

In the silent darkness, under a moonlit sky, the whispering wind swirled over the plot where new growth stood. Casting a twisted shadow over the deserted garden, the uncanny, coarse bodies swelled. Multiplying under the old leafless oak tree, the evil growth would take on the world.

Their entangled roots spread wildly, delivering the vile disease to the earth. Above the ground, the emerald, widening stem held thousands of swaying limbs, all abnormally dotted in crimson, ready to latch onto the land and drag it into the unknown.

Uncanny, unseen before, nothing compared to the odd, blackened spikes, which covered the stalks. The species waited to be discovered. Nothing would stop it, it would kill, it would wreck life.

At the crown, the strangest bud started to blossom. Jagged petals which looked like razor-sharp blades flourished, silver in colour. Suddenly a chilling gust. A storm threatened, ready to erupt over the lonely, blackened lawn. Thunder rumbled in the distance, moving closer, nearer, to the wickedness. Such weather would only spur the development of this sickening shrubbery.

One of the limbs started to crack, surrounded by dancing silhouettes. Small claws emerged through the fractured shell, antennas piercing the oval shape, eventually breaking free. A repugnant creature appeared. Another followed. Eager to distribute their poison, they scuttled down the overgrown foliage, scampering like their life depended on it.

Within seconds hundreds had darted over and away from the plot scattered with evil.

Twenty six hours earlier

Clouds moved over the grey sunless sky as light rain tapped onto the car windscreen. Gusty air moved tree branches, the drizzle increased into downpour. Flicking the car headlights on Michael Hilton sighed, he hadn't missed the British weather over the last two and a half weeks. He glanced at his sleeping wife in the passenger's seat. Her strawberry blond hair almost covered her face as she dozed, head gently nodding as Michael drove slowly over a speed ramp.

The leaf scattered dim lit street looked so bleak compared to the palm tree lined, soft sand laden beaches of Kenya. Michael glanced wearily at the grim scene; his African holiday now seemed a distance memory. He ruffled the front of his dark wavy hair and yawned, the long flight had tired him and Amelia, she continued to sleep next to him, her petit body relaxing as her husband drove them home to the Clifton area of Bristol.

The vacation provided a well-earned break for the couple. Michael's occupation as a lead medical technologist was extremely well paid but involved long working hours. Amelia, a general practitioner, equally had the pressures of extensive shifts, both had been looking forward to 'recharging their batteries' for some time.

Turning left into Redland road Michael was glad his long drive was nearly at an end. Looking at his home street, the detached Victorian style homes appeared almost spooky under the darkened rain clouds, their large windows now lit enabling him to see into the front rooms. Slowing down, he pulled the car onto one of the long driveways. Home at last. Amelia stirred.

'Have I been asleep for the whole journey?' she asked, rubbing her usually bright sparkling eyes. Michael smiled warmly and lovingly squeezed her leg.

'Thought I'd let you get your beauty sleep,' he scanned the area. 'This old place never changes does it?'

Amelia laughed through her nose; ‘we’ve only been gone a couple of weeks Michael, I wouldn’t expect it too.’

She opened the car door and stepped onto the drive. The wind breezed over her as she zipped up her jacket and adjusted a cashmere scarf around her neck. Michael watched her for a moment; he loved how no matter what, her unblemished face was always immaculately applied with subtle makeup. She always looked beautiful he thought as he turned his attention to unpacking the boot. Ducking under the door he pulled out one of many of his wife’s bags. She never travelled light but he was used to it by now after holidaying with her since he was twenty six, a trip every year, this was their eighth vacation together, everyone had been perfect.

Making three trips to the car boot Michael finally made his way into his home with the final few cases as Amelia went into the kitchen.

‘Tea?’ she called as her husband browsed the large pile of post she’d put on the side board. Michael shivered, the contemporary decorated hallway felt chilled, he immediately turned the heating thermostat up in a bid to quickly heat the large building before taking up his wife’s offer.

She filled the kettle and then looked out onto her pride and joy, the garden. It looked charming even in gloomy weather, she was proud of the area having worked hard on it during any spare time she had, which was something she didn’t get often.

The precisely pruned shrubs, although now less in flower at this time of year, had grown in abundance. The pretty little summer house stood in one corner, ivy climbing over it. Amelia liked the way it had spontaneously twisted its way up and over the sides and roof, an effective feature. Her bird table and feeders were in desperate need of being filled; the birds had eaten their way through the food whilst she’d been away, the old oak tree’s branches hung over this wildlife feeding section of the garden.

Michael walked into the newly fitted kitchen, spotting Amelia at the window he moved towards her and put his arms around her waist.

‘You’ve done a great job out there,’ he said as he looked out onto the garden with her.

She smiled, ‘I enjoy it, you know how much I love gardening, I must take after my father,’ she squeezed her husband’s arm and then moved over to the unit to put the kettle on. Upon flicking the switch she turned to face Michael who was leaning against the glistening white worktop.

‘Your father would’ve been proud of that garden,’ he replied as he pulled two mugs from one of the cupboards.

‘I’ve still got a few bits to do out there before the winter sets in,’ she said glancing at Michael as he sat at the dining table rubbing his tired hazelnut eyes.

‘You better hurry up, the way this autumn weather has been it almost feels like winter.’

‘There’s still time, anyway, I got those seeds to plant that I bought on holiday, I’ve the perfect place in the garden for them.’

‘Planting seeds in autumn? That’s a bit unusual isn’t it?’

She brought the mugs of tea over to the table and joined Michael, she wrapped her designer cardigan around her as she quivered then placed her hands around her cup to warm them.

‘It is,’ she replied as she sipped her hot drink, ‘but that sweet little African lady I bought them from said they were a magical flowering plant for the winter, maybe it’s so special it has to be planted this time of year,’ she shrugged.

