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LEX SINCLAIR

"A must read for readers who want to feel the hairs on the back of their neck stand up"

- Tommy Trumpet

"One of the best horror novels I have read in the last few years"

- Amazon user review

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

Is their bravery merely a suicide mission? Can they put a stop to this atrocity or will *the thing with the goat's head* reign supreme?

Contents

Front Matter	i
<i>Title Page</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Publisher Information</i>	<i>ii</i>
Neighbourhood Watch	1
<i>Part One</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Prologue</i>	<i>3</i>
1.	8
2.	20
3.	32
4.	50
5.	67
6.	83
7.	92
<i>Part Two</i>	<i>103</i>
8.	105
9.	119
10.	134
11.	149
12.	167
13.	176
14.	193
15.	205
<i>Part Three</i>	<i>218</i>
16.	220
17.	236
18.	249
19.	261
20.	282
<i>Part Four</i>	<i>288</i>
21.	290
22.	304
<i>Epilogue</i>	<i>319</i>

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

by
Lex Sinclair

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Part One

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...”

1 John 4:1-6 (V.1)

Prologue

Cathy Sheldon sat bolt-upright in her bed, awoken by a noise downstairs that sounded very much like the front door being opened then closed again. She squinted through the fog of darkness at her alarm clock, which told it her it was a couple of minutes past two o'clock. It was madness to even consider the front door being opened and closed. If that was true then Paul would have heard it also, and would be wide awake. But he wasn't, he was fast asleep, sprawled out on his side of the bed. True, he was a deep sleeper, but then so was Cathy. The thud of the door closing would've woken anyone, whether they slept deeply or not.

She must have imagined it, Cathy told herself. Although, she was still reluctant to settle down again and rest her head on her pillows, doubting herself. She'd feel a lot better if she went downstairs herself, checked the door was in fact locked. Then she could get back to sleep with a clear conscious, knowing that it had been her wild imagination, after all, and nothing more. Yet she remained where she was, unmoving, in her bedroom, staring through the darkness at the door, listening intently for the sound of footfalls climbing the staircase to where she and Paul were, vulnerable without any forewarning of an intruder's sudden appearance.

Cathy wasn't sure about how to proceed. She was too frightened to go back to sleep, and yet she was too frightened to go downstairs. But staying motionless, listening to the alarm clock ticking incessantly wasn't going to help matters; all it did was prolong the anxiety.

Before last week, Cathy would never have thought it possible that a burglar or an intruder would ever try to break into their house on their quiet cul-de-sac street called

Thorburn Close, but ever since her neighbour, Julie Thomas, who lived at number twelve, just a couple of houses up had disappeared, without trace or forewarning that she was going away

for a while, Cathy no longer felt her cosy street was as comfortable and secure as she did in all the years she and her husband Paul had resided there.

Now, it *was* possible for an intruder to break into her beautiful home, while she and Paul were in bed in the middle of the night, where most decent folks were, unless they had to work a night shift.

Cathy nudged Paul in his ribs with her elbow, not once taking her eyes - which had slowly adjusted to the darkness - off the door, in case it edged open without her noticing. Paul grunted something incoherent, but it was clear that he wasn't awake. Cathy nudged him again, harder, two consecutive times, causing Paul to grunt once more and roll over on his other side facing away from his wife.

Running out of patience, Cathy reached her right hand under the quilt, under her husband's *Simpson's* T-shirt, and pinched the skin on his back between two of her manicured fingernails.

'Argh!' Paul sat up, wincing and caressing the area where he'd been deliberately pinched, checking to feel if he was bleeding. He saw the distinct silhouette of his wife sitting upright in bed, not looking at him, but staring at the bedroom door. 'What the hell did you pinch me for?' he croaked, his voice still weary from having his sleep disturbed.

Cathy didn't answer him at first; she was transfixed with the bedroom door and what might be beyond it.

'Cathy!' Paul hissed.

She briefly glanced at him, and then said, 'Sorry if I hurt you.'

'What did you pinch me for?' he asked for the second time.

She leaned closer to him and said as quietly as she could, still reluctant to remove her gaze from the bedroom door, 'I think there's someone in the house.'

Paul's heart stopped, momentarily. He forgot all about the sharp, stinging pain that had gone through him from being pinched by his wife; instead the entire room enveloped him in a darkness that was far more ominous than the night.

‘What do you mean - “there’s someone in the house?” That’s impossible! I locked both the front and back door and put the keys in the bowl on the worktop.’

‘I think I heard the front door opening and then closing again,’ Cathy said.

‘What do you mean - you *think*? You either heard the front door closing or you didn’t?’

‘I’m not sure!’ she cried. ‘I was asleep, same as you, when I was awoken by the sounds I just described.’

Paul was wide awake now. ‘It was more than likely John coming home from town, closing his door.’ John lived next door and was prone to staggering home at least once a week, pissed out of his skull. How he managed to actually get home by walking from the town centre without falling down in a culvert or getting mowed down by a speeding car was quite amazing.

Cathy breathed a sigh of relief. That explanation sounded plausible. And, anyway, like her husband said, how could anyone get in? Both entrances were locked, and she hadn’t heard the double-pane glass breaking. Moreover, one of their neighbours would have spotted an intruder lurking about in the hedgerows and shrubs surrounding the front and back yards of each and every home on the street.

