

The Shadows Trilogy



Paul Kane

'Paul Kane is a rare talent with a
fiendish imagination'

Stephen Laws - author of *Ghost Train* and *Chasm*

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In the Shadows

What can I say about the Order of the Shadows that has not already been written?

Very little, I suspect, and remain alive. Their agents are everywhere, you see – monitoring everything, much like those other creatures I have written about in the past whose name I dare not repeat for fear they might be observing through their globes in their distant dimension; those who watch, who manipulate, who control.

In actual fact the two mythos have quite a bit in common. I started to write about them both around the same time, the late 1990s, an era of paranoia, of millennium bugs and Nostradamus prophecies. The predicted end of the world didn't come, of course, but that might just be because The Order wasn't ready yet. Give them time, reader, give them time.

So, to these 'fictions' I present before you – or perhaps fictionalised retellings of events that might have happened? No, I really shouldn't say that. It's better for all concerned to think of these as inventions. It makes it easier to sleep at night – and makes it less likely that The Order should turn its attentions to us.

The first is a tale about a writer. I know, I know, you've heard it all before. Well, not this one you haven't. Like you, I've always groaned in the past when I've read stories about writers. The problem being that when certain authors start to make their living from books, the only reference points seem to be those professions. As Stephen King (and spot the in-joke in 'Shadow Writer' here) once said in an interview upon showing his wife the manuscript for *Bag of Bones* - a superb novel, I hasten to add - "She turned and said to me, 'Steve, it's another story about a writer who can't write anymore.'" Alas, the writer in our first story has no such difficulty, it's the reason he writes that's the problem.

In our second story – and I don't think it's giving too much away to say this – we find out the consequences of that writing. A woman, all alone in the

dark during a powercut, is haunted by things around her: as well as her past. This, of all my stories, reveals a glimpse into my own fear of the dark and what might lie within. Under the bed, on the landing at night, behind the dimly lit street corner...

Thirdly, there's a new Order of the Shadows story to complete the trilogy. Written around the same time as the other two, due to one reason or another (publishers shutting down, or being *forced* to shut down? I have my suspicions) it never saw the light of day. But then, being about the Order of the Shadows, perhaps it never could. The dark is their dwelling place, pitch black, where the things you see, or *think* you see, actually come to life. In this one we follow three desperate parents as they try to recover their children from a dreaded cult, little realising that it is connected with The Order.

Once you've read them, you might ask yourself: is that likely to be the end of it? Surely Kane won't dare to write any more stories about The Order – after all, it's been such a long time since he wrote these original accounts. The answer is, of course, that I will someday return to this fertile ground. I have to, if only to warn you all indirectly of the danger you are in from things you cannot possibly understand. I'll write as long as they *let* me write.

And as long you still believe it's all made up.

Enjoy the fiction, won't you.

Shadow Writer

I listened to the slapping of water against the boat as great oars propelled me onwards. At any other time I would have found it relaxing, but I was far too excited by the prospect of that which awaited me. Excited and yet strangely anxious.

Had it only been last week when the letter arrived on my desk at the *Daily Herald*? It seemed like several lifetimes ago. I remember being puzzled by the unique handwriting on the front of the envelope, curling and intricate. Hardly anyone hand-wrote envelopes these days, especially people who corresponded with me. Most printed out their names and addresses using a computer.

But this was nothing compared to the surprise I experienced when I opened it and started reading.

Dear Mr Regis, it said in that same wonderful hand, My sources inform me that you are one of my biggest fans in this country. Therefore, I am granting you the opportunity of coming to my home to interview me, alone of course. If you are interested in accepting my offer, please confirm this by writing to the above P.O. Box address. I urge you not to speak of this to anyone yet, not even your editor at The Herald. I will know if you do so and the offer will be withdrawn at once. Yours sincerely, Herbert Lynch.

At first I believed it to be a joke of some kind. My colleagues were fully aware of the love I had for Lynch's books: his many, extraordinary books. I thought one of them had forged the note to provoke me.

Everyone knew the horror author never gave interviews - no one had even seen him for decades - but something at the back of my mind told me to remain silent. If the letter really was genuine, I could spoil everything by confronting my bewildered workmates. So I decided to write back. Nothing ventured...

Then several days later I received blunt instructions telling me roughly when I could meet with Lynch and where he was residing: near a small

village along the coastline called Rath's End. Surely none of my friends would go to this much trouble to trick me, I thought. This was real. I was actually going to meet with my life-long literary idol. Not only that, but I was also going to be the first journalist ever to interview the enigmatic recluse.

Ever since I can recall I've read, collected and enjoyed Lynch's dark fiction. His style is unrivalled by contemporaries - a blend of old and new, with chilling consequences for the reader. His stories, of things in the shadows (hence his nickname the 'Shadow Writer'), strange creatures beyond our imagination, ghosts and demons, hellish realms and nightmare landscapes, came alive in the pages of untold novels and anthologies over the last half a century.

Enviied and imitated by other scribes, yet loved and adored by fans in their millions around the world, Herbert Lynch was *the* voice of horror in the world today. So you can imagine my joy at hearing he'd invited me to his home, the location of which was a closely guarded secret. I should know, I've been trying to discover it for years...And now it had just fallen into my lap with no effort at all. I suppose I could have sold the address on for a small fortune, but didn't wish to betray the man's confidence. Anyway, I had no intentions of passing this opportunity up.

I could only assume that he - or someone close to him - must have seen one of my articles. Lynch being something of an obsession of mine, I tended to write about him whenever the opportunity arose. Usually when a new hardback appeared on the shelves or as Halloween descended upon us once more.

The last piece I'd penned was a retrospective of his entire back catalogue, a daunting task for any other writer, I'm sure. In it I compared his prose to that of the grand master of modern horror literature, 19th century writer Sir Horrace Fenshaw, plus other well-known voices in the field such as turn of the century scaremonger James Weir. I drew parallels between their styles and argued that Lynch was indeed a worthy successor to the throne, having updated, as well as embellished upon, their terrifying work.

