

*THE*  
*NIGHTWALKER*

# One

In the dream he had become something else, but he did not know what it was. Less than human, impossible to define. He could only be certain that he had changed, as if everything about him had undergone some unique metamorphosis. Yet he remained the same person beneath it all, with the same brain and emotional makeup. Or did he?

In the dream nothing happened. He stood there seeing himself standing there. Present but not quite visible. Through leaves. It felt like a summer night, cool and windy but pleasant. He saw himself behind foliage and branches, on the other side of a shrubbery perhaps. He stared at himself and he stared back. Only the bushes moved in the breeze. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't make out the features of the face. It remained in shadow. The eyes caught what light there was; otherwise he might not be sure.

In the dream the ending was always his ending. Was it his death he experienced again? He would stand watching, prepared not to move until it all became

dear to him, never taking his eyes from the dark presence of a few yards away. He knew he was watching himself, but there was more. A message, something he had to discover. Something very important to his life. But always the apparition ended without revelation. His body grew steadily weaker. The effort to remain standing grew more difficult, as if the force of gravity were pulling him down. His shoulders slumped, his face sagged, he would slip into a crouch. Mental cables would snap; he would lose his hold on the scene. He would give way and dissolve, like a photograph vanishing into a million random dots. The shadowy figure, his twin self, would watch, unmoving, as he disappeared into himself.

What would be left?

Smoke.

*Smoke?*

Vaguely he realized it was not part of the dream. The sweet blackness of oblivion had bottomed out in another world. He was awake; he stirred in bed.

He opened his eyes and found the room was still dark. It must be very early morning. Again. He groped for his watch. His eyes began to hurt and then he could feel it in his nose—smoke.

*Christ, something's burning.* He scrambled out of bed and turned on the bedside lamp. A steely cloud hung in the air, growing rapidly thicker as more smoke drifted in from the hallway. He began to cough as he pulled on his pants. *If the building's on fire I'm in real trouble*, he thought. His flat was on the top floor of a narrow, three-story building in Kensington. It was a tired, mock-Tudor structure with an updraft which could now turn the whole place into a silo of flames.

## *The Nightwalker*

Without bothering to look in the kitchen, he unlocked his door and stepped onto the landing. Smoke billowed up the stairway, confirming his fears that the fire came from below. The tiny back top-floor flat was vacant and had been for years; Mrs. Jackson, the landlady, who lived in the basement, used it as an attic storeroom. There might be an exit to the roof in there, but he didn't intend to waste time breaking in to find out. Instead, he started down the stairs. It was the only way to go.

The thought of fire terrified him, but he was surprised to find that in spite of the dense smoke the stairway was not unusually hot. Tears streamed from his eyes as he stumbled, reaching the second floor. He turned and took a couple more steps down. Abruptly there was much less smoke.

He had almost forgotten Platt, the middle-aged man who lived alone on the second floor. The smoke was coming from the half-open door of his flat. Had the man already fled or was he still inside, unconscious or maybe even dead?

He bent over until his head nearly touched the stairs, coughing violently to clear his lungs and blinking until he could see more clearly. Then he took a deep breath that was only mildly irritating and rushed into Platt's apartment.

Still heat.

He had never been in these rooms before and he didn't know his way around, but lights were on in every direction and music came from a radio somewhere. He moved toward the sound and entered a large kitchen. Smoke billowed furiously from the stove, but a cold breeze told him that a window must be open, thus pushing the smoke farther into the

building. He reached the far wall, found the window, opened it all the way and gulped in fresh air. There was no fire; he could see that now.

A large blackened pot sat over a low flame on the stove. The fool had intended to heat up a late-night meal for himself and then had forgotten all about it. Fallen asleep probably. A few more minutes and the place would have started to burn.

He turned off the flame, but in all the smoke he couldn't find anything to grab the pot with. Then his hand fastened on a large plate, intended for the meal no doubt. With it he knocked the loose cover away, and then he slid the plate over the top of the container, cutting off the torrent of smoke. *That's it*, he thought. No danger now, no need to fear. But he was still trembling with agitation.

He went back to the window for air. The smoke was beginning to clear and more details of the kitchen became visible. The sink was piled high with unwashed dishes, pans and utensils. The counter was covered with empty cans—predominantly baked beans—and fruit peels, eggshells, bread crusts and empty wrappers. The table held more of the same clutter, including several empty gin bottles and dirty glasses. He could almost feel the grease that covered everything from floor to ceiling. The place was a one-man slum, a human garbage can.

Platt.

He had forgotten about Platt. He rushed into the next room, where a light was on. Smoke still hung heavily there. He opened the single window and swung the door back and forth to fan the room a little clearer. It was the bedroom, and he could see immediately that it too was a pigsty. But Platt wasn't there.

