

“SIEVERT & GRAY, DETECTORS”

Duncan P. Pacey

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This book is dedicated to:

*The English language, without which
you would not be able to read this dedication.*

INTRODUCTION

Or, the Untimely Demise of One John Doe

John Doe fled across the street, and the man with the saw followed.

It was a dark street. Foreboding, one might say, but yet it was the middle of the day. The sun did its best to cast a lamentable glow down from the snotty, smog-cluttered heavens above, but here, way down here, in this thin stretch of cold, dank alley snaking its way at the foot of giant, huddled towers, one might reasonably have presumed it was running out of batteries.

But dark or no, cold or no, exhaustion or no, John fled. For should he stop, the man with the saw would be on him. And, you know, he had a saw. That was never a promising weapon for an assailant to wield.

Using his full body as a battering ram, John slammed his way through the boarded-over doorway that marked the entrance to Tower AB16, its cobbled-together scrap iron lock snapping in two and clattering to the tiled floor below. Sweat poured off John's body as if it had some place else to be, this despite the afternoon's icy fangs gnawing on his reddened face and stiff, surprisingly well-moisturised fingers. Wind whistled past his ears as he sprinted through AB16's shadowy lobby, the clamour of his boots on old broken tiles crunching and echoing around him. He bee-lined straight for an old staircase on the opposite side of the modest room, ignoring the three old elevators that probably hadn't worked in a century. He'd been using the shafts as a long drop.

Somewhere behind him boots pounded on gravel, growing louder with every crunch.

John had to be quick.

He cursed his awful luck, grumbling swears through gritted yellow teeth and laboured breaths, heaving himself up the first of the creaking stairs. He also cursed his stupidity. And cursed just in general. It was a curse sort of day.

He had long since dropped his bulky backpack, and it was a stupid move. It might have been useful right now - something he could throw, or place down as an obstacle. Plus he'd lose a lot of money if he couldn't find it again - or if someone else got there first and knicked off with it. Which they probably would, the thieving little buggers. But its contents weighed him down like an anchor with a grudge. He could never have eluded the man with the saw while hefting that clumsy thing along.

Well, *eluded* was a strong word at this point...

But he'd gotten this far, and there wasn't much further to go. AB16 was his domain; had been since he moved into the suburb of Westhill a few weeks ago. He'd claimed a disused office space on floor fourteen of the tower, converting it piece by piece into his man cave. The rest of the building remained unoccupied, just another empty tower in a rolling sea of empty towers. This was the part of Westhill the locals seemed nervous to inhabit. There were still Borgons about, so they said. It wasn't civilised yet. And not to mention the problems with the electric streetlights, which were neither prevalent nor reliable. Nobody in their right mind would be caught in the Orcklands at night without a decent source of light. But John needed a place to work where he was less likely to be disturbed. Somewhere he could sort out his affairs without prying eyes and greedy ears. He'd packed floor fourteen with all his essentials: food, medical supplies, solar panels, electric lights, ingredients so he could make wares to sell, and, most relevant to right now, a gun. An old shotgun, to be precise. Not much ammo for it, but enough to obliterate the man with the saw.

Heavy footfalls below clattered on old tiles. John resisted the urge to look back.

"Bloody hell, John, you're gonna make me run up there?" roared a voice, wheezing, somewhere below. It was muffled slightly. Hidden behind a mask. The sweat build-up on that thing must have been ferocious.

"You don't have to!" John shouted back, hearing his own ghostly echo thrown back at him.

"Aw you're a bloody riot alright! Come down and talk to me!"

He snorted. Yeah right.

Gripping the handrail tight, John hauled himself up the final step of this flight and threw his body around the corner to the next. Floor three. Just a heart attack's worth of steps more to go and then he'd be on fourteen. The ancient damage to floor eight might slow him down, but if he was lucky he could use it to create a booby trap and waylay the man with the saw. How John would get back down again afterwards was a future problem.

Life was finally going well for John, too. That was the worst part. After a life of struggle, of poverty and starvation, he'd finally lined up an existence that made waking up each morning something to look forwards to, not regret. He had a great job where he could travel about in the more or less fresh air. He had a girl who appeared fond of him, even after he took his clothes off. He earned decent money, making friends, earning favours. It was all perfect. Bliss. Paradise, even. But maybe that was why it had all gone wrong. Life in the Waste wasn't meant to be perfect. There was no such thing as bliss (unless you counted that stinky drug people were smoking in Lynchfield). The Waste hadn't even heard of the word paradise.

No. Life here was meant to be short and to the point. Possibly shortened by a point.

