

EXTRACT FROM NIGHT SOULS - A DEPARTMENT 18 NOVEL

Robert Carter pulled up behind Department 18's black SUV and switched off the engine of the Toyota. The rain was beginning to ease. As he stepped out of the car he saw Frankie Morgan sheltering in the doorway of Dunster House, the very exclusive apartment block he'd been asked to investigate.

He sketched a wave and stared up at the building. Twenty-six floors of cold concrete and glass. Carter remembered a time when this area of London was a run down part of the city, with streets filled with slum dwellings backing onto the River Thames. But that was before the London Docklands redevelopment program transformed the place. Millions of pounds injected by astute businessmen who saw the potential of riverside dwellings for the upwardly mobile men and women who were flooding into the area to be closer to their workplaces in the City and Canary Wharf.

Now the area was unrecognizable from the dark side of town he'd known as a child.

'Frankie, what have we got?'

'Didn't Crozier brief you?' Frankie Morgan was thirty, pretty with fair hair tied back in a pony tail from a round, open face.

'He left a message on my answering service asking me to get down here. He mentioned poltergeist activity; said you'd fill me in.'

'Not very helpful,' she said.

'When is he ever?'

'You look flushed,' she said.

'I came straight from the squash club. Are the others inside?'

'Yes. And I think it's a little bit more than poltergeist activity. The police evacuated the place yesterday after the third fatality.'

'On whose authority?'

'The Home Office.'

'So the whole building is empty?'

'Apart from the ghosts,' she said with a smile.

'Let's get out of this rain,' Carter said and pushed open the door to the apartment block.

The others were waiting inside. There were three other people in Frankie's team, all of them young and fairly inexperienced. Adam Black, Chris Baines and Ellen McCrory. Frankie made the introductions.

'So Crozier thinks we can't handle this on our own. Great vote of confidence,' Baines said petulantly, glaring at Carter. Baines was in his early twenties and had an attitude that bristled with antagonism.

'It's not like that,' Frankie said.

'I've handled poltergeist cases before,' Baines said.

'So have I,' Ellen McCrory said. 'And I really don't think we need a babysitter.' At thirty-two Ellen was the oldest of the group.

'In my experience poltergeists don't kill people,' Carter said. 'How many fatalities have there been, Frankie?'

'Three.'

'So it's unlikely we're dealing with a poltergeist,' Adam Black said. Black was in his mid-twenties but looked like a teenager. Carter had read his file and had been looking forward to meeting him. Adam Black's upbringing was similar to his own. A child prodigy when it came to clairvoyance, giving readings from the age of eight. A

domineering father with a God fixation who pushed his son relentlessly to the point of a nervous breakdown. Carter could empathize.

‘Unlikely, but not impossible.’

‘So what do you think it is?’ Baines said.

‘No idea. I’ve only just arrived. Frankie, where was the first fatality?’

‘Apartment 53. Fifth floor.’

‘Ok. We’ll start there. I suggest that, until we have a clearer idea of what we’re dealing with here, we all stick together.’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake!’ Ellen McCrory said. ‘We know what we’re doing.’

‘And we have the details of your next of kin on file, do we? Just so we know who to contact if you get killed,’ Carter said.

Ellen McCrory glared at him.

Carter held her gaze until she looked away. ‘Right. Let’s get on. Are the elevators working, Frankie?’

‘Yes. All utilities are functioning. The police just cleared the residents out and left everything else alone.’

‘What were the residents told?’ Carter asked her as they walked towards the two elevators set into the south wall.

‘Asbestos alert,’ Frankie said. ‘They were told that routine maintenance had uncovered asbestos in the roof and they had to be evacuated until it was cleared. We fed the same story to the local media. Didn’t want a circus down here.’

‘Good idea. And all the residents swallowed it?’

‘Most of them,’ Frankie said. ‘There were one or two who didn’t believe a word of it, but they were the one’s who’d had *other* experiences here, and they were only too happy to have an excuse to leave.’