She let herself lie down again, feeling better now that she’d got Paul to reassure her it was just her imagination playing a cruel trick on her, especially after their close friend and neighbour, Julie Thomas, had gone missing a few weeks ago and had her face printed on a missing poster put up on lampposts and tree trunks all around the suburbs in case anyone spotted her.

However, thinking about Julie brought the worry to the surface again, like a tidal wave. According to the rumours around the neighbourhood, no one had seen or heard from Julie. Not a friend or family member. And that was unlike Julie because she was very close to her mother and father, and her younger brother. She always told someone where she was headed, even if it was into

town just to run some errands or to do her weekly shopping at one of the big name superstores.

There's an explanation for that, too, Cathy told herself.

Paul shifted on his side of the bed, looking at his wife, knowing she was still awake, contemplating all kinds of different scenarios in her mind. He knew this, because he was doing the same. 'You're thinking about what happened to Julie, aren't you?' he said.

Cathy didn't even bother to conceal her thoughts tonight. 'Yeah.'

'She'll turn up, sooner or later, apologising to everyone for worrying them. Now you think someone's gonna come in here and take you away, too, isn't it?'

'I know how it sounds. But it's possible.'

'Your concerns for Julie are making you paranoid. No one's gonna get you, anyway, 'cause I'm here, right?'

'Yeah. It's just I remember Arthur saying that he saw Julie's front door standing wide open, and when he went inside, after calling her name over and over again, she wasn't anywhere close by, nor had she packed her suitcases, or any of her other belongings. Even the police think there's something unpleasant about her disappearance.'

Paul knew it was true. He was good friends with some of the local policemen.

'Would it make you feel any better if I went downstairs and checked the doors?'

'I know you must think I'm going crazy - but I just can't switch off not knowing for sure.'

Paul rested his hand atop her shoulder. 'You're not crazy. You're just thinking that if Julie was kidnapped from her home then the same thing could happen to you. That's not crazy, as such. But these are two separate situations. Julie was either taken or she left abruptly of her own accord. You *think* you heard the front door opening and closing. I can assure you that it didn't. But if it'll make you sleep, then I'll go take a look.'

Cathy stroked his hand resting on her shoulder. 'Thank you.'

Paul pulled back the covers, swung his legs from underneath and slid his feet into his slippers, padded across the room, glancing over his shoulder at his frightened wife, watching him, pleading with him to be careful. He thought she was overreacting, and up until he saw the hooded, faceless figures in the living room, awaiting his arrival, Paul hadn't considered what he might do if there was an intruder in his home.

The last thing he thought about before he was taken was that he'd never see Cathy ever again...

1.

Joe Camber slowed his Audi down, now that he reached the suburbs and was cresting the hilltop towards his new residence, gripping the steering wheel in a ferocious white-knuckled grip, gritting his teeth, thinking about his money-grabbing ex-wife, Jenna-Marie, getting half of his earnings, after a long, arduous divorce settlement that couldn't have been any more unpleasant if it was done on purpose. The rotten bitch had even used the famous waterworks when speaking, gaining sympathy she didn't deserve.

In retrospect, he was also to blame. Joe had truly believed that he and Jenna were destined to be together for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, the woman he'd fallen in love with drastically changed into a nagging, interfering, control-freak, who treated him and spoke to him like last week's rubbish pile.

Nevertheless, that was all behind him now, he kept telling himself; otherwise he would only wind up hitting something or someone out of pent-up frustration at how that glutinous bitch managed to wrap him around her devil finger, extracting money out of him as though he were printing twenty-pound notes for a living.

The resplendent sun dazzled him on his journey to his new home so much that he had to reach into the glove compartment, still driving, to fish out his sunglasses, even though it was only the middle of February.

He hadn't long driven past Thorburn Close, which appeared to be deserted. If Willet Close was half as picturesque and tranquil as that cul-de-sac, then Joe was on a winner. Perhaps his life would take a turn for the better. God knows, it couldn't get any worse than the last couple of years. His marriage had been more painful and arduous than the majority of his world title fights with some of the greatest middleweight boxers of all time. No one he faced in the ring was as ruthless and cunning as Jenna-Marie. She

hadn't made him bleed, but boy, oh boy, had she scarred him and knocked him down on countless occasions.

Furthermore, Joe knew she'd been sleeping around with other men behind his back when he was in his intense training routines that dragged on for months prior to fight night, when all his hard work would hopefully pay off. He couldn't prove her infidelity with anything other than circumstantial evidence and good old-fashioned intuition, which was probably the reason she'd done so well in the divorce settlement.

He kept telling himself it didn't matter. But the little voice inside his head kept conjuring images of his ex-wife in their bed, or in a hotel (paid with his money, no doubt) jumping another fellow's bones, who was laughing his arse off at how he got away with his dirty deed undetected.

Joe sighed deeply. Then he focused on keeping an eye out for street signs that would tell him when to take a right turn. No matter how many times he had been to these parts over the last couple of months, being shown around by the estate agent, he still had trouble finding Willet Close, because the other cul-de-sacs looked identical when passing them by.

