



THE GREAT
DARKNESS

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CHAPTER ONE

October 1939
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The secret place lay at the end of one of Cambridge's many blind alleys, through a small oak door. Brooke had the key which turned the well-oiled antique lock. Slipping down the narrow, mossy steps, he reached the river. Here he sat in the darkness on a stone ledge, setting his ochre-tinted glasses on a shelf in the brickwork. A wooden box, with a slate lid, hid a canvas bag containing bathing shorts and a towel.

For a moment he sat listening to the old city, unseen beyond the high walls. Water trickled in drains, pans clattered in a college kitchen, and close by a bicycle rumbled over cobbles. And something new, the sounds of war: soldiers marching, synchronised boots fading away towards the station, and the *silence* of war, the empty streets, the buses and trams confined to depots, the cinemas and theatres boarded shut.

To the south, a pair of searchlights crossed and uncrossed in the sky like knitting needles, on the watch for the parachutes of spies.

Brooke filled his lungs with the night air, laced with the scent of the river, that unmistakable concoction of river weed, sodden

roots and banks. Coal fires brought a smoky softness to the night. The great Fen fields to the north, harvested of beet and potatoes and cabbages, added an earthy edge, the signature of the deep black peat below. And, tonight, a trace of air fuel from the fighter base on the outskirts of the city.

Setting his hat on a nail in the frame of the door, Brooke took a minute to change, folding his clothes neatly in the box. For a moment he hesitated: swimming after dark had been banned, and the army ran a motorboat on regular patrols, armed with a searchlight. But such rules, for Brooke, had always amounted to a challenge.

He used his palms to raise himself the inch needed to allow a forward slide from the step into the cool, forgiving stream.

He lay on his back, floating, looking up into the mercy of the night. Closing his damaged eyes, he drifted with the current, which ran in its ancient canyon of stone; dark tonight, not overseen by the jewelled windows of college rooms. Especially dark tonight, for all of Cambridge was cast in shadow, the streets patrolled by air raid wardens, every window blind. The Great Darkness had fallen by Whitehall decree across half of England, an official blackout in preparation for the bombs that would fall.

For now the war itself, a month old, had been branded 'phoney' – the German offensive in the west, following the surprise attack on Poland, was not expected until the new year. The Poles fought on, but were clearly losing. The Russians had invaded from the east. The French had managed a token sortie in the Saar, while the British Expeditionary Force camped along the Belgian border.

But there were casualties, even as the world waited. In the Atlantic, a U-boat had sunk HMS *Courageous*, with the loss of more than five hundred men. One of the dead had been a former

scholar at Brooke's old college. They'd posted his name on a board by the porters' lodge, a little ceremony which brought the loss closer to home. For Brooke, just forty years old but a veteran of the Great War, it felt like an augury.

He swam north, where open meadows lay on the west bank, a fen marked on one of Brooke's beloved city maps as St John's Wilderness. The river ahead retained the ghost of its reflection: a sinuous bend of faint luminescence, slightly blurred by a rising mist. Somewhere, he heard the dull thud of a poacher's gun, repeated, matched by echoes. Submerging his face, his eyes, then his ears, he listened to the river turning over the tiny pebbles of its gravel bed, a treble, set against the bass note of the water, the deep rumble of the main stream, as it ran between its banks.

As he surfaced he caught, or rather finally identified, a noise that had been present for some time, and which he'd confused with the under-song of the river itself.

A trundle, a murmur, as of cart wheels.

But he could see nothing: the darkness seemed to rest against his eyes.

The cart wheels came closer, with the trudge of boots matching the pace of the turning wheels.

Finally, he glimpsed shadows on the bank.

And heard a voice: 'Grim work.'

A half-bar of a song in three voices followed, the melody tangled.

'Quiet there! Right, we're under the trees, boys. Those who want to smoke, can.'

A match flared, then another, the light passing from face to face. Brooke saw it all in a moment: a line of three empty carts, the traces horseless. A dozen soldiers, each with a spade, stood in a circle as the cigarette smoke rose. Recalling the scene later for Claire, his wife, he noted that the men appeared cowed,

shoulders down, heads bowed, one leaning on the next.

Soldiers had become as common as students on the streets. In the weeks since Chamberlain's broadcast had marked the advent of war, Cambridge was an armed camp. Tents in rows filled Parker's Piece, one of the city's great parks, as if re-enacting the night before Crecy, or Agincourt. Anti-aircraft guns, dug into pits, formed a necklace of encampments along the borough boundary. Even the sky was defended, dotted with barrage balloons, held by cables over the railway lines and factories, braced to deter dive-bombers when they came, flying low.