## *The Nightwalker*

The next room was bright, with several lights on, but it too was full of smoke. No Platt, no furniture, only boxes of empty bottles stacked against the walls. Hundreds of bottles—all gin, except for a few mixers. He must keep every bottle he's ever had. A perverse sense of accomplishment. The light came from two floor lamps and a cheap chandelier, which made the room look even more absurd. *What an animal*, he thought.

Platt was in the bathroom. He wore only socks and dirty underpants. His shirt and trousers had been thrown on the floor by the door, actually helping to block out the smoke. Platt lay on the floor, curled around the base of the toilet. How appropriate. Like a cockroach.

He stood in the doorway looking down at the wretched creature, the snoring cockroach . . . And it all began to circle in his mind. The panic and fear he had felt on waking. The tension—as if his body were full of wires stretched to an unbearable degree.

Then it all began to spin and buzz, like amorphous dust clouds of gas and matter gathering into the somber heat of a monstrous new star in the night.

He turned to the bathroom mirror, part of his mind noting the filthy condition of the glass surface. His body cellophaned in sweat, smeared with streaks of smoke and soot, his hair wild, his face seemingly twisted with furious disgust—he hardly recognized himself, but it registered: himself and nothing more.

He turned to Platt.

“Wake up.” His voice seemed unusually loud in the small room.

The other man moved an inch or two, sighed and lapsed back into noisy, rhythmic breathing.

“Get up,” he yelled, crashing his bare heel down on Platt’s ankle. “Up, get up.” He kicked again.

“Aauughh,” Platt moaned, rolling onto his back. His eyes fluttered blindly.

Now he stomped relentlessly. The drunken man’s ankle had become a kind of contact point; every time his own foot slammed into it he felt as if an electrical charge was shooting through his body from heel to brain.

“Get up, you goddamn pig.”

Pain hauled Platt into consciousness. He swung his feet away protectively and his eyes widened with terror and bewilderment. Who was this? What was happening? What was he doing on the floor? He had been having a quiet drink. Pain telegraphed its message. Move. Do something.

He grabbed Platt tightly by the hair and ears, yanking him up into a sitting position. “Stupid fucking pig.” He slammed Platt’s head against the rim of the toilet bowl. “Stupid fucking cockroach.” The words sang in his head like rhapsodies of lightning. “Burn the goddamn house down.”

Bang—into the porcelain.

Bang. Bang.

“Oh, God, stop it,” Platt wailed, blood washing freely down the side of his head. “Stop it, stop it, please.”

He pushed the door open with one foot and dragged the helpless man along the floor. This pig should be out of here for good. The whole flat should be stripped and cleaned. Start again. Platt began to resist, striking weakly at his arms, squirming like a desperate beast.

“No, no, what are you doing? Stop it.”

He let go long enough to hammer the man about the

## *The Nightwalker*

head and face until more blood splashed and his fists hurt. Then he resumed kicking—stomach, ribs, neck and groin—until Platt rolled into a screaming, fetal shape.

Into the kitchen.

“Look at it, look at what you’ve done. Goddamn fucking shithead animal. You aren’t human, do you hear that? You aren’t even human.”

He flung the table over, sending bottles flying through the air and crashing on the floor. Platt moaned loudly, still not knowing what was going on.

He took Platt’s head in his hands again, like a football, and twisted it toward the stove. Anger had become a bright jet of energy surging through him.

“See what you did, pigshit. Try to burn the house down. Look at it.”

“Oh, God, leave me alone,” the other man whined.

“Leave you alone. Bullshit I’ll leave you alone. You shouldn’t even be here. You’re an animal, motherfucking shit-eating scumhead bastard.”

He yanked Platt out onto the landing, punching and kicking him as they went. Then he shoved him violently down the stairs. Platt tumbled awkwardly, like a broken pinwheel, crying aloud. He thumped into a heap at the next landing and remained there, sobbing, not daring to look up.

Above, his rescuer stood impassively. The burning light within had gone. He felt calm, refreshed, even cleansed. He spun around and returned to his own flat on the top floor. The sound of the radio drifted away.

## Two

The rooms were still full of smoke. He opened all the windows and then sat down on the end of his bed. He began to feel again, and the single message from all over his body was one of pain. His throat, blasted by smoke, felt as if a layer of skin had been peeled away from it. His feet were bleeding from the broken glass. His toes ached from kicking. His hands were torn and bloodied. Bruises appeared on his forearms.

What had happened?

Suddenly he had been propelled into a white heat of outrage and aggression. He hadn't struck anyone since his school days—until tonight. It seemed incredible. The signs on his own body amazed him, as if he had just become a stigmatic or grown a sixth finger on one hand. All the exhilaration was gone, leaving only confusion and a dull booming in his head.

He took four aspirins and 600 milligrams of ginseng.

