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Opening extract from

# The City of Fear

Written by

**Andrew Beasley**

Illustrated by

**David Wyatt**

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**Ben Kingdom 3**

## PROLOGUE

The Wall. Two short, hard words that had come to mean life or death for the people of London. It just depended which side you were on.

Captain Mickelwhite led his Legion brigade along the battlements, enjoying the slap of the sword against his leg. Overhead, thunderclouds were gathering and ravens croaked as they battled against the wind. The first drops of rain struck Mickelwhite as cold and heavy as stones, but he didn't care. He felt unstoppable.

The Legion had built the Wall in six weeks.

Six weeks of pain. And blood. And war on the city streets.

Mickelwhite smiled, a slash of red against his ghostly pale skin; he had never had so much fun.

Not many Londoners had known that conflict was coming. They had been too busy or too stupid to see the signs that a war had been waging around them for centuries; a secret, silent war. On one side were Ben Kingdom and the Watchers, spies and warriors living on the rooftops; and on the other was the Legion lurking in their maze of tunnels beneath the city. It was the oldest battle in the world, the eternal battle between light and dark. And the dark was winning.

Soon the Watchers would be no more.

"Quickly, boys," Mickelwhite urged his troop of boy-soldiers. "You know that it doesn't do to keep Mr. Sweet waiting."

The brigade had been together for a long time – first sharing a lowly barracks in the Under, the Legion's subterranean lair, then leading labour parties working on the Wall. They were all young, Mickelwhite included, but they had grown up fast. There was John Bedlam, a short, stocky lad, born and raised in the Devil's Acre. Fighting came as naturally to him as breathing. Beside Bedlam was Jimmy Dips, a rat-faced pickpocket; then came Hans Schulman, a German lad with fists the size of ham hocks but a clumsy pair of feet. Finally, limping along in the rear was the hunchback, Munro, pulling his mangy three-legged bulldog, Buster, along behind him.

"Look," said Mickelwhite, surveying the bruised and broken city beneath them. The Wall surrounded it, as inescapable as a hangman's noose, marking the limits of Legion rule, the territory which Mr. Sweet had staked out for himself. "We did this."

"Makes you proud, don't it?" said Bedlam.

The Wall was not a thing of beauty. Houses had been torn apart to provide enough stone. Whole streets sacrificed for the great cause. Some buildings had become part of the Wall itself; their windows bricked up against the outside world, the rooms filled with rubble, their roofs fortified by coils of barbed wire. Jagged sheets of metal, spiked railings torn from front gardens, broken glass, wooden stakes with sharpened points; all crowned the Wall like a necklace of death. Anything and everything that could be used to repel an attack had found its way into the monstrous structure.

Rising in the west in Hammersmith, the Wall stretched as far Lime House Cut in the east. It snaked along the north bank of the Thames, where all the bridges stood broken, leaving the river like a moat. Only Tower Bridge had been kept whole, its drawbridge defiantly raised.

To the north, Legion rule stopped at Balls Pond Road. Beyond that, outside the Wall, London had been levelled to the ground for a distance of one hundred feet. All that remained was a swathe of debris and the skeletons of houses. This was the northern Dead Man's Land – littered with landmines and mantraps, it was a deterrent to both attackers from outside the Wall and would-be escapees from within.

And south of the river it was much worse.

That was where the resistance had been the strongest, stirred up by the Watchers. That was why the Legion had wiped South London off the map.

Mickelwhite felt a sudden wave of hatred towards Ben Kingdom and his rabble rousers. Bile rose in his throat and he spat out a curse.

"Death to the Watchers!" he snarled.

"And death to Ben Kingdom!" said Bedlam.

About a quarter of stubborn Londoners had dared to resist Legion rule. They had fought back. But they had lost. And then they had been punished. It was these men, women and children who had built the Wall. With chains around their ankles, the work gangs had slaved day and night. Mickelwhite, Bedlam and a thousand other Legionnaires had cracked the whip until the work was done.

A short distance ahead, Mickelwhite could now see Mr. Sweet, standing alone on the windswept battlements. None of this would have been possible without him.

Who else but Sweet would have had the courage and strength to achieve all this?

Mickelwhite felt his breathing quicken as he drew near. It was an honour to be in his presence. Through cunning manipulation not only had Mr. Sweet made himself Prime Minister, but then, with treasonous audacity, he had kidnapped Queen Victoria and crowned himself as King in her place. And now, at Sweet's command, the Legion had bullied and beaten an entire city into submission. Truly, his deadly ambition knew no bounds.

