



EVIL WAYS

"Justin is a first class writer; he's smart and he's fun, he moves quickly and he takes corners at speed."

Simon R. Green

A MORRIS AND CHASPAIN INVESTIGATION

JUSTIN GUSTAINIS



Evil Ways

Quincey Morris, Supernatural Investigation Book 2

Justin Gustainis

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In memory of
Pat Grogan

Ursus Major has an extra star now, that the scientists can't explain.
Sleep well, bear.

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"The children are far from safety; they shall be crushed at the gate without a rescuer."

Job 5:4

"He said to me in a dreadful voice that I had indeed escaped his clutches, but he would capture me, still."

St. Teresa of Avila

"How long, O Lord, how long will the wicked triumph?"

Psalms 94:3

"Walpurgis Night was when, according to the belief of millions of people, the devil was abroad—when the graves were opened and the dead came forth and walked. When all evil things of earth and air and water held revel."

Bram Stoker, *Dracula's Guest*

PROLOGUE

The Middle East

April, 2003

Baghdad, Iraq April 9th

The Americans were at the edge of the city, and in another day—two at the most—they would occupy it completely. Sporadic automatic weapons fire in the distance indicated that some remnants of Saddam's army (the fanatical Republican Guards, probably) were still either brave or foolish enough to offer resistance. The rest of Saddam's forces had either fled or made an abrupt return to civilian life, leaving their military careers in the dust, along with their uniforms. Most of the city's police had followed their example, reasoning correctly that trigger-happy Americans might not make fine distinctions between one kind of Iraqi uniform and another.

For the next few days, until the Americans established complete control, chaos would rule the city. The looting had already begun, and there was no one to stop it.

It was the day the five men had been waiting for.

They made their way through the narrow side streets and alleys of the Al-Salhiya district, at least fifty feet between them to avoid the attention that a group walking together might draw. Each wore the dishdasha robe and checkered kaffiyeh headscarf common to lower middle-class Iraqis. Their garments were neither too clean nor too dirty. Their beards were neither too long nor too short. Every one of them could speak near-perfect Arabic with an authentic-sounding Iraqi accent. The weapons and tools they carried were mostly hidden under their clothing, although two of the men had the canvas carryalls that many in Baghdad used the way Western college students use backpacks.

Their winding course finally brought them to the mouth of an alley directly across the street from the great, fortress-like building that houses the Iraqi National Museum. The ornate front doors were open wide, and through them, in both directions, poured a stream of men. Some appeared to be alone; others made up groups of three or four. Those entering the building were mostly empty-handed, but those leaving never were. Their arms were full with bowls, cups, swords, statuettes, and other artifacts from ancient Mesopotamian history.

The five men, out of sight within the alley, silently watched the looting for several minutes.

Finally, the team leader spoke, his voice just loud enough to be heard by the other four. Even so, he spoke Arabic. There was no reason to break character, and, in any case, this was not a good place to be overheard speaking English. "This is as good a time as we are likely to see," he said. "No one will notice us entering with that mob, and"—he glanced up, noting the position of the sun—"darkness will hide us when we are ready to leave. Questions?" The team leader's name was Miles Hawkins, although

all of the identification he carried said he was Mohammed al-Sayeed, a carpenter from Rumallah.

Ten seconds passed in silence. "All right," Hawkins said, in Arabic. "Let's go." If he was tense, his voice failed to show it.

They crossed the wide street quickly, making no effort now to disguise the fact that they were together. They drew little attention as they passed through the doorway and went up a short flight of broad stairs into the museum proper. Hawkins turned left without hesitation, and the others followed. They could hear alarms going off throughout the building as various priceless treasures, some thousands of years old, were ripped from their supposedly secure exhibits.

The men passed quickly through two of the exhibit halls. In the third, they slipped through a side entrance into a hallway, which took them to an inconspicuous metal door that was marked, in Arabic, "Private. No admittance."

Hawkins looked at one of the men, a tall Russian whose name was Alex Scrodin. Scrodin immediately stepped forward, producing a stick of putty-like substance from under his robe. He began to break off chunks of it, which he then carefully molded to the door's three hinges, as well as the lock itself. Then he reached under his robe for the detonators.

The others didn't bother to watch Scrodin as he worked. Instead, their eyes moved restlessly around the corridor, searching. They didn't care about surveillance cameras, since there was almost certainly nobody manning the control center that such a camera would feed. Alarms didn't concern them, either. One more alarm amid the cacophony rising throughout the building would make no difference. The men were on the lookout for something more proactive that might have been put in place to protect a door this important—something lethal. But they saw nothing to give them cause for worry.

