

Prologue

The Boy Next Door

The screams tore Jake from his sleep, and from his bed. He could barely comprehend what he was hearing, then like eyes adjusting to the dark, everything became clear.

“Sophie?” he shouted, his voice quiet compared to his sister’s terrified screams.

He was unsure if he was awake or dreaming, but he stumbled from his room into the hallway.

“Soph!” he shouted as he reached his sister’s room. “What is it?” Jake ran to Sophie, who was glued to her bedroom window. He grabbed her to pull her away from the window, then Jake became as still as his sister.

He saw what she saw and looked down from the window curiously.

In the middle of the street, lit only by the street lamps, was a young boy hunched over an old man. The boy looked about the same age as Jake. He was cradling the old man in his arms. Jake couldn’t understand why he was crying into the old man’s chest until he realised the boy was not crying. The boy was eating the old man.

Jake had to fight the urge to throw up. He’d seen gross things before: a dog devouring the carcass of a sheep and a kid’s arm break as he fell off his skateboard doing a trick. He’d seen all the documentaries he could find on lions and tigers -which always showed them hunting down prey and eating it. But there was something wrong, distinctively wrong about seeing a person eat another person.

As the boy looked up from the old man, a splash of red over his face, Jake pulled his hand over Sophie’s mouth. It was too late. The boy looked up at the second storey window,

catching Jake and his sister's mortified gaze. It was dark, and even with only the pale light from the street lamp, it was enough to see that the boy wasn't normal. His eyes were empty, filled with a white nothingness and his skin looked scratched all over.

Jake felt a pit in his stomach as he recognised the boy. His name was Thomas, and he was the quiet and sarcastic boy from next door. They had been neighbours and friends since the dawn of time, and Sophie even cradled a crush on him. The deformed creature looking up at Sarah's bedroom window wasn't the boy next door – at least not anymore.

Everything seemed to freeze for a moment as Tom looked up at Sophie's window with wet, hungry lips. Sophie looked down at the boy that she had thought about almost every day for the last three years. She wanted to scream louder, to crawl into a ball, to hide under her bed, anything other than seeing the monster he had become.

Jake pinched himself as if to wake from a dream, but when Tom's head twitched to the side, he decided he didn't need to see anymore. Jake grabbed his sister's hand and pulled her away from the window. Before Jake reached the bedroom door, the window exploded behind him, and Tom crashed into the bedroom.

Jake pulled Sophie behind him, shielding her as they both inspected Tom. His mouth and face were stained red, and his skin was almost grey and scaly. Tom stayed on his hands and knees as his hollow eyes looked around the room. Tom jumped into the air, spiralling until his hands and knees stuck to the ceiling, like a spider defying gravity. Tom opened his mouth like a snake ready to devour a prey twice its size and revealed a row of pointed teeth.

“Tom...” Sophie begged.

Jake slowly edged back, pushing Sophie as he went; he was only a couple of steps from getting out of the room.

Tom hissed, and Jake froze. He was in the doorway, but too scared to move. Tom's shoulders twitched as its head lowered to the ceiling. Jake recognised what he was seeing from the animal documentaries his father made him watch, it was the sign of a predator getting ready to strike. With as much speed as he could manage, Jake pushed his sister from the room and stepped back as he slammed the door just behind him.

Everything was still and dark, the only light seeped from under Sofia's door. Jake's eyes begun adjusting to the dark and a loud thud boomed through the hallway. Tom had crashed into the door, it was cracked but not broken. Jake knew his luck wouldn't last much longer, he grabbed his sister's hand and pulled her down the hallway.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Jake shouted as Sophie was pulled behind him into their mother's room.

Jake slammed the door shut behind him, locking it as he turned the light on. "Mum! Mum!" he shouted, running to the bed.

"Wake up, Mum!" Sophie squealed.

Jake and Sophie's mother stirred, but she stayed asleep. Sophie started to poke her, as Jake tried to shake her.

"What now?" their mother asked in a grumble, swatting away Sophie's poking hand, as she kept her eyes closed.

"It's Tom!" Sophie screeched.

"He's a monster!" Jake yelled.

"Stop showing your sister those movies," their mother said groggily, the smell of old wine on her breath.

"He ate a guy!" Jake shouted.

“Mum!” Sofia screamed.

Their mother pulled a pillow over her face and proceeded to keep sleeping.

“Jake?” Sophie asked, tears filling her face.

He was overwhelmed, his mind a mess and his heart racing, to say Jake was terrified was a sheer understatement.

“Jake?” Sophie asked again.

Reality collapsed onto Jake as he heard a boom against his mother’s door; Tom was coming.

“We should have just run!” Jake admitted, “I’m sorry.”

“Jake!” Sophie screeched.

“Come on!” Jake shouted, running to the window overlooking the backyard. He pulled it open and felt the cold hit him. He looked out the window and saw the smallest ledge against the brick wall under the window frame. “Quick!” Jake shouted as he helped his sister out the window.

Sophie slid across the ledge towards the corner of the house. Jake climbed out following his sister, looking back to the window every second.

The door to their mother’s room crashed open, and Tom crawled along with the ceiling, only stopping when he realised that there was a full-bodied human tossing in the bed. He licked his red-stained lips.

The screams of their mother would stay with both Jake and Sophie for the rest of their lives. Neither turned back as they climbed down the gutter and onto the grass, wet from the cold.

They were both dressed in pyjamas, and the cold bit them like spiders as they hurried into the night. “Come on!” Jake shouted as he led the way through the gate to the front yard. “Do you want to stay here?” Jake asked as he reached the road and turned to see his sister not moving past the driveway. Jake reached the road and turned to his sister frozen, not moving past the driveway. “Do you want to stay here?” he yelled.

Sophie shook her head.

“There are only two things a person can do: fight or run - I mean flight. Fight or flight. So do you want to face and fight the monster?”

Sophie shook her head again.

“Then...we run.”

Sophie nodded as she took a step onto the icy road.

The night seemed to get darker and colder, the further they got from their house.

Jake knew the only reason he and his sister were alive was because of luck. He remembered one thing that the Librarian at his school always said: “Luck is lightning, it’ll strike once and be amazing. But if you rely on it, you’ll stand out in a stormy field for days and nights getting wet.” Jake never really understood what the Librarian was saying until the night the boy next door ate his mother.

Luck saved his life that night, and his sister’s, but Jake vowed to himself that next time it wouldn’t be luck that saved him.