He killed the radio, cutting off Michael Jackson, singing about a man in the mirror, so he could concentrate.

Not five minutes later, Joe smiled to himself when he spotted the sign reading Willet Close. He indicated for the next right turning, slowed the car down using the gear stick, and pulled over to the kerb seeing the house with a SOLD sticker on the peter alan signpost sticking out of the ground in the immaculately trimmed front lawn.

He turned the engine off, retracted the keys from the ignition, grabbed his heavy cardboard box from the passenger seat, filled to the rim with his world titles, trophies, framed photographs and gloves, then slid out, mindful not to whack his head on the frame of the door and made his way to the front gate.

As strong as he was, Joe was having some difficulty shifting the heavy cardboard box from one arm to the other, enabling him

to open the gate so he could amble down the narrow footpath leading to the front door. Trying to lift the handle and push the gate open without dropping his possessions of a past long gone, but nevertheless proud of, was making him lose his temper, when a voice called out behind him, getting his immediate attention. 'Hang on! I'll give you a hand!'

Joe pivoted, careful not to slip on the melting snow glued to the pavement, seeing a bespectacled aging gentleman with grey, receding hair, hobbling across the road, fighting not to be blown over by the sharp gust of wind sending ice-picks into the pores of his flushed cheeks.

When the fellow with a limping gait grew closer, Joe noticed he had one lazy eye, looking at the empty road. He ignored the imperfection, realising that this man was a decent human being coming over to help him, regardless of the fact that they didn't know each other, in the slightest.

'Name's Hugh Green,' he said, proffering a shaky hand, and then realising what an asinine gesture that was, as Joe was struggling. 'Sorry, mate,' he said, opening the gate and then stepping aside so Joe could pass.

'No problem,' Joe said, grateful for his assistance.

He put the cardboard box down on the welcome mat left by the previous owner on the doorstep. Then he reached out and clasped Hugh's varicose veined, leathery hand in his own. 'Name's Joe -'

'I know who you are,' Hugh interrupted, evidently excited. 'I'm a big fan of yours.'

Joe raised his eyebrows, genuinely taken aback. 'Really?'

'Aye. I've watched all your fights. Well, that's a white lie - I've watched all your televised fights. You're one of my favourite fighters of all time.'

Joe smiled, slightly embarrassed, but also enjoying the unexpected admiration from this kind man.

'Shame you lost that one fight, just because of your domestic troubles -' Hugh stopped himself, going bright red, ashamed of

what he'd just blurted out, afraid that Joe would take offence and knock him out. 'I shouldn't have said that.'

Joe held up his hand in a don't-worry-about-it gesture. 'I know what you mean,' Joe said. 'The rematch was like watching two completely different fighters getting it on.'

'You battered him senseless. They said in the papers that you hit him nearly eight hundred times - and those were the clean shots. That's not including the ones hitting his gloves or not landing cleanly. His face looked like he'd been run over by a steamroller at the end.'

Joe nodded and smiled politely. Regaining his four middleweight world championship belts was one of the greatest rematches of all time, according to the boxing experts around the world.

'I live across the street, at number two, in case you're wondering who I am. I couldn't believe it when I heard you were moving here. If you ever want to come over and watch one of your fights on DVD, you can. I got them all.'

Joe thanked him for his generosity, adding that he would indeed do that once he got himself settled in. First he had to get through all his boxes and furniture that the rental moving van had dropped off yesterday and early this morning.

'Well, it's been great getting to finally meet you,' Hugh declared. 'I'll see you later, perhaps. And don't be hesitant if you want a hand lifting and handling furniture around.'

I may be getting on in age, but being a postman for forty-years sure has given me a lot more strength than my frail frame gives the impression of being.'

Joe snorted laughter at Hugh's quick, yet accurate, analysis of himself, watching the retired postman hobble across the deserted street back into his red-brick home, hoping that all of his neighbours were as friendly and affable as Hugh.

Thorburn Close had been cordoned off for several weeks after the inexplicable disappearance of Paul and Cathy Sheldon.

They had been the fifth and six abductees of the once quiet and peaceful neighbourhood that had rapidly become the most talked about local crime in recent history. The events that had apparently occurred in the quiet suburbs, where mostly decent people lived, were unheard of. Detective inspectors leading the investigation were utterly perplexed by the series of events that had unfolded, without a single lead to aid them discover the truth they so dearly sought.

It was uncanny to think that all the residents of Thorburn Close would all take their leave without any notice or contact with their friends and loved ones, leaving their vacant homes unguarded and possessions behind, just taking themselves. Not even their cars were gone. It was as if they had quite literally been obliterated, without trace, from the face of the earth. The authorities only answer to prevent more innocent citizens of Thorburn Close being snatched from their homes and everyday lives, was to accommodate them in hotel suites in the town centre, where they knew they were, so they could be questioned and traced at any time, day or night.

The shrubs lining the front lawns of Thorburn Close rustled softly in the chilly breeze. Plain-clothed police officers sat in their unmarked vehicles, watching, waiting for something to happen that was out of the ordinary. Or for someone who didn't look like they belonged in the neighbourhood to appear, practically walking right towards them so they could get to the bottom of this unnerving predicament.

