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Opening extract from

The Fear

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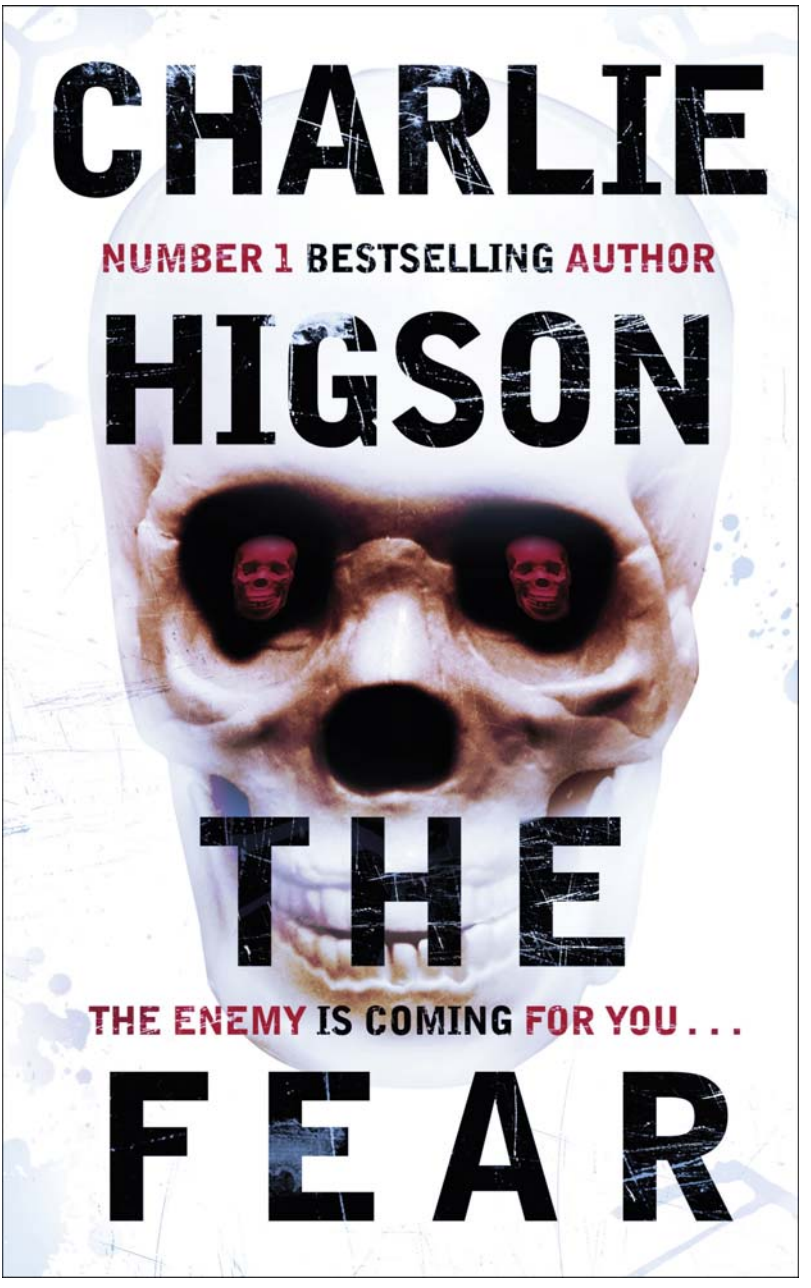
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CHARLIE

NUMBER 1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HIGSON



THE

THE ENEMY IS COMING FOR YOU . . .

FEAR

The Collector



Stuff . . . more stuff . . . Get more stuff . . . good stuff . . .

It was dark outside, safe to leave now. He squeezed his great bulk down the hallway and out through the front door, sniffing the air. A curtain of greasy hair flopped in front of his eyes, and he pushed it back with an enormous fat hand, smearing a shiny yellow streak across his face from a burst pustule on his cheek.

He smiled. He was going out to find stuff.

More stuff.

All he had ever really been interested in was stuff. Things. Kit. Gadgets. Toys. Gizmos. His tiny basement flat had always been full of it. Days and nights he had spent down there on his computer – TV on, music blaring, playing games: playing and playing and playing until he lost all track of time. He had been so happy, surrounded by his stuff, his shelves of DVDs, CDs, old vinyl, comics, *Star Wars* figures, manga figures, *Star Trek* collectibles, books and magazines, takeaway food cartons, toy robots, keyboards and amps and screens . . . Nothing ever chucked away. Old computers piled in corners, mobile phones, cameras, tangled piles of leads and plugs . . .

