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opening extract from

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The Curse Of Snakes

Christopher Fowler

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HELLION

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For Clare and Charlotte

WEDNESDAY

1: Nightwalker

As the yellow moon rose high and the traffic lights changed to red, it came looking for victims.

It walked alone through the town's empty streets. The wind in the chestnut trees dropped away, as if in fear of its approach. It glided silently over the wet pavements and roads. A thousand dark shadows twisted in its wake.

It passed the dead houses one by one. Sometimes it stopped to stare and listen, tilting its head to one side. It paused before a house where the TV flickered in the living room, and waited for a moment, sensing life. All the windows were bolted shut, as if people inside had closed them against the presence of something evil. No one ever saw or heard the creature when it walked, but a few felt it. Parents told their children that there was nothing to be afraid of in the dark, but there was.

Something had been released into the night streets. It moved unnoticed and sucked the life from people. It

caused slow painful death, but even those who could sense its presence were too scared to admit it was there.

And now, with quiet deliberation, it was heading for the street where I lived.

A dog barked sharply, then screamed and whimpered, as if it had been hurt.

A cat yowled, but the sound was suddenly cut off.

A dustbin rolled over on its side with a clang.

I was lying on sweat-damp sheets, waiting for the sounds of the city to fade away. The quiet would herald the arrival of a terrible presence. I was expecting it. But I wasn't ready for it.

Before I could think of what to do, the deep silence fell.

It was so thick that nothing could be heard at all. The rustle of leaves, the noise of the traffic, the low hum of city life, everything became muffled and vanished. It was as if a dense layer of snow had suddenly deadened all sound. Or as if the town had suddenly sunk to the bottom of the sea. No movement anywhere – time itself might as well have stopped.

The creature always walked in a pool of stillness.

It was passing by the window of number 13 Torrington Avenue right now, without a whisper. A shadow crossed the streetlight, moving slowly and steadily.

Up on the first floor, in the front bedroom, I pushed the duvet down from my shoulders and listened. After

another minute and a half, the normal noises of the street returned, and it was safe again. I heard a distant car alarm. The faint seesawing two-note of an ambulance siren. The wind lifted in the trees. The dog was crying in pain, or was it a fox? I couldn't tell. It was the sound of the city at night, as distinctive as a beating heart.

I sat up in bed and lowered my feet to the floor. I was boiling hot, because I was fully dressed. I pulled my nylon backpack from under the bed and tiptoed to the door. It was dark in the hall, but I could see a light coming from my mother's bedroom. The middle floorboard always creaked, so I carefully walked on either side of it.

I crept down the stairs and into the hall. Stopping before the stained glass windows in the front door, I held out my hand to see if my fingers were shaking. No, they were steady enough. *Let's finish this tonight*, I told myself. *Now. Before it's too late.*

Opening the door, I stepped out into the freezing night and pulled the latch shut behind me, but it still made a noise; it always did. I ran lightly down the garden path and out of the gate, stopping to check inside my backpack. At the brow of the road I could see a swirl of dried leaves, an absent shape, like a hole in the air. I knew the creature had just passed from sight. It was in no hurry, because it was scared of nothing. I was sure I could catch up with it – that wasn't the problem.

The problem was what would happen next.

I knew I might get injured or even die, but I also knew I had to act alone. No one else could help me, because no one would ever believe me in a million years. But I still didn't know what to do.

Ahead I heard the wail of another cat, then a muffled explosion, like the thump of snow sliding from a roof. When I reached the corner, I found Mrs Hill's mean ginger tom lying on the pavement. It had been turned inside out. Its steaming pink guts were hanging on the nearby hedge, like sausages displayed in a butcher's shop window.

I'm dealing with something that can explode a cat, I thought.

My world had always been safe, predictable and pretty boring, but now it had been shaken upside down, and I felt that nothing would ever be truly safe again. There was no going back. There was something out there in the dark that lived to kill – and incredibly, I was the only one who could stop it.

2: Crazy Rainbow Water Lady

Back at the start of the week my life had been completely normal, or at least as normal as anyone's life in London ever was. My name is Alfred Jai Hellion. I don't like my first name. My dad insisted on the middle name because his father is called Jai. I have a lot of other names, but we'll get to that.