John ran because he had witnessed the one thing in the whole messed up suburb of Westhill that caused a bunch of wild lunatics to not want him to witness much more of anything ever again. The man with the saw was there. And now he was here.

Curse his stupid, annoying, downright awful luck.

John would need a pay rise.

The cat and mouse chase continued, winding its way up Tower AB16's narrow staircase floor after floor. Light bubbled in through a series of old casement windows lining one side of the stairs, although the vast majority of actual glass had been blown out long ago. The afternoon's chill wind blew freely into the small space, mischievously pushing at John and his would-be assailant to see if they might trip and fall or something. That'd be a laugh. But the two men persevered. Their lungs sounded close to death, but they persevered.

Then, John rounded another flight to see light spilling through the roof above his head, and a lunar landscape of bullet scars pockmarking

some very-charred walls. More streamlets of light poked their little faces through the holes, big dusty beams lining the staircase like laser trip wires. The sweaty man grinned wide. Yes! Floor eight was just up there. Time to inconvenience the man with the saw.

The landing on floor eight was less a landing and more the idea of a landing. It was a falling, really. In some battle long past, something big and awful had burst through the wall and struck what used to be floor eight, turning the mouldy carpet, concrete slab, and steel beams into the same, but tiny little shard versions. Bullets had rained down on the rest of the vicinity, making it the wall and stairs equivalent of a sieve. John, in his infinite wisdom, was clever enough to lay a long piece of metal scrap across the gaping void as a makeshift bridge. Now, in whatever wisdom was beyond infinite wisdom, he was going to simply remove said bridge and then continue on his merry way to floor fourteen. Then he'd be at his leisure to grab his weapon, find some ammo, and saunter back down to put a nice big hole in the man with the saw. Maybe even a couple of holes, if he was feeling generous.

Which he was.

Very much so.

Breath still glugging out of his lungs like spilled soup, John Doe took his first careful (albeit hasty) steps onto the so-called 'bridge' and inched his weight forwards. The whole thing creaked, haunted by wailing ghosts, rattling with every footfall. It was never a very good bridge, but it was functional. In the Waste, that's all one could ask for. And it held, technically. John slid his way along as quickly as he could brave, his ears hyper-focused on the sounds of heavy boots slamming on torn carpet spiralling up the staircase below. His bridge made its complaints known, but soon he was on the other side and grinning like a mad man.

Here we go, he thought, turning back to face floor eight's gaping hole and squatting down on his haunches. Beneath his feet, the hole-ridden floor groaned. John held his breath. Better be quick with this.

As efficiently as he could - still hearing the approaching sound of a very out of breath man (saw included) - John slid his stiff, red fingers under the nearest edge of the scrap bridge and lifted it away from the largely fossilised carpet. Its slim, jagged edge bit into his skin, causing him to wince and make a little "Ooh!" noise under his breath. Blood welled beneath the metal and trickled drunkenly to the side. That cut

might be a problem later, but if there was to be a later in which said cut was even noticeable, he needed to keep going. And so he lifted, and he heaved, and he pushed.

The metal scraped awfully loud in this small, bare space. John felt he heard the man with the saw's pace quicken in response, his stomps growing subtly closer together, as though he instinctively knew that scraping metal was bad and now tried to get up the stairs faster. He was damn close, too. Was John even going to make it in time?

He pushed harder. The bridge scraped forwards. The edge slid closer and closer to the hole in floor eight. Come on!

John took a step forwards, shifting his weight to give the bridge one final mega-hurrah and send it tumbling down to floor seven.

This was his mistake.

Most of John's bodyweight now rested on the edge of the hole with no support to speak of. Floor eight's tired, bullet-ridden, altogether miserable landing just couldn't take it and, sadly for John, gave way.

He had just enough of a pause before tumbling for a moment's "Oh shit."

And then it all collapsed.

John fell feet-first through the floor, tumbling with limbs flailing in a shower of concrete, dust, and bits of suicidal carpet. He landed hard on one foot, immediately losing his balance and crashing towards the floor. On instinct he put a hand out to save his fall. Of course, all this served to do was transfer the weight of his body to his flimsy wrist joint. He screamed, finally hitting the ground with his shoulder as he tucked his hand up to his chest. It pulsed with an awful pain, a sharp sting he could feel all the way up to his shoulder.

