls and tried to calculate the combination of numbers, the relevance of the shapes, the meaning of the symbols. Baffled and frustrated they walked with very heavy footsteps and sat down without acknowledging the gathered journalists.

When they were as settled as they could be Lovelace bent his microphone stalk backwards and cleared his throat.

"Thanks for coming here." He spoke out of range of the microphone. Assistant Commissioner two tutted. "Thanks for coming here. I'll keep this brief and then take questions from you." No response. "I'm Detective Inspector Paul Lovelace and I'm temporarily heading the investigation into the bodies discovered in Dunlace Road, north east London. You all know them as the Bodies in the Basement. My colleague Chief Superintendent Brian Heron is currently on special leave and won't be back for . . . several weeks. I'm not sure. It's not my concern." And no one else was bothered judging by the reaction.

"Anyway, what I wanted to say today was to reposition the investigation." His tie didn't need straightening, but he straightened it anyway. "The four victims have now been identified as Susan Bekker, Denise Vincent, Elaine Daley and Rene van Voors, known collectively as Toten Herzen." Cameras came out of stand-by mode, smartphones were raised. "In addition to the identities, which had been the subject of speculation for a number of months, I can also confirm that the house once belonged to Michael Powder, A&R manager of Crass Records, Toten Herzen's original record label. This information was public knowledge, but we weren't in a position to confirm the details until now. However, I am able to confirm the details. . . ."

Lovelace's attention was drawn to a private discussion at the back of the room. Several journalists clustered around a smartphone. "Is something wrong?"

"It's a livestream." The journalist scanned the ceiling. "There's a camera in here streaming us. It's all on YouTube."

"What?"

Lovelace couldn't get a signal on his phone. Assistant commissioner one found YouTube first and shared his phone screen. For several seconds the room's occupants huddled and separated, huddled and separated, their heads looking down and then up as if the novelty of being spied on was

a modern day parlour game. Nadine studied her feet, Dremba circled and muttered the lyrics to an Algerian rap song. He checked his phone and nodded. The live stream on YouTube was attracting comments. They were pouring in. *'Confirmed, it's them, 'TH are the Bodies in the Basement.'* Nadine leaned over with her own phone. *'The portal to hell has been found.'*

"Any questions?" said Lovelace. The journalists ignored him, gathered their coats and bags and pushed their way out. He stopped one of them. "What's the rush?"

"We're getting down there before the fanatics turn up. You'll probably have to close that road now."

When they were gone Lovelace confronted his colleagues. "Well that went well."

"Didn't it just," said Assistant Commissioner one late for his next meeting. He tried not to barge Dremba's shoulder on the way out, but stepped on Nadine's foot and surged away down the corridor without apologising.

When Assistant Commissioner two approached, Dremba said, "Your co-operation is much appreciated."

"Fuck you." He turned back. "Just how well is your strategy progressing? Three thousand three hundred murdered in Romania? When you piss off back to Lyon we're the ones dealing with the riots in Hammersmith and Fulham and Brentford."

"Riots?" said Dremba. "You sit in your fucking office while my colleagues drive through riots risking their lives. You turn your nose up at the shit printed on my clothes. Look at yours. You look like a fucking idiot-"

"Pierre." Nadine pushed him away. "We do need to get to the other side of London."

"What?" Lovelace must have been psychic to know he was tasked with driving through London at four in the afternoon.

"Relax. There'll be plenty of rozzers on their way now. Let plod up in Stoke Newington deal with it."

Assistant Commissioner two was gone leaving Lovelace to endure his fate, endure another day in the Met. "Where was the camera?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me you were streaming it?"

Nadine waited for a supplementary question.

"Am I missing something here?" said Lovelace.

"No," she said.

"Who told you to stream it?"

"Why do you think it was us?"

The tiny camera was stuck to the frame of the window blinds, small enough to look like part of the drawstring mechanism. "We didn't want you performing." Dremba retrieved it. "Come on, let's go. How long do you think it will take?"

"One hour." Lovelace led the way out. The daylight had no warmth, no enthusiasm, or it could have been that the heat had travelled on ahead of them eager to see the chaos that would be developing along Dunlace Road. The traffic couldn't make its mind up, some of it streaming towards the north east, propelled by morbid curiosity, the rest of it heading south west out of fear.

They spotted the first banner on the A10 moving north towards Haggerston. A flag printed with the Crest flapping and rattling alongside a panting Renault Clio, the weight of malevolence forcing one of its hubcaps loose. It could have been a coincidence, but a second flag ten minutes later suggested a gathering storm. "When you notice one you see them everywhere," said Dremba.

Lovelace's hands gripped the steering wheel as if he was in agony. "That's Toten Herzen's logo isn't it?"