Stuff. A life of stuff.

Eventually he had made holes in the walls, burrowed out

of his flat, taken over the basements on either side, and when they were full he had moved upwards, floor by floor, filling the building ever fuller with stuff.

And now he was off out to find more stuff. It was so easy now. Everything was just lying around waiting for him to come and pick it up. He held a sturdy carrier bag in each meaty hand, though he didn't think he'd need them tonight. Tonight he was looking for toys. His last toys had got broken beyond repair. They'd stopped moving, stopped entertaining him with their jerky actions. Stopped making their funny noises. What use were toys if you couldn't play games with them any more?

When they no longer worked, he simply ate them.

Collecting stuff and eating, that was all he did now. When his toys broke, he slumped on his sofa and stared at the blank screens of his TVs, waiting for night to fall. Sometimes he'd sit at the computer, tapping away at the keyboard, some deep memory stirring inside him. For hours on end. Tap, tap, tapping. Making a strange kind of music.

But now he had a purpose.

He waddled slowly down the road, taking great care with each step. There was just enough light from the thin moon and distant stars to pick his way along. He didn't mind the dark. In truth he had always been nocturnal, sitting with the curtains drawn, no interest in sunlight or fresh air or other people.

He was careful, though. If he fell down, it would be hard for him to get up again. His bare feet landed solidly and squarely on the filthy surface of the road he knew so well. Night after night he would come out here and move from shop to shop, house to house, looting them for more stuff.

Like some huge clumsy bear ransacking people's dustbins, his strong arms ripping and tearing to get at what he needed.

He was tempted by the massive building down the road. The department store. So many nights he'd spent in there removing stuff. But it was getting too dangerous now. Others had got in and made nests and they sometimes tried to attack him as he trundled about searching for anything he'd missed. They couldn't do him any real harm – he was too big, too heavy, too solid – but he liked to hunt for his stuff in peace. So he had taken to breaking into houses instead. There was always stuff in them. This had been a rich neighbourhood. He would tear out hi-fi systems, pull flat-screen TVs from walls, dig through drawers for cameras and sat-navs and iPods and mobile phones, cramming them into his bags to carry home and add to his collection.

Not tonight, though. He had to concentrate, not forget what he was looking for.

Toys.

He'd heard them the night before. Smelled them. On his way back home with bulging carrier bags. He'd tried to get at them where they were hidden in a building, but the sky had started to brighten over the tops of the roofs and he had slunk back to his cellar to hide until the darkness returned.

He hated the sun. It burned his skin, blinded him, sent his thoughts spinning so that he couldn't think straight. The darkness was warm and comforting, like an old blanket. He would sit slumped on his sofa through all the long day: waiting, dozing, dreaming. And now . . . Now he had the whole night to break in and get at the toys.

He smiled as he pictured all the fun he was going to have when he got the toys back to his collection. Prodding them, and making them skitter about on the floor. Letting them get away, then pulling them back. He chuckled, the sound a wet gurgle in his throat.

Stuff . . .

He only wished they would last longer and not break so quickly, because it was hard work catching them. They ran about and made too much noise. Most broke before he could even get them home.

He followed the scent down the street, wiping away the snot that bubbled permanently from his nose. He was dribbling too. Sticky saliva falling on to his stained T-shirt.

Stuff . . .

It took him ages to make his way down the street, round the corner and on to the next road. Each footfall landing softly on the tarmac. He hoped no one had got there before him. The smell of the toys was very strong.

Here was the place. A shop he used to come to a lot. A gadget shop. Long since cleaned out, but the toys had got inside. He'd come past it last night and the good sweet smell had hit him like a hammer blow. He'd tried to get in, but there were wooden boards nailed across the front.

He had plenty of time tonight, though.

He smiled again.

Stuff . . .

Good stuff. Cool stuff. More stuff. Nice stuff. More stuff. Stuff stuff stuff.

There was nobody else around. The streets were quiet tonight. He walked over the road, his legs making a swishing sound as they rubbed together. He put his face to the gap between two of the wooden boards and breathed in.

