

He had entered on a corner of the quadrangle. Colonnaded cloisters ran off to his left, and straight ahead. Vaulted stone walkways set around a sad-looking square of lawn bordered by autumn-withered shrubs. Moonlight fell in through the colonnades to lie cold across dusty flags, and he took the option to his left. His footsteps echoed back at him off ancient stone, and as he reached the end of the walkway, he heard the door opening from the alleyway outside. He turned right, still running. Past an open chamber where stone figures stood around the prone figure of Jesus laid out on a slab. A narrow doorway at the end of the passage had been bricked up, and he turned into the third side of the quadrangle. Had his pursuer taken the other route around the square he could easily have cut Enzo off. But Enzo could hear his feet on the flagstones running along the top end of the square, following in Enzo's footsteps.

Now he saw a maroon-painted wooden door set into the far corner. It had to be the entrance to the church. He slithered to a halt and pulled on the handle. The door didn't budge. He looked back along the cloister and saw the young man who was chasing him run into moonlight at the far corner. He stopped and they looked at each other along the length of the north passage, the breath of both men rasping in the silence of the night and echoing among the vaults. In desperation, Enzo turned and put his shoulder to the door. It swung violently open, and his momentum carried him staggering in astonishment into the vast breathless nave that rose endlessly

above him into darkness. The damned door wasn't locked. It just opened the other way.

Multiple columns rose up to support an unseen vaulted ceiling. Moonlight bled through stained glass to sprinkle dead light among the pews. Enzo clattered between the bench seats, the chancel and altar away to his right, and sprinted up the central passage towards the entrance. To his immense relief, the door opened on to the covered area at the top of the steps he had passed just minutes earlier. He ran from darkness into street light, and scampered down the steps and out through the arch into the open stretch of palisade.

His legs were shaking, his breath tearing at lungs that hadn't had to cope with this level of exercise in years. He just wanted to stop. To lean forward, hands on thighs, and try to regain some degree of control over his breathing. He worried that his heart rate was now reaching dangerous levels. It felt like something in his chest was trying to punch its way out through his ribs. But the sound of feet on the steps behind him robbed him of that option. He crossed the road and started running. And it was a full ten seconds or more before he realised that he was sprinting across the bridge that led west out of the village, further away from the sanctity of the Fenelon with every step.

Where was everybody? He wanted to shout for help, but there was nobody here. Full-time residents had long since shuttered up windows in thick stone walls, and were sitting watching TV or preparing dinner.

At the far side of the bridge he stopped again and clutched at

the handrail. Looking back he saw his pursuer jogging steadily towards him.

‘Jesus Christ!’ he shouted at the night. ‘What do you want?’

Which brought the chasing figure to a halt at the mid-point of the bridge, and there was a stand-off that lasted almost half a minute. Just enough time for Enzo to regain his breath and look around for some way out.

A cobbled track dropped away from his end of the bridge, past a dark house on three levels, down towards the river and the footpath that ran back below the palisade towards the village.

He set off again on legs that would barely support him, slithering and sliding on dew-wet cobbles, to stagger on to the footpath by the river. The black water of the river itself reflected shimmering moonlight. He saw clusters of narrow wooden rowing boats tethered to trees, bobbing gently on slowly eddying water. And he set off back towards the village, legs burdened by lead weights that made every step a supreme effort of will.

The palisade rose into the night above him now, and he glanced over his shoulder to see his stalker walking after him, no more than twenty metres back. He no longer felt the need to run in order to catch up with his prey.

Enzo had reached that moment in the chase when the will to run had left him. When the need simply to stop was greater than the fear of facing up to his pursuer. But a part of him was still looking for a way out, a brain that remained functioning

more efficiently than his body. Just ahead of him, a rowing boat, like the ones he had already passed, was tied to a tree on the riverbank. If he could get himself into that boat and push off into the flow of the river . . .

He stooped quickly to untether the rope, and stepped into the boat. Immediately it moved away from under him, rocking dangerously, and he fell along its length, crashing through the cross boards. To his horror, he felt the whole boat disintegrating beneath him, rotten wood giving way to drop him into icy water.

The cold stole away what little breath he had left, and he was incapable even of crying out with the shock of it. The water here was not deep. No more than a metre. But the riverbed comprised a thick sludge of mud and decaying vegetation, and he found it impossible to get back to his feet. His nostrils were filled with the stench of decomposing flora, and the more he struggled, the more he felt himself being sucked into the alluvium. It was all he could do to keep his head above water. And then he felt it wash over his face and knew that he could not hold his breath for more than a few seconds. The final seconds of his life. Time enough to curse his stupidity and regret all the foolish things he had ever done in his sixty-five years on this earth.

He prepared himself for the shock of cold water filling his lungs, and felt fingers close around a hand still above the surface. Another hand joined it, and their combined strength pulled him clear of the water. They grasped him now beneath

## THE NIGHT GATE

the armpits and dragged him free of the clawing sediment and up on to the footpath.

Enzo lay on his back, shivering uncontrollably with the cold. He gasped to fill his lungs with recuperative oxygen, his eyes open, staring up at stars that glistened like jewels fixed to an eternity in which, to his amazement, he still existed. A face swam into view above him. A face caught in the moonlight. A young face, full of concern. This was his pursuer, and Enzo was shocked to see that he was no more than seventeen or eighteen years old.

‘Are you alright?’ the teenager asked him.

When finally he found his voice, Enzo spluttered, ‘No, I’m not alright! Do I look all-fucking-right?’

The young man seemed distressed. ‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. And then he was up on his feet and sprinting away along the footpath, back the way they had just come.

Enzo heaved himself up on to one elbow and glared after him. ‘What the hell?’ he shouted. ‘Come back here, you wee bastard!’ But the youth was gone, quickly swallowed by the night, and Enzo lay for several minutes recovering his breath before attempting finally to get to his feet.