Three minutes later, Scrodin gave a small grunt, and backed away from the door. He was now holding a device about the size and shape of a garage door opener. He nodded at Hawkins, who made a sharp clicking sound with his tongue. Immediately, all the men began to move back the way they had come, down to the end of the corridor and around the corner.

Hawkins said, in Arabic, "Masks." Each man quickly donned a small, light, state-of-the-art gas mask that was said to be proof against any poison gas, nerve agent, or biowar aerosol known to science. Hawkins found himself hoping that the Iraqis hadn't concocted a deadly gas that modern science *hadn't* heard about.

The men dropped to the floor and lay flat, covering their ears. Scrodin looked toward Hawkins and, receiving a nod, placed his thumb on one of the electronic device's buttons, took in a breath, and pressed it.

The explosion was achingly loud in that confined space, but the damage it caused was focused and controlled, just as the men had intended. The heavy metal door, ripped free of its latch and hinges, lay flat on the corridor's floor, smoking slightly.

Beyond, the empty doorway yawned at them, a great black rectangle with no light showing behind it. The men were prepared for that, and had brought small but powerful flashlights. They got to their feet, plaster dust from the ceiling trickling down

their robes to fall unnoticed on the floor. The gas masks stayed on.

At Hawkins's signal, they rapidly made their way, single-file, down the corridor and through the doorway, into the darkness and whatever awaited them there.

Two hours later, all of them were dead. Except one.

*Istanbul, Turkey
April 11th*

"He'll be here by six," Pardee said. "His train pulled in about five minutes ago, and I've been scrying him ever since. He wasn't followed as he left the station."

"Satisfactory," Walter Grobius said. It was the highest praise he ever gave. He was sitting on the suite's king-size bed, back against the headboard, and hadn't looked up from his laptop. Pardee wondered whether the old man was buying England, or merely selling France.

Pardee went over to one of the big windows and looked down. The penthouse of the Hotel Sultanhan afforded an excellent view of Istanbul's insane rush hour traffic, for what that was worth. "We could have picked him up when he crossed the border from Iraq two days ago," he said mildly. He was tall, and very thin—but there was nothing about him that looked frail.

Pardee was the only living person allowed to question Grobius's decisions, even obliquely.

"But then you couldn't have watched his progress with your magic, to make sure that no one was interested in him." His voice had the rasp of a longtime smoker, although the old man had never touched tobacco in his life. "Plenty of people would love to get their hands on the Book, you know that. And it's only a matter of time before word gets out that it's been... liberated."

Pardee allowed himself a quick smile. "Yes, that should cause quite a stir, in certain circles."

"They can stir themselves into a frenzy, for all I care, once the thing is in my possession and secure."

Grobius put his laptop aside and looked up for the first time since Pardee had entered. The clear, sharp blue eyes were a startling contrast to his seamed, weathered face. "Besides, we have friends in Istanbul, in case there's trouble."

"People you've bought, you mean." There was no criticism implied. Not even Pardee would have dared go that far.

"What other kind of friend is there?" The old man's voice contained no irony—just a statement of cold fact. "Now, suppose you call room service and conjure us up some dinner. But first, hand me my medication. It's time for another dose."

Miles Hawkins, a battered old valise next to him, sat on a park bench, apparently at ease. He had chosen this bench with care—it was directly across Piyerloti Caddesi from the front entrance of the Hotel Sultanhan. Although looking toward the hotel, Hawkins was less interested in the former Ottoman palace's elegant

marble façade than he was in the traffic around him, both pedestrian and motorized.

It was only one and a half kilometers from the train station to Istanbul's best hotel, and Hawkins had walked it, despite the heat. He'd wanted to stretch his legs after the long train trip—and, more importantly, wanted to see if he'd picked up any ticks. That would have been impossible to do in a taxi, especially in the rush hour traffic.

Hawkins had spent a number of years with MI6, Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, and "ticks" was the term by which Her Majesty's spooks referred to opposition surveillance. Now, after using every reflective surface he'd passed to unobtrusively check behind him, then spending ten minutes in the park vetting everything that moved, Hawkins was virtually certain that nobody was interested in him. The old man had insisted that he arrive clean, but Hawkins would have made sure, anyway. It was simply good tradecraft, even though that trade had changed considerably since his cloak and dagger days.

Without appearing to do so, Hawkins was watching the traffic patterns on Piyerloti, which had three lanes running each way. When he finally saw that a gap was about to develop, he rose in one smooth motion, grabbed the valise, and sprinted across the street. He'd cut it fine—as it was, a taxi nearly nailed him from one direction, and a blue Mercedes sedan from the other—but that was all right. If Hawkins barely made it, then someone on his tail would not make it at all. As he approached the hotel's big glass doors, Hawkins used their reflection to check behind him one last time. No one had tried to follow him from the park. He was clean.