Perhaps he had been flattered by the comparisons, who knows? If so, then I would die a very happy man because it was Lynch who indirectly inspired

me to take up writing in the first place. In my teens I tried to copy him, coming up with my own macabre stories. But the talent just wasn't there; even I could see that. Dejected, I turned to non-fiction instead, figuring it to be the next best thing.

As it turned out I was right, and over the years I've managed to carve out a modest little niche for myself. Now, finally, all that hard work was paying off. My mentor - in all but presence - wished to see me, and only me!

I badgered my editor for some time away from the office, promising him it would be worth his while in the long run.

'Hot scoop, Stephen?' he asked, half-jokingly.

'Could be, boss. Could be. I can't say any more right now.' He must have seen that look in my eye, the one that meant his circulation would increase if he went along, because eventually he agreed.

'Take as much time as you need, Stephen. But *The Herald* gets exclusive rights.'

And off I went, driving up to Rath's End without further delay - only calling at my flat to grab a few essential items of clothing, my dictaphone (no camera, as he expressly forbade me to take photographs) and, of course, a bundle of books for him to sign.

The drive was uneventful enough through miles of countryside, but as I careered along I began to feel a nervous flutter deep inside. I put this down to the fact that I hadn't really prepared for the interview. Just what would I ask this man when I came face to face with him? I quickly suppressed these concerns for the time being and concentrated on the road ahead. It would be a moot point if I rolled the car into a ditch and missed my opportunity. I hoped that when the time came I could play it by ear without looking too much of an idiot.

The journey took nearly a day to complete, by which time it was almost dusk. I eventually stumbled upon a small tavern in Rath's End where I would spend the night pacing in my room, attempting - unsuccessfully - to bring some order to my thoughts. I concluded that the most important question would be about Lynch's vast fortune. What exactly did he do with all his money, the cash he made from royalties, films rights and so on? The rumours

I'd heard seemed to indicate that he didn't spend any of it but, naturally, these may have been exaggerated. It was a crude subject, I know. Nevertheless, it was one which many people would be interested in...myself included. I vowed to broach the topic early on in my interview.

When morning came I was up with the sun, refreshed despite only catching a few hours' sleep. I enquired about the address on my piece of paper and the proprietor of the tavern laughed out loud, pointing me in the direction of a salty looking man outside. A fellow I would come to call Jack.

'Course I know where it is! But you won't get there on foot,' he growled. 'Nor in that flash car of yours.' (With the best will in the world I'd hardly have called my car 'flash'.)

'What do you mean?'

Jack said nothing more. Instead he merely nodded over the sea in the direction of a small outcropping shrouded in thick, grey mist. I could just about make out the shape of a rectangular structure perched precariously on those rocks. The ocean swelled around this place and no matter how hard I looked, I could see no route on or off that barren 'island'.

'It's completely cut off,' I gasped. 'How am I supposed to get across there?'

Jack chuckled and turned to me. 'This is your lucky day. I'll take you in my rowing boat...For a small fee that is.'

Lucky day, my foot. Jack let it slip that he sometimes delivered letters and essential supplies to Lynch. I began to suspect he'd been waiting for me by the tavern that morning. He'd probably opened and read the exchange of letters before posting them on. But he was my only option, and by this time I was desperate to meet with Lynch. He could have fired me over in a cannon for all I cared.

I transferred my belongings into Jack's boat and we set off within the hour. My companion on this fairly lengthy trip said very little on the way, which was fine with me. It gave me more time to think of what to say when I arrived, and what to ask. If only I'd had more warning I could have...But what was the use in thinking like that? I was here now, nearly upon my destination. It was too late for making plans and last minute notes.

The closer we got, the more of Lynch's house became visible. The curtains

of fog parted for us, allowing me to fully take in the shape of this mansion - for now I saw it was a dark, stone, gothic building in keeping with his trade. I shivered slightly.

‘Second thoughts?’ Jack asked, his back to the house. I didn’t answer him. I was nervous, certainly, but only due to the enormity of the task, not because of some mock façade of a house which had probably been constructed by builders at Lynch’s request. It all helped perpetuate his esoteric image.

At last the boat came up to those jagged rocks. Jack steered his vessel so close I thought he would actually hit them, but he seemed to miss by a mile when the time came.

‘I’ll take my money now.’ There was no feeling in his voice. A little greed perhaps, but that was all. Reluctantly, I handed him the promised amount. He snatched the notes from me, counting them with nimble fingers.

‘When are you coming back?’ I asked as I climbed out of the rocking timber, dragging my holdalls behind me. It was a question that had been nagging me since we passed through the fog.

‘I’ll know when it’s time.’

‘Wait a minute-’ I called after him, but it was too late. Already he was rowing away, his strokes swift and sure, hands pulling the shafts much faster than he had on the way over. His attitude annoyed me. What if he came back before I’d finished? Or, worse still, returned days later by which time Lynch would be sick of the sight of me? Well, there was nothing to do now but make my way to his door. Part of me wanted to rush, and another part was calling for me to take my time - savour the moment. In the end the former won, although I did hesitate before raising my hand to knock, my palms sweating and my heart muscle hammering away inside my chest.

In that instant the door opened inwards, even before my knuckles could strike the wood. The hinges creaked impressively. He certainly didn’t do things by half, Mr Lynch.

‘Er...Hello,’ I murmured into the black interior, feeling a mild sense of trepidation. Such were my nerves on this momentous occasion.

A voice cut through the gloom, eerie and almost non-existent compared with my own. ‘Come in, Mr Regis.’

I laughed but it came out more like a mewl. I was beginning to feel like I was in one of Lynch's books. Any moment now the mad axe-man would appear, or maybe some sort of creature would lay its vile tongue on my neck, savouring the taste of its next victim.

'M-Mr Lynch, is that you?'

'Yes. Now come in and shut the door behind you.'

I did as he requested, but only when I moved further into the hall did I lay eyes on Herbert Lynch himself, his form suddenly revealed to me. There was very little light in the house, and yet I saw him as clearly as a firework on bonfire night. He was a small, stooping figure with very short arms that hung straight down at his sides. His face was the shape of a light bulb, with curly white hair on top and memories of what had once been a full beard scratching around under his chin. The man's iguana-like eyes bulged out, as if the pressure inside his head was too great, and when he finally smiled his golden teeth seemed far too big for his mouth.