‘I guess so; they do look nice from the picture on the packet.’

‘They look lovely, gorgeous colours, they’ll be just right for that empty plot I have down the bottom of the garden, besides, I felt so sorry for that poor old woman selling the seeds I couldn’t say no could I? May as well plant them now I have them.’

Michael smiled as he finished his tea and then gently patted her hand.

‘Whatever you think best babe, the garden looks great either way.’ He got up from the table. Amelia returned his warm grin.

‘Going to unpack?’ she asked.

Michael exhaled loudly. ‘I suppose so, back to reality. I’ll leave your bags on the bed, don’t forget to take your malaria tablet, I’ll be upstairs if you need me,’ he replied, his wife smiled and nodded. Michael kissed her head before leaving the kitchen for the hallway. Amelia watched him walk away; almost having to duck under the door frame he effortlessly picked up the hefty luggage and proceeded up to their bedroom. He was her soul mate, her friend as well as a husband, they had barely spent a day apart since their first date. Amelia would always joke he was her toy boy yet she was only two years older than him. They were the ‘perfect match’ so her mother and many friends would say, she knew they were right.

Picking up the empty mugs, Amelia placed them in the sink; she couldn’t help but admire the garden again. *Michael was correct, Father would’ve loved it out there, pottering around* she thought as she swilled the cups out, she put them to dry on the draining board, then she glanced out of the window one last time before going to help Michael unpack. As she walked away from the kitchen she pictured her holiday souvenir growing into the exquisite, vibrant plant pictured on the seed packet. *They’ll complement the garden beautifully* she decided. The empty plot waited to be filled.

Chapter 2: Interference and scattering

Cedric Hawthorne looked towards the end of his back garden and rolled his eyes. Shaking his balding head and adjusting his glasses, he stomped down to the bottom of the garden and glared at the braches growing into his backyard and resting on his fence. The blustery, bleak day was improving although still not quite enough for the sky to shine, it was enough however to bring Mr Hawthorne out of his house.

Having lived alone for most of his life Cedric, now retired for the last five years, filled his days by poking his nose into other people's business, gossiping and generally being a rather annoying neighbour.

Being careful not to snag his woollen jumper Hawthorne peered over the Hilton's fence and made a 'tut' sound as he looked at the old oak tree. He scanned their precisely preened and faultless green area. Jealously swept over him. He couldn't help but feel bitter, after all, his garden used to look similar but now the arteritis had set in he struggled to keep up with Michael and Amelia's outdoor arrangement.

The grey clouds dispersed further, the chill in the air remained as Cedric turned towards the Hilton's conservatory. He spotted Amelia coming out of it with gardening utensils.

'Mrs Hilton,' he called as he stretched upon his tiptoes. 'I say, Mrs Hilton!'

Amelia spun around upon hearing him on the second attempt. She waved out and smiled falsely *oh god what does this irritating little man want now* she wondered. She reluctantly walked towards the fence where he was peering, only three quarters of his head was visible.

'Mr Hawthorne, hi,' she said through gritted teeth.

'Mrs Hilton.'

'Please, call me Amelia.'

‘Amelia, I thought we discussed this,’ he said pointing to the oak tree. ‘We distinctly said something had to be done and you promised you would cut some of these branches back, did you not?’

Amelia sighed and rubbed her head. ‘I no, I’m sorry, I do remember but we only got back from holiday this morning.’

‘Well please can you attend to this as soon as possible before they take over my whole garden,’ he replied abruptly.

‘I will, I promise, once I’ve planted these seeds I’ll ask Michael to cut them back or I’ll do it myself.’

‘Not more seeds Mrs Hilton?’ asked Cedric wearisomely.

Amelia merrily pulled the packet out of her gardening tool box, any conversation that involved horticulture aspects appealed to her greatly, she was eager to plant the seeds, if they were to grown to anything like the photo on the packet she’d be more than pleased. Amelia loved nothing more than seeing her garden develop, as soon as a mere seedling appeared she felt a sense of achievement.

‘Just a few Cedric- I mean – uh, Mr Hawthorne.’ He glared at her, she wasn’t sure if it was for calling him by his first name or for sowing more seeds which, in his mind, could turn into additional overgrown branching in his garden. She tried to convince him the latter wouldn’t happen.

‘They’re only going to grow into these pretty *little* plants,’ she replied, trying to persuade him there was nothing to worry about. She waved the packet photo so quickly in front of his eyes he could barely get a glimpse.

‘Very well,’ he said sighing, he’d given up arguing. ‘Just make sure it is only a few and they *don’t* grow over here.’

He disappeared without so much as a goodbye. Amelia exhaled loudly, then realised she was at last alone in her favourite place in her home and was keen to proceed with her hobby.

The sun peaked out from behind a now whiter clouded sky; Amelia caught a glimpse of it before it hid itself away again. She hurriedly made her way to the bottom of the garden knowing the rain could make another appearance at any moment. Scanning the oak tree as she passed under it she realised just how much it had grown, *perhaps Cedric, no, Mr Hawthorne, was right for once* she thought as she stopped in front of the bare plot she'd decided was to be scattered with the enchanting little seeds.

Kneeling besides the soil patch she picked a trowel out from her box and created a drill in the earthy area. With only the African lady's broken English instructions to go on Amelia took a guess on how to plant the seeds as the directions on the packet were all in Swahili. Knowing how most should be sown, she knew the usual way to plant them, preceded with a reasonable amount of watering.

The breeze picked up. The vague shining heavens turned overcast. Despite her enthusiasm for the planting a slight doubt of whether the seeds would even grow in the low British temperatures did cross Amelia's mind, after all, the heat of Kenya must have had a bearing on development. Never the less, she was a trier and enjoyed a challenge, she continued with the drills hoping the possible storm would hold off long enough to allow her to sow.

