

# THE BUILDING

Richard Snodgrass

Book One of the Furnass Towers Trilogy



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Sample — For Review Only

Also by Richard Snodgrass

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*This book is for Carol  
and the memory of Jack Martin  
and, as with everything,  
for Marty*

*. . . it is the mid-1980s, in early spring, a time in southwestern Pennsylvania, the town of Furnass, that is barely distinguishable from late winter, just a hint of green on the otherwise bare trees and bushes with the first buds of the season, a dusting of green on the valley's hills still too undefined to be considered anything more than a hope, a promise of warm days to come, but as yet the sunny days surprisingly and disappointingly chill, the possibility still of waking in the morning to find a covering of light snow or at the least frost, enough to make the sidewalks and bricked streets slippery as they say in this part of the country, the windows of the cars parked along the narrow streets needing scraped before the cars can be driven, though on this night, sometime in the darkness after midnight a breeze starts deep in the woods in the hills beyond the town, nothing you can see but is present nonetheless, persistent as desire, a stirring in a patch of gooseberry vines and fallen leaves that stops a deer dead in its tracks, freezes a groundhog in its burrow . . . but it is only a gust of air, and the deer flicks its tail and continues to pick its way between the dark trees, the groundhog continues to dig further into the hillside after waking from its hibernation and prepares for the coming summer . . . it is only the wind, little more than an added chill to the night air that sweeps along a dry creek bed and up a ravine, over some sandstone boulders to the top of the hill and along the ridgeline, being drawn by natural forces or its own momentum down the slope of the valley on the other side, cascading through the just-budding branches of the hickory and oak and maple trees and over the town at the base of the hills along the river . . . the gust of air plays among the narrow peaked roofs of the houses and whistles in the chimneys, dips down into the playground next to a grade school and rides the teeter-totter and gives a push to the swings before tumbling down the dark deserted streets under the streetlights, heading toward the abandoned mills and factories along the river now in the pre-dawn*

hours, then detours and climbs into the black open tower, the tall building under construction on the main street . . . it whisks through the stack of empty floors and swirls up the unfinished stairwell, setting a string of bare bulbs swinging, creates a small dust devil from a pile of debris and sawdust in a corner, rattles a stack of electrical conduit and sets a loose two-by-four clapping against a wood form, up across the top deck of the building high above the little town . . . it dances in and out among the rows of unfinished columns sticking up for the floors above, it tests the guy wires supporting the columns' cages of reinforcing steel and sets them waving gently as if they were little more than clusters of tall grass . . . the gust of wind sings through the cages of steel, it curls around inside the hollow shafts, playing with itself, dallies there longer than it should and loses focus and becomes scattered and spends itself and dies there among the spirals and spacers and ties, and the construction site becomes still again . . . soon the black sky will lighten above the hills on the other side of the valley with the first hint of dawn, soon the workers will arrive on the empty floors of the building under construction and there will be different currents at play, different forces at work, but for now the construction site is quiet and the town is quiet, no one is about, nothing stirs, except . . . there, do you see it? . . . a solitary pickup truck is parked at the end of the wood fence that fronts the jobsite along the main street . . . a man sits at the wheel, the jobsite superintendent, drinking a cup of coffee, waiting, thinking about something . . .

# PART ONE

Jack set his coffee on the dashboard of the truck, making sure that it stayed where he put it on the sloping surface before removing his hand. Steam from the Styrofoam cup clouded the windshield, spreading up the dark glass; traces of green then yellow then red from the stoplight at the corner flared with the workings of heat and cold, shifting and wavering in the clouded glass, obscuring his view along the main street. All the windows were beginning to fog over. Jack started the engine again, turned on the defroster. That's all I need, a cracked windshield. Can steam do that? I suppose that's another one of those things I'm supposed to know about. Well, I don't so forget it. Add it to the list. She said Why do you always think you have to know everything, no, that wasn't it, she said Why do you always think everything depends on you? Because it does, that's why. He wanted to see what was going on.

Along the sidewalks an occasional figure appeared in the pre-dawn darkness, a cluster of dark figures was beginning to gather in front of the locked gate in the fence. Jack rested his left arm on the bottom of the steering wheel, rubbing absently at the soreness in his elbow. It was usually his favorite time of day. Sitting in his truck alone, the half hour or so before the job started, waiting for the others to get there. A time to get his thoughts together, go over in his mind what they had to do during the day. A few quiet moments to himself, before the noise and the shouting and the confusion started again. Before he had to be *Jack* again.