Mickelwhite studied Mr. Sweet with admiration. The strong broad shoulders. The massive arms of a weightlifter. But…the scars…

It was forbidden to talk about Mr. Sweet's "accident", but it was no secret that he had suffered terrible burns during the Legion's battle against the Watchers at the Feast of Ravens. Mickelwhite couldn't forget the inferno that had swept through the Tower of London when the Watchers had attacked during Mr. Sweet's dark sacrificial ceremony of power. However, he could only guess at what remained of Mr. Sweet's once handsome face after the flames had caressed him from head to toe. That was probably why the great man had begun to dress so…eccentrically.

Mickelwhite could see the outline of the mask which encased the whole of Sweet's head; the hard lines of the eye sockets, the fierce point of the beak. The collar of the man's coat was wreathed in black feathers and on his head, encircling the shining dome of the mask, sat the crown of a king.

Not just any crown though. This was the Crown of Corruption – the great weapon of the Legion. It was set with the thirty Coins of Blood – the same silver coins that Judas, the great betrayer, had once held in his clammy palm – and it gave its wearer ultimate power to dominate the minds of weaker men. Sweet had made the crown his own, fixing shards of metal, daggers of broken glass, even long square nails around the iron band, until it resembled the Wall itself.

As they drew closer, Mickelwhite could sense the raw power radiating from Sweet. It was as if the man was a furnace and to draw near was to feel the blistering heat of the rage that boiled within him.
The young captain announced his presence with the Legion salute, slamming his left fist to his chest. “My Lord!” Mickelwhite declared.
The big man turned slowly and Mickelwhite felt himself flinch as two eyes pierced him, as hard and unforgiving as metal skewers.
“So, it is finished,” said Sweet. “Finally.”
“Yes, My Lord,” said Mickelwhite, nodding. “The Wall is now complete.”
“Hmmm,” Sweet growled. “Complete, you say?”
Mickelwhite could feel the sickly tide of fear rising inside the other boys; Sweet had that effect.
“Sector three is secure?” asked Sweet.
“Yes, My Lord,” Bedlam snapped in reply. Sector three had been his to oversee.
“And the watchtowers?”
“Yes, My Lord,” said Jimmy Dips.
“And the tunnels? Every conceivable exit blocked, including the outer limits of the Under?”
“Yes, My Lord,” muttered Munro. He and Buster had only just caught up with the rest of the brigade, the dog whimpering at the boy’s side.
“You were responsible for the work gangs who were collapsing the passages beneath Hackney Wick?” Sweet continued.
“Yes, My Lord,” Munro mumbled, his eyes on his feet.
Sweet took a step forwards and plucked Buster up into his arms, stroking the dog’s wet fur and scratching behind its ears. Mickelwhite couldn’t help but notice the skin on Sweet’s hands, a patchwork of scabs and open sores; another souvenir of the flames.
“Didn’t the Watchers lead an escape through one of those tunnels three days ago?” said Sweet, still fussing with Buster.
“Yes…but, my work party was one of the smallest and…” Munro’s words dried in his mouth. “The tunnel is sealed now,” he whispered. “It will never happen again.”
“No,” said Sweet, “I’m certain it won’t.”
Munro braced himself, waiting for the inevitable punishment for failure. He shut his eyes, but his master’s blow never came.
“And so the real work begins,” Sweet continued. “Every soul in London shall bow to me or face the consequences. The Watchers must be hunted down and eliminated, every last one of them. And Ben Kingdom must be made to suffer…” Sweet gestured towards his mask. “Just as I have suffered.”
Sweet swung round towards Munro again, and offered the dog back to him with outstretched arms. Gratefully, Munro reached out to reclaim the only living creature that he could truly call his friend.
At the last instant, Sweet snatched the poor animal away and, in a single movement, flung Buster over
the Wall.
They all heard the pathetic whimper as the dog fell. Followed by the awful crunch of its landing.
“You should be grateful,” Sweet growled. “You find me in a merciful mood tonight!”

It was only then that it occurred to Mickelwhite that Mr. Sweet might be insane.