With a hiss one set of doors opened. ‘Okay. Fill me in on the details on the way up,’ Carter said and was about to step into the elevator when the main door of the building opened and a young man wearing an Armani suit and an angry expression strode into the foyer. ‘Would one of you mind telling me what the hell is going on here?’

Frankie Morgan stepped forward to intercept. ‘I’m sorry, sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. For your own safety.’

The young man raised his chin pugnaciously. ‘And who the fuck are you?’

‘Doctor Frances Morgan, Environmental Health. And you are?’

‘Jonathan Lassiter, Braxton Developments, the company that built this block. What’s all this crap about asbestos? There’s no asbestos here. The building’s only a year old.’

‘Be that as it may, Mr. Lassiter, but I’ll have to ask you to leave until the matter has been properly investigated.’

‘Tough. I’m not going anywhere. Let me see some identification.’

Frankie glanced back at Carter, uncertain how to proceed.

Robert Carter sighed and walked across to join them. ‘Do we have a problem, Doctor Morgan?’

‘Identification,’ Lassiter said. ‘Now, or I call the police.’

Carter reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his pocketbook, flipping it open and letting Lassiter read his ID card.

‘And what’s Department 18?’ Lassiter said, looking at Carter quizzically.

‘Part of the Government. We’ve been called in by the Home Office to investigate three suspicious deaths that have occurred here in the past week.’

The color drained from Lassiter’s face. ‘Three deaths? Nobody told me. What

are you, police?’

‘We work in conjunction with the police and the security services and, as Doctor Morgan said, the Home Office. So, if there’s nothing else, for your own safety, you should leave now.’

Confusion clouded Lassiter’s eyes. ‘I’m not happy about this,’ he said.

‘I don’t care,’ Carter said. ‘Go away, and leave us to do our job.’

Lassiter hesitated for a moment, then spun on his heel and stalked from the building.

‘Thanks,’ Frankie said. ‘I wasn’t sure what to do when he asked for identification.’

‘Always tell the truth, Frankie,’ Carter said. ‘Within reason,’ he added with a smile. ‘Come on, let’s get to work.’

Carter was thirty-five, tall and slim with an athletic physique he owed to the four hours a week he spent at the gym, combined with regular games of squash. The exercise was complemented by a healthy diet, apart from far too many cigarettes, a light intake of alcohol, and occasional sex with willing partners.

Frankie turned the key in the door of apartment 53 and pushed it open, reeling back as the stench hit her like a physical blow. She clamped her hand over her nose and mouth and struggled to prevent herself from gagging. ‘Jesus! What *is* that?’ she said.

‘I can’t smell anything,’ Baines said.

Ellen McCrory shook her head. ‘Nothing.’

Robert Carter was watching them. He worried about Frankie Morgan sometimes. She was too open; her senses too attuned. She needed to protect herself more. He lowered his defenses slightly and sniffed the air. Yes, she was right. There *was* an odor; something rank and fetid; something long dead. He stepped through the doorway.

‘Very nice,’ Chris Baines said as he followed the others into the room.

‘Wouldn’t mind a place like this myself. Look at the size of that TV.’

‘Concentrate,’ Carter snapped at him. ‘Frankie, are you okay?’

She was last into the room and now had a handkerchief pressed against her nose. ‘It’s fading,’ she said. ‘The smell’s nowhere near so strong once you’re inside.’

From his pocket Carter took a small black box with a dial at its center and a small white dome on one end. There was a switch on the side. He flicked it on. The needle jumped across the dial. ‘Strong electro-magnetic residue,’ he said. ‘Be careful.’

‘The death occurred in the bedroom. Melanie Fry, thirty-two, commodities analyst,’ Frankie said.

‘How did she die?’

‘The autopsy was inconclusive. Four puncture wounds to her thorax, but small, not enough on their own to kill her. The pathologist could find no other injuries. In his words, it was as if she had just been switched off. As if someone had thrown a switch and she just died.’