Lumps of Swiss-cheese concrete and choking clouds of dust rained from above for a few seconds more. Chunks struck John as he writhed around, gasping in pain and coughing, his lungs swirling with the chalk-like clouds that were, let's be honest, probably full of pretty awful spores at this point. One meteoric chunk with maliciously good aim landed square on his ankle, breaking in two on the little sticky-out bone at the leg joint and shattering part of the man's foot. Something loud snapped.

John Doe screamed again, the noise soon tapering off into a sob. He coiled forwards to grasp his foot, tears welling in his eyes.

And the man with the saw finally caught up.

He arrived running, skidding to a halt as he entered ground zero, skin glistening with sweat. He doubled over, hands on knees, falling against the wall for balance, burnt lungs wheezing. And John beheld him: a ragged figure, with loose, itchy-looking clothing you'd expect on just about any nondescript civilian roaming the civilised Orcklands. The man didn't look like a Borgon or anything scary like that, just some guy you'd meet in a pub after work, except that this 'some guy' had on a truly upsetting faceless mask - a skin-tight white sack that hugged his face, but did not betray any features (except for the sweat, which was at this point making significant in-roads into the mask's business. If John knew what a Rorschach was, he'd be seeing butterflies right now). What was worse, mostly for John, was that the man gripped a hell of a weapon in his big paws. It appeared that a saw and a sword had had some kind of love child, and that their love child hated its own existence, taking it out on others. This saword consisted of a long, copper-tinged saw blade welded to a squat pole, which was maybe a foot in length. It looked to be an unwieldy weapon, but something in the back of John's brain couldn't help but utterly fear it. It didn't look like it offered a swift death.

John sniffled, and it was wet.

"How you doin' there, John?" asked the man with the saw, still leaning on the wall. His body had gone slightly limp from all the day's activity. Hardly threatening at all. Probably couldn't run very fast anymore, on account of his state of breath.

If John could just...

He screamed.

"Oooh," the man with the saw hissed as he recoiled from John. "I wouldn't try to run with an ankle that looks like that, eh? I reckon your toes ain't meant to point in that direction."

John curled back into a ball, unable to clutch both his sprained wrist and shattered foot at the same time. Tears cleared little tracks of clean skin through the dust that coated his red face.

The man looked up at the ceiling. He whistled. "That's a hell of a hole. You come through there, then?" He shook his head, a professional appraising someone else's poor craftsmanship. "You oughta put in a bridge or somethin', eh? Be much safer."

John gritted his teeth, but said nothing. The pain was nearly blinding. Everything looked fuzzy. Except that saword. He saw that in full high definition. No way the brain could be fuzzy about that.

"Well," continued the man, "I suppose that ain't gonna be your problem soon. Probably don't need this anymore, do I?" He reached with chunky fingers under the edge of his mask and rolled it up and over his head.

"Oh yes, that's much better," he said, sniffing a long, tired, blessedly sweat-free breath.

John's eyes widened. "Y- you?! Wh-" John tried, feeling a hoarseness in his throat as his voice stuck to his uvula. "Why?"

"Why?" replied the man, whom John had met so many times before. "You know how it is, eh? You saw too much, didn't ya?"

"I'll- I'll just forget. I'm a forgetful guy."

The man shook his head again. Solemn. "We both know that ain't true. Look, I liked ya, Johnnie. Truly. You were one of the good traders, eh? Never ripped me off. 'Least not that I ever knew."

John sneered. "Maybe I should have."

"Hah, yeah maybe. But you never were the sort, eh? Too good for this world, I reckon. Certainly for Westhill, anyway. But enough chin-waggin', mate. Time to get this over with, eh? I got errands to run on me way home an' I don't wanna lose the light."

"N- no, wait! They'll come looking for me! People will find out you did this, but it doesn't have to be this way!" He raised one pitiful hand towards his assailant.

The man stomped towards him, claspng his weapon with two firm hands. "No one's comin' to look for ya, pal. It's just murder - 'snot a real crime, eh? Just personal business between you an' me."

"Please!" John tried scrabbling back, fighting through a pain that threatened to steal his consciousness right from under him. He had to get away! He had to escape! Tell the world about what he saw. Blow the whole thing wide open. Ruin their plans!

"Please no!"

"Stop beggin', you'll make me feel bad."

The man loomed above John, now, wrapping and unwrapping his fingers around the hilt of the saword. His face had grown dark.

"Wait! No! Don't do this!" John sobbed. He couldn't get away. He could hardly move. His body felt paralysed.

"Look, I'm real sorry about this, Johnnie. Truly. It'll keep me up at night an' everythin'. But you ... you just saw too much. This is how it has to be. Now stay still, eh? This is gonna take a few chops."

And that's how John Doe was murdered.