## CHAPTER 1

## THE WINGS OF DEATH

“Hold on tight,” Ben Kingdom whispered.
Lucy Lambert gave him a wry look with her one good eye. A leather eyepatch hid the other empty socket. “I can see why you’re our leader,” she said. “I never would’ve thought of that.”
Ben flashed her a grin. Both he and Lucy were Watchers. They lived and ran and fought on the rooftops of London – all they ever did was hold on tight. That night, however, they were hanging on for dear life.
For over an hour, Ben’s squad had been hiding on the stone gallery above the ghostly white face of Big Ben. Rain had been falling steadily all evening and the sky had turned from grey to black to an angry purple. Up here, with the storm churning around them, Ben felt as if he
was in the belly of the beast. The hair on the back of his neck stood to attention and his right hand trembled involuntarily, as if an electric current was passing through it. Then a fork of lightning blistered across the sky, followed by the deep booming rumble of thunder as the clouds around them began a battle of their own.
Water streamed down Ben’s face beneath the rain’s merciless assault. They were all cold to the marrow and afraid too, truth be told. That was why Ben made light of their situation. He was the leader of the Watchers, the one the prophecy called the Hand of Heaven. It was his duty to keep the spark of hope going. And since the Wall went up, hope was in short supply.
There were just five of them in the squad. Five Watchers against the army of the Legion. But Ben couldn’t have chosen a better crew to stand by him. He looked along the line, saw the faith glinting in their eyes beneath the rain-streaked goggles, and his heart surged with pride.
Lucy Lambert was the bravest person Ben had ever met; fearless and loyal and true. Beautiful as well, Ben thought. He had known her for long enough now not to even see the scar that split her cheek in two. If he could choose only one Watcher to fight beside him, it would be her.
Next to Lucy was Valentine, a boy who had been an enemy in the Legion when Ben first met him. Valentine was a toff and he looked it, with his pointed nose and pinched lips, but Ben, like every good guttersnipe, knew better than to judge by appearances. Toff or not, Valentine was alright by him since he came over to the Watchers.
Then there was shaven-headed Ghost; so silent, so still. No one had ever heard the African boy speak a word, and yet they all trusted him – Ghost was a Watcher to the core. Ben met his gaze and gave him a nod. We’re gonna need your strength tonight.
Last in the group was Nathaniel Kingdom, Ben’s big brother. Anyone could see they

were related; they had both inherited their father's strong features. But only Ben had their mother's flame-red hair. Ben had never had a chance to thank her for it though, because she had died giving birth to him. For a long time neither Ben nor Nathaniel nor their father had known how to handle the depth of their loss, but in the midst of the war with the Legion, they had grown closer than they had ever been. The risk of death made them all cling tighter to the things that really mattered.

For three months all they had known was war. Running. Fighting. Hiding. Knowing that the greatest battle – the final battle – was fast approaching. Every day they spread the word in the taverns, on street corners, in whispers, in private, out of the corner of their mouths. A simple secret message: 1st May, we take the city back. 1st May is Revolution Day! That was when free Londoners were going to fight back against the Legion, and when Ben and the Watchers would destroy Sweet's grip on the city and restore the Queen to the throne.

Or die trying.

But before the final conflict could even begin, it was the Watchers' duty to get those not fit for battle out to safety: the youngest, the elderly, the invalids and the vulnerable. That was why Ben and his crew were clinging to the tower of Big Ben – watching over the latest in a long line of breakouts they had orchestrated.

On the ground, Ben's father, Jonas Kingdom, and Jago Moon, oldest, toughest and roughest of the Watchers, were preparing to help the new batch of escapees make their bid for freedom. They had to get them up and over the Wall to the boat that was waiting silently for them in the Thames. A boat filled with British soldiers.

For the last few weeks the Watchers had been working hand in hand with the army. Less than a mile away, on the far side of the death zone, the full might of Her Majesty's armed forces were waiting with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets. But that was all they had been able to do – wait.

For Queen Victoria was still Mr. Sweet's prisoner, and every Londoner had heard his threats pronounced from the battlements by loudhailer: "Attack my city and you will be welcomed by your Queen's severed head on a spike." No one doubted that Sweet would be true to his word.

And so the army was over a barrel and would remain that way, unless Ben and the Watchers could rescue the Queen. For now they played a deadly game of cat and mouse, with the Watchers sneaking out refugees and the army spiriting them away to safety. All in preparation for 1st May – Revolution Day.

From his viewpoint on the clock tower, Ben could see Watcher sharpshooters, poised and ready. They used weighted crossbow bolts instead of lethal pointed ones, but these were still enough to knock a Legionnaire unconscious. Life was precious to the Watchers – all life, including the lives of their enemies – but they still had to defend themselves. The sharpshooters gave ground cover. Ben's squad provided protection from above.

Because the sky was where the real danger lay.

The Legion was not simply an army of men – they

were an ancient order, allied with the darkest forces of creation. Fallen angels fought for the Legion, beasts with the heads and wings of eagles, known as the Feathered Men. Every Londoner, even the staunchest Legion supporters, had come to fear the shadow of those wings

of death. Very often it was the last thing a person saw, hanging over them, before beak and talons ripped them to shreds.