Two minutes later, Hawkins stepped out of the express elevator into the elegant foyer of the penthouse, and was immediately confronted by two large men in suits, Turks by the look of them. Hawkins stood still, spread his arms a little, and waited for the men to pat him down, which they did with a clinical thoroughness that paid no regard whatever to their subject's personal dignity. Hawkins bore this stoically—he had been there before, many times—but then one of them tried to take the valise from him.

Hawkins pulled it back roughly. "Uh-uh, mate. No way. This stays with me. Ask your boss, he'll tell you."

But the security man, who may or may not have understood English, was persistent. He reached for the valise again, while his companion moved in and grabbed Hawkins's other arm.

Eighteen seconds later, the door to the penthouse opened to reveal a tall, wiry man with a shaved head and black goatee. "I thought I heard a commotion," he said, taking in the carnage.

"Mister Pardee," Hawkins said with a nod, straightening his tie. The two security men lay strewn about the floor, not moving, one of them bleeding copiously from the mouth. "I'm sorry about that, but these gorillas—"

"It doesn't matter," Pardee said, and opened the door wide. "Come in, please." He didn't spare the security men a second glance.

Pardee brought Hawkins into the suite's master bedroom, where Grobius was again sitting up in the bed, pecking away on his computer. The shadows under the old man's eyes looked a little darker than nine months earlier, when Hawkins had last seen him.

"The prodigal is returned," Pardee said.

Grobius nodded. "But not, it would appear, empty-handed."

Hawkins hefted the valise slightly. "No, not at all. I've got what you want."

Grobius closed the laptop and set it aside. His hands trembled a little. They had not trembled nine months ago.

"And where are your colleagues, who took part in this adventure with you?"

Hawkins gestured toward one of the windows with his head. "Out there. Waiting for me to come out. And they know what to do, if I don't."

"Very wise of you, I'm sure," Grobius said. Pardee was standing a little behind Hawkins, so only Grobius saw the smile that briefly crossed the wizard's face.

Grobius pointed at the valise and said to Hawkins, "Show me."

Hawkins placed the valise on the bed, produced a key, and unlocked it. Then he carefully lifted out a bundle made of some ornately decorated cloth. "This tapestry, here, was in the same vault as the book," he said. "I needed something to wrap the thing in, so I figured this would do. I suppose it's valuable, considering where they were keeping it." With exaggerated care, Hawkins placed the bundle on the bed near Grobius's feet. "You can have it—no extra charge."

"How very kind." Grobius might have been thanking him for passing the salt at dinner. His eyes never left the bundle on the bed.

Hawkins finished unwrapping the tapestry, let it fall open, then stepped back.

Resting on the cloth was a thick volume bound in old, cracked leather. On the cover, faded but still legible, were several esoteric symbols and a few words in Arabic.

Pardee stepped forward and bent over the book. He studied the symbols on the cover carefully, and ran his long, thin fingers gently over them, several times. Then, with great care, he opened the book and carefully studied several pages apparently selected at random. Finally, he slowly closed the volume and looked up at Grobius.

"Oh, yes," he said, in the voice a man might use after fantastic sex. "It's genuine. Exactly what we wanted."

Grobius nodded. "Very well." Hawkins thought this was the first time he had heard genuine emotion coming from the old man. Grobius was staring at the book, and continued to do so until Hawkins finally felt obliged to cough gently.

Grobius blinked a couple of times, then looked up. "Well, I expect you'll be wanting your money."

"Yes, sir." Hawkins managed to keep most of the eagerness out of his voice.

Grobius reached for his laptop again and began working the keyboard. Less than a minute later, he pressed "Enter," watched the screen a moment longer, then shut the computer down.

"Duly transferred to your account in Barbados," he said to Hawkins. "Ten million dollars."

Hawkins reached into a pocket and pulled out his Blackberry. "You won't mind if I just confirm that, sir."

"You'd be a fool if you didn't."

It took less than thirty seconds with the device to bring a wide grin to Hawkins's tanned face. "Very good, Mister Grobius. A pleasure doing business with you, sir."

"That works out to two million for each of you, assuming you're dividing it

equally."

"Yes, sir."

"Is that what you're doing—dividing it equally?"

Hawkins looked at the old man. "No offense, Mister Grobius, but what do you care?"

"I care because it annoys me when people lie to me. And when they do, I want to know why."

Hawkins stated to speak, but the old man's hand slashed through the air like a blade, cutting him off.