Carter walked through to the bedroom and looked around. It was smart and neat with a low, oak-framed, king-sized bed taking up the center of the room. The rest of the furniture was modern and plain, Shaker style. ‘There’s nothing here,’ he said. ‘I’m not picking anything up.’

‘How do you explain the smell?’ Frankie said.

‘An echo, I suspect. Nothing more.’ He held the meter out in front of him and scanned the room. ‘Are you sure this is where she died.’

‘She was found in bed. Naked, spread-eagled. Looked like she’d been enjoying

a sex session when she died.'

Carter shrugged. 'I'd expect there to be more residual energy than I'm picking up.' He slipped the meter back into his pocket. 'Okay. The second death. Which floor?'

'We go up,' Frankie said. 'Apartment 120. Seventeenth floor.'

'Right, let's get on,' Carter said.

Chris Baines had already left apartment 53 and was making his way to the stairwell. Ellen McCrory was close behind him. 'Where are you going?' she said.

'Up,' Baines said. 'I'm getting nothing on this floor, but something's nagging me to climb. Coming?'

'And you don't care if you upset Carter.' It wasn't a question, and the grin on her face encouraged him.

'Come on then.' He pulled open the door to the stairwell and started to climb the stairs two at a time.

By the time they reached the tenth floor Ellen McCrory was panting for breath.

'It's time you quit smoking,' Baines said.

'What are you, my father? Why didn't we take the elevator?'

'Not safe,' Baines said, every nerve in his body tingling.

'But we just used it.'

'Well it's not safe now. Trust me. Come on.' He pushed open the door to the tenth floor. He stood for a moment, eyes closed, letting the random impressions flood into his mind. *Black shapes slithering across the floor, coalescing, becoming a much larger mass, rising up and moving through the apartments. A woman's scream. Pain. Death.* 'This way,' he said, his eyes snapping open.

Ellen watched him nervously, her maverick spirit starting to dissipate. She'd worked with Chris Baines before and knew he was a risk taker. She found it an attractive attribute and, if she was honest with herself, a bit of a turn on, but she was beginning to have second thoughts about leaving the others behind.

She was getting her own impressions of the place and they weren't good. Not good at all.

'Did you see that?' she said, squinting her eyes and peering along the plush, carpeted corridor.

'See what?' Baines said. He was looking from door to door, trying to focus, to feel where he should lead them next.

'Something black, moving, down at the end of the corridor. It went into one of the rooms.'

'Can you try and describe it?' he said, turning his attention back to her.

'Like a black sheet, blown in the wind, but not as substantial. Like gauze.'

He frowned at her. 'Come on. Show me the room.' He strode off down the corridor, Ellen following tentatively a few paces behind.

'Where are McCrory and Baines?' Carter asked as he came out of the bedroom and saw Adam Black standing alone in the lounge.

Black shrugged. 'One minute they were here, the next they'd gone.'

Carter swore and wheeled on Frankie. 'Are your team always this undisciplined?'

'No, Robert,' she said bridling. 'But they're used to carrying out these investigations unsupervised. They're both strong psychics so they're more than

capable of looking after themselves.'

'Let me be the judge of that,' Carter said. 'We don't know what we're dealing with here yet, and until we know what the danger is I don't want anyone taking unnecessary risks. Come on, let's find them.'

'We'd better check floor by floor,' Frankie said trying to wrest back some element of control from Carter. She knew why he was so angry. A routine investigation he'd been heading a few months ago had ended tragically with the disappearance of his assistant, Sian Davies. Some members of the Department were convinced he'd never really got over it. 'We'll take the stairs and search thoroughly.'

'Up or down?' Adam Black said.

Carter turned to the young man who was scuffing the toe of his shoe on the deep-piled carpet in a mixture of anxiety and embarrassment, and avoiding eye contact. 'Pardon?'

'Up or down,' Black said again. 'We don't know which way to go.'

'Up,' Carter said.

'Why?'

Carter fixed him with a cold hard stare. 'Because I say so.'