I had imagined Lynch to be in his mid-60s, for word had it he started writing at an early age. But the person in front of me was at least twenty years older than that. Lines traced curving patterns across his throat and cheeks, the skin there rippling with folds. And when he turned to walk up the hallway, it was with slow, careful movements: those of an ancient man who was frightened of breaking his brittle bones.

Leaving my bags behind, I followed him to a large drawing room. There was a gigantic arched window on the far side, though incredibly it was still dark - the mist preventing all but a sliver of sunlight to pass through. However, my eyes soon became accustomed to the gloom. Lynch shuffled over to a grand rectangular table with carved legs and a polished surface. He sat at the head, waving me over with his left hand.

As I approached, I noticed that two places had been set for dinner: the host's and my own. On the table sat covered silver trays.

'Are you hungry, Mr Regis? I thought we might eat together.' He looked at me intently, inspecting every movement I made. Daring me to reject his hospitality.

'I...That's most kind of you. Please, call me Stephen.'

‘Very well. And you may call me Herbert, though it isn’t my given name.’
The teeth appeared again.

Now this really was interesting. I’d always suspected Lynch used a pseudonym, that’s why nobody could find out anything about him. This was the proof I needed to confirm my theory. Maybe I’d even find out what his real name was...But I was taking things too fast. Slow down and enjoy your meal, I said to myself.

I sat at the table next to Lynch and he immediately lifted the lids off those trays to reveal a superb spread consisting of roast chicken, potatoes and other assorted vegetables, all piping hot.

‘Help yourself. It’s not often I get callers out here.’ His tone was melancholy and for just a split second I realised what his life must be like in the house. Day after day, just writing, never seeing a soul. The life of a loner.

Still, it was by his own choice. Or was it? Had the poor man been driven here by his fame? Forced to shut himself away because he was so good at his chosen career? Maybe he was agoraphobic; Lord knows the pressures of the outside world are enough to make anyone run screaming from the crowds and cities. It would certainly explain a few things. Another question for later.

I silently chewed my chicken, seeing the man I’d admired all my life in a new light.

* * *

The meal was delicious, but Lynch didn’t leave it at that. He insisted on showing me around the great house itself, a tour which lasted most of the afternoon and intruded upon early evening.

It was definitely a breathtaking, if somewhat depressing, abode (I quickly realised that the outside was not a front at all) and Lynch took great pleasure in recounting some of its history. How it had been built at the end of the eighteenth century by two French architects, who’d fled to England after revolution engulfed their homeland. How they had erected it in one of the most isolated spots in the country because they found it an effort to mix with the nobility in London. And how the place had been the envy of Sir Horrace

Fenshaw - who covertly acquired the property in 1830.

‘You mean Fenshaw actually lived here?’ I was amazed by this revelation.

‘He spent some time here writing, yes.’

‘I suppose that’s one of the reasons why you bought the place.’

Lynch looked vacant for a moment. ‘Oh, I didn’t buy the house. It was...left to me.’

‘I see.’ In all honesty I didn’t, but I was sure I’d find out more when I questioned him.

Except the interview would have to wait a while it seemed. Lynch had just finished showing me around the vast library when he stopped to comment on the lateness of the hour. I hadn’t noticed, but it was now even darker outside thanks to the onset of night. The house had no electricity, so I watched as the author lit several lamps here and there along the hall. The thin patches of light created shadowy patterns on the walls, which danced as if to a tuneless beat.

When that was done, he told me he was going to start work now and we could conduct the interview at dawn. I was eager to begin there and then, but had little choice in the matter. If I argued, then he might refuse to speak to me at all. Anyway, if he was writing then that could only mean more material for me to devour the next time I was in my local bookshop.

‘Goodnight, Stephen,’ he said, warmly. ‘It was nice to have met you.’ Then Lynch made his way to a room adjacent to the library. His private writing chamber.

Left alone, I decided to take my holdalls up to the bedroom Lynch had provided for me. It was still dark upstairs and, despite reason telling me otherwise, I felt afraid of the blackness. It seemed oppressive, as if I might lose myself in it, never to be seen again. Being in the presence of a master horror-smith has set your imagination racing, I told myself. There’s nothing there in the dark that isn’t there in the daylight. Somehow that thought only served to chill me more.

The steps creaked loudly as I made my way higher, another cliché of the highest order. But fears I had shrugged off whilst reading Lynch’s books were not so easily dismissed now. The sounds of this house made me edgy

and by the time I reached the landing my heartbeat was up once more.

There was an indistinct noise to my right, just along from the banisters. A clawing sound. Rats, perhaps? But this was followed by definite movement. I could feel a closeness here, a figure. No, several figures...

'Who's there?' My speech was croaky, hoarse with the burden of coaxing the question out. I knew there was no one else in the house, just Lynch and I. Unless someone had been hiding when he showed me around-

Then I heard the voices. Quiet, almost muffled, voices; one on top of the other until they became incomprehensible. I couldn't determine their direction, they were all around me, whispering, chattering with a mind-numbing resolve. It became hard to tell whether they were on the inside or outside of my head. At times it felt like both.

I dropped my baggage on the landing and gripped the rail, a sudden queasiness taking hold of me. The figures were moving again, shifting about on the walls, the floors. Blocking the way to my room and sliding towards me at the same time. It was like they were almost there, but not quite. I had trouble focusing on them - for one thing the incessant whispering was driving me mad, but there was also the absence of light to contend with.

It wasn't until they came within feet of me that I ran, descending the stairs so briskly I was lucky not to have tripped and broken my neck. The funny thing was, the closer I came to the lamps in the hall, the more ridiculous the whole episode seemed to me. Like a dream that felt real at the time, but merely foolish once the dreamer has awoken. The voices were gone and when I looked up there was no sign of any living shadows up there. I bowed my head and sighed, grateful at least that Lynch hadn't been here to witness my stupidity.

I was just about to climb up the stairs again when the crying started. It was coming from Lynch's study. Quickly, I dashed along the corridor to the door he'd closed not five minutes ago. I put my ear against the oak and the wailing grew louder. Yes, it was Lynch I could hear on the other side of that barricade. And in between the sobs he was talking, talking to someone inside there with him! I might have been mistaken, but the longer I listened the more his cries sounded like urgent pleas.