'This shit just doesn't make an iota of sense,' Detective Sark said, thinking aloud, breaking the silence in the Ford.

His partner, Detective Reeves bit into his cheese and onion sandwich, gazing out the driver's side window at the empty houses surrounding them; their opaque windows reflecting the radiant sunshine. But at night those windows looked and felt like eyes staring at them, condemning them for letting another day go

by, still no sign of their rightful owners arriving to bring life back to the red-brick buildings that had been the venue to barbeques, birthday celebrations, parties, Christmas dinners and other jovial celebrations all year round.

A crow sailed down from the heavens, perched atop a chimney stack, scanned the lifeless street below, cawed... then took flight again. Sark couldn't decide whether or not the crow was cawing with approval of the eerie quietness or not. He knew it wasn't important. Yet he was so suspicious of every minute sight or sound, it danced around his conscious until it before he went out of his mind.

For Detective Sark it was the sitting on his arse waiting for something unusual to happen that drove him to the edge of sanity. It had always been his Achilles' heel. Patience was not a virtue he would ever possess.

While he was sitting idly in the passenger seat, praying for a break, he could be doing something productive. However, there was no evidence of any kind. He'd been through each and every house, searching for handprints, blood, or any clue that would help them in their investigation. But not even the crime scene detectives could find anything, save vacant homes and cars deserted either on their driveways or parked in their garages. No people, dead or alive anywhere in the vicinity.

Sark wasn't sure if that was a good thing or bad thing.

His mother had always told him - when he was still living under her roof - that no news was good news. And, although in everyday life that statement was accurate, Sark would rather have an injured person or a blood smear, anything to give them a start into the investigation; instead of going to all the missing persons' relatives homes, questioning them for hours on end, being told the same thing over and over; that the relatives knew as much as the police did - nothing.

Cathy Sheldon swam to the surface of consciousness; her vision blurred and hazy. It took her three attempts to blink away her weariness, and for her eyesight to regain its focus. Then, and only then, did she see the timber joists overhead in the dimness enveloping her.

She moaned softly, weakly, when she tried to move. Her body felt numb from head-to-toe. She hadn't fallen or bashed herself to her knowledge, but she couldn't be sure at this moment in time. Nothing made sense to her any more. All she knew was that her peaceful, mundane life had been destroyed by the intruders, who had brought her to wherever the hell she was, and had temporarily put her in an unconscious state.

Where was Paul? What had those strangers done to him? Was he still alive? If not, would she also die in an unspeakable fashion? Or were they being kidnapped for ransom.

Lying there listening to her breathing and seeing her chest rise and fall at a quicker rate than normal, in the cold damp barn - where, she didn't know - scared Cathy more than she ever thought possible. She thought this was the kind of ordeal you read about in horror books and newspapers, or watched on the television... not in real life.

Evidently, Cathy was wrong.

A man's ear-piercing scream jolted her and sent a nasty shock through her drumming heart. If Cathy was scared before hearing that shriek of pure agony she wouldn't dare imagine, now she was terrified beyond her wits, because that scream had to have emitted from her husband, Paul. She had never heard him scream in all the years she'd known him and been married to him. He was her rock; her knight and shining armour. Nothing hurt Paul, or if it did she had never seen him expressing grief and sorrow.

Now he was screaming over and over again, whimpering, snivelling, sobbing, and pleading with the punishers something incomprehensible through his constant blubbing. That was followed by another shriek of sheer pain.

'STOP! STOP! STOP! Please, God... *stop!*' The voice that cried those words was definitely her Paul. He was begging for his life, begging for the pain to cease and to be granted his freedom from this venue of Hell.

Cathy opened her dry mouth, peeling her lips apart and tried to cry out so Paul could hear her. Perhaps if he did, he'd gain strength, knowing she was still alive. Or maybe it would only make things worse for him by prolonging the agony he had already endured thus far. In spite of risking her own life and her husband's, Cathy tried to shout her husband's name, but found she had no voice. She tried numerous times, eventually surrendering, realising it was no use.

A guttural scream was cut off abruptly, followed by an eerie, foreboding silence that was far more frightening than hearing her husband's torture on the other side of the darkened barn.

The silence spoke volumes, echoing in Cathy's eardrums, informing her instincts that her husband breathed no more. For the darkness that enveloped him now was for ever. And if she didn't get off her back and flee the barn, she too, would also meet death sooner than her intended life expectancy.

For Paul's sake as well as her own, she had to get up and escape, so she could tell the authorities what had happened.

Clenching her frozen hands into taut fists, then tensing her arms and legs, she willed herself to sit upright, like she'd done the night the intruders broke into her home and destroyed her tranquillity - but this simple task was proving to be so arduous she wasn't sure she could do it. They must have given her a sedative to incapacitate her muscles, so there was no chance of her moving while they were busying themselves torturing Paul. But drugged or not, Cathy grimaced and fought with her mind over her unwilling body to get off the hardwood table and to a vertical base.

Amazingly, she managed to achieve this goal, gritting her teeth, grunting as quietly as possible, doing her utmost to be discreet so not to attract unwanted attention. However, when she rolled off the timber surface onto her feet, her knees buckled, causing her

to stagger forward in the direction of the two nine foot doors that were ajar, letting in a sliver of white light from the half-crest moon outside. She steadied herself with a trembling hand to keep her from falling down; not only would that make a curious noise, but it would also seriously jeopardise her escape.