'You're the boss,' Black said without malice.

'And I just wish people would remember that,' Robert Carter said and walked from the apartment.

Jonathan Lassiter was seething. He walked backwards and forwards on the street outside Dunster House, punching numbers into his cell phone and wallowing in the frustration of not being able to raise anyone significant at this time of day. The frustration was feeding his anger. He couldn't believe he'd been dismissed from the block in such a high-handed way, as if he were nothing more than an errant schoolboy caught loitering indoors during recess.

He snapped his phone shut and dropped it back into the pocket of his suit jacket. He suddenly became aware of the rain, soaking his hair, his Armani, and his Gucci loafers. This was intolerable. He turned on his heel and pushed open the door of Dunster House and walked out of the rain.

Once inside he looked around for someone to vent his anger on, but the foyer was deserted. He swore savagely and crossed the marble tiled floor to the elevator, punching the call button, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for the elevator to descend. Once the doors slid open he stepped inside, staring at the panel of buttons for a long moment before making a decision. Finally he pulled his bunch of keys from his pocket, inserted one into the panel and twisted it, at the same time hitting the button for the penthouse.

As the car started to ascend he leaned back against the wall, taking out a handkerchief and dabbing away the rain from his face. He'd only been up to the penthouse twice before and that was pre-occupation. Now the luxurious apartment was owned by an Asian businessman who had made his fortune in the clothing trade.

It would be interesting to see how the mega-rich lived. It was a lifestyle he aspired to but knew he was a long way from attaining. He also wanted to be up at the top of the building when the bunch of morons from the Home Office, or wherever they were from, arrived there. He'd show them he wasn't fazed by their scare mongering and that Braxton as a company stood by the quality of their developments.

The elevator juddered to a halt between the twenty first and twenty second floor. He twisted the key and pressed the button again but the car didn't budge. He ran his hand over the panel, hitting all the buttons, but nothing happened.

He was suddenly aware that the temperature in the car was dropping. A few seconds later his breath started to mist in front of his face and he shivered. He sniffed the air and recoiled as the stench of rotting meat filled his nostrils.

As the first black shape slithered in under the door Jonathan Lassiter felt a tremor of disquiet. *What the hell was going on?*

Chris Baines hesitated outside the door of apartment 85 and rested his hand on the door. There was something inside. He could sense it.

'Well?' Ellen said, catching up with him.

'Can't you feel it?'

She shook her head, chewing pensively at her bottom lip.

'You're blocking.'

'You betcha,' she said. 'I'm not leaving myself open to attack. Three people have *died*, Chris.'

'Okay,' he said. 'Stay behind me.' He slipped the key-card into the lock and turned the handle.

It was dark inside the apartment, despite the onset of early morning. He slid his hand across the wall and located the light switch. He flipped it but the room stayed dark.

'The lights should be working,' Ellen said, a tremor to her voice. 'We shouldn't need them anyway, it's light outside.'

'Relax,' he said and pulled a flashlight from the bag he had slung over his shoulder. He switched it on and swung the beam around the room, drawing in his breath when the light flickered over a figure sitting in a chair by the window. He pulled the beam back, aiming it directly at the chair but he couldn't see any more clearly. There was a figure there, but it seemed to be absorbing the light, sucking it in like a black hole.

'We should go back and fetch Carter,' Ellen said, clutching the sleeve of his jacket,

'Shhhhh! Hello!' he called to the figure in the chair. 'I'm Chris Baines; this is my colleague, Ellen McCrory.'

The figure in the chair remained silent and unmoving.

'We were told this building was empty. Would you mind telling us what you're doing here?'

Ellen tugged at his sleeve. 'Chris? Chris! Let's get out of here.'

As she spoke the figure in the chair started to rise. They still couldn't see properly. It was just a shape, the build of a large man, darker than the surrounding darkness.

They took a step backwards. Ellen clamped a hand across her nose as a foul odor hit her like a physical blow.

'God! I think I'm going to be sick.' She started to retch.