But given the strictures of the Great Darkness, what had brought this platoon of men out to the meadows at midnight?

A voice from the riverbank: 'So no pocket money this time, eh, Sarg?'

'You've done alright. I told the lot of you, stick with me and you'll not go short. Next time they'll pay double.' This accent came from the North, a strange guttural sound Brooke couldn't place, but the questioner was a Londoner.

Brooke caught a sweet smell on the breeze.

It was as if the next speaker had heard his thoughts. 'That's you, Spider – the stink: you haven't had a wash this year.'

London again, the East End, reeking of the market stall and bargain calls.

'Christ. The stench is on the spades,' said another.

'Use the river.' The sergeant's voice this time, losing patience with his men.

Brooke saw the white splashes where they plunged the tools in the water.

'Right. Let's get some grub,' said the sergeant. 'Put your backs into it . . .'

Cigarette butts sizzled in the stream, and the soldiers were

gone, tramping south, man-hauling the empty carts away to the north.

The sticky sweet smell went with them.

Treading water, Brooke pushed thick wet hair out of his eyes. He thought that anything undertaken by night came freighted with connotations: shame, secrecy, guilt. What had the soldiers buried? Where was the pit?

Detective Inspector Eden Brooke swam back to the mossy steps.

CHAPTER TWO

Brooke was a nighthawk, but he was not alone. Over the years since he'd been invalided home from the last war, his insomnia had deepened, and the wounds to his eyes had failed to heal, so he'd taken to strolling the streets at night. He found them inhabited by fellow travellers: those who couldn't sleep, those who didn't wish to sleep, those whose work began when the sun went down. They offered a warm fire, a friendly chat and sometimes inspiration when a case proved intractable. Each night he did, finally, find rest: at home if Claire was not on night shifts at the hospital, or in a cell at the station. Sleep, when it did come, was always brief and sudden. In the dark watches of the night his life often felt like a clock winding down.

Rose King, at her tea stall on Market Hill, had been his first nighthawk. Returning from the Great War, Brooke had joined the Borough – the city's own police force, one of the oldest, and smallest, in the country. After training, he'd secured a night beat, a preordained path which led him across Market Hill, the city's central square, each midnight. Rose had provided a hot drink and, beneath a wide awning, an oasis of golden light.

But even the resilient Rose had to abide by the rules and regulations of the Great Darkness, and he found her hut boarded up in the corner of the square, amongst the empty traders' stalls, and partly obscured by a wall of sandbags. A chalk sign read simply: CLOSED BY GOVERNMENT ORDER.

Brooke stood in the silent square, considering his next move, lighting one of his precious Black Russian cigarettes. He watched the flame consume the paper, edging down towards the golden filter. The mist was thickening, seeping up through drain covers and out of culverts, a milk-white flood which threatened to engulf the city. The night was getting chilly, and his damp hair made him shiver. The strains of a piano came and went from a nearby pub, but there was no light, just a half-line of a song.

Something of the scene he had witnessed on the riverbank refused to succumb to a rational explanation. Many people are curious and ask questions, but Brooke was driven by an innate conviction that he had a right to know the answers. The result was a restless life. Why order soldiers to dig at night? Why promise to *pay* soldiers to dig at night? He needed a fresh perspective, to rise above the moment, and he knew precisely which nighthawk to visit.

Leaving the shadows of the old market he made his way down Petty Cury, the narrow street a procession of shop windows taped up in criss-cross patterns against bomb blast. His footsteps echoed, thanks to the Blakeys on his brogues: metal studs to protect the leather, an army trick he'd adopted for civvy street. He circled St Andrew the Great, playing his torch over the stained glass, noting the familiar image he'd been shocked by as a boy: the severed head of John the Baptist, neatly set on its silver platter, awash with the saint's blood.

An echo of this grisly martyrdom waited a hundred yards along

the street, where Brooke paused outside Sidney Sussex College. His father, a professor of medicine, had been a distant figure, but had once returned home from dinner at the college with a sensational story, which he'd told his son while sitting on his bed, an unheard-of degree of intimacy that had cemented the moment in Brooke's memory more than the gruesome tale itself.

'I've seen a man's skull tonight,' his father had said, his eyes bright in the candlelight.

The story was richly Gothic. The body of Oliver Cromwell, the great republican and a former student of the college, had been dug up from his quiet grave by supporters of the restored King Charles II. The head, hacked from the body, had been hung from London Bridge, beside that of common criminals, where it was pecked at by birds.