In her peripheral vision, Cathy saw her shimmering shadow on the wall, created by the flickering candles from somewhere behind her, where she daredn't look. As she got closer to the barn doors her shadow grew larger and disproportionate, until it became a black veil covering her only exit towards any hope of salvation.

Cathy was within a few feet from sidling through the gap in the doors when a hooded, faceless figure stepped out of the shadows, instantly blocking her escape.

Cathy gasped!

The figure before her stood, unmoving. Its face a white, ghostly blur, like that of a broken cloud, losing its puffiness and finally dissipating in a clear blue sky. The figure did not reach out to grab her, did not speak to her - and from what Cathy absorbed of that precise moment - it did not appear to breathe, either. Although, that might have been merely her terror exaggerating the facts into the supernatural of those in shock which could be felt in the victim's marrow, it was so deep and resounding.

Cathy whirled around, clasping a hand over her mouth, cutting off her scream of alarm at the four hooded figures without faces, wearing robes to conceal the rest of their anatomies.

When she darted out of their way as they grew within touching distance, her feet crossed one another, inadvertently tripping herself up. The hay-covered ground rushed up to meet her face. The impact knocked her senseless, but even in her dazed state of mind, she knew that falling over and whacking her head hard had cost her life. There was no escaping this terrifying faction, who either wore the most horrific masks ever created, or were more likely something not of this world. Something far more sinister than her disorientated mind could conjure.

She groaned, louder this time, feeling her cranium thudding the unyielding surface, her head buried in the hay. Then she was lifted off the ground where she lay - not by a fierce grip - but by a force that made her define gravity, carrying her over to the timber workman's bench where she had lain for how long she had no idea.

Her body slowly, gently, descended into its previous position.

Cathy considered resisting, thrashing about on the table, arms and legs lashing out at this malevolent faction that held her captive, but the impact from her fall, not to mention the terror that caused her heart to beat like a jackhammer informed her it would be prudent just to let the inevitable occur, rather than fight against them and make it worse on herself.

For a few brief seconds, she really believed that she'd escaped to the outside, where she would've run at roughly the speed of an Olympic athlete sprinting to the finish line to flee the barn and to find solace at the nearest police station. It wouldn't bother her that they thought she was crazy as hell. It wouldn't matter if they locked her up in an asylum. It wouldn't matter that she'd be chained to her bed at night and was watched vigilantly 24/7; nothing would matter, just as long as she didn't have to see or suffer any more harm.

But that wasn't her destiny, so it would seem. Instead she found herself shaking, teeth chattering, her body going through vicious spasms; her muscles contracting so hard and fast that it literally rocked her from side to side. The only thing preventing her from falling off the side of the table were the disturbing, featureless hooded shapes, looming over her, studying her, on the verge of a colossal panic attack.

Cathy's protruding eyes moved swiftly to one figure to the next, seeking any kind of emotion behind their ghostly facades. Or were they incapable of expressing emotions? she wondered, incoherently.

She turned her head so that the right hand side of her jaw came to rest on her collar bone. The flickering candlelight created amorphous images on the walls. One of those images bouncing

on the orange-lit wall was that of a lifeless form in the shape of a person lying down with folds of skin from the abdomen peeled back, overlapping the sides along with perfectly aligned bones that had to be someone's ribcage. She couldn't be sure of this, as she wasn't actually seeing it... only a shadow. Nonetheless, it looked as though the lifeless form belonged to her deceased husband who had his ribcage snapped then pried open, enabling access to his exposed innards.

Cathy quivered and whimpered simultaneously when she felt her head being carefully turned so that it looked straight up at the figures again. This time, however, one of the hooded murderers had stepped forward into her immediate vision, claiming her devoted attention. Once this was achieved, the figure raised his hands to its head, reaching into the hood that shrouded its head, then slid it back, removing the ghostly mask and revealed its true identity.

If she could have screamed, Cathy would have. Instead her heart climbed into her throat and all that escaped was a throaty sharp intake of breath, understanding why they wore those creepy masks. Because, as frightening as those masks were, they were not as terrifying as the skeleton features that were otherwise hidden.

Tissue still clung to the skull, but had lost its original colour due to decay, and the dark brown eyes that glimmered in the candlelight were further back than a living, breathing person. Blood rushed through the invisible veins returning life to the fluxing face beneath the hood that was both horrifying, yet hypnotic at the same time. Cathy could actually see more and more fibres intertwining, sheathing the whiteness of the skull in a dark red layer.

She wondered why her thudding heart had not yet exploded inside her chest.

The hooded figure with a half-formed face spoke in a raspy, deathlike voice. 'Fear not us but death. For we have suffered more than you will ever know. Death is whispering to you, but you are not listening. You cannot hear what death is telling you, but soon

you will hear everything. Death is not suffering. Death is bliss. You may not want death but death wants you, wrapped in its arms... for ever.'

The evil, supernatural being rested its hand atop her chest... then dug its long, sharp talons into her, piercing the pale flesh, ripping it apart with minimal effort.