Baines focused the flashlight, willing the beam to glow brighter, but it was useless. The light was being swallowed. There was a sound, like dry autumn leaves blown across concrete, and the shape exploded, fragmenting into a hundred smaller shapes that skittered across the floor, flapping and flailing like disembodied blackbird wings. The shapes moved past them, plucking at their clothes, slithering over their skin.

Ellen screamed.

Chris Baines dropped the flashlight and sank to his knees, folding his arms over his head as he was buffeted by the shapes.

The apartment door slammed and it was all over. The stench and the shapes had gone.

Baines gradually uncurled his arms from his head, picked up the flashlight, and stood upright. He shone the beam around the room. Ellen was standing at the window with her back to him as if staring out at the street below. 'Ellen? Ellie?'

She didn't move; didn't acknowledge him at all.

He took a few steps forward, reached out and touched her shoulder. 'Ellie?'

At his touch Ellen McCrory crumpled to the floor, deflating like a burst balloon.

The flashlight's beam took in the withered skin of her face, the bleached white, cotton-candy texture of her hair. Her mouth sagged open and Chris Baines watched as her teeth crumbled to dust and fell away.

And then he screamed too.

He was still screaming when the others found him five minutes later.

In the elevator Jonathan Lassiter was brushing frantically at his clothes, trying to dislodge the black shapes as they crawled up his neat Armani suit towards his face, but it was no use. It was like trying to sweep away shadows.

He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Panic, pure blind panic.

The shadow-shapes reached his throat and he felt himself suffocating as they constricted his breathing. He opened his mouth wide, trying to suck in the fetid air of the elevator car, but only succeeded in sucking in the slithering black shapes.

They poured down his throat in a shadowy wave, filling him up, swelling in his stomach. And then they were moving through his body; settling in his legs and arms, nestling in his genitals, making his penis swell into a huge erection.

Suddenly he felt exhilarated; felt more alive than he had for years. He stretched his arms wide, inviting the shapes to enter him; all panic gone, just a sense remaining of peace, of power. He felt he could do anything, anything at all.

Anything that is except remember who he was.

The elevator car lurched and restarted its ascent. As it reached the penthouse the doors opened and he stepped out into the plush, luxurious apartment. He looked about him, taking in the hugely expensive antique furniture, the massive plasma-screen television, the Picasso hanging on one wall and the Degas on another, and he felt nothing. No sense of envy, no sense of desire. Everything he had ever needed he now possessed. Buried deep inside him was the key, the essence of life itself. He flopped down onto a Louis XIV chair, surveyed his new kingdom and started to laugh.

'Frankie, take Baines downstairs and get him out of the building. Wait by the car.'

Frankie was staring down at Ellen's desiccated body, a look of sheer horror on her face. Carter's words washed over her but didn't sink in.

'Frankie!' Carter gripped her by the shoulders and shook her. 'Get Baines outside, Now!'

Her eyes refocused and she stared at Carter as if seeing him for the first time.

'What?'

Carter turned to Chris Baines who was slumped against the wall, tears coursing down his face. 'Chris, go with Frankie.'

Adam Black said, 'I'll take them.'

'No, I want you with me.'

'It's okay,' Frankie Morgan said, gathering herself. 'I'll take him. I'm fine now.'

She crossed to where Baines was leaning against the wall and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. 'Come on, Chris. Let's get you out of here.'

Baines responded by burying his face into Frankie's shoulder and sobbing, his whole body heaving with the shock of losing Ellen.

Carter watched them go. He was as relieved to get rid of Frankie as he was to be rid of Baines. He'd seen the fear in her eyes and fear was dangerous in a situation like this. He walked from the apartment, out into the corridor, Adam Black trailing close behind him.

'Any ideas?' he said to the younger man.

Black was staring at the indicator panels for the elevator. 'There's a clue,' he said pointing to the right hand panel. A red letter P was glowing under the black plastic casing. 'The penthouse,' he said.