"Spare me your protestations," Grobius said. "You've been under surveillance ever since you left Baghdad. You left alone, and you've been on your own ever since. I knew your little threat was empty as soon as you made it. The other men on your team are not lurking outside, ready to take revenge if something untoward should happen to you in here. So, *where are they?*"

Hawkins stared at Grobius for several seconds, wondering if it was worth trying to keep the bluff going. But then he sighed and said, "I wonder if I might trouble you for a drink of water."

At a nod from Grobius, Pardee glided off to the suite's kitchen. "Sit down," Grobius said, his tone less angry. Hawkins stepped over to a nearby armchair and sat down gingerly, as if he was expecting the thing to grow teeth and bite him.

Pardee returned and handed Hawkins a plastic bottle of Evian water. Hawkins cracked the top and took a long swig.

"I must apologize for deceiving you," he said to Grobius. "I figured as long as you got what you wanted, the specifics of getting it didn't matter to you. And I don't much want to talk about what happened back in Baghdad."

"But you will," Grobius said. It was not a question.

"Yeah, all right." He twirled the bottle in his fingers for a moment. "It was in the museum that it all went to shit. We'd followed the blueprint you'd given us—worked a treat, too. Everything was just where it was supposed to be—including the door leading to the vaults underneath the building. We blew the door, no problem. Went down the stairs to the first vault and kept right on going past it. Same for the second. You'd said the book was in the third vault, so that's where we headed.

"Scrodin, the explosives bloke, blew the combination lock. Took more juice, that did, than the one upstairs, but he got it done. Then we pried the vault open."

Hawkins took another long draw from the bottle of water. Then he sat there a moment longer, as if hoping that someone would interrupt him. No one did.

"Way I figure it, they had some kind of state-of-the art nerve agent *inside the vault*, all ready to go. Saddam probably had his boffins make it up special. One of those 'weapons of mass destruction' that wanker Bush is always goin' on about. The stuff must have been under pressure, because it dispersed into the hall pretty damn quick once we'd got the vault door open."

"How do you know that?" Pardee asked him. "Nerve gas would surely have been invisible to the naked eye."

"I know that, because it killed every man on the team in the next ten seconds, before we even had time to get into the bloody vault."

"And you alone survived to tell the tale," Grobius said. He might have been

discussing pork belly futures. "Why is that?"

"Because I kept my gas mask on, that's why. We'd all put them on upstairs, in case there was something wired to the hallway door. Nothing. It was stuffy underground, and the other guys took their masks off so they could breathe better. Hell, the only reason mine was still on was, I was so busy thinking out the next move that I forgot about it."

"Did you attempt to render assistance to your fallen comrades?" Grobius asked.

"Waste of time. The gas killed them in a few seconds. Nasty stuff, nerve gas, and works pretty damn quick. And I know dead men when I see 'em."

"No doubt," Grobius said. "So then..."

"So then I went into the vault, found your fuckin' book, wrapped it in that pretty tapestry there, and got the hell out. Sir."

Grobius nodded. "What about the bodies of the others?"

"What about 'em? I had the book, and that was the objective. I wasn't about to carry corpses out with me, even if I was able to, which I wasn't."

"That raises a security issue," Grobius said.

"No, it doesn't. Look, we were all dressed as locals, with first-class forged ID, along with a few other bits for credibility—letters from somebody's mother, an address book written in Arabic, stuff like that. Sure, their prints are on file someplace, most likely. The Iraqis might eventually get positive IDs from Interpol, if they push it. Or the Yanks, who I guess are in charge now. But so what? Job's done, mission accomplished, and all that. A whole lot of stuff got lifted from that museum. Nobody's going to get upset about some old book."

Grobius gave a grudging nod. "Possibly."

Hawkins scratched his unshaven chin. "You know, I read Arabic pretty well. Wouldn't have been much good for you on this job if I didn't."

Grobius just looked at him.

"I took a quick look through that little volume there, just to be sure I had the right one. The script's old, not the sort of Arabic they use nowadays. I couldn't make sense of most of what I saw. But the cover says it's the *Book of Shadows* by some bloke called Abdul Alhazred."

"Did you have some point you wished to make?" Grobius asked softly.

"Nah, it's just that that name rang kind of a bell, when I first saw it. Wasn't this Alhazred the one that wrote the *Necronomicon*?"

"The *Necronomicon* is a myth," Pardee said. His right hand had found its way into his pocket. "Product of the fevered imagination of that pulp writer, Lovecraft. It never existed, nor did its putative author, this Alhazred. That's not an uncommon Arab name, you know."

Hawkins shrugged. "If you say so. But I've heard people talk about that *Necronomicon* sometimes, as if it was real."