'The eyes were first to go,' his father had explained.

Blown down in a storm, the top of the skull had fractured and had been spirited away by supporters, taken north to Cambridge to be hidden within the great man's old college. Only two trusted fellows ever knew its hiding place at any time. On special nights, the lights over dinner were doused and the custodians despatched to find the treasure, which was set on the polished mahogany table, supporting a candle.

'He was with us until the port and cheese,' his father had said, tucking Brooke in. 'Then he was whisked away.'

As Brooke surveyed the college facade, he saw a flickering light, briefly, in one of the lancet windows: the selected fellows, perhaps, returning Cromwell's head to its hiding place.

Pressing on, he cut down an alley full of metal bins to a fire escape, which took him up six flights before decanting him onto the roof of one of the shops. A metal ladder led a few feet further aloft to a lookout post, one of several set up across the city by the Observer Corps, with a sweeping panoramic view across

the rooftops, ideal for spotting enemy aircraft and the fires their bombs and incendiaries might ignite.

Jo Ashmore emerged from a conical hut at the rear of the platform, straightening her uniform, unable to stop herself retouching her short, expensively cut brown hair. Tall, willowy, fashionably boyish, she smiled broadly when she recognised her visitor.

Brooke swept his hand across the scene below. ‘The Great Darkness! A success, and no doubts. But what have you seen, Jo? Tell me all.’

‘Always questions, Brooke, never answers.’

‘I’m a scientist. Sorry, I *was* a scientist, of sorts,’ he said, taking off his hat and running a hand back through the thick black hair. ‘If you want answers, you must ask questions. Ask the right one, at the right time, and the world makes sense.’

She peered at Brooke’s shadowy face and laughed, retrieving a powder compact from her uniform and holding the mirror up. The detective took off his glasses and stared at his own image: the high forehead, the pale blue eyes, the hair flopping forward. A long strand of green river weed was stuck to his cheek.

‘You’ll be growing webbed feet next,’ she said.

Ashmore was Brooke’s newest nighthawk recruit, tonight marking her first full month as a member of the Observer Corps. She’d grown up next door to the Brookes, played with their children, free to come and go with her brother, Marcus. The houses, a mirror-pair of detached villas, were set in meadows down by the river. The families were close in that entirely natural way which means that nobody can recall how the threads had become entangled.

A racy reputation had marked her coming of age: there were parties in London, boyfriends with fast cars, smart clothes. She’d

abandoned it all at the outbreak of war for her post, a mystery Brooke suspected she felt cast her in a Romantic light. He noted that she'd expertly applied lipstick to create a delicate bow of her lips, and that her tin hat had been hand-painted with the elegant motif: *OC*.

From her post she watched for EA: enemy aircraft, especially bombers, of which, so far in this war, there had been none. But the whole country had its eyes on the sky, when it wasn't trying to ferret out spies and German parachutists hidden in garden sheds. This was the intolerable burden of the phoney war: a time of watching and waiting.

Not a single light betrayed the city below. Rooftops stretched north towards the Fens, south to the Gogs, a range of low chalk hills, dimly seen against the stars. Mist lay in the streets, as if college sheets had been laid out on the cobbles.

'I saw you earlier,' she said, a smile widening under the tin hat. 'It's a good job these glasses aren't really powerful otherwise I might have seen more than I should.'

She enjoyed teasing Brooke about his looks. When she was a child she'd been told the tall, pale man with the odd glasses had fought with T. E. Lawrence in the wildernesses of Egypt and Palestine. The great hero's dark good looks found an echo in Brooke, a wounded knight, brooding, soldiering on. And there'd been a medal from the king, for some always unspoken act of heroism, which added lustre to the legend. As a ten-year-old she'd once spent an evening with Brooke's daughter searching the upper floors of the house for his missing desert robes.

'You didn't see anything else when I was swimming?' asked Brooke. 'On the far bank, just there . . .' He pointed to a spot in the gloom beyond the rooftops.

She went back to her hut, reappeared with a box file and handed Brooke a typed order sheet:

CAM 005/OC ADVISORY

20–21 October 1939

Duration of scheduled blackout 21.30 hrs to 6.30 hrs. All troop movements cancelled. All vehicles confined to depots by midnight.

NO FLIGHTS LOCAL – DUXFORD.

Air Ministry advises two overflies by RAF reconnaissance, Stanmore.