A sharp bang interrupted the grief. The callous crack of gunfire. Then silence.

Without hesitation, I tried the door. It was locked. I rapped on the wood and shouted: 'Mr Lynch? Mr Lynch, are you all right in there? Please open the door!'

There was no answer, but my request was granted all the same. The door suddenly flew inwards, seemingly pulled back by invisible wires. For now, by the light of another small lamp, I could see Lynch lying face down next to his desk. My first thought was that he'd been murdered...possibly by the person he was arguing with. Yet as I stepped inside I saw a pistol in his own frail hand, which itself was bent horribly round by the angle of the fall. If I had been thinking straight, I might have wondered where he'd found the strength to pull its trigger.

In shock I put my hands to my mouth, stifling a scream, my breath coming in short spasms. I tore my eyes away from Lynch to look around the room, only to discover it empty. No one had been in here at all. Lynch must have been talking to himself, convincing himself to proceed, or attempting to stop the inevitable from happening. All these years spent alone, writing about the unimaginable, had finally taken their toll. A sudden thought occurred to me. Perhaps this was the reason he'd sent for me, so his last hours would not be spent alone. And so he'd have someone to pick up the pieces after his death, arrange the funeral and the like.

Slowly, I approached the body and felt his neck for a pulse. There was none. My attention then travelled to his desk where I saw a journal open and an ink pen laid on top as if he'd been writing something. His suicide note?

But no. When I looked at the last thing he'd written (in his unmistakable style) I found it to be my own name coupled with today's date, placed beneath a list of other names and dates. The one before mine was from five years ago, a man called David Kramer. All visitors to the house I supposed. But when I turned a page, the dates and monikers stretched back as far as 1830 - to Sir Horrace Fenshaw. What did all this mean?

I did not have time to ponder this mystery because the voices I had heard upstairs chose that moment to return. To begin with they were just as

jumbled as before, but strangely they were louder in volume. And as I listened, sat behind the desk in Lynch's still-warm leather chair, they separated - becoming individual - each one giving me instructions.

I tried to resist their demands, gritting my teeth until I thought I would pass out. But my efforts were in vain. I had to obey them, do as they commanded. Taking the ink pen in my hand, I reached for a fresh sheet of paper and began to write. To my surprise the words flowed easily: sentences, paragraphs, soon pages of prose, all in Lynch's old fashioned handwriting.

And the more I wrote, the more I became aware of the things from upstairs flocking to my desk, converging there and gathering around my body. The voices were telling me exactly what to put down, I knew that, yet I felt some part of me was actually contributing to the story. All my life I'd wanted to write horror like Lynch, and now I was - *exactly like him*. The elation was at once substituted for pure terror, though, as I read the content of the tale I'd committed to paper...

* * *

Since that first night I've uncovered more of the secrets of this place, and the thought of what I've become appals me. I've managed to piece it all together, what has happened, what *has been* happening here for the last two centuries. They leave me virtually alone in the day you see, my new masters, so I've had plenty of time to conduct research in the vast library here.

What Lynch failed to tell me about the French architects who constructed this house was that they were both members of a universal group called 'The Order of the Shadows' - devotees of the black arts who follow what is known as the left-hand path.

They needed an isolated spot, not just because they failed to fit in on these shores, but also to keep their bloodthirsty activities a secret. Rituals they used to call up unfathomable things in the dead of night. Things that remain here to this day.

Sir Horace Fenshaw had been the first writer to encounter the men, and in exchange for ideas for his narratives, in effect his fame, he gave them

money. A donation to the Order. But exposure to the demonic forces caused him to die prematurely, as no man can listen to the voices for long before insanity claims him. However, prior to his death Fenshaw was charged with finding a replacement, someone to write in his place, using *his* name - a new cipher for the tenebrious ones to exploit.

And so it continued like this, a small army of writers - one following the next - for almost fifty years. Then a new pseudonym was adopted: James Weir. A second cover so more stories could be sold and the Order would become strong. This name would be used for another five decades, until it was time for Herbert Lynch to emerge.

I have the 'privilege' of being the last man to assume *his* identity, the latest addition to the list...In one joyless moment the other week, I even went so far as to sign the books I'd brought here *myself*. I am being used as a tool for evil, just like the man who greeted me when I came here. David Kramer.

There is nothing I can do about it; I cannot leave this place, cannot make contact with anyone on the mainland. All I can do is write more frightful stories (stories I now know to be true!). At night, always at night.

Jack sometimes comes to the island. I see him through the window as he leaves me supplies and takes away my latest manuscripts to be published. But he never comes in. He too is one of their servants I have learned.

If my predecessor is anything to go by I have but five more years of this left, before all my energy is sapped, my hair turns silver and I become completely unstable - so far gone that the only way to end it all will be with a bullet. I'll have to send for a replacement first, of course. Someone worthy. By that time a new pseudonym will have been chosen by the Order. The successor to Herbert Lynch who will take his work well into the next millennium.

I've already written more text than I care to remember - every day losing another piece of myself in the pages. The spark of life that was once present in my eyes is being extinguished over time.

And in case you're wondering what I set down on that very first night when the demons took me, changing me forever; well, it was the account you now hold in your hands - *my story*. I don't expect any of you reading this will

believe me, indeed, the Order wouldn't have let it be published if they thought that. But *I* know the truth. *I* can vouch for its authenticity.

I suppose that's what scares me the most. When I realise people will look upon it as simply entertainment, like I once did. As fiction, and nothing more. My God, if you could only experience one hour - one night - of my life as the Shadow Writer, shut away here all alone.

But then, if you're reading this, if you're a devout follower of 'my' work, maybe one day the summons will come...

And you just might get your chance.

Blackout

When Kelly awoke everything was black. To start with she thought perhaps she was in bed and it was the middle of the night. But everything was so, so dark. Not even the streetlights outside were shining.

And she was alone.

It wasn't until she raised herself up and something heavy dropped from her lap that she realised where she was. Where she *had been* before she'd fallen asleep. Reading on the sofa, curled up enjoying her book.