But he knew already what he was supposed to do today. He was supposed to wait for the concrete crew to get there, and then send them home again. Rotten way to run a job. How were they ever going to get anything built that way?

When Mac called a half hour earlier, Jack was just leaving his hotel room.

“What took you so long? I didn't wake you, did I?”



“Yeah, sure thing, Mac.”

“Or maybe you’ve got somebody there with you. I didn’t interrupt you and a lady friend, did I?”

“Don’t you wish?”

“You and me used to have some good times when we worked out of town.” Mac chuckled but there was weariness in the old man’s voice too. “Remember that redhead up in Erie, her and her sister? We called them the Daily Double. I doubt if your health has slowed you down very much.”

Jack shifted the receiver to the other ear to ease the crick in his arm. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I was halfway out the door. I’ve got the concrete crew coming early this morning. You wanted those columns on seven poured today, remember?”

“Yeah,” Mac said. “Well, now I’m telling you to hold off on them.”

“Hold off?”

“That’s what I said.”

“You’ve been chewing on me all week to get those columns done. We’ll have the last two welded up by this afternoon and then we can—”

“Now I’m chewing on you not to get them done.”

“The concrete pump will be here any time now, the first ready-mix truck is probably batched already and on its way from Pittsburgh, I’ve got men coming for a six o’clock start, I’ve even got an inspector coming today to look at the rebar—”

“And I’m telling you forget about those columns. Send the trucks and the men home, send ’em all to hell for all I care, especially the goddamn inspector. What the hell is an inspector coming out for now anyway, there hasn’t been an inspector on that job for months, we can get along fine without some candyass getting in the way. Just do what I tell you.” Mac’s voice had grown loud, his anger starting to run away with him, though Jack could tell he was trying to keep it in check; the Old Man

obviously wasn't any happier about the situation than Jack was. After a moment's silence, Mac said, "Look, I'll be down this morning to fill you in about what's going on. For now I'm telling you don't worry about pouring those columns today. Look at it this way, you're getting a little breather."

"Yeah, I'll be standing around breathing when you get here."

The phone call put him off his good mood. Now that Mac was field superintendent for Drake Construction and Jack the jobsite superintendent—for years it had been Mac who was the jobsite superintendent and Jack the foreman—Jack was supposed to have control of his own project. He didn't like being told which columns to pour in the first place—Jack knew better than Mac which columns needed to be poured; before, when they worked together on projects, Jack always told Mac the schedule for the pours because Mac couldn't keep such things straight—and he especially didn't like being told which columns *not* to pour now. Jack took a sip of coffee. And what the hell was that talk about his health all of a sudden? Look at it this way, you're getting a little breather. Did Mac think Jack wasn't pulling his own weight? You old bastard, I had to carry you even when I was the one in a wheelchair. Even his coffee didn't taste as good as it usually did this morning, the more he thought about the phone call. It was Friday, for shit's sake, you were supposed to be in a good mood on a Friday.

A pair of headlights came down the street behind him; Jack caught a glimpse of them in the side-view mirror as they turned at the corner, turned up the hill and out of sight. Her Corvette? He listened for the roar of an engine but couldn't hear anything over his own defroster. Maybe she was just coming in after a late night. Or maybe it wasn't a Corvette at all, maybe it was somebody else, bringing her home. At one time, at the start of the project, he could have seen her windows across the alley from here, could have watched to see if the lights came on in her

apartment—that is, if he cared whether she was just getting in or not—but the building was too tall now and blocked the view from the street. Why do you think everything always depends on you? Why do you always think you're responsible for everybody else? Because that's my job. But you're ill, you've been ill. Why can't you let somebody else help you? Probably wasn't Pamela at all. Somebody else entirely. Maybe it was Bill swinging by for a quickie before work. Last night he said I want to talk to you about something. I'm thinking about leaving my wife for Pamela. One of the figures in front of the gate broke away from the others and came toward him in the darkness. Jack rolled down his window.

"Nippy this morning," George, the labor foreman, said, grinning.

"Your kind of weather."

"Yep. Good hunting weather. Good working weather." He looked up at the dark framework of the building rising above the fence, then back at Jack. "I forgot. You probably need to be careful you don't catch a chill."

Jack ignored the remark. "All your men here?"