I live with my mother and sister at number 13 Torrington Avenue, in the middle of a terrace. We have windowsills of peeling sky-blue paint, and several slates missing on the roof. We also have the scruffiest front garden in the whole street. My father used to look after it, but when he went away he took the key to the shed with him, so we can't get the hedge trimmer out. People are always sticking cola cans and yellow polystyrene kebab boxes through the spikes of the railings around the garden, and my mum has given up trying to keep it clean.

Opposite our house is a wild piece of parkland known locally as Viper's Green, although the name on the mossy entrance board says 'Torrington Park'. Viper's Green is one of London's curiosities. It should be a popular place for kids to play ball and for families to picnic, and I think in the olden days that's what people did. Instead, it's overlooked and untended, on the way to becoming derelict. The paths are potholed and overgrown. Spiky brambles and weeds have tangled themselves across every route. You couldn't ride a bike through it – not that bikes are allowed in there anyway.

Through the railings I can see stagnant green pools of water where mosquitoes and nettles wait to bite and sting. The water makes the woods smell really bad. The gates had been closed long ago with a rusty padlock and a thick chain, draped around a central iron pole that looked like a massive spear. Mothers tell their children to stay out, but sometimes they still climb over the high railings. There have always been stories of unpleasant things happening to kids who went there at night.

My bedroom overlooks the tallest trees of the park. When I lie in bed and look out of my window, the shifting branches fill my view, blocking the sky; all I can see is the dark green canopy of jagged leaves. When we first moved in, the view didn't bother me. Lately, though, I'd found it disturbing in ways I couldn't explain. The park was closed off years before our family moved here. Nalin, the super-skinny guy running the Am-La Grocery

Store, remembered two men getting out of a council van and padlocking the front gates. Nobody knows why the place was shut. A sign had been put up behind the railing, something about 'council authority', 'illegal trespass' and 'liable for prosecution'. The sign is still there, covered in mould and graffiti, and is completely unreadable. I asked Nalin how long it had been like that, but didn't get much sense out of him. He always talked really fast and chucked tons of information at you, but still didn't answer your questions. Really annoying.

At the end of last term, my friends had started slipping away one by one. Kay, my mate from next door, moved to a place called Cole Bay on the south coast, and my best friend had been taken out and sent to another school for fighting. Kate, my mother, was working long hours in a jewellery shop at the Westfield mall, and was always tired when she came home. My sister, Lucy, spent most of her time at friends' houses, and only came home to get changed or do complicated stuff to her hair.

I wanted a bit of excitement and the chance to make new friends, but in the winter most of the kids in my class only got excited about Arsenal matches, and I wasn't that obsessed with football. I played some fantasy games online, but usually got thrashed. Once I played all day and right through the night, and after that it became boring. Most of the time I felt a bit trapped at home and wanted to leave, but had no money and no way of going anywhere different.

So I waited, and in the meantime I spent my evenings on the net downloading cheats and tips. I like gathering facts. It's different from learning at school, because you're free to choose what interests you. One of the things I learned first was that people fear anything they don't understand.

I was flicking through old hits on YouTube and found 'Crazy Rainbow Water Lady'. She was an American woman who thought that the government was adding something poisonous to her water supply. Her proof of this was the rainbow that glowed around her lawn sprinkler in sunlight. She kept filming it and posting the footage. Somehow, the idea that water droplets refracted light into the colours of the spectrum had zipped right past her. She kept asking, 'What the hell are they doin' to our water supply? What is the government puttin' in it?' She was scared because she couldn't figure out a basic law of science. People scare easily when they can't work something out. I guess I don't scare so easily, because I'm always trying to work out what causes things to happen.

Still, I realized that there were loads of things I didn't understand. There were things that looked impossible and a bit magical because I had no clue how they worked. I've always understood mechanical things, and computers, and how trains operate; I know about plants and how they grow, but girls are a problem because I don't know that many. I figured if they were

all like my sister, then it was obvious that their brains worked differently and I would never understand them. The ones who hung around outside the Am-La talked over each other at ninety miles an hour so I had no idea what they were saying. They stood there most nights waiting for someone older to buy them cigarettes, giving off that 'what are you looking at?' thing.

I've always tried to keep an open mind. I felt sure I could discover the world for myself, even if it meant asking questions that made me look like a total spoon. I didn't believe in magic or the supernatural; I trusted science and nature. I've changed a bit since then, of course.

At 4:45pm on the third Monday in October, something happened that eventually made me believe in the impossible. It all started outside the great closed gates of Viper's Green, as I was on my way home from school.