God, I must be getting old, she thought, nodding off without warning just like mum used to do. Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that she'd been up since six, dutifully seeing Jeff off at the station.

In any event it was a shock to wake up and find such a stifling gloom bearing down on her. She couldn't see the hand in front of her face, let alone any of the familiar, comforting objects in her living room.

Kelly never had liked the dark. As a child she'd pleaded with her parents to leave the table lamp on for her at night, and they had done so for a time. But as she got older they said it was a waste of electricity. Kelly was a big girl, and big girls weren't afraid of the dark. It couldn't hurt her. It wasn't alive or anything. And the daytime Kelly agreed with them. There was nothing to be frightened of.

It was the night-time Kelly who was the problem; whispering lies into her ear, forcing her to see things that weren't there.

'Oh, but it is alive! And so are the things that lurk within...'

Was there any wonder she'd wet the bed until she was almost in her teens? The fears didn't go away just because you were older. The blackness didn't go away - ever.

Of course Kelly hadn't thought about any of this for ages. Her nights were no longer sleepless ones. No more tossing and turning. For one thing she'd been married six years and with her husband beside her at night she was

perfectly safe. Her childish fallacies had finally been laid to rest.

And yet waking up here and now had stirred some of those dormant memories.

Kelly's sofa was next to the window, so she only had to look over the top to see outside. Everything was in shadow. The other bungalows; the streets branching off from her close; the town in the distance. Total blackout. It was as though someone had covered the entire area with a blanket. Or a shroud.

Trust Jeff to be away when she needed him most. He'd probably be enjoying himself in the hotel bar right about now; she knew what these so-called conferences were like. Whilst she was here, on her own. In the dark. Kelly leaned in closer. Not a light to be seen. Not-

There was something moving at the window.

Startled, Kelly pulled back. She could only see a vague outline, but that was enough. She inched forwards again. Was there someone outside? A face at the window?

It moved again. Sweet Jesus, it was behind her! Something with protruding eyes and a wide, gaping mouth. Kelly lost her balance and fell backwards. She landed awkwardly, the hardback novel jabbing into her spine.

Cursing, she flung it away into oblivion. *Get a grip on yourself. It was just your reflection, that's all.* But that doubting little voice was talking to her again, reminding her that reflections don't move of their own accord. That something was coming for her...

Kelly started to rise, slowly, carefully. Dammit, this was all her own fault. She should have taken up her sister's offer, gone to stay with her for the weekend. But it would have been like admitting she couldn't cope. Fran would just love that. She'd been bad enough to live with when they were little. Kelly wasn't about to give her the satisfaction. Although by this stage even Fran's company was starting to look pretty appealing.

What to do now? A light! She should go and get a light.

As she staggered around the living room, trying to work out in which direction the door lay, an unwelcome thought crossed her mind. Why had no one else in her neighbourhood done the same? When Kelly had looked out of

the window she'd seen none of the usual flickering of candles. No erratic torch beams flashing. What did this tell her? That the electricity had only just gone off. Or maybe, just maybe, something had happened to those people before they could-

She was doing it again. Scaring herself silly for no reason. It was all in her imagination. Now she'd get to the kitchen, find the torch, and shed some light on the situation.

Kelly followed the wall around, fingertips tentatively reaching out, half expecting to touch something nasty and slimy despite what she'd just told herself. Before she had too long to dwell on this, she came upon the open door and sighed with relief. She was no longer trapped in that room, in a confined space. Here was the hallway, and further up, the kitchen.

Still Kelly hesitated before stepping out into what felt like a dank, empty cavern, or some kind of disused railway tunnel with no beginning and no end. Perhaps *it* wanted her to come out. That might be part of *its* plan.

Stupid! Stupid!

Kelly dug her nails into the palms of her hands, the pain taking her mind off things for a blessed moment. She pressed on regardless, dragged into limbo. Kelly couldn't see the floor, so was it still there? For all she knew she could be falling into a pit and at the very bottom, waiting for her, would be...

Something brushed her arm as she moved through the hall. Kelly rounded on it and heard a crash as an assortment of objects fell to the floor. The plastic clatter of a telephone, coins jangling in a collection box, the tinkling as a photograph frame shattered. She'd bumped into the hall table.

Calm down. Have to calm down. Kelly's heart was fluttering and she felt sick. What the hell was wrong with her? She was falling apart, and all because of a tiny power cut. Kelly bent down and groped around for the phone. The line was dead. But whether it was due to the fall or not, she had no way of knowing.

Steeling herself, she carried on down the hallway. Her bedroom would be on the right coming up any second, with the spare room directly opposite. Ignoring these, Kelly made for the open space of the kitchen. She lost her grip on the wall for a second and found herself wading in a sea of nothingness.

She collided with the edge of a work-surface and stepped back only to bang her head on the extractor fan. But this was a good thing. Now she could work out where the overhead cupboard was in relation to the oven. And in there was the torch, a really powerful one Jeff had been given for joining that motor rescue service. In addition to an ordinary beam there was also a fluorescent strip down the side, which had the capacity to illuminate an entire room.

Smiling, Kelly opened the cupboard door. Everything would be all right once she had the torch in her hands. She could chase away her demons in no time. Standing on her toes, Kelly searched around inside. The torch wasn't where it was supposed to be. *No, this isn't happening, we always keep it in here!*

Wait. Now she remembered. Not two weeks ago Jeff had used it to poke about up in the loft, clearing some space for his old junk. But what had he done with it? God, she was forever telling him to put things back when he'd finished with them...

Access to the loft was through the spare room, so she'd try in there first. Knowing Jeff he'd probably left it on the sideboard or something. *But not up in the loft...please not up there!* She heard laughing. *It* knew she would have to double back, and *it* was mocking her. Watching, safe in the knowledge that she could see nothing. *It* had come when she was at her most vulnerable, just like when she was a kid.

But she'd show *it*! Kelly could beat this thing yet. It wasn't far to the spare room, a few short metres. She could run if she had to.

Kelly turned and started to move forwards. Again it was hard to tell where she was going. She prayed that her internal radar would guide her, take her safely to her destination.