Just then, Big Ben tolled. This close to the huge bell, the vibrations rattled every fibre of Ben's body. Twelve melancholy chimes.

As well as the usual Watcher equipment – crossbow pistol, rope, extendable quarterstaff – Ben and his crew were wearing bulky backpacks. Ben could feel the weight cutting into his shoulders. He shifted uncomfortably, anxious to get going.

"Look!" hissed Lucy. "That's the signal!"

Ben followed the line of her pointing finger, trying to penetrate the darkness of the night and the sheeting rain. Nothing. He squinted, then he saw it at the foot of the Wall: the unmistakable flash of a lantern.

Ben felt his breathing quicken. It was time to act.

Lucy had drawn a brass telescope from a side pocket in her pack and lifted her single-lensed goggles to search the shadows, as one black shape after another broke away from the buildings below and set off towards the light of the lantern.

"Here they come," she said. The escapees were a sorry sight. Frail old women with unsteady legs, mothers with infants clutched tightly to their chests, young children with fear written on their faces. Easy prey, Lucy thought grimly, now scanning the clouds.

The Wall had grown more impenetrable by the day and it was getting harder and harder for Ben and the Watchers to find chinks in the Legion's armour. At the start, when the Wall was first being raised, hundreds had made a break for it. Ben had led escapes where the Wall was at its weakest, where there were blind spots between the watchtowers, or where the Wall was still low enough to be scaled. Under Watcher protection, people had fled across the bridges, even through the Legion's own tunnels, taking nothing with them but the clothes on their backs. But now the last of the tunnels had been sealed and the bridges had all been broken.

Far below, Ben could see the wreckage of Westminster Bridge and the gap where Lambeth Bridge used to stand. He closed his eyes briefly as he remembered the surge of people who had tried to make it to the other side of the river, and the terrible explosions that had halted them in their tracks. There wasn't even much to escape to, he thought bitterly. South of the River Thames, London had become a wasteland. Newington, Bermondsey, Southwark, Kennington. All gone. Reduced to dust and bricks and bones. The dead city.

A shot pierced the night air and Ben snapped back into the moment. He saw his father send a rope ladder rattling down from his exposed position on top of the Wall. Seconds later a stream of escapees began to scramble up like ants, up and over the Wall to the steam barges waiting on the other side. But a line of bobbing lanterns told him that the Legion patrols were approaching far too quickly.

A woman passed her baby up into Jonas's waiting hands. Another shot splintered the darkness. The woman was scrambling onto the Wall to join her child when the Legion bullet clipped her, spinning her off balance. She fell, only to be caught by Jago Moon at the foot of the ladder, but she screamed. And her baby screamed. Then the panic spread.

“I can’t wait,” said Nathaniel, climbing up on top of the balustrade and preparing to launch himself over the edge. “I can’t just sit here and watch this.”
“Not yet!” ordered Ben.
“Pa’s down there!” Nathaniel was shouting now, as more shots rang out.
“I know!” Ben shouted back. “But we wait.”
Ghost placed a firm hand on Nathaniel’s shoulder and drew him back from the edge. The look in Ghost’s eyes brooked no argument; he was with Ben.
Down on Horseferry Road, one of the Legion searchlights burst into life. A long finger of light raked the Wall, stopping once it had the escapees in its gaze.
“They’re sitting ducks!” snarled Nathaniel.
Ben looked at Lucy and he could see that even her steely reserve was wavering.
“Ben…” she began.
“If we go too soon, then we lose our only advantage,” said Ben.
It was then that three Feathered Men came screaming down out of the sky. The creatures flew in formation, whistling around Big Ben itself, so close that Ben could feel the downdraught of their wings as they swept by.
“Now we go,” said Ben, climbing up onto the parapet and throwing himself into the air behind them.
Gravity grabbed Ben immediately and for an instant
he was certain that he had made his last mistake. Heart in his mouth, Ben yanked hard on the cord on his backpack. Instantly the pack unfolded and two canvas wings snapped outwards, supported by spring-loaded metal arms.
And Ben wasn’t falling any more.
As the wings took his weight, Ben enjoyed the rush of pure adrenaline. Behind him he glimpsed his crew, gliding into action in his wake.
While the Watchers on the ground fended off their attackers with crossbow fire, Ben’s squadron would tackle the Feathered Men in the air.
The trick, Ben knew, was to take the Feathered Men by surprise. They considered themselves to be invulnerable, with their massive strength and ferocious anger. However, they would not be expecting an attack from above. The gliders could only carry the Watchers downwards, so the key would be to position themselves immediately over the Feathered Men, then strike hard and fast.
Ben used the guide pulleys and the movements of
his own body to steer himself where he wanted to go.
It wasn’t as easy as he had hoped. Somehow Lucy drew level with him – she had the knack already, Ben noticed with a little envy.
On the ground, the last escapees were scattering, fleeing into any nook or cranny that would take them,
like cockroaches on the kitchen floor. Ben couldn’t see his father or Jago Moon or any of the other Watchers, but he knew that they would be the very last to head for safety. More than one Watcher had lain down his own life helping someone else to get over the Wall.
Ben could see a group of frightened children, separated from their parents in the confusion, and now at the mercy of the Legion. He knew that if the Feathered Men reached them, these kids wouldn’t be rounded up and put into the detention camps with the other dissenters. They would