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because it should be showing the ground floor, not the penthouse. We called both elevators *down*, remember? Someone, or something's, taken it up to the top of the building.'

Carter crossed to the elevators and pressed the call button. Moments later the left hand doors opened and they stepped inside.

Black studied the buttons. 'We need a key to get up to the penthouse. This only takes us to the twenty fifth floor.'

'It will have to do,' Carter said. 'There must be service stairs, or maybe even a fire escape that will take us up there.' He hit the button to floor twenty five and watched as the doors slid shut.

Adam Black tapped his foot nervously as the car began to move. There was a fine sheen of perspiration coating his face.

'Are you up to this?' Carter said to him.

Black nodded. 'What do you think happened to Ellie?' he said.

Carter shook his head. 'I've never seen anything like it before. What I don't understand is how Baines escaped the same fate.'

'Maybe he was better able to protect himself,' Black offered.

'Possibly. But I don't want to lose anyone else, so be careful.'

'You mustn't blame yourself,' Adam Black said.

'I don't,' Carter said bluntly. 'I said we should all stick together. If they'd listened Ellen McCrory might still be alive.'

Black fell silent and watched the floor numbers pass with a mounting sense of trepidation.

When they reached twenty five the elevator stopped moving, the doors opened and the two men stepped out.

Frankie settled Chris Baines into the back of the SUV, closed and locked the door. He was too distraught to go anywhere so it would be safe enough to leave him. She'd caught the look of concern in Robert Carter's eyes and it was bothering her. He'd submit a report to Simon Crozier, Director General of Department 18 and, however he phrased the words, it would show her in a bad light.

She had spent the last two years pushing for the promotion that would enable her to lead her own investigative team and finally she had achieved her ambition. It would be nothing short of a travesty if, on her first serious assignment, she was perceived to be lacking in the necessary leadership skills. The fact that Crozier had called in Carter to oversee the operation showed that he still lacked confidence in her abilities. She couldn't afford now to be seen as weak, or worse, incapable.

She pulled up the collar of her jacket against the rain and walked quickly back to Dunster House, pushing open the doors and slipping inside.

Every member of Department 18 had one psychic ability or another. Frankie Morgan was a highly adept physical medium. She had held séance's where whole rooms had come alive as psychic energy channeled through her. There was one memorable instance where a stone elephant weighing several hundred pounds had risen three feet into the air, floated the entire length of the room, and then landed gracefully in the fireplace.

She wondered now how best to put her special skill to work. First she had to ascertain just what it was they were up against. Chris Baines had described shadow shapes, swarming over them. The description had rung bells in the back of her mind. She'd read something about similar phenomena, but a long time ago and she couldn't bring the exact details to the forefront of her mind.

She sat down on the cold hard tiles in the middle of the foyer and closed her eyes. Letting her breathing settle into a steady rise and fall she lowered her defenses little by little and opened her mind, letting the store of random images floating about the place register in the deepest part of her subconscious.

Come on, show me what you are. She spoke the words in her mind; calling out to the entities that inhabited Dunster House.

You're very brave, Doctor Morgan. You really don't want to know what we are.

The words entered her head. She recognized the voice immediately. The young man who had barged into the building earlier spitting piss and vinegar. Lassiter. Jonathan Lassiter.

She flicked open her eyes, but there was nothing to see. Nothing at all...except...

She focused on the elevators. The indicator panels were glowing red, letters instead of numbers.

UP HERE.

Up where? she thought and the answer came to her in another psychic flash.

The penthouse. Come and join the party.

She got to her feet and crossed the marble floor to the elevators. *Okay,* she thought. *You*

want to play, we'll play. She punched the call button and waited for the elevator to descend. The doors opened and she stepped inside. The doors closed and the elevator began its upward journey.

It was only when it reached the halfway point that she realized she hadn't selected a floor.

Ellen McCrory.

When he opened his eyes, Chris Baines could see Ellen McCrory.

That can't be, but she was there, in the doorway to the apartment block. Standing behind the ornate glass doors.