"It's a symbol, not a logo. Get your definitions right," said Dremba. "The significance of symbols can't be underestimated." He preferred sitting in the back of a car. It made him feel important, but to an outsider he must have looked like the villain being escorted to the nearest nick. Nadine up front, calm, enjoying the London scenery, Lovelace harried and bothered, hunting for gaps, for opportunities to race out of junctions, jumping amber lights.

Dremba leaned between the front seats. "If Dugarry says we have a problem, we have a problem."

"We do not have a problem," said Nadine. "They were his idea remember."

"His idea included rotating the symbols. Make them seasonal. We might as well work naked if they're ineffective."

"Tell that to Leonard. I'm not your tailor, Pierre."

"What exactly do they mean?" said Lovelace. "The symbols?"

"Incantations," said Dremba sitting back. "Defences, numbers for protection, sigils. It's all a code."

"And you believe it?"

"It's worked so far." He leaned forward again. "But for how long?"

"When we get back to Lyon we'll sort something out." Nadine pointed at a small Ford festooned with stickers, most of them offensive, all of them related to Toten Herzen. "Follow that car." She smiled. "I've always wanted to say that."

The drive to the house was an arduous stop start journey. Lovelace parked on a pavement, turned on the car's hazard warning lights and lit a cigarette. The journalist was right. They would have to close the road.

"News travels so fast in the internet age." Nadine stepped out of the car eager to read the minds of the people streaming towards the house. Black was a common element, peculiar hairstyles were everywhere and the street filled with the honking and blaring of car horns, the nasty gaseous puffing of diesel exhausts and a minibus trapped in the middle of it.

Dremba leaned on the roof of the car. "They'll tear it down brick by brick if the police don't get here soon."

The animals began to arrive. Two by two, one by one, mammal, bird, reptile, alien. The bizarre iconography of Toten Herzen fanhood. Livestock, domesticated, wild species, stuffed, plastic, ceramic, metal. An inflatable crocodile crowdsurfed the mohicans, occasionally knocked off course by a flying squirrel or bison. A monkey launched itself up the road, its gangly arms flailing like furry windmill sails. An outstretched human arm grabbed it and threw it on.

The trailing edge of the crowd crept backwards towards the car and still people kept coming. The murmuring turned to shouts, the shouts to chants, a single two-syllable word, '*Toten.*' Plastic bottles flew, liquids skimmed overhead and a stray Melton Mowbray pork pie hit the windscreen.

"Such a sharing crowd," Nadine said to Dremba relieved to get a cigarette in his mouth again. "That sense of community."

"This community gave me a fucking good kicking in Helsinki."

"They were just being affectionate. What I really like about England," said Nadine above the growing din, "is the way the police respond so quickly."

"They'll be here," said Lovelace. "London traffic, you know how it is. We've just come through it."

Dremba laughed. "We set out an hour ago. Has anyone called them?"

"Not that I know of."

"Have you requested back up?"

"No."

"Why was your colleague suspended again?"

"He had wandering hands. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Wandering hands." He took a long draw on his cigarette. "Do you want to go, Nadine?"

"Yes. No, hang on. Look at this."

The animals headed east to west and bits of number 23 Dunlace Road headed west to east. The front door was the first item to pass along the human conveyor belt. A deep blue colour, heavy wood, the door knocker still attached. Four hands carried it above head height and following close behind a roll of carpet. The house was leaving brick by brick, window by window (none of which made it as far as Peckham Lane). And once the removable bits were gone the crowd started on the permanent fixtures. A scuffle broke out for a kitchen sink, someone swung a worktop, several metres of copper piping went past, carried vertically like a collection of bayoneted rifles.

The first police sirens entered the street. "Now we can go," said Nadine.

"What are they gonna do with it all?" Dremba's cigarette flapped between his lips. "I mean, what does he want with that length of skirting board?"

"Memento. Maybe he'll get it signed."

Police motorbikes harried their way through the crowd growing dense now and filling every part of the street. Residents watched from windows, their postage stamp gardens full of intruders, their car roofs adrift amongst the bodies. Lovelace hesitated, waited for a gap, gasped and sighed and bounced around his driving seat.

"Sit back here, let me get us out," said Dremba. He swapped places with Lovelace who closed his eyes when Dremba reversed as if he was in an empty field. Bodies bumped and thudded off the car's bodywork and an urgent corridor formed, strewn with dropped bricks, lost roof tiles and an abandoned seagull glued to a wooden base. Eventually human traffic was replaced by metal traffic and Dremba sped away.

"Well now that you've started the Apocalypse what's next?" said Lovelace.

"Nothing you need to worry about." Nadine ran her hand along the sigils of her sleeve. "We're done here. Thank you."