She had only managed a few steps when she heard the noise. A rough scratching - like that of sharpened claws - echoing all around. The laughing grew louder. Kelly made a dash for the spare room. This wasn't her imagination, this was real. There was something in here with her, fuelled by the energy of the night; the thing from her youth that would not leave her alone. Images returned to plague her. *It* had waited so long for the chance to savour her spirit. So long. And now that opportunity had arisen.

Kelly began to panic and took short, sharp breaths. Without realising, she plunged headlong into Sorrow's arms. *It* grabbed her by the shoulders. She felt hands there, clutching. Strong hands. The blackness given form. Kelly twirled out of *its* grasp, swinging her fists round until they struck something. Tumbling, she caught a glimpse of *its* contours. The monster groaned. Kelly heard the flapping of wings, could picture those appendages which grew out of the black.

You're dreaming. Can't you see that it's all a dream, and you're still on the couch in the living room, and none of this is happening? None of this is real, Kelly!

But dream or no dream, she couldn't just wait for this thing to attack again. On the floor she crawled backwards to avoid *its* talons.

'Kelly...' *it* whispered, coming closer, closer.

She put her hand out, feeling for something she could use as a weapon. Kelly's fingers came across a shard of glass from the ruined picture frame. Quickly, she grabbed the makeshift dagger and brought it up with all of her might. A warm wetness jetted across her face and she realised her aim had been true. The shape gurgled, then seemed to be absorbed by *its* dense surroundings.

She'd done it. The monstrosity was defeated. She felt stronger than she'd ever felt in her life.

That was when the lights came back on, and Kelly slipped even further into madness.

The scene was unreal, still part of her nightmare. On the floor was Jeff's prone body, his raincoat flowing behind, a bloody pool welling beneath his chin where the glass jutted out. Behind him was the open front door, his key still in the lock, scratch marks around the wood...She could imagine what he'd been trying to say: *'Kelly, guess what? The conference was rubbish so I thought I'd surprise you. I know how much you hate being on your own at night...'*

And to her left, the discarded book she'd been flipping through when she dropped to sleep. One of those horror stories Jeff warned her about reading because they always made her so jumpy. The latest Herbert Lynch...Next to it was the broken picture frame. Her wedding photograph.

Kelly sat there on the floor, rocking back and forth. She wept, but they

were more than tears for Jeff. She cried for herself, because she knew that after all these years the darkness, the *Shadows*, had finally won. She'd never sleep with her husband beside her again. Never be safe again.

As if to underline this fact Kelly heard the laughing again, inside her head. And it wasn't long before she too began to black out...

The Convert

Charlie Daines parked the car by the side of the dark forest road, tucking it in out of the way.

Turning off the ignition, he looked at the man in the seat beside him. His face was stony grey in the moonlight. Charlie undid his seat belt and peered into the back. The second passenger sat with his head in his hands.

'Well, we're here. If anyone wants to back out, then say so right now.' Charlie looked from one man to the other. Neither of them spoke. To be honest, he hadn't really expected them to. Each knew what was at stake, and they'd both come this far. But, then again, you never could tell. Not everyone had the stomach for this kind of business, even when your child's life depended on it.

'Right,' said Charlie. 'So let's get to work.'

He climbed out of the car and went around to the boot. As he undid the latch and started pulling out the bags, slinging the one containing his gear over his shoulder, the two men finally got out. From the front came Marcus Burns, a little over six foot with badly receding hair and the beginnings of a stoop some taller men get later on in life. His companion, Des Quick, was slightly squat, with more hair than he knew what to do with, piled up on top of his head like a curly black wig. Not much of a squad, but Charlie was certain he could rely on them. At the very least they could watch his back.

'Here,' he said, tossing them each a bag and quietly closing the boot. Inside they'd find a Kevlar vest and a belt from which hung a baton and a can of pepper spray. 'Put them on like this,' said Charlie, demonstrating the correct way to suit up. 'Then we'll get going.'

The men did as instructed and followed Charlie into the forest. He lit his path with a pen-torch, but he could have found his way blindfolded the amount of times he'd been here the last few weeks.

Though Charlie hardly made a sound, Burns and Quick were clumsier, thrashing branches aside and treading on dead bracken.

'Keep it down you two!' he snapped tersely.

'Sorry,' said Burns, 'but we're not as used to all this as you.'

'Used to this...'*Charlie couldn't believe what he was hearing. Did they really think he did this sort of thing on a regular basis? Christ, he'd never done anything like this before in his life, not even in his early years. He'd had his moments, sure, but nothing like this. And anyway, nowadays he was more used to sitting behind a desk and dishing out orders, doing paperwork, drinking mug after mug of steaming hot coffee...and even that was decaff. But he could also see it from their point of view; they were just ordinary people living ordinary lives. He was the authority figure and it was only natural they'd look to him for their lead. 'Just try and be a bit more careful,' he said quietly.*

Burns nodded; Quick simply looked from one man to the other. Perhaps it had been a mistake bringing him, pondered Charlie. He hoped the guy wouldn't fall to pieces at the last minute. Perhaps he should have risked asking some of his own men to come tonight...there were plenty who owed him favours, who would have been happy to...No, Charlie would never put any of their careers at stake. Besides which, this was personal.

Turning, he ventured further into the undergrowth. He had to admit it was a great place to hide out. Ringed by a forest in the middle of nowhere. The perfect retreat. Nevertheless Charlie had found them, more through sheer luck than anything, granted, but there it was. He still knew some faces and had pulled a few strings, kept his ear to the ground. Strictly off the record, of course. And sure enough one of his contacts had come good. Yeah, he'd heard where they were, and all it had taken to get the info out of him was a repeal for his brother ('He didn't do it anyway,' the informant had said. 'It was one of your lot fitted him up.' That's what all the guilty ones say). Guilty or not, Charlie had arranged it: though not before verifying the information with his own eyes, making sure they really were up here. It was a moral dilemma, but where family was concerned Charlie was prepared to bend the rules so far they almost cracked under the strain. His family was paramount to him.

'I just hope Clare's all right,' whispered Burns. 'If those bastards have so

much as...’ His voice tailed off, thinking about all the nasty things that might have happened to his daughter.

Good, thought Charlie, get angry. I need you angry.