"People talk about Atlantis, too, I understand," Pardee said with a tiny smile. "And Excalibur, as well as the Holy Grail. They aren't real, either."

"Yeah, you got a point there."

"There have been fakes of this *Necronomicon* over the years. **But** Mister Grobius doesn't purchase fakes, nor works written by *fictional* characters."

"Sure, no offense," Hawkins said. "Just asking."

"None taken, I'm sure," Pardee said. "Well, if that's everything... He looked toward Grobius, received a nod. "I'll just see you to the door, Mister Hawkins."

"Enjoy your money," Grobius said, in a voice that was expressionless as his face.

Pardee returned a few minutes later. "One of the Turkish guards is dead," he said. "They tried to take the case away from Mister Hawkins on his arrival, and he objected. Most efficiently, I may say."

"Make sure that the Turk's family gets enough money to keep them quiet." Grobius looked at the book resting at the foot of his bed. "I was beginning to think we would never get our hands on this."

"Those stories our people planted about weapons of mass destruction did the trick, as I predicted. Bush was just looking for an excuse. He should be grateful to us for providing one."

"I doubt he'll write us a thank-you note," the old man said, then looked up at Pardee. "And speaking of excuses..."

"Hawkins was lying, of course. I could see the deception rising from him like smoke. He killed the others, probably as soon as he was sure he'd found the book."

"Ruthless bastard," Grobius said, with what may have been a touch of admiration. "Greedy, too. Still, he's saved us a certain amount of trouble."

Pardee nodded. "He's left himself as the only loose end."

"Wait until he's well away from here to snip it off."

"Of course. I'll go see him tonight."

"Good. Now, have someone notify O'Rourke that I want the plane ready to fly out tomorrow morning at seven," Grobius said. "We're going home. There's a great deal to do."

Miles Hawkins got to bed a little after 2:00am. He'd found a room in a medium-priced hotel within sight of the Blue Mosque. Hawkins might be officially a wealthy man now, but the money was stuck in his Barbados account until morning. Tomorrow he could go to a bank, arrange a wire transfer of a half million or so, and then start spending it. Get a decent hotel room, for starters. Maybe even in that palace where Grobius and his trained cobra, Pardee, were staying. Then Hawkins remembered the security man he'd killed, and thought maybe another hotel would be a wiser choice.

He'd had enough wiggle room left on his Amex card to pay for this place, and enough ready cash to afford a bottle of good champagne and a medium-priced whore, who'd left half an hour ago. Well, at least the booze had been worth the price.

Hawkins downed the last mouthful of the champagne straight from the bottle, went into the tiny bathroom to take a piss, then crawled into the creaking bed. He hoped he wouldn't be sharing it with any of the local insect life, which was one reason he had chosen this place and not something more down-market. In the Middle East, the cheaper the hotel, the bigger the bugs.

Even though he was still charged up from the recent experience of becoming a

multi-millionaire, fatigue, combined with the alcohol, soon prevailed. Hawkins fell into a deep sleep, and found that Pardee was waiting for him.

Hawkins was back in the vault under the Iraqi National Museum. He had just killed Scrodin, the last member of the team. Hawkins's pistol was effectively silenced, so the other three had died in the hallway without a lot of noise. They were all still half-deaf from the explosion that had blown the vault's door, anyway. The three in the hall had been easy to dispatch from behind, one quick shot each to the back of the head.

Scrodin had actually seemed surprised when he'd looked up from the glass case containing the book, to find Hawkins's pistol pointed at the middle of his forehead. But the surprise lasted only a second, and then Scrodin was sprawled on the floor, dead like the others.

So far, the dream was an accurate reflection of what had really happened. But then, as Hawkins was using the stolen tapestry to wrap around the Book of Shadows, he heard a familiar voice say from the vault entrance, "Most efficiently done. My congratulations." Hawkins's head snapped up, and he saw that Grobius's man Pardee was standing in the doorway, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. In his dream, Hawkins was so dumbfounded that he never even tried to raise the gun.

"You're quite the cold-blooded bastard, aren't you?" Pardee said conversationally as he approached Hawkins. "Quite the credit to Her Majesty's Secret Service. After four murders in as many minutes, I'll wager your hand isn't even shaking."

Pardee was standing right in front of Hawkins now, and in his eyes Hawkins could see something that made him want to scream.

"Neither is mine. See?" Pardee held up his right hand, which was as steady as a boulder. But then, instead of lowering it, he plunged it straight into Hawkins's chest. Through the skin, the sternum, the fifth and sixth ribs, all the way to the heart. Yet there was no rent in Hawkins's flesh, no blood gushing from what should have been a terrible wound.