With the lengthy holes in place and enough depth in the soil to contain the seeds Amelia reached for the packet. A cool wind chilled over her, she shuddered and ruffled her fringe out of her eyes. The oak tree's leafs rustled as if woken by the sudden wind, it began to sway, the ivy on the summer house hissed in the breeze as it gripped and twisted over the appealing little building.

The packet was carefully ripped open. The seeds poured onto the slender, gentle hand of Amelia. She stared at the odd, scarlet coloured pip like objects, tiny spikes dotted over them. Never had she seen a seed like it before. Intrigued by the bizarre look she began to scatter the seeds into the soil. She kept scattering. Scattering and scattering again, *scatter, scatter scatter until she could scatter no more...*

The holes in the soil were filled. Scarlet speckles on black. A mass of flecks created in the once lonely space, a dark patch which was once unfulfilled was now occupied. Amelia covered the seeds. The brewing storm arrived. The rain lashed. Amelia gathered her tools and ran for cover.

Chapter 3: The lab

Michael walked into the almost deserted laboratory. He didn't feel much like being in his office today after a long flight and drive but his work-alcoholic instincts had taken over him as Amelia would say. He didn't plan on over doing it; the jet lag would see to that anyhow, this was just a brief visit before throwing himself back into work properly the next day, Mondays were always busy.

He walked along the white walled corridor, the familiar smell of disinfectant and various liquids being used at present in research stung his nostrils. He was usually immune to these aromas but having been away for the last few weeks it hung in the air and around his noise.

Peering through the half glass doors as he continued walking, spotting only two colleagues at work. Reaching the last door of the long hallway Michael glanced at his name proudly. A silver panel reading *Dr Michael Hilton MSc* was positioned at eye level as he opened the panelled door.

The neat spacious office was just as he'd left it before the trip apart from a messy pile of paper work which had been obviously just dumped on his desk. Annoyed by the disorganised heap Michael immediately proceeded to tidy it, tapping the paper on the desk until they all rested together. A knock at the door temporarily halted his organising.

'Come in,' said Michael, wondering who it could be in this almost silent lab. A familiar face appeared. 'Walter,' continued Michael, welcoming his superior, Dr Gilman, into his office. The studious looking man entered, glasses almost falling off the end of his nose, his usual fuzzy white hair a mess.

'Good holiday?' he asked pushing the small round glasses back up his nose.

'Fabulous,' replied Michael as he sat at his desk, Walter sat opposite him.

'Amelia enjoy it?'

'Loved it, back to it though,' Michael patted the large pile of paperwork he'd tidied.

Walter smiled, his bowtie slightly slanted to the left.

'That's good, I'm glad,' said Walter he looked a little awkward as he shifted in his seat.

'I know I'm not meant to be back in here until Monday but I just wanted to get a few hours in before the onslaught next week,' Michael joked 'Show willing,' he grinned at Walter, the man gave him an uneasy smile back.

'Listen Michael-' he began before being interrupted by his colleague.

'Did you get a chance to look at my application Walter?'

'Uh, briefly.'

'Well? Any news?' Michael's holiday mood was still present, he beamed once more.

'Well, you see-' Walter was stalling for time, stuttering his way through the sentence.

'Come on, don't keep me in suspense'

'Actually, that's why I've come to see you, about your application.'

‘Yes, go on.’

Walter lent forward, he was now perched on the edge of his seat, his forehead a little moist.

‘The thing is Michael, I’m not sure you’re ready yet for promotion,’ he replied. The pair sat in silence for a few seconds, Michael taken aback by his bosses’ words.

‘What? Why?’ Michael finally asked, his voice now more firm and slightly angered, ‘I’ve got all the qualifications, I’ve worked hard for this Walter.’

‘I know and you’re correct, your commitment I never doubt but your last two projects weren’t convincing enough.’

‘That’s hardly fair; I worked morning noon and night to meet those deadlines.’

‘Like I said, commitment isn’t the issue.’

‘Ok, I admit, my father-in-law’s illness and passing didn’t help my concentration at work but I did more than my best under the circumstances.’

Walter stood up from his seat; he looked sympathetically at Michael;

‘I know it was a difficult time for you but in medical research there is no room for lack of concentration whatever the reasons,’ he paused ‘I’m sorry Michael.’

Michael didn’t answer, he stared straight ahead and shook his head before standing and walking over to the window, he couldn’t bear to look at his superior any longer, he stood peering out of the rain splattered glass instead. His boss walked over to the door and rested his fingers on the handle, he spoke once more before leaving, telling Michael he’d see him tomorrow and to have a good evening.

Disappointed and annoyed by Walter’s dismissal of his promotion Michael stood alone, hands in pockets just staring. He wanted it so badly, he wanted a step up the ladder, he didn’t spend all those years at university to stand still, he wanted that medical director’s roll.

The stormy weather seemed to be passing, the rain easing, the clouds looking a little whiter than when he'd arrived at the lab. He thought of Kenya as he stared onto the almost empty car park. A perfect holiday with his wife. Calm, relaxing, now back to reality, that damned promotion, god he wanted it. He gripped onto the window sill tightly in frustration, teeth gritted, his knuckles turning white. Eventually he turned away, *mustn't dwell on it* he thought as he tried to disperse his anger with distraction, he started reading some of the paperwork on his desk, *not my style to sulk* he told himself, *I'll prove him wrong. I'll prove to him he's made a mistake.* He continued to leaf through the pile of paperwork.

Chapter 4: Night

Michael threw his keys onto the coffee table and plonked himself onto the couch. He wearily rubbed his face and eyes, he'd stayed longer than he'd anticipated at the lab, the pile of paperwork taking longer to go through than expected. Nevertheless, it had been dealt with which was the purpose of him going back to work before he was meant too. He'd watched Walter Gilman drive away from the lab around half past six hoping his boss had noticed him staying late *again*. It was Michael's plan to show him he was wrong, he was determining to prove he could get a job done, and correctly, with or without any distractions.