She was smiling at him. She raised her hand and waved to him. No, she beckoned him.

Beware the beckoning stranger.

The words vibrated in his brain.

Ellen isn't a stranger. She's a colleague, a friend.

I thought she was dead but she can't be.

Baines opened the door to the SUV and slammed it closed behind him. His

feet on the pavement felt a bit shaky but he made himself cover the distance between the vehicle and the doors.

The glass felt cold to the touch and when he took his fingers away they left an imprint. He touched the mark and thought the imprint was slightly indented as though the pressure of his touch had pushed the glass inwards a little.

Ellen was beckoning him more now.

It looked as if she was naked. That must be a trick of the light.

Baines took the handle of one of the heavy glass doors and pulled it towards him. It opened and it felt like a hand tugged at his clothes to encourage him inside.

There was no sign of Ellen.

He looked around the smart foyer but it was empty.

Then he felt moisture on his head, as if water had dripped down onto him.

He looked up and wished he hadn't. He wished he had stayed in the SUV.

He had found Ellen.

With her hands and feet she was hanging from the ceiling. Her arms and legs were bent behind her so her body was arched forwards as if waiting to pounce.

Surrounding her, forming a blanket of black around her, were dozens of what seemed to be shadows. When Baines looked more closely he saw they were more than shadows, they had more substance. They were of different shapes and sizes but coalesced into a smooth sea of darkness. The smaller ones looked like beetles with arched backs, while some of the larger ones had appendages poking from misshapen bodies in a parody of limbs.

Baines wanted to run but he wasn't fast enough.

With a scream that was as shrill as it was fierce Ellen fell onto him and enveloped him like a huge eiderdown of skin. She wrapped herself around him, folding into every crevice and orifice until she was invading him.

When he was totally entrapped the black shapes dropped from the ceiling and entered him.

The service stairs up to the penthouse were poorly lit; just two low wattage emergency lights lit their path as Robert Carter and Adam Black climbed upwards. They reached the top of the staircase and were confronted by a steel-clad door. Carter twisted the handle but the door didn't budge. 'Damn it!' he said softly and as the words left his lips there was a click and the door swung inwards.

'Looks like we're expected,' Adam Black said.

'That's worrying,' Carter said. 'Come on. Stay close.'

The penthouse apartment was in semi-darkness as they slipped in through the doorway.

What scant illumination there was came from a large glass tank in the corner of the room where multi-colored tropical fish darted back and forth. Music was playing softly on the stereo; jazz – Miles Davis, *Blue in Green*. It would have been soothing had the circumstances not made it so incongruous.

'Welcome, Mr. Carter. And you too Mr. Black. Welcome to my humble abode.'

The voice seemed to come from everywhere. Gliding on top of Miles Davis's mellow horn.

'Show yourself,' Carter said.

'And spoil the surprise? Besides it would be rude to start the party before the final guest has arrived.'

A small bell sounded as the elevator reached the penthouse. There was a hiss

as the doors opened and Frankie Morgan stepped out of the car.

'Ah, right on cue.'

Carter ran forward. 'Frankie! Get back in the elevator. Get out of here!'

A shadow passed in front of his face and something wet and heavy crashed into him, knocking him to the ground.

'Carter!' Adam Black yelled and rushed towards him, but more shadows appeared, crawling from the darkened corners of the room, slipping out from beneath the furniture. They circled Carter as he struggled to push himself to his feet. Black stopped in his tracks as one of the shadows reared up in front of him. He felt himself being lifted from his feet, and then he was thrown backwards, crashing into the fish tank, the weight of his body shattering the glass, sending water cascading over the Persian rug that covered the floor.

Frankie Morgan stood at the threshold of the room, trying to focus her thoughts, to channel her energy. She could feel the evil all around her. She tried to push it back but it was all-pervasive.

The evil was in every shadow that moved through the room. A tangible evil, cloying, pressing down on her like a suffocating wet rag. She tried to call out to Carter who had made it to his feet and was standing, swaying in the center of the room, but the shadows had reached her now and were starting to move up her body. Her chest was constricted and it was becoming more and more difficult to breathe.