Pardee smiled, the way a shark seems to, just before it bites your leg off. "Give my regards to your friends," he said. "I'm sure they'll be eager to see you." Then he squeezed—hard.

The hotel maid discovered Hawkins's body in the morning. Getting no response to her knocking, she'd let herself in to do the work she was paid for. Seeing Hawkins in the bed, she'd at first assumed he was asleep, and started to withdraw quietly. Then she'd gotten a look at his face.

The medical examiner's verdict, rendered two days later, was "death from cardiac arrest." Doctor Kerim hesitated briefly before signing the form that would officially close the book on this dead Briton's life. Clearly, the man's heart had stopped beating while he lay asleep. Equally obvious, there was no sign of external trauma to suggest that death had been anything other than natural.

And yet Doctor Kerim was troubled, a little. The man had been comparatively young, and very fit. What's more, his arteries had been almost clear of the cholesterol

deposits that are usually associated with heart attacks. And the doctor had seen, over the years, many others who had died in their sleep. Their faces were usually blank, untroubled, as if death had come during the night and courteously declined even to wake them. Nothing in Dr. Kerim's experience allowed him to explain the expression of terror that had been stamped on the man's face when he'd been brought in.

Well, such mysteries were not Dr. Kerim's business to solve. He signed the death certificate, dropped the clipboard onto the corpse's chest, and rang for his assistant. It was time to forget about this death, and move on to the next.

I GENESIS

Chapter 1

Quincey Morris stood alone in the shadows of a decaying eucalyptus tree and wondered if this was the night he was going to die.

Morris was not by nature a pessimist. Indeed, he had an innate faith in the ultimate power of good over evil. But thinking morbid thoughts before beginning a difficult job was his way of guarding against complacency, which was as dangerous to someone in Morris's line of work as it would be to a lion tamer or trapeze artist—with the same fatal results likely to follow.

Except in Morris's case, death might not be the end of it.

The house he was watching from 200 feet away was built in the Spanish Mission style that Morris always thought of as Southern California Tacky. The property was surrounded by a high concrete wall that would have done any movie star's home proud. But the man who lived there now was no movie star.

Bet he could be if he wanted to, Morris thought. *Horror movies, maybe. Jason and Freddie, watch out, 'cause the real thing's in town, now, y'all.*

Morris had researched the subject, as he always did before carrying out one of these specialized home invasions. He knew that Lucas Fortner was an occultist of mid-level skill and above-average malevolence. He was said to have spent a year in Budapest, studying black magic under the infamous Janos Skorzeny. A year with Skorzeny made Fortner dangerous. Five years would have made him too deadly to mess around with.

In the moonlight, Morris could just make out the jagged bits of glass that had been set into the top of the stone wall. He knew that the glass was coated with viper venom (Black Mamba, supposedly) that was reapplied weekly—more often, during the rainy season—to keep its potency up.

Morris checked his watch and saw that it was just after 4:00am. Time to go. There were still two hours of darkness left to skulk in, but midnight was long enough past so that some of the Powers guarding Fortner's place would be at less than their full strength.

Morris would not have approached that house at midnight for all the gold in a rapper's teeth.

He patted his pockets to assure himself that all his gear was where it should be, then started across the street. He did not cross in a straight line, but angled to the left—a path that would take him to the property of Fortner's neighbor, a producer at DreamWorks Studios with absolutely no connection to the occult. Morris had checked. He always checked. He was a professional.

The producer's grounds were of interest to Morris for a couple of reasons. One was that the exterior wall was considerably shorter than Fortner's, and free of broken glass, venom-coated or otherwise. The other reason involved an ancient oak tree on the property—the one that rose up tall and stately a mere ten feet from the wall separating the producer's grounds from Fortner's, with several of its branches overhanging Fortner's property.

Morris scaled the producer's wall with little difficulty, swung his legs over the

top, and dropped lightly to the ground on the other side. He stood crouched among the plantings and flowers, all his senses alert. There were supposed to be no guard dogs on the property, and no human security either, but you never know these things for sure until you're on the scene. Morris spent the next two minutes absolutely still. He saw no movement except the flowers and shrubbery swaying in the gentle breeze, heard only the drone of crickets and cicadas, smelled nothing except for mimosa and sweet jasmine. Then he straightened slowly and began to make his careful way across the grounds.

As he approached the oak tree, Morris took from his pocket a gemstone, about the size and shape of an almond, that his witch friend Libby Chastain had given him. He stopped, held the stone in his open palm, and waited.

If Fortner had decided to hedge his bets by placing some kind of protective spell on his neighbor's trees, that gemstone would glow bright red.

The stone retained its pale blue color. The tree had not been ensorcelled.