He had to be sure. Sometimes their smell could linger for days, even if they'd moved away. *No*. They were still in there. His toys. He leant his weight against the boards, heard them creak and groan, felt them bend. He moaned with delight. That was the way to do it. Last night he'd made the mistake of trying to pull the boards down with his hands. Better to push. He walked backwards. Put down his bags. Then moved forward, not exactly running, but gaining speed. Until . . .

THUD.

He hit the boards, heard a crack and then sounds on the other side. Scurrying. Whispered voices. The toys were awake.

He backed off, further this time, then went forward again, the breath hissing through his nose.

THUD.

And again. Again and again and again – slow, unthinking, patient – until at last the wood splintered and fell away from him and he was inside. In the dark.

Stuff . . . Come on . . . Where's the cool stuff?

The smell of the toys was more intense now. Filling his head and making him feel drunk. He closed his eyes and smacked his lips together, then stuck out his tongue, tasting the air. They were nearby. If he could just catch two, maybe three, of the toys, he would have the whole night ahead of him to play with them before he went to sleep. After that? How long? A few days maybe before they broke.

But where were they? He stopped moving and stood very still so that he could listen. There was a scraping sound, a rattling and banging. More whispers. Ssss-sss-sss-sss-sssssss . . . He moved towards the sound, groping his

way through the darkened shop, past the empty shelves and on into the back.

There they were. Four of them. Trying to open a back door. They'd barricaded themselves in with no way out. He spread his arms wide and belched. The toys all turned round together, their faces white blurs. One of them ran at him, but he barely felt it. Like a moth, bumping at a window. They were shouting. Why did they always shout? Why not just come quietly?

Come on . . . stuff . . . make it easy for me . . .

They were on the small side, easy to carry but easy to break too. He picked one out, trying not to be distracted by the others. The smallest one. He backed it into a corner, while the rest of them battered at his back. Just moths.

There. He'd got it. He picked it up and tucked it into his armpit, the weight of his arm holding it still. The rest of them carried on hitting him, shouting, their thin voices irritating him. Maybe if they'd run they might have got away from him because they were faster. He would have tracked them all night, slowly and steadily, following their scent, and he knew that the smaller ones couldn't keep going for long – they always got tired before he did. But these ones had stayed to fight, so this way it would be easier.

Two of them had sticks. The biggest two. Their blows fell harmlessly on his flesh, no more than a tickle. He sighed and swept his free arm wide, flinging one against the wall. He knew that would break it, but he couldn't take all of them home anyway. The smashed toy fell to the floor and he managed to scoop up the other small one. Two was enough. He tucked it away neatly in the great folds of his flesh.

Maybe he should try for a third, hold it by the neck. Sometimes they broke, though, if he did that.

No. He'd leave the other one. Maybe it would stay close and he could come back for it tomorrow.

He sighed again and headed back towards the front.

The fourth toy followed him through the shop. It had found a bigger stick. It was sharp. The toy was screaming very loudly as it jabbed at him with the stick. It might follow him out on to the street, all the way home, and its noise would attract the others. Then they would fight him for his treasures.

He stopped, turned and pushed his huge belly against the toy, forcing it against the wall. He pressed harder and harder, watching the soft blubber fold itself round the toy until it was invisible. He could feel it wriggling feebly.

It wriggled and wriggled and then, at last, was still.

The collector moved away and the small body stayed pressed into his gut. He took it by the hair and trudged out into the street. It would be no good for playing with, but he could dump it on his food pile.

And so, with a toy under each arm, he dragged the third broken toy down the street towards home.

He would leave the carrier bags where they were. He had plenty more. He had stacks and stacks of them among his stuff. He felt a little pang, though. He hated to leave anything behind.

The toys under his arms kicked and struggled, but by the time he had got to his front door they had stopped, exhausted. He was pleased with himself. This had been a good night's work. He had more cool stuff. New toys. They would keep him happy for a few days. He dreamt of all the things he would do with them, all the games he would play. First, though, as soon as he got them inside, he would have to snap their little legs. He had learnt the hard way that

they could escape if you didn't do it. Why did they always try to run away? Why wouldn't they just stay and play nicely? Why did they always have to make things so difficult?

And why, in the end, did they always have to break?