Suddenly the whole apartment was flooded with light as every lamp in the place burst into blinding life.

Standing there was Jonathan Lassiter, illuminated by an overhead spotlight, behind him the open French doors to the balcony. The Armani suit was immaculate, the Gucci loafers gleaming, and he was smiling. Around him shadows danced with a life of their own.

'Lassiter?' Carter said.

The man's smile broadened into a grin. 'Yes,' he said. 'And no. The inadequate young man who entered this building is no more. We have entered him, improved him.'

'And who are you?' Carter said. 'What are you?'

'You're about to find out,' Lassiter said. He raised his arms and the shadows around him rushed forwards.

Carter spread his arms out in front of him as if welcoming the shadows, as if he was going to embrace them, but as they were about to swarm over him he crossed his arms over his chest and yelled, 'No!'

The shadows faltered, and then started to retreat, slithering back to their hiding places.

Lassiter's smile stuttered and he took a step backwards. A frown creased his forehead.

Carter glanced round at Frankie and Adam Black. Frankie Morgan was on her knees, almost engulfed by the shadows. Adam Black was wet and bleeding. He was clutching his arm which had been sliced open by a shard of glass from the shattered aquarium and from the way it was pumping out through his fingers it was likely an artery had been severed.

'You and me!' he shouted at Lassiter. 'Let the others go.'

'And why in God's name should I do that?' the young man replied.

'Because if you don't I'll know you're still the inadequate, pathetic little prick I met down in the foyer. Delusions of grandeur. Is that it, Lassiter? Show me the kind of man you are now.'

'You'll regret it,' Lassiter said, the smile returning.

'I doubt it.'

Lassiter snapped his fingers and the shadows slipped from Frankie's body and slinked away into the corner of the room.

'Robert, no!' Frankie said.

'Frankie, take Adam down in the elevator and get him to a hospital before he bleeds to death.'

'I'm not leaving you,' she said.

'Neither am I.' Adam Black staggered forward, then sank to his knees, weakened by the loss of blood.

'Do as you're bloody told! Both of you!'

Frankie looked from Carter to Black, who looked as if he were about to pass out. Then she rushed forward, helped him to his feet, and hauled him across to the elevator. With one desperate glance back at the apartment she hit a button.

As the doors closed Lassiter laughed. 'They don't have as much faith in you as you do yourself.'

'Go to hell!' Carter said.

Lassiter snapped his fingers again and the shadows surged forwards. This time Carter was too slow, much too slow. The shadows swarmed over him, shredding his clothes, ripping at his skin. They had weight, so much weight. He felt his knees begin to buckle. With a supreme effort of will he focused his thoughts, concentrating fiercely, trying to repel the onslaught. But he'd miscalculated badly. There were too many of them and they were pulling him down.

He could feel claws raking his body, sharp pains as spindle thin spikes were driven into his side. The spikes moved inside him, searching out his vital organs, hungry, probing. As he was pulled down by the weight of the shadows he felt his life begin to slip away. The room was growing dark, the light being sucked into the shadows. He was aware of Lassiter laughing obscenely, triumphant, victorious.

His neck was wrenched one way then the other. Hard blows smashed into his chest and he felt ribs crack.

And then the elevator doors opened and Adam Black was back in the room, running, throwing himself at Lassiter. The two men tumbled backwards, crashing onto the balcony. For a moment it seemed like they would stay propped together against the metal railings. Then there was a shout like a pistol shot and they tumbled, Jonathan Lassiter wrapped in Adam Black's embrace, out into the night and down to the cold hard ground below.

As he lay there, unable to move, Carter felt the weight of the shadows lift from his body as they slithered away. And then Frankie's face swam into focus. 'Shhhhhh. Don't move. I've called for an ambulance.'

'Too late,' he said. 'Much too late.'

And darkness crashed in to claim him.