Tiredly moving from the chair Michael walked over to the mahogany drinks cabinet in the far corner of the long, modern furnished lounge. Amelia had chosen the furniture and decor for every room in the house, Michael preferred it that way, he hated being dragged around department stores in search of fixtures and fittings, besides, he trusted his wife's taste and he knew she'd always go with the contemporary option.

He stood on a long beige and brown striped rug, a purchase chosen by Amelia, as he poured himself a whiskey. Leaning against the marble fireplace he sipped the drink and

momentarily closed his eyes. The house was still and silent, only the buzzing sound of the refrigerator could be heard. Michael knew Amelia would've given up waiting for him to return home and gone to bed, she wasn't a night owl, especially after many hours of traveling.

Downing the last drop of his whiskey Michael walked through to the kitchen and put his glass into the sink, he looked out of the window onto the garden which was partially lit by the security light. He could clearly see the patio and the area directly in front of the kitchen, the middle and end of the garden were hardly visible through the blanket of darkness that had descended. The rain had finally stopped, the wind had increased however; it swirled around the house as Michael continued to stare. It sounded almost like a boom of thunder as the gale hit the outside walls with force.

He squinted. Looking with his fatigued eyes in confusion and doubt, was he so tired he was seeing things? Or had there been something there for some time that he hadn't noticed before? Gazing harder, widening his eyes so they didn't feel so sleepy he looked again. Yes, he could defiantly see something sticking out of the ground at the back of the garden, it was too dark to see anything more than blackened objects, all he could make out was, what seemed like an array of sticks poking out of the ground.

Too tired to stare anymore Michael moved away from the window unconcerned. Maybe Amelia had planted something down there before they'd gone away? It must have finally sprouted, although he felt sure she'd have told him. Only earlier that day she planned to plant the seeds she bought on holiday at the end of the garden. *They'll be just right for that plot of bare soil I have down the bottom of the garden*, he could hear her saying it in his head. *I must be mistaken* he decided as he ran his hands over his exhausted, drained face once more. Either way, he was far too fatigued to ponder such triviality, he knew he must take to his bed.

The light was switched off in the bedroom; Michael didn't turn it back on as he knew it would wake Amelia who was in a deep sleep. Her breathing made a whistling sound as he felt his way around to his side of the bed with only a gap in the curtains, which the security light outside shone through, for light.

Reaching the curtains he couldn't help but check to see if the stick like shoots were still there, not that he'd suddenly become concerned by them, he was more worried that he'd allowed himself to become so tired that he'd dreamt them or, more disturbingly, he was hallucinating. Surely he wasn't that exhausted was he? After all he'd only just come back from a relaxing, body recharging holiday, he should be feeling more alert than ever but the traveling and going into the lab had left him somewhat drowsy. He knew he shouldn't have gone into work but he couldn't help himself.

The shoots were defiantly still there. Michael was satisfied he wasn't seeing things, undressing; he was careful not to make a sound which could wake his wife. He was so shattered he felt like simply falling into the bed but instead, still thinking of Amelia, he gently pulled the duvet back and slowly climbed onto the mattress. She didn't stir, her noisy inhaling and exhaling continued as Michael nuzzled as close as he could to his wife without waking her.

Amelia's body was warm and inviting. Michael tenderly rested his forehead against her shoulder, closing his weary eyes he breathed in her alluring smell. A lavender scent passed under his nose, the bath salts she always used still lingering on her supple, smooth skin. Her soft hair ran lightly over his face as Amelia moved in her sleep, her body shifted

away from her husband as she stirred and half opened her eyes. She turned her head back to Michael;

‘What time is it?’ she said sleepily. Michael brushed back her hair.

‘Eleven,’ he replied. Amelia nodded and closed her eyes once more. ‘Did you get round to planting those seeds earlier?’

‘Yes,’ her eyes still shut, ‘I planted them in that bare plot like I said I would.’

Amelia was too tired to ask why her husband was questioning her, she drifted back to sleep as Michael spoke; ‘they’ve sprung up already, either that African lady is right and they really are magic or you’re more of a talented gardener than you let on —’

He realised his wife hadn’t heard his last sentence, instead she slept soundly. Small snoring sounds came from her. Michael smiled, resting his head on his pillow he closed his eyes briefly. A few minutes passed, he opened them again. He felt like he could sleep for a week but the events of earlier at the lab were on his mind. He wanted to tell Amelia, off load his troubles, but it would have to wait until the morning now. He knew she’d be disappointed but she wouldn’t show it, instead she’d show him her support, tell him not to worry. That was his Amelia, that was what Michael loved about her, always caring, always thinking of others.

Clouds suddenly moved over the moon, blackening the gap in the curtains. The bedroom abruptly descended into complete darkness. Michael lay, surrounded by the night, desperate to drift into sleep. His eye lids began to close; he couldn’t control them any longer, his body unable to fight the exhaustion. Michael’s thoughts of his conversation with Walter Gilman disappeared, for tonight anyhow, he was asleep at last.

Outside, as a chilling gust of air breezed over the silent garden, the ‘shooting sticks’ at the bottom of the lawn began to develop further. The stems thickened. They sprouted a little more in the now crowded plot. Intensifying and powerful, maturing in the bitter, murky

midnight air. The scattered seeds had progressed at a strange, rapid rate. By morning, the progression would be intensely thriving.