‘I-I’m sure she will be fine, and Patrick too,’ said Quick. It was the first time Charlie had heard him speak since setting off.

‘We’re here to make sure they stay that way,’ Charlie called over his shoulder. Them talking about their kids made him think about Jules. Shit, there he went again. Not, Jules - Julianne; she’d told him often enough (‘Dad, I’m not twelve anymore, you know!’ she informed him, grinning mischievously as though she were secretly quite pleased). But she would always be his little girl, no matter how grown-up she thought she was. Always his Jules.

Forever and ever...Amen.

God, how had she wound up in this mess to begin with? How many times had he seen this exact scenario in documentaries or used as the basis for stupid soap opera plots? You never thought it would happen to you though, no way. It was always something that happened in other countries or to other people.

Maybe if she’d been unhappy, he could’ve understood it more. But she’d had a decent childhood, everything money could buy – including a public school education. She’d never really gone through that rebellious stage other teens seemed to revel in. Jule...Julianne had always come to Charlie or her mother if she’d any problems. Charlie recalled what it had said in the official manual: *Cults are unlike any other religious groups. They seek commitment and unquestioning devotion. In return, they provide the subject with a stable environment, perhaps something to believe in. Members will prey on the lonely and depressed in society, those vulnerable to their ideals...* Surely that wouldn’t include his Jules. She had a good head on her shoulders, was doing well at university. Charlie simply couldn’t accept that she’d gone off with them of her own volition. They must have done something to her, something to make her go with them.... To make her break off all contact with friends and family.

Charlie was thinking so hard, he almost walked into the fence.

‘This is it,’ he told the men behind him. Pulling his own bag down off his

shoulder, Charlie took out the cutters he'd brought with him from home, sharpened in his garage just to make sure. Burns and Quick cringed every time the cutters snipped at the fence, but Charlie was done in a couple of minutes. The hole was just wide enough to crawl through and Charlie went first, standing and helping the others get inside.

'Thanks,' said Burns as he took Charlie's hand, then they both heaved Quick to his feet (*Quick*, Jesus what a joke). Charlie remembered the first time he'd set eyes on them, never imagining it would come to this. They'd both had kids at the same university as Jules, and had both lost them to this insanity. It had been a simple enough matter to track them down. There was nothing the police could do, they'd told him when he contacted them in turn. Burns' daughter and Quick's son were legally adults and unless there was proof they'd been abducted against their will...

Exactly the same brick wall Charlie had come up against. Though to be frank, if his own girl hadn't been involved he might have agreed with the local force; it was a hard thing to admit, but true – there just wasn't the manpower to conduct a full-scale investigation these days, no one knew that better than him.

So it had been Charlie who'd brought them all together, meeting for the first time in a little café in a neutral location. And it had been Charlie who'd finally suggested *this* course of action, seeing no other way to deal with the problem. 'Leave it with me,' he'd told Burns and Quick. 'And if I find them, you'll be the first to know.'

Well he found those bastards all right. And now here *they* were: the three musketeers to the rescue. A civil servant, an ad man and Charlie. Better than nothing, he supposed.

'Aren't there professionals who do this kind of thing?' Burns had asked him the last time they spoke. And there *were* people who would do anything for a price, Charlie knew some of them by reputation. But he wasn't prepared to let some stranger go blundering about after his Jules. If anyone was going to blunder after her, it would be him. He was tired of feeling so useless, tired of not knowing what to do, and he was sure the other fathers felt the same - which of course they did, or they wouldn't have agreed. Now, though, as

they made their way towards the castle itself, Charlie couldn't help wondering if they'd made a colossal mistake.

Very little was known about this particular group, and his own research had got him practically nowhere. What if they were the real deal, these guys? Proper nut-jobs? *Naw*, he said to himself, *they're probably just a bunch of mixed up kids who want to get their leg over and smoke wacky-baccy*. Just so long as they hadn't done any of that with his Jules, that's all...

'Look,' said Burns.

Charlie had already seen them - already scoped out the guards on his daylight trips up here, looking through the fence at their security. Two youths, illuminated by lighted torches on the outside of the house and dressed in some sort of grey tracksuits, were touring the perimeter of the ancient building in opposite directions, just as they had done on previous visits.

'How're we going to get past them?' asked Quick.

Charlie looked around at him. 'How d'you think?'

'Oh God,' said the squat man with the hair.

'Relax, they're not armed or anything.'

'I-It's just that...well, I've never been in a fight before.'

'Now's your chance,' said Charlie.

This would take some working out, though. Charlie couldn't risk one of them getting away and alerting the others.

'Look, we wait until the lad on the left goes around the side, then jump his mate. Three against one. But for Christ's sake don't let him call out. Then we wait for the first one to come back. Think you can handle that?'

Quick seemed to like those odds, and nodded.

They waited on the outskirts of the undergrowth for the guard on the left to disappear. As soon as the man on the right turned to do the same, they rushed out. Charlie was the first there. Heart beating out of his chest, he came up behind the guard. The tracksuited youth seemed to sense someone was there and turned, but already Charlie was slamming the end of the baton into his gut, winding him.

Burns arrived and struck the figure on the back of the head, a little too

hard for Charlie's liking. The guard collapsed to the ground with a groan.

'Careful!' whispered Charlie. 'You'll kill someone doing that.'

'Sorry,' said Burns, his hands shaking.

At last Quick joined them, relieved to see it was virtually over. 'Now what?'

'Now we- Christ, watch out!'

Charlie saw the second guard come up behind Quick, drawing something out of his tracksuit top. The metal of a knifeblade glinted in the moonlight as it arced and slashed across Quick's shoulder. With a tiny whelp of surprise and pain, Quick fell backwards, and as he did so Charlie brought up his pepper-spray and fired it into the guard's face. He instantly doubled up, coughing and choking, strings of saliva dripping from his mouth. Charlie delivered the knockout blow this time, just hard enough to put the guard under. Then he went over and crouched down next to Quick.

'I-I've been stabbed...' Quick murmured. 'You said they weren't armed...'

Charlie flicked his flashlight quickly over the wound. 'He's only nicked your shoulder. Now you see why I made you wear the vests.'