Then the high-pitched screaming at the back of Cathy's throat began...

2.

Michael Gibson woke up at the shrill sound of the alarm clock going off. *That god-awful sound could wake the dead*, he thought, as he turned it off and got out of bed.

After doing his routine stretches for his chest, back and legs, Michael crossed the room, opened the bedroom door to the landing and padded into the bathroom to brush his teeth and have a nice hot shower before heading downstairs to make himself some breakfast.

Weighing two-hundred and twenty pounds of granite muscle due to lifting heavy free weights ever since he was a teenager had given Michael a big appetite to fill his massive frame. He could barely fit through the narrow doorway into the kitchen because of his broad, cannonball shoulders. If he got any bigger he would have to sidle into each room. Just thinking about that prospect brought a broad grin to Michael's face. He envisioned construction workers building wider doorways specifically for guys like him, who were so big they had to have their own separate accommodations.

Unfortunately, his bodybuilder physique was too intimidating for his last girlfriend, who ended their relationship, due to the fact that Michael's strict high-protein diet apparently came before everything else, even her. And yet there were other people, who would admire him, or scarper in the opposite direction, or gawk at him, envious of his physique.

Shirley had been one of those people who scarped, in spite of the fact that once you got to know Michael, you'd realise you were making a fuss over nothing, because he was a great big softy, with a big heart, who never used steroids or growth hormone, or had even been tempted. His jaw-dropping superhero body was as natural as the forty shades of grass.

Michael devoured his Frosties and gulped down his meal replacement milkshake, then sauntered into the living room, sat down in his armchair and watched the morning news.

A young, attractive female reporter with a long dark mane of hair and accentuated cheekbones looked directly at the camera pointed at her and spoke clearly into the microphone.

‘... still unclear as to what has actually occurred here at Thorburn Close; although one thing is certain - the street is empty of its residents. This Amelia Jenkins reporting for BBC Wales news.’

Thorburn Close? That's just down the road. What the hell has happened, now?

Michael got up from his comfortable armchair, not wanting to relax and let his food settle before going into the garage to workout any more. Catching that snippet of news had ruined his morning... and he knew that even if he did lift some weights this morning, his mind wouldn't be totally focused.

He went over to the living room window, opened the curtains, letting the sunlight pour inside, giving life to the interior. Then he watched for any activity on the street outside. Michael was hoping he would see one of his neighbours emerge from their homes so he could discuss what he'd just seen. With a bit of luck he could find out what bad thing had taken place just down the road, for Thorburn Close to make the news headlines.

The door to number 3 opened. Emma Harris - Jake's wife - walked up her path, dragging the bin outside to leave on the pavement for the rubbish men to empty into the back of their disposal truck tomorrow morning.

Emma was dressed in an expensive pin-striped suit that exuded an elegant appearance and made her look even more attractive than when Michael saw her in her usual faded jeans and blouse. He hurried to the door, mindless to the fact that he was only wearing shorts, opened it and stepped outside into the sunlight.

‘Emma!’ he called, loud enough so she could hear him as she made her way to her Mercedes.

She whirled around, frowning, and a little alarmed at whoever yelled her name, startling her. Then when she saw it was Mike, she smiled; then frowned again when she saw him crossing his front lawn in only his briefs.

‘Have you seen the news?’ he asked.

Emma shook her head. ‘No. Why?’

‘Something’s happened at Thorburn Close.’

Emma had to avert her gaze from Michael’s sculpted physique with slabs of muscle she didn’t know existed, not to mention the impressive bulge in his pants.

‘What’re you talkin’ about?’

‘I don’t know exactly. But there was a news reporter speaking live this morning, just down the road where Thorburn Close is, saying that it was deserted. I didn’t catch it all.’

‘I haven’t heard anything, I’m afraid,’ Emma replied.

Michael realised he was stopping her from getting into her car and driving to work downtown. He raised his hand in a goodbye gesture, turned and headed back inside, feeling ridiculous at his behaviour and what Emma must be thinking as she reversed her silver Mercedes onto the street, put it into first gear and rolled to the junction before joining the road leading out of the suburbs.

Emma hardly knew Michael. Out of all her neighbours in the quiet cul-de-sac that was Willet Close, the only acquaintances she had were Naomi Shepard, who was a single mother of five-year-old, Corrie, divorced from an abusive husband, and Sherri Douglas - a retired second-hand bookstore clerk and avid reader of history books, who lived at number 8.

She was still trying to make some sort of sense to what Michael was ranting on about when she drove past Thorburn Close on her left and saw a white news van with the BBC logo on the side, parked up on the kerb next to two patrol cars.

In her fleeting glance, she saw a couple of uniformed officers talking to reporters in front of the yellow crime scene tape, stopping anyone unauthorised going any further.

Michael had been right.

Jake had been lying in bed reading his hardcover copy of *Dreamcatcher* by Stephen King when his concentration was broken by the sound of someone yelling his wife's name from across the street.

Jake dropped the book, threw himself out of bed and darted to the bedroom window, peeking through the curtains, scanning the familiar street below, wanting to see everything without being seen himself.

He saw Emma standing on the driveway by the driver's door, looking across the street where the voice came from.