Chapter 5: Cedric Hawthorne

The grandfather clock in Cedric Hawthorne's front room chimed to signal three o'clock in the morning. Cedric heard the rings as he lay awake in his bed. He couldn't sleep; having only managed to doze for a mere hour and a half he was agitated and disgruntled. Staring at the ceiling he exhaled loudly in frustration and closed his eyes once more, and then opened them for, what felt like, the hundredth time. *It's no good* he thought as he tossed over onto his side, *I won't drift off again tonight now meaning tomorrow will be another wasted day if I'm tired, nuisance, nuisance, nuisance...* he touched his temple with his finger tips and pressed hard with gritted his teeth as if trying to stop the voices in his head. The darkness in the bedroom seemed to be closing in on him, shadows on the walls watching his annoyance, laughing at his misfortune. Cedric let out an angry growl as he abruptly whipped the duvet over his head, and then immediately off again. He couldn't settle, he was uncomfortable, overtired, irritated. His body was cold, the room was chilled, a breeze passed through the bedroom from the bathroom. The window had been left open by Cedric earlier after a shower, he'd forgotten to close it leaving the upstairs area extremely cool.

Lying with his eyes wide open for another few minutes, Cedric shivered and thought of his conversation with Amelia earlier. More frustration crept into his already aggravated mind. He knew she wouldn't cut those branches back, she promised on numerous occasions to do so without following it through. He touched his forehead once more; it was now

pounding slightly, a dull headache, pumping against his skull. The shadows sniggered, or so he imagined, cackling again at him.

‘Quiet! Be quite, be quiet!’ whispered Cedric at the walls, his mind was playing tricks on him, he believed someone or something was laughing at him, but the room was silent. The whole house was silent apart from the pendulum of the grandfather clock ticking back and forth in the front room. It gave out a single chime as the second hand hit a quarter past three.

He got out of bed. He’d had enough of trying to get to sleep and he suddenly remembered he’d left the bathroom window open, *no wonder it’s so cold in here* he thought as he put on his dressing gown and went into the bathroom to close it. Slamming it shut he gave out a ‘*burrrrr*’ and shuddered.

Returning to the bedroom he pulled back the curtains and peered through the rain dripped glass. Everything seemed still, the wind had dropped, the black of the night motionless. The PIR light flicked on, possibly triggered by a passing animal, lighting his untidy garden.

Cedric frowned at the Hilton’s oak tree. Its branches remained flowing freely into his garden, falling over his fence and draped over his shed. He turned away in disgust and clutched his head once more. The pounding was increasing, thumping more and more. Cedric grimaced as he reached for the window sill to steady himself. Starry eyed he glanced out of the window again. He rubbed his eyes, was he seeing things now? Not only were the shadows laughing at him but now his eyes were making him see things that weren’t really there. He looked again, the fencing low enough to see into Amelia and Michael’s garden. Moving closer to the window, his nose now almost pressed up against it, he blinked a couple of times and stared harder at the plot at the bottom of their garden.

Was there something growing already? Cedric wondered as his headache began to turn into a menacing migraine. The PIR light went off. The two gardens were plunged back

into darkness. He cursed in frustration but remained at the window just staring into space. His hammering skull brought him back to reality; he held his forehead in his hands then covered his face with his palms, pulling them away he saw the PIR light had been switched on again. Cedric immediately looked towards the Hilton's garden again, his aching mind momentarily forgotten.

Although the plot was very dimly lit by the PIR he could still see enough to notice some kind of shoots sticking up from the ground, *she only planted those seeds there this afternoon*; he continued to think through the pain in his head, how on earth have they grown so much so soon? He was baffled. The light went off once more. This time Cedric turned away from the window, his agonising temple so bad now he dismissed the seed's growth, presuming Amelia must have planted something else, as well as the current seeds, there weeks ago.

He fell against the bed in agony. Groaning as he hit the mattress, his head so painful he didn't want to open his eyes, he remained gripping the duvet, pulling it towards him in anguish, the bedding slowly falling from the bed. He wailed as the sheets fell onto the floor. 'Stop!' Cedric screamed out as he slid from the bed and fell to the ground. 'Please, make the pain stop!' He let out a cry as he managed to open his eyes slightly, the sheets and now the duvet surrounding him as he sat, back against the bed, on the wooden floor.

His body was now in a shivering, a sweaty sodden state. A fever taking over him at a startling rate. He breathed heavily, unable to control his pounding heart. 'What's wrong with me?' he said under his failing breath, too ill now to shout, he didn't have the energy. 'Please...' he didn't finish his sentence as an unprecedented pain shot through his body, from his toes right to the top of his head. This time he did shout. He yelled, hollered, cried out through the torture. His suffering was unbearable, excruciating torment rushing over his feet, legs, torso, before smashing into his brain. His head felt like it was going to explode; he

howled as he rolled around on the floor, his finger nails digging into his head, begging the pain to stop. 'Leave me alone... please, I beg you.... please...'

His forehead started to split open. It slowly cracked, ripping his skin, pulling and tearing, it began to run from the top of his head downwards. Feeling something wet on his hands Cedric removed them from his temple and stared through terrorised eyes at his reddened hands. Blood. He let out a horrific yelp, struggling to control his breathing he sobbed hysterically. The pain then hit him again. He knew he hadn't hit his head when he fell to the ground; he was frenetically confused as to what was happening to him.

Cedric tried to get up but the room spun, he fell back to the floor, his head then ripped further, he wailed in agony. He now had an open wound running from his scalp to his forehead. His whole head was now horrifically cracked open, thick, deep red blood poured from the split, running down his face, blinding his eyes, choking him as it entered his open mouth as he frantically gasped for breath. He screamed once more, the agony unbearable; 'help me...someone help me...'

Cedric wildly scrambled on the floor, rolling in his own blood which was splattering and dispensing rapidly around him. It sprayed onto the walls; they dripped with his crimson, body fluid. The blackened room plunged into unimaginable terror. He insanely thumped his ruptured head against the ground several times, out of control, his body had been taken over by this illness. He couldn't begin to imagine how he could've contracted something so unprecedented. He wailed once more, his scalp bursting like a volcano spewing its lava, more blood and mucus flowed out. The room was filled with devastating repulsion; a smell of death had arrived even though Cedric was still alive. But only just.