When he had finished picking bits of glass from his feet and washing his wounds it was just after 5:00 a.m.

## *The Nightwalker*

Hyde Park would be open now. He reached it in a few minutes.

The air outdoors was damp with a cold mist, but it still felt wonderful to him after the smoke. There were few cars on the road, some trucks and an occasional bus. Within an hour the traffic would increase and people would appear, but now it was dark, quiet and as close to empty as the city ever gets.

He knew Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens well. They were his territory, early morning his time. He always woke early and he always walked in the park. For some reason he couldn't understand, this place seemed more private and personal to him than his own flat. If he felt tense or especially unhappy, the park settled him. If he felt alert and in good spirits, his mood was enhanced by walking among the trees in the wet grass. He preferred the early morning, when he could persuade himself he was the only person roaming an estate, but even on hot, sunny summer days he didn't mind the crowds. Even then there was something singular between the place and himself, something shared. He had noticed it the first time, when he had arrived in London the previous August.

He sat on a bench within sight of the Speke Monument. The sky grew slowly lighter and all the greenery in turn more vivid. For several long moments he stared at nothing in particular, his mind and body relaxed, the last of his tension scudding away like vapor. Then he turned his head idly and followed the flickering movement of a yellow taxi light along the north side of the park until it disappeared. Early. He had forgotten his watch, but he knew it was still early.

The trouble at the flat came back in a hissing rush. He could have killed the man, Platt, that pathetic crea-

ture. All right, he had been angry, that was understandable. Even to slap the man around a little and bring him to. But to bash and kick him like that . . . and then the stairs. What on earth had he been doing? He vaguely remembered how good it had felt at the time, but it was too blurred and confused—like someone with no sex knowledge trying to understand his first wet dream.

Finally he stood up and walked to shake off the cloud of worry. Why should he care about Platt? The man was an alcoholic wreck who apparently had no steady job. A sound thrashing would do him no harm. When he eventually woke up it would probably all seem like just another bad dream, if he remembered anything at all in his hangover. Mrs. Jackson wouldn't have heard anything in her crypt of a basement, and the first floor was a doctor's office, vacant at night.

He stopped under a tree. Ahead would be the Round Pond, and he saw the first joggers in the distance. The air, heavy with moisture, was like a silvery film on his skin. He squatted down and placed the palms of his hands on the ground. It was as if he were pressing the entire planet: all that life and energy at his touch, coming into him. He was a receptor, a priest in a dark sacrament of earth, leaves and bark. He tore out clumps of grass and soil, and flung them into the air. The fierce booming had resumed in his head. His hands felt as if they were on fire, but pleasantly. He thought he could almost soar through the sky. He ran across the grass beneath the trees, along the pathways through the park, through the mist turning to rain in the cold air; he ran as hard as he could run, until the ghost music and ghost fire inside him had subsided. Until he reached his flat.

## *The Nightwalker*

The air was now sharp and clear but his rooms were cold. He shut all the windows, grabbed the telephone and threw himself on the bed. She wouldn't like this, but too bad, he needed her.

"Hello?" Very sleepy.

"Hi."

"Oh." One, two beats. "Hi."

"Come on over here." An order and a plea.

He got a question mark in the form of a yawn by way of reply.

"I said, come on over here." A little more urgent.

"Now?" Mild annoyance, but not as bad as he had expected.

"As soon as you can." Then, "Now."

"It's—six o'clock."

"We'll have breakfast."

"We're having drinks today. It is today, isn't it?"

"Yeah, we'll have those too. Just come on over here now, okay?"

"Oh . . ."

"Please."

"Did you have a bad night, is that it?"

"I also love you."

When he saw the taxi stop out front he moved away from the window. She was breathless from climbing the stairs and still sleepy around the eyes, but she managed a smile. She set her handbag down and placed her overcoat on top of it. He thought she looked terrific and he crossed the room quickly to hold her.

"I was lucky to find a stray taxi," she said. "I don't usually make house calls this early."

"Oh, you are good," he whispered, steering her to the bed.

“Your hair smells all smoky.”

They made love in a rush. His own anxious rhythm was completely at odds with hers, but she relaxed and let him go his way. He needed her so much—that in itself was enough. He could be good with her in bed, but not if something was bothering him. Then he would be lost in himself. She didn’t mind. It was the only time he seemed weak and vulnerable.

Afterward she sat up. Was he going to drift off to sleep now? No. His eyes were closed but he was still awake.

“Do you want some coffee and eggs?” she asked. “I’m going to have some. You did offer breakfast.”

“Help yourself.”

“Thanks a lot.” She poked him but got no reaction.

“Hey, are you all right?”

“Better, yeah.”

*Typical*, she thought, smiling.

“Look at your hands, all dirty and cut. How’d that happen?”

Eyes still closed, he laughed into the pillow.