Night exercise St John's Wilderness. Ignore all sound. No plot required.

EASTERN COUNTIES COMMAND.

MADINGLEY HALL.

Office of CO Eastern: COL. SWIFT-LANE.

‘It's odd, isn't it?’ said Brooke. ‘Why hold a night exercise when we're all supposed to be tucked up in bed behind our blackout blinds? I doubt our lads need that much practice digging holes in the ground. Did you follow orders and ignore all sounds from St John's Wilderness?’

‘That would have been a challenge,’ said Ashmore. ‘They made a racket, actually. Civilians first, dragging spades down before dusk. They disappeared into town later, promptly replaced by soldiers, and carts . . . Looks like the civilians dug a hole, and the soldiers filled it up.’

Brooke studied the order paper. ‘I saw the soldiers. A sergeant and a squad. They'd been working, alright. No other orders like this?’

She handed him five more notes, all referring to the same location and at similar times, stretching back over the previous month.

‘You can keep the bumf,’ she said. ‘If we could produce Spitfires and bullets as fast as red tape we’d win the war hands down.’

They stood in companionable silence, during which Ashmore checked her watch at least three times.

‘I’m waiting for the moon to come up,’ she explained. ‘Which it is due to do – according to my chart – any moment now. Madingley Hall has been on the line to say they’ve lost three barrage balloons.’

Madingley Hall, a Tudor mansion on the outskirts of the city, was military headquarters for much of Eastern England.

‘They broke free from their cable moorings an hour ago a mile south of the station. So they’re headed this way. Three runaway airships out of control – what fun, eh? No one has any idea where they are until we get some moonlight. If I see them I have to phone in a position.’

Brooke peered into the darkness, disturbed that three sixty-foot-long cigar-shaped balloons could remain invisible right before their eyes.

‘Someone will cop it for letting them slip,’ said Ashmore. ‘A week ago, according to the grapevine, they lost six in a storm on the East Coast. Drifted across the North Sea and took down power lines in Norway. Havoc, apparently – it’s the cables underneath and the netting that do the damage. They snare stuff. The sooner we can spot the blighters the better. Once I’ve radioed their position it’s someone else’s headache. Anything for a quiet life.’

Brooke had never before associated Josephine Ashmore with the quiet life. He wondered what really lay behind her decision

to volunteer for lonely work, at night, on a cold rooftop.

‘There’s the moon, at least . . .’ she said.

A bright light had appeared on a college roof, lodged between tapering medieval chimneys. Within seconds it had revealed an arc of its circle, moving quickly against the silhouette of the buildings. Silver light washed over the Cambridge skyline, revealing the four great pinnacles of King’s College Chapel, the distant, brutal tower of the University Library, the colleges running down to the river, which lay in a great meander opposite open meadows, along a stretch every student learnt to call the Backs.

Brooke watched the moon rise, imagining the gentle hum of celestial mechanics until it was free, gliding into the sky, the light spilling out and seeming now to ignite the river, which gleamed like steel sliding from a furnace.

‘There!’ said Ashmore.

A balloon, the size of one of the city’s buses, hung in the air a few hundred yards downwind of the cube-like tower of St John’s College Chapel, a network of cables ensnaring the building. As they watched it rippled, waves moving over its surface, as it strained at its moorings.

‘And there,’ said Brooke, pointing away from the river towards the open fenland to the north.

This balloon, several hundred feet up in the air, had got much further and, glimpsed beam-on, was heading swiftly towards the distant coast, impeded only by what appeared to be the remains of a tree held within the net beneath its ‘belly’.

There was no sign of the third balloon.

Ashmore plotted the two within sight and phoned in the data, sitting down to make out a report on paper by torchlight.

‘Bumf,’ she complained. ‘Bloody bumf.’

Finished, she lit a cigarette.

Then they saw the third stray balloon.

A sudden flare of yellow-blue flame flashed and lit up the sky over the distant railway station. A few seconds later came the strangely elongated pulse of sound, like a hot, jagged hiss. A burning balloon, caught up in power lines, crumpled over the large grain mill beside the station. As the 'skin' burnt away it revealed the structure within, crashing towards the ground. The distinctive *crump* of the collapse shook the rooftops.

A fireball of escaping gas lit up the night, a pulsing vision in yellow, dripping with flame.

The pain in Brooke's eyes was needle-sharp despite the yellow-tinted glasses, and he had to grip the plotting table for support.

An air raid siren began to wail.

Brooke pulled the rim of his hat down over his eyes. 'So much for the Great Darkness.'