Cedric's head had now completely caved inwards, he body shook violently, he was barely conscious, he lay faced down, his limbs spread wide, fitting, he let out a moaning

sound. His twitching eyes minimally moved under dried blood, his hands convulsing in the gigantic pool of redness surrounding him.

His brain started to bulge from his skull, the organ slipping out of its cage. Pink, squidgy, tissue spilling through the masses of cracks and rips. Cedric's body feverishly vibrated, he groaned and gargled, his breathing becoming faint, his shallow breath was failing. His brain was now running away from his skull, sliding over the back of his down faced head, falling at his neck and flopping like a jelly onto the floor. It lay next to him, his body now dead. The organ sat in its own blood, bits of it destroyed, other parts decaying already, turning grey by the second. The room stunk of sickening horror, looking like a riot had broken out at an abattoir in which humans had been stampeded by rampant animals. The once white ceiling now covered in a blanket of bloodiness, the duvet from the bed in a heap coated red.

Cedric's body lay still. The blood bath suddenly silent. Outside a storm was present, lightning flashed through the gory, death filled area where the dead, brainless corpse waited to be found. But who'd miss Cedric? When would he be discovered? And, what had been wrong with him? What illness did he have that, was so horrendous, it forced one of his major organs, so repulsively, through his destroyed head?

Cedric's skull mangled body continued to wait, lonely and ravaged, with his brain sitting beside him.

Chapter 6: Grown

Ruffling her hair whilst yawning, Amelia slowly retreated from the bed. She rubbed her eyes as she reached for her dressing gown which hung on the back of the bedroom door. Michael didn't stir, he snored quietly, his sleep deep. Amelia gently pulled the duvet back over her

husband, placing the edge of it just below his chin. She softly kissed his forehead, being careful not to wake him. She knew he must have worked late, the jet lag had forced her to bed at nine o'clock, he hadn't returned by then, she presumed it must have been at least ten before Michael had got home. She was annoyed he'd gone to work at all, yet she still sympathised and let him lie in and an extra half an hour until his occupation would come calling again.

Amelia herself was not particularly looking forward to returning to morning surgery. The holiday seemed a lifetime away now, just photos and memories to remind them of such a perfect trip. She sighed as she sat on the edge of the bed watching Michael sleeping for a few minutes. Snapping out of her day dreamy moment Amelia knew she had to get back to reality, after all, she did love her job as much as Michael did his, once she got to the surgery she'd feel like she hadn't been away.

Moving from the bed once more she proceeded to the window and drew back the curtains. It was overcast but no rain as yet, weary eyed, she surveyed the hazy atmosphere, *a dreary day* she contemplated as her gaze moved from the heavens to admire her garden. She didn't want to look towards the oak tree knowing neither herself nor Michael had followed Cedric, Mr Hawthorne's, stern request as yet. *He'll be peering over the fence again today* she thought as she forced herself to glance at the old tree, *abruptly asking when we're going to do something about the braches and* —

Amelia's thoughts were interrupted by what she saw at the bottom of the garden. She stood in astonishment, blinking a few times as if assuring herself she wasn't still asleep, still dreaming perhaps. But she wasn't. She was very much awake as she glared at the shoots growing out of her once bare plot at just under a foot in height.

She whispered 'that's incredible,' to herself as she stood in amazement at her latest planting, a little concerned at the sudden sprouting but more jubilant that perhaps the 'magic' in the 'magical flowering plant' had worked. Was that what it was? She contemplated the

'magic' working, it had to be, it was such a special species maybe the growth wasn't unusual, well, not in Africa anyhow. The country's warmer climate must spur progression, but in England? It was barely ten degrees out. Astonished by how quickly the seeds had turned into, at least, or so she thought, half developed plants, she couldn't believe she'd only sown the seeds yesterday afternoon. If she hadn't needed to get to the surgery so promptly she probably would've gone out to the garden to inspect the plants more closely, as it was, she'd little time so bewildered, yet feeling quite pleased that her 'green fingers' had nurtured such a thrilling specimen, she turned away from the window. Her work was calling her now, tapping the clock radio alarm button to make sure her husband woke in time, she made her way to the bathroom. Michael continued to doze.

The radio turned itself on, activated by the alarm set by Amelia. Michael stirred, forcing his eyes to open he glanced at the time. Quarter to eight. He realised his wife had already left for work as he lay in the bed for a few moments bringing himself around from his much needed sleep.

The local radio station told of a gloomy, grey day ahead which didn't give Michael a lot of encouragement to get out of his warm, comfortable bed. He thought of how wonderful Kenya was, better weather and no having to get up early, bliss. He made himself push back the covers and swing his legs around to a sitting position on his side of the bed. Yawning, he stood up and stretched. He then remembered last night. The sticks in the ground, the plot now filled with sudden shoots, he knew he hadn't dreamt it, he knew he wasn't so tired last night that he'd imagined it, even so he still went to the window to confirm what he'd seen.

Staring through the glass his memories of the evening were confirmed. There they stood, looking as they did last night only now clearer to see in the day light and green in colour rather than bathed in darkness. Peering from the bedroom he felt amazed at the seeds sudden growth spurt. What were these weird seeds that strange little African lady had sold his wife? Magical she said, Michael wasn't convinced by her selling methods, she decided if you were that poor you would say anything to get a sell, Amelia was too nice to say no to her.

Knowing he didn't have the time to investigate further now Michael hurriedly pulled a suit from his wardrobe, as he did so he spotted Thomas Parker, the boy was their neighbour to the right, dressed in his school uniform, jumping over the fence and into their garden. His ball had flown over the fence, landing under the oak tree; he darted across the grass to retrieve it. Michael forcefully tapped his knuckle several times on the window.