George Slovodnik was nearly as old as Mac, somewhere in his sixties, with a knobby, weathered face and prickly white hair showing under the rim of his old-fashioned rigger's hardhat. Mac had hired him away from the mills thirty years earlier; once George had a taste of working outdoors, he had stayed with Mac, going with him from company to company, project to project, though the two men rarely spoke and didn't care that much for each other personally. As he looked off toward his crew at the gate, George swept back the tails of his long denim jacket as if it were a frock coat and stuck his hands in the side pockets of his bib overalls.

“Well sir, I’d hazard a guess and say they’re all present and accounted for. ’Cept, of course, for those that haven’t made it yet.”

“Wonderful, George.”

“Always count on a few stragglers. That way you’re never disappointed. Nature sees to it that you always have some who straggle.”

“I’m never disappointed, George, in anything.”

“I like a man with blind faith in himself.”

Jack grunted. Sometimes George was easier to take than others. “The pump should be here any minute.”

George stood with his legs spread, one foot aimed east-west and the other north-south, as if braced for any eventuality. “You know, the rumor is that the company’s going to pull off this job today. Going to shut her down completely.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Eddie the truck driver was in the main office last night picking up some stuff and heard Mac and some others talking about it. Yep, going to send us all home to play with mama.”

“I don’t know anything about shutting down the job. But Mac decided he doesn’t want those columns poured today so I’ll have to knock off most of your crew. I was waiting till they all got here before I said anything.”

“Any reason why Mac doesn’t want to pour the columns?”

“Because Mac said.”

“Reason enough. Must be that’s what Eddie heard them talking about. You know how rumors are.” George thought a moment. “We still have to pay the men two hours for showing up.”

“Thank you, George, I’m aware of that. I may have trouble getting around sometimes but my mind hasn’t gone. Yet.”

“Just thought I’d mention it,” George said. He gave a gentlemanly nod of his head; all that was missing was for him to tip his hardhat. “I guess I better go count noses.”

Jack was surprised; at the mention that the company was thinking of shutting down the job—his job—something gave way inside him. For a moment he felt lost, then it quickly turned to anger. What the hell do they mean, shutting down my job without telling me? What the hell for? It wasn't that he might be out of work himself; he knew there were other jobs he could go to, Mac had talked about moving him to another project for months. And he didn't blame Mac, the Old Man was just doing his job. It was the idea that something like this could happen without his having a say in it. If they shut down the job what were his men supposed to do? Were there other jobs for them? And what about all the work they had put into this building, were they supposed to just walk away from it?

The concrete pump had arrived, rumbling toward him through the dogleg in the main street several blocks away; the front of the truck was lit with running lights, glowing like a mechanical dragon in the empty street. Jack got stiffly out of his truck, easing his weight first onto one leg and then the other, easing into the pain like a man stepping into water. And a thought occurred to him. He smiled to himself, then grinned openly. Why not? You've got to be crazy. Old Mac would shit a brick. You really going to do this? He angled his hardhat on his head, lit a cigarette, and headed toward the gate. In his mind a tiny toggle switch flipped to *On*.

"What the hell you guys standing around for?" he bellowed in a voice that both meant what it said and made fun of the way he said it. "We've got all those columns to pour today. Why the hell don't you get to work?"

Among the half-hearted grumbles somebody said, "You heard the man." Another voice, deep and melodious—Jack was sure it was Marshall, one of the laborers—replied just loud enough to carry, "A man'd have to be deaf not to hear Jack Crawford."

As Jack waded through the men and unlocked the gate, George said to him, “I thought you weren’t going to pour those columns today.”

“I changed my mind. We’re pouring them after all. I’ve got the men, I’ve got the pump, I’m going to have the mud and I’ve got a place to put it when it gets here. Sounds like a concrete pour to my way of thinking.”

“Fine with me. You know what you’re doing.”

No, I don’t. For a second Jack marveled at himself. This is crazy. Whooee. Jacky-Boy, what are you getting yourself into this time? But as he pulled the chain through the links in the gate and pushed it open, the men brushing past him on their way to get to work, he felt his good mood returning. Besides, if we’re walking off this project we have to pour those columns today, wouldn’t be safe just to leave them standing there. End of discussion. Around him the bustle and activity of the job started up again—the voices of the men calling to each other, the slam of the gang boxes being opened and the engine of the manhoist coughing into life, the *Bla-a-a-at!* of the air horn from the concrete pump waiting in the street. He stuck his hands in his jacket pockets and lifted his face in satisfaction to the dark morning sky, feeling more like his old self than he had in months. Years.