'You said they weren't...I want to go back, I-'

'Pull yourself together,' snapped Charlie. 'We can't turn back now.' Then, cooling down, he said: 'You want your son back, don't you? You want him away from these people? This is the only way it's going to happen, but we have to stick together. You understand?'

'Y-Yes,' replied Quick.

'Good. Now keep your hand on your shoulder. Apply pressure. It'll be okay, I promise.'

Charlie told Burns to remove the men's tops and they ripped the material into pieces for binding and gagging them. Charlie went over and examined the knife. Unusual – not a switchblade or anything...

'Shouldn't we get moving?' asked Burns.

'Right, check the trouser pockets for keys, as well,' Charlie instructed him, and was delighted when Burns found a ring with a dozen or so hanging off it. After trying most of them, Charlie found the one that fit the large wooden door, and the three men stepped inside.

It was fairly dark in the passageway, but Charlie resisted the temptation to use his torch. He'd studied the history and layout of this place in great detail and reckoned he could find his way around more or less blindfold. Any minute now they'd come to a set of two more doors. One led to a stairway, and the upper rooms – the bedrooms. The other would take them through into the great hall. They'd agreed to check the upper floors first, reasoning that most of the group would be asleep. But when Charlie heard sounds coming from behind the other door, he hesitated.

'What're you doing?' said Burns.

'Listen, don't you hear that?'

'I don't...wait, voices.'

'We'll just take a look. If it's nothing, we'll head on upstairs.'

Charlie started trying the keys again and was amazed when he found the right one first time. 'Lady Luck's with us tonight,' he croaked dryly.

Easing the door open as quietly as he could, Charlie led them into an arched curtained doorway on the other side. He pulled the curtains open a crack so they could all see. In the enormous hall there were at least two dozen people assembled: male and female. They all had the same kind of tracksuits on as the guards outside, and were holding hands by the light of several tall candles - positioned strategically around the room. Now Charlie could see who was talking, a young fresh-faced man at the front.

'What are they all doing in here?' asked Quick, and Burns shushed him.

The words of the speaker carried through to them at the back, loud and clear: '...gathered here tonight to welcome our new members. Those who have proved their devotion over the weeks past, and are willing to serve as we all serve. Without selfishness. Without reluctance. Without fear. But they have yet to pass the final test. They have yet to meet those whom they shall serve so humbly and meekly.' He held out both his hands. 'Step forward. Do not be afraid. Step forward, my friends.'

Three figures - two girls and a boy - broke away from the group then walked over to join him. When they turned, Charlie could only see one face: Julianne's.

'Patrick,' said Quick.

‘Clare,’ said Burns.

They looked tired, dark rings under their eyes. But they were all smiling broadly as if it was their graduation day back at university.

‘My friends, do you renounce the ways of the other world? The one you have left behind?’ the youthful man spoke.

They answered together. ‘We do.’

‘Are you willing to serve as we all serve, and to prove your loyalty this night?’

Again they answered yes.

He bent down and Charlie lost him for a moment behind the crowd. When he rose again, he held a knife in his hand, similar to the one the guard outside had brandished. He handed it to Julianne. Patrick and Clare gathered around her and each placed a hand on the knife's hilt. Then the young man pulled up his tracksuit top and bared his chest.

‘You know what you must do,’ he said.

Before his companions knew what was happening, Charlie yanked back the curtain. ‘Stop!’ he cried. ‘Police!’

The crowd turned, hand in hand, to look at him. Julianne, Patrick and Clare turned to look at him. The young man at the front looked across the hall at him.

‘Julianne...Jules, what are you doing?’

She stared at him strangely and answered: ‘They demand a sacrifice.’ As though it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

‘All right, this has gone far enough,’ he shouted. Two of the cultists moved towards him and he pepper-sprayed them. They fell to the ground, coughing and retching. ‘Stand back. I just want my kid.’

Quick and Burns came with him as the assemblage parted. ‘You three are coming with us,’ Charlie told the students. ‘And as for the rest of you...you’re all nicked.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ came a voice from behind him. Charlie felt the pepper-spray being knocked out of his grip, but he still didn’t realise who’d done it until two pairs of hands grabbed him, and he had a baton wedged up against his throat. ‘It’s far too late to turn back now,’ finished Quick.

‘Jesus, what’re you...’

‘Just close your eyes,’ Burns said in his ear as he struggled. ‘Can’t you hear them?’

‘I can’t hear shi-’ But now Charlie *could* hear something. More voices now - a cacophony of them all talking at once. And they became increasingly louder the more he listened. At first he thought it was the people in the hall mumbling; then Charlie realised the words were inside his own head. Something was speaking to him in a jumble of different languages, many of which he didn’t even recognise. Or were there more than one? He couldn’t say for sure. He just knew that he had to get out of that room, try to block his ears - as if that would do any good - before he went completely insane.

For now he could *see* them as well, the candlelight painting strange patterns on the stone walls. Dark and frightening shades that moved of their own accord. There were gasps from the congregation. Some even got down on their knees to pray.

Charlie shook his head from side to side. No, this wasn’t real. It couldn’t be...And that was when he saw the informant who’d traded with him, standing near the front with his brother - the one who’d been “fitted up”. If he’d been allowed to think for himself, Charlie might’ve worked it out. But the voices were dividing and he understood everything they said. What’s more, he agreed with them wholeheartedly.

‘It was always you we wanted,’ said the lad at the front. ‘It was always you...’

Charlie nodded, the blackness intersecting at his position. They needed him, he could see that now. His new *family* needed him. And he couldn’t let them down.

‘They demand a sacrifice,’ repeated Julianne, walking over and handing him the knife.

Quick and Burns let him go now, knowing full well that he wouldn’t attack. Instead, he brought up the dagger, examining it: the symbols, the writing on its tip, the comfortable feel of the handle. And he grinned. ‘They demand a sacrifice,’ he told his daughter and she nodded, laughing. Then she pulled up her tracksuit top.

As the point wavered over her chest, he nearly snapped out of his daze.
Almost...

But then he heard the acolyte at the front speak a final time, the others cultists eventually joining in.

'Welcome,' they said. 'Welcome Chief Superintendent Charles Frederick Daines.'

'Welcome to the Order of the Shadows.'