Morris slipped on a pair of thin leather gloves to protect his hands, then began to shimmy up the trunk of the great oak. After ten feet or so, he was able to reach the lowest branches, which made his ascent easier. He continued climbing until he reached a branch that seemed thick enough to bear his weight. He crawled out about half its length, then hung from it with both hands, listening hard for the telltale *crack* that would betray weakness in the limb. But it held him without complaint.

This was important. The second worst thing that could happen tonight was for the branch to give way while Morris was on his way onto Fortner's property.

The worst thing would be for that branch to break while Morris was trying to *get out*.

Sitting on the branch now, with his back carefully braced against the trunk, Morris uncoiled from around his waist a twenty-foot length of rope. It was the kind of line that mountain climbers use, except that Morris's had been dyed jet black.

He crawled slowly along the branch, pausing every few seconds to listen for any sign that the thing was going to give under his weight.

Now he was just over the wall that stood between the producer's grounds and Fortner's. The deadly shards of broken glass grinned at him in the moonlight.

Three feet further, and Morris carefully tied one end of his rope around the branch, using the knots that he had practiced a hundred times while blindfolded.

From between the leaves, Morris could see Fortner's house, a sprawling, two-story structure. No lights burned in the windows, which was unsurprising. Fortner was away in San Francisco for three days, having left that very afternoon. Morris had watched him board the plane, and waited for it to take off, just in case. The man lived alone, which meant there should be no human presence in the house tonight.

Which did not mean, of course, that the place was unguarded.

Morris stayed on the branch for the next ten minutes, watching Fortner's house and grounds. Finally he decided that whatever might be protecting the property, he wasn't going to learn about it from the safety of the producer's tree.

Morris lowered the rope to the ground inside Fortner's wall. He twitched it a few times, to see if anything below would react to the movement. Nothing.

Wrapping his legs around the rope, Morris used his gloved hands to control the speed of his descent. A few seconds later, he was on the ground, watching and

listening before moving on.

Morris was halfway to the house when he picked up movement out of the corner of his eye.

He froze, then slowly turned his head to get a better look. Whatever was out there, it was keeping to the shadows. And it was *big*.

Morris thought about some pictures he had seen in *People* or someplace about movie stars and their exotic taste in pets. One well-known actor had a leopard, shipped all the way from Africa. Another, who had played Tarzan in several films, was photographed next to the cage containing his pride and joy—a Bengal tiger. Some states had laws about that sort of thing—but not, apparently, California.

If members of the Hollywood crowd could get any of the great predator cats, then presumably Fortner could, too.

The creature moved again, revealing a hint of black fur in the moonlight. A black panther? Fortner would probably enjoy the symbolism of such a sentry. And the damn thing would be dangerous, too. All leopards were formidable, whatever their color. And once they had tasted human flesh...

No, not a panther. It was closer now, and Morris could see that this thing had a short tail, its fur long and shaggy-looking. And it didn't move with a cat's fluid grace. Instead, it had the bouncing muscularity of a—dog?

That was all right. Morris could deal with dogs.

Hell of a big pooch, though, if that's what it was. It looked to be the size of a bull calf.

Then he saw the eyes. They were looking right at him, and they were glowing like hellfire.

Morris looked away instantly. Now he knew what he was dealing with.

Fortner had his grounds guarded by a Black Dog.

Those eyes were the creature's principal weapons. Some of the legends Morris had read claimed that locking eyes with a Black Dog would freeze you in place instantly, a helpless, living statue until dawn. Other accounts said that its gaze could strike a man blind, or speechless, or drive him instantly insane.

But you have to stare into its eyes for any of those things to happen. All the stories were in agreement on that. And after all, who wouldn't gape at such a horrific apparition?

Morris wouldn't, for one.

He closed his eyes tightly, then reached into the side pocket of his jacket, moving as if he were under water. Black Dogs usually relied on their basilisk gaze for both attack and defense, but Morris didn't want any sudden action of his to give this one an excuse to start acting like a real canine and tear his throat out.

He finally found what he wanted in his pocket. Morris removed the object carefully, then slowly went down on one knee. To make this work, he would need to be on the same level as the dog.

Morris could hear it now, drawing closer. He made himself wait, eyes still shut. He was only going to get one chance to make this work.

Now the thing was growling at him, softly, from a few yards away. It was preparing to attack.

In one smooth motion, Morris brought the small hand mirror up in front of his

face, the reflective surface facing toward the Black Dog.

The creature's attention would be drawn by the movement, and it was probably looking at Morris's face now anyway, trying to work its mojo on him and wondering why he wasn't screaming, or running away, or doing whatever its victims usually did.

But now the dog's magical gaze was being turned back on itself by the mirror.