'Hey!' he shouted, knowing the chance of Thomas hearing him was slim from so far down the garden and from behind glass. He didn't, but as he picked up his ball he glanced guiltily at the Hilton's house. He saw Michael at the window; he glared at the boy who had stopped dead in his tracks. The pair stared at each other for a few seconds before Thomas scurried off, back over the fence, ball under arm.

Michael stood at the window for a moment after the boy had disappeared back to his own home. The shooting 'sticks' caught his eye once more in the now not so vacant plot. The plants looked almost like they'd grown a little more in the short time since Michael had gone to his wardrobe and come back to the window. He shook his head, bemused by the oddity. The news headlines came on the radio snapping him out of his mystified thoughts and making him turn to see if it really was eight o'clock. Realising it was, he hurriedly washed, dressed and had a quick shave before heading out of the door destined for the lab. Breakfast could wait, he would pick something up once he got there, he couldn't afford to be late after his conversation with Walter yesterday. Michael was determining to prove his superior was

wrong to doubt his focus on projects. He'd show him he didn't lack attentiveness in his work, he would prove this whatever it took.

The lab was far busier than when Michael had come into work yesterday. He made his way down the white painted corridor, peering at his co-workers through the small squares of glass towards the top of the doors. He hadn't spotted Walter as yet although he knew he wouldn't be lurking far away from the main activity of the research area, he was always keen to be involved at the heart of his workplace.

Stepping into his office Michael felt relieved the big pile of paperwork, that had welcomed him so untidily on Sunday, had been dealt with before his proper return after his holiday. He sat at his desk, opened his post and proceeded with his morning work before being interrupted.

'Michael Hilton,' he said as he picked up the phone's receiver, an external line had rang several times before he'd answered it, such his engrossment in his work he made the caller wait until he'd finished writing a sentence before taking the call.

'It's me,' said a familiar voice. It was Amelia, she sounded stressed.

'Oh hi, what's up?' replied Michael, slightly relieved it was his wife and not Walter who he still hadn't seen so far, he wasn't sure he wanted to see his boss so soon after yesterday's 'chat.' *Let the dust settle for a bit* thought Michael as he smiled to himself upon hearing Amelia's sweet voice. 'How come your home at this time, I thought you were back in the surgery today, you'd gone by the time I got up this morning.'

'Yes, I just popped back to get some paper work, have you seen this size of those shoots in the garden?'

‘Yes, it’s quite something isn’t it? They were about a foot high when I left this morning, I’ve never know something sprout up so quickly, that African lady must be right about them being magical eh?’ Michael chuckled.

‘They’re more like nearly two foot high now and they’ve got weird black spikes growing on the stems, I can see a funny looking flower starting to sprout out the top of it too, they must have grown some more since we left the house, it does seem strange, do you think they’ll be ok? You don’t think they are a bit iffy or anything?’ asked Amelia with concern.

‘No, I’m sure they’re fine, just quick growing, it must be the magic,’ he joked, ‘I expect they’re a special species or something, maybe they’re man-made, manufactured to sprout up quickly.’

‘Maybe, I’ll go out into the garden when I get home from surgery later this afternoon, have a proper look at them, it’s just, for something to grow to that extent in the space of about eighteen hours is a bit mad, perhaps we should get rid of them? Pull the plants out of the ground, there could be something wrong with them, they might be poisonous.’

‘Relax, let’s not be too hasty, you’re just letting your imagination run away with you, you were looking forward to seeing them grow into the picture on the packet, why would there be anything wrong?’ asked Michael in a rather more calmer tone than Amelia.

‘Because of how quickly they’ve grown.’

‘It’ll be fine, so they’ve shot up over night? It’s a foreign plant, it might be the norm for them to do that in Africa, stop fretting, the only person that might have a problem with them is our old nosy neighbour, Mr “busybody” Cedric Hawthorne.’ Michael sniggered again. Amelia laughed down the phone at her husband, his reassuring words were making her feel better about her fears over the plants.

‘You bet, he’ll have something to say,’ she giggled ‘like “I hope those plants aren’t going to start growing over into my garden” or “those plants are blocking my sunlight.”’

Michael continued to laugh out loud before controlling himself and realising he must continue with his work.

‘I don’t know, poor old Cedric eh?’ he replied once the pair had calmed their mocking and amusement. ‘Listen, I’ll see you later ok? and stop worrying about those plants, just enjoy them, they’ll look great once they flower.’

‘Ok,’ replied Amelia, ‘I will and you try not to be too late tonight.’

‘I’ll do my best, we’ll defiantly eat together tonight, promise.’

‘Umm,’ Amelia didn’t sound convinced. ‘Don’t work too hard, see you later, bye.’

‘Bye,’ Michael returned the receiver and turned to tap away on his laptop. *The plants are the least of my worries* he contemplated as he paused to think. He knew Walter would be keeping a close eye on him in the coming weeks, but somehow he wanted him too, he wanted him to see how he could put every effort into a project, how he could give his work full concentration. His telephone buzzed to indicate an internal call. Michael answered it; it was one of the administrators in the lab’s main office.

‘Breakfast roll?’ she said cheerfully.

‘Please,’ replied Michael, relieved that food was being ordered at last. He spotted Walters head pass by his door window. ‘Could you ask someone to bring it to me? It’s just I want to get as much work done as I can today, first day back and all that, if I move from here I’ll lose all focus.’

‘No probs, one of juniors can bring it along.’

Michael put the receiver down once more and immersed himself with facts and figures. He would be in the lab until seven in the evening.