be eaten.
It looked as if the lead Feathered Man had spotted the children too, as it angled its great body towards them.
But before Ben could make a move to cut it off, he saw Valentine and Nathaniel make their descent towards it. The fallen angel gave an ear-splitting cry that was enough to make a grown man freeze in his tracks. Ben noticed a boy, hardly more than six years old, rooted to the spot at the foot of the rope ladder, unable to move as the horrible creature dived towards him.
Valentine and Nathaniel took careful aim with their crossbows. They would only get one shot. Two bolts sang out, finding a home in the foul creature's back. The Feathered Man continued in its arc towards the boy but, instead of snatching the child up in its talons, it ploughed into the rubble, twitching and flapping its broken wings. Valentine and Nathaniel hit the ground running. That's my brother, thought Ben, as Nathaniel seized the terrified child, flung him over his shoulder and then disappeared into the night.
Ghost, meanwhile, had actually landed on the back of the second Feathered Man. He silently dispatched it, then let it fall to the ground.
Ben urgently unfurled the weighted net that he had stowed in his own pack. He steered himself closer to Lucy, but the tips of their wings almost brushed in the process and he was forced to twist away. Heart hammering, he came in for a second attempt and this time managed to pass the other side of the net to Lucy. She gave him a smile of approval and together they positioned themselves above the remaining Feathered Man.
Although they were bestial in their hunger, the creatures were not stupid, and even as Ben and Lucy flew in to attack, the fallen angel spun round to face them, snarling and spitting as it came.
Lucy gave the nod and together they dropped the net. It spread out as it fell, wide enough to catch the evil being in its embrace. But anger kept the Feathered Man powering up towards them, beak reaching for their flesh through
a hole in the net. Lucy was able to steer away, banking sharply to the left and bringing herself in to land on a
flat roof.
Ben wasn't so quick.
The Feathered Man's wings were now tangled hopelessly in the net, but as it began to tumble out of the sky, it shot out one long-fingered hand and grabbed Ben by the ankle, taking him down too. The glider slowed Ben's descent for the first few seconds, then the metal armature of the wings sheared in two and Ben and the Feathered Man dropped together. In a struggling mess of limbs they landed hard on the cold, wet cobbles.
Ben blacked out for a second. He came to with his head spinning and the metallic taste of blood in his mouth. Stars swam in and out of his vision. Beside him, the Feathered Man was breathing heavily, a deep, rasping sound coming from its throat. Then its eyes snapped open and, still enmeshed in the net, it began to pull itself towards Ben.
Ben tried to get to his feet and promptly fell back to
the ground again. He must have hit his head harder than he'd thought – his balance was all shot. Starting to feel the rise of fear, he looked around for a way to escape. The trouble was, London had changed since Mr. Sweet had begun his rule. Ben had always prided himself that he knew every street, every alley – but the Legion had set up roadblocks and checkpoints, making dead ends where none had existed before.

Ben began to shuffle backwards on hands and feet, while the world continued to blur like a bad dream. Lucy had seen him crash but more Feathered Men were already circling. The other Watchers were nowhere near and Ben was on his own in enemy territory. Sweet had spies on every street. Neighbours who followed their neighbours with beady eyes and tongues that were eager to wag.

And the punishment for aiding Watchers was death.

Ben's vision cleared long enough for him to be able to see the Feathered Man gradually untangling itself. Its legs had apparently been broken by the fall, but its hatred burned as hot as ever. Slowly the creature hauled itself after Ben.

Ben looked into its cold avian eyes and knew that it would never give up.

Ben struggled to his feet. Nausea dragged him back down to the floor.

The clacking beak was getting nearer. Ben could see the thin yellow tongue and the pink gash of the waiting gullet.

In his last moment of consciousness, Ben imagined that he saw a figure charging through the rain. A tall man in a long leather coat. A man with a claw where his left hand should be.

Then Ben saw nothing at all.