Jake's cheeks flushed an angry beetroot colour at the sight of Michael Gibson, displaying his slabs of muscles, gleaming in the morning sunlight in just his tight-fitting briefs. He'd only admit to himself that he was envious of Michael's body. He knew how Emma liked muscular men, because whenever they were watching a boxing match or an action film, she would usually say something aloud like, 'Wow! Look at those bulging, tennis-ball arms.'

Was the security guard for Wilkinson's store trying to hit on his wife? If he was, how would Jake stop him? If they had a fight, Michael would kill him. There was no way on this earth Jake could beat Michael, not without a weapon of some kind, at least.

The double-glazing window prevented Jake from hearing what they were talking about clearly... although he did hear the words, *news*, *Thorburn Close*, and his wife saying *no*, shaking her head.

Did that mean what they were discussing had nothing to do with his unfounded suspicions? Had Michael been asking an innocuous question? Or had it been a code they used to mean something entirely different?

It drove Jake crazy just thinking about Emma having intercourse by the six foot one, muscle-bound stallion. The more sensible, rational part of his conscious told him what he was considering was preposterous. Emma would never do such a thing to him. She wasn't that type of woman who slept around. Her thoughts were either on her career as a psychotherapist or with him and their home life.

Emma was one of those productive women, who always found something to keep her occupied, whether it was mowing the lawn, writing confidential evaluations about the clients she was treating or simply spending quality time with him.

Then he saw Michael wave to Emma as she drove off and a hurt bomb exploded inside him.

As far as Jake was aware, Michael had never spoken to either of them in the three years they'd been living opposite him. So, why all of a sudden did Michael start talking to his wife, as though he had known her for years, and then wave goodbye to her?

Calm down! Calm down! There's no need to get worked up over nothing. There's probably a reasonable explanation for all of this. Just wait till Emma comes home, and ask her nonchalantly, by way of conversation, what your neighbour, Michael and her were discussing, and see what she says. But don't go assuming all kinds of scenarios that will only give you stress and a headache. Okay?

His conscience was right. There was no need to get emotional over something that might have been nothing more than a neighbour asking a harmless question.

Jake put the bookmark on the page he had been reading, closed it and got dressed. In spite of what his mind had prudently advised him to do, he knew that he wouldn't be able to focus on anything like reading a captivating novel until his suspicions were obliterated with his wife's answer to his question later on.

It had already been four days since Joe had moved in to his new home. He thought it was a little bit weird, sleeping in his bed all to himself. There was no Jenna-Marie nagging at him to get up and put the kettle on, while she had yet another lie in. He had the quilt all to himself. Furthermore, he didn't have to get up at the crack of dawn any more to go for a long run before heading to the gym once he'd had two bowls of cereal and an orange juice. If he chose to, he could lay in bed all day long. Nevertheless, Joe wasn't tired. After opening cardboard boxes and putting his belongings in their correct places around his new house and moving heavy furniture to and fro, deciding where best to place it, he had no trouble getting to sleep as soon as his head touched the pillow at night.

He heard voices outside, and then the sound of a motor starting, the sound growing distant as it exited the cul-de-sac, disappearing around the corner, out of sight. He paid the voices no heed. There was plenty of time to become acquainted with his fellow neighbours.

When he'd had something for breakfast, Joe decided to go for a stroll into the town centre to pick up some provisions, now that the fridge was functioning, humming quietly in the kitchen, waiting to be stocked with supplies.

Exiting the house and inhaling the crisp morning air reminded him of all those mornings when he'd been training hard for all those title defences against challengers from all around the world. It was nice to walk, instead of running, for a change.

Although the radiant sun was warm, he could still see the plumes of air dissipating from his own mouth as he headed down the street, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his hooded pullover.

Five minutes later, further down the road, Joe saw a police patrol car parked up on the kerb outside a cul-de-sac street, (similar to the street he lived on). It looked out of place, temporarily stationed in the quiet suburbs on the outskirts of town, and Joe wondered why it had been there for almost a whole week. Evidently something

very bad had taken place there, which evoked what the real estate agent told him when he was viewing his house.

‘As you can see, this neighbourhood is peaceful. Most residents here are either retired or wealthy enough because of their careers to enable them to live here. The prices of properties may well be dearer than other parts of town. But you can see why, can’t you? You’re not just paying for the property itself, but also the tranquillity that comes with it.’

Had he been a sucker to believe the estate agent’s lies, just to sell him the house? Or was this just a one-off?

It was just a one-off, he decided. And if he was going to be moving house just because the law had been broken every once in a while, then he would never find a place he could call home... ever. It was just the way of the world these days. Crimes were committed anywhere and everywhere.

He noticed the street sign. Thorburn Close. It was almost identical to Willet Close.

A police officer in uniform, talking into his noisy, staccato radio, nodded at him as he walked on by. Joe tried not to stare at the deserted street beyond, cordoned off by yellow crime scene tape fluttering in the gentle breeze.

He purchased more shopping than he expected, realising it would have been a lot easier and prudent had he driven into town and used the Morrison’s superstore car park. Instead he had to carry six heavy bags filled to the rim of groceries, hoping that the plastic wouldn’t tear, or the bottom fall out on his journey home. If nothing else, he thought, the muscles in his arms would have something to do. And it was vitally important to Joe to stay in shape now more than ever, having nothing specific to train for. He had to watch he didn’t quickly turn into a fat slob.