Amelia pulled onto the long driveway around four o'clock in the afternoon. Picking up her briefcase, handbag and a few papers on the passenger's seat she opened the driver's door and stepped onto the pebbled scattered ground. The sky was clear but there was no sign of an autumn shine making it a chilled day.

Feeling a cold breeze Amelia promptly made her way to the front door. The pansy petals, dozens dotted evenly in a flower bed under the front window bay moved in the wind as did the conifer trees lined to the side of the house separating Cedric's front garden from the Hiltons. Amelia could just about see Cedric's front bedroom above the trees, she glanced upwards as she fumbled for her keys in her handbag. She noticed the curtains were drawn which she thought was odd for the time of day but then presumed he was taking a nap, as older people generally did in the afternoons, or perhaps he'd just got out of the shower and was getting dressed. With no net curtains he would've closed the main drapes for that reason too. Either way Amelia knew he'd be looking out for her once he'd seen her car on the driveway, knowing she was home he'd be hoping to discuss the branches again.

Finding her keys she opened the door and stepped into the hallway, her thoughts of Cedric slipped away as she made herself a coffee and took a well-earned rest on the settee. She leant back, stretched her legs out and closed her eyes. Her day had been hectic, she was glad it was over, all she wanted to do was unwind, ease the tension and hope her husband would be home at a reasonable hour. The plants in the garden crept into her jaded mind. She wondered if they'd grown any more since her return earlier. She didn't have the energy to move, her body was relaxed for the first since she'd woken. *Five more minutes* she said to herself, her eyes still shut, body and mind restful, *five more minutes and I'll go and check on those bizarre shoots...*

Amelia's body and mind would be far from restful once she'd seen what was waiting for her in the garden, but she wouldn't see it today. She fell asleep on the settee until Michael

came home, by then it was dark. A thunder storm stirred outside, moving towards the neighbourhood.

By daylight she'd see the shoots at the fully grown height, just over three and a half foot high and hideous, unsightly, ugly, not plants to admire. The growth spurt had been remarkable whilst the pair had been at work. The repulsive dark spikes on the body were completely formed, appearing dangerous and sinister. Sharp looking petals had grown at the top of the harsh body, thin, entwined stems clung to pods. Under the old oak tree the evil plants waited. Waited to be discovered, waited to spread something wicked.

Chapter 7: Thomas Parker

Thomas Parker kicked his football in front of himself as he wandered out of the park's tall iron gates. Straight from school he had joined his friends for a game of five a side football in the local playing fields but now he was alone.

The autumn evening was drawing to a sudden darkened end; night seemed to be falling quickly around the third year secondary school student. He ran his hand through his now flattened sweaty hair returning it to the spikes he had before they fell out of place during the high energy football match he'd just competed in. His school shirt had been white when he'd left the house in the morning but now mud stains and a pen mark on the sleeve had turned it into a grey grubby colour, the tie around his neck hung loosely from the collar.

Picking up the ball Thomas wiped his perspiring head with the back of his already dirty shirt arm. He dabbed his cheeks and adolescent facial hair before continuing his walk out of the park area down a long path which would take him back to the main road.

The lighting was poor along the boy's route. Street lamps shone dimly down the winding path. Being followed by his own shadow Thomas felt slightly unnerved by the silent

remote space, he sped up a little knowing once he was on the high street he'd not be so alone. His only company at present was the bird's final chirps before complete nightfall and the hissing of the trees as they stirred in the cool evening gust. Black silhouettes lay in front of him, dancing as the wind increased, Thomas stopped for a moment, halfway along the eerie walkway, to catch his breath.

Standing with the breeze whistling in his ears, the storm had now turned to lighter rain; he clutched his chest and winced. A shooting pain passed over his tight winded torso, the boy gasped as it hit him before it passed, he tried to steady his breathing, thankful the discomfort had lapsed. He stood upright, still holding his chest but more at ease, he tried to walk on. He couldn't. The ache in his upper body returned but this time it had intensified, pounding at his chest like a hammer striking him over and over, harder and harder, each time more harsher and violent than the last blow.

Wheezing and doubled over in agony Thomas staggered towards one of the many trees for support, he lent up against the trunk panting excessively. The football bounced away, the teen oblivious that he'd dropped it amongst the turmoil. He slid down the tree's sap leaking bulk, his face twisted, his hand gripping his chest, pleading the torture to stop. His head shook as his eyes rolled backwards, sinking into his disturbed, throbbing skull.

Thomas was struggling to stay conscious, he tried to call for help but the words wouldn't come out of his blood filled mouth. Even if he could've spoken, no one would've heard him, no one would've come to the school boys aid, no one was there. The park exit was so immersed by a black, hollow, loneliness that now even the birds had abandoned the area, their dusk call replaced by the sound of rustling trees and vehicle engines in the distance. Thomas was alone. Unaccompanied, unaided and by himself in the woodland surroundings.

Blood started to gush from his nose, redness spraying onto his shirt and tie. He gargled, eyes closed, he was lifeless, unconscious. His body lay sprawled under the moonlit

sky, tree branches seemed to whisper to him in the blustery air. Shadows moved inwards, nearer to his helpless limbs, covering him like a blanket.

A dark green substance started to drip from his ears, slowly at first but quickening within seconds of its beginning. Thick, rank, fluid leaking from both holes, draping and expanding onto the grassland, surrounding Thomas' limp figure. His fingers twitched as did his eye lids but he remained in a half conscious state, the torment had taken over his scorching, perspiring half dead body.

The green liquid continued to run from his ears, then it appeared from his nose, a trickle at first then it poured. Gushing from his nostrils at a disturbing rate. His chest began to crack, bursting open as if the pressure under the skin had become so severe it had to explode, ripping open in a ferocious release. His upper body skin now torn, the green liquid was present once more. Mixed with blood it instantly ran from the opening, the smell repulsive, a sickening odour wafting up to the