The growling stopped suddenly, as if cut off by a switch. There was a brief whimper, then—nothing.

Morris made himself wait for the length of ten breaths, then risked a look.

The dog was frozen in a crouch, as if it had been preparing to spring. The red and yellow light was gone from its eyes, and it made no sound as Morris stood and put the mirror away.

The Black Dog was now no more dangerous than any other lawn statue—at least until dawn.

He could have destroyed the thing, now that it was helpless, but that would have been petty. He was a professional, not some teenage vandal.

And anyway, if Morris were not out of there by sunrise, he would have bigger problems than Poochie to worry about.

A minute later, he was searching the house's exterior for the best way in. He had studied the original architect's plans, as well as photos taken from a distance with a telephoto lens. But Morris had a finely developed sense for these things that no image on paper could ever replace.

After a quick but cautious circuit of the place, he decided on the front door. Fortner might well expect any intruder to use a window or one of the auxiliary doors, and would thus concentrate more of his protective energies toward those access points.

Unless, of course, that's what Fortner figured I'd think, in which case the front door is going to have all the heavy artillery trained on it. Which means I'll be blued, screwed, and tattooed.

Morris shook his head impatiently at his own dithering. You could make yourself crazy trying to second-guess someone like Fortner. Sometimes you had to go with your instincts, and Morris's were telling him that the front door was the best bet.

He checked the front steps for traps or tricks, and found none. Then he spent the better part of a minute regarding the door with affection and good will. It might not matter, but he wanted there to be a good karmic relationship between himself and the door before he touched it. It pays never to take inanimate objects for granted.

As doors go, it was nothing special, considering the ostentatious grandeur of the house. No glass in it, of course. Morris was never that lucky. Solid wood, walnut maybe, carved into a series of panels. The knob was plain brass, and the lock was complicated-looking and intimidating—or it would be, to anyone with less experience than Quincey Morris.

He produced the almond-shaped gem again, and passed it slowly over the doorframe, the door itself, and the lock. The stone did not glow red, which meant no magic was being used to protect the door.

Morris scratched his chin reflectively.

Did Fortner leave the door deliberately unguarded, so as to lull the unsuspecting intruder?

He just might, the bastard. You get through the door without breaking a sweat,

then stroll inside humming to yourself, only to have an anvil dropped on your stupid head.

Or maybe...

Morris brought out a pencil flashlight and moved its narrow beam around the doorframe, very slowly.

And there it was—the faint bulge under the paint.

Just because Fortner had sorcery at his disposal didn't mean he had to forgo more mundane protections. And now Morris had spotted the wire for the alarm system.

You open the door, you interrupt the circuit, and all hell breaks loose. Morris didn't know whether the alarm would set off a klaxon horn, ring up the nearest police station, or trigger one of Fortner's nastier occult surprises. And he wasn't interested in finding out.

With a sharp knife Morris gouged into the doorframe about a foot above the knob, exposing the blue wire that he knew he would find there. Then, with a pair of insulated pliers, he clipped the wire, disabling the alarm.

The lock itself was relatively easy. Morris didn't even need the magically charged lock picks that Libby had made for him.

He turned the knob and, standing well off to one side of the entranceway, gently pushed the door open.

The darkness and silence within seemed to mock him.

He shined his light inside, revealing the long hallway that the blueprints said would be there. Several pieces of furniture were visible along the walls on either side—brittle-looking antiques in what appeared to be French Provincial. Fortner was said to be a connoisseur.

Spanish Mission architecture with French Provincial furniture. Some connoisseur.

Morris was three-quarters along the hallway when he felt a floorboard give imperceptibly under his foot. This was followed an instant later by the sound of wood moving against wood overhead.

Morris dropped at once to one knee, a posture that would allow him to run, dodge, or roll as needed. Then something flashed above his head from left to right, something long and black and sinuous that appeared to be suspended somehow from the ceiling. It struck the wall with a soft thud and rebounded, swinging back to the left.

When the dangling, wriggling shape bounced off the opposite wall, Morris was ready. He shot out a gloved hand, trying to grasp it a few inches from the end, just behind where the head would be, if his guess was right. Quincey Morris hated snakes.

Black Mamba venom on the glass shards outside. Bastard Fortner has to get it from somewhere. The Black Mamba, deadliest snake in Africa, maybe in the whole world. Jesus Christ, better not miss—

It was made of rubber.

Morris had held on to a few real snakes in his time, very reluctantly. The feel of a live reptile struggling against your grip, fighting to get free so that it can kill you, is something you don't forget. This thing he was holding now was utterly inert. It was not alive, nor had it ever been.

He stood, and examined his prize in the flashlight's narrow beam.