As he trudged up the hill at a languid pace, a dark blue Ford Escort pulled in alongside the kerb, its indicator signal flashing. Joe hoped the driver wouldn’t ask him for directions, because he still wasn’t sure of the exact street names of the neighbourhood. Yet when the window wound down into the gap and the driver

poked his head out, flashing his identification badge, Joe realised that the man behind the wheel was in fact a plain-clothed police officer.

‘Can I give you a lift?’

Joe thought about it for a moment; then said, ‘No. I’m almost home now, anyway. Thanks, though.’

‘Name’s Detective Inspector Sark. I’m investigating the disappearances of the residents at Thorburn Close. Do you know anything about that, sir?’

Joe frowned. ‘Disappearances?’ He paused. ‘No. I didn’t know anything like that was going on. The other day when I was driving up here to where I live, I saw the area cordoned off, but didn’t think much of it. I’ve just been through a long, hellish divorce and my head was in the clouds. I haven’t been out the house for the best part of the week - been busy moving furniture, going through boxes, n’ stuff.’

Sark eyed the bags of shopping stretching the plastic, threatening to break at any moment. ‘Lemme give you a lift. Whad’ya say?’

‘Do you suspect that I had somethin’ to do with these disappearances?’

‘Not exactly. But I’m a police officer. I keep my eyes and ears open all the time.’

Joe understood what the inspector was saying. If he thought Joe was a suspect, he wouldn’t be offering him a lift, unless he was in handcuffs. Nevertheless, everyone was a suspect, until the perpetrator was either apprehended by good detective work, or came forward of their own accord.

Joe opened the back door and put the shopping bags on the back seat, then climbed in the front on the passenger side, slamming the door shut, making sure to put his seat belt on.

‘Where’d you live?’ Sark asked.

‘Willet Close.’

Sark indicated to get back on the road leading over the crest towards Willet Close. ‘So, you haven’t heard about what’s happened then?’

'Like I said,' Joe began, 'I've been busy going through my boxes, moving furniture, doing my utmost to make the interior of my home look a bit familiar to me. I haven't even tuned the TV in yet. I haven't had chance. It took me the best part of one morning constructing the frame of my bed.'

Sark chuckled.

'You said someone has disappeared, is that right?'

'Not someone. Five people... all living on the same street.'

'Perhaps they've gone away together for awhile,' Joe suggested.

'No, they haven't. Each and every one of them has been snatched out of their homes and lives, without trace.'

'It beats me who would do such a thing, in the first place,' Joe said.

The car drove past a very desolate Thorburn Close, continuing up the hill.

'I don't think its one person doing it. I believe it is a group of kidnappers.'

'Have the other residents seen or heard anything out of place?' Joe asked.

Sark shook his head. 'Not a thing... It seems whoever sees these abductors are the ones who get taken. We still haven't been contacted by them, and the longer it goes without them contacting us for a ransom, the more likely it is, whoever these people are, aren't doing it for money.'

'What are they doing it for, then?'

'The pure pleasure,' Sark replied.

'Why?'

'Some sick bastards just want to inflict pain and misery.'

They drove in silence the rest of the way. Then when Sark brought the vehicle to a halt outside Willet Close, he said, 'I shouldn't have spoken to you so openly. What I told you can't be repeated -'

Joe held his hand up in a 'stop' gesture. 'Hey, my lips are sealed. I mean no one knows for sure what exactly has happened. Everyone's probably speculating. I'm just shocked because I

thought this was a part of town where this kind of shit never occurred. I hope you find the bastards and give them multiple life sentences for what they've done. The less people like that around the better and safer for everyone.'

Sark smiled at Joe, proffering his hand. They shook.

'You look familiar,' Sark said. 'Have we met before?'

Joe shook his head. 'No. I doubt it. I'm Joe Camber - former Super-Middleweight champion of the world.'

Sark's mouth fell open in genuine astonishment. 'Jesus Christ! It is you! Oh, man. You're a legend.'

Joe snorted laughter through his nose. 'I dunno about that.'

'Yeah, you are,' the detective insisted. 'You're the undisputed champion of the world. Remember that fight against the mighty Russian, in the unification bout?'

Joe nodded. 'Yeah. I still get migraines because of that fight.' Even though he had meant it as a joke, there was an underlying truth to it, as well. Sometimes, on occasions,

Joe would wake up with splitting headaches, and would have to take Paracetamol tablets to ease the pain.

'Thanks for the lift, inspector.'

'Anytime, champ.'

Joe got out of the car, went around to the back door, grabbed his shopping bags and then stepped up on the pavement. He turned to the cordial inspector. 'Good luck with the investigation. And if I hear of anything, I'll let you know.'

'Thanks, Joe.'

Detective Inspector Sark spun the Ford around, tooted the horn before driving off down the road back to Thorburn Close.

Joe carried his shopping inside.

The front door to number 5 Willet Close opened, letting an excited, cute Jack Russell called Homer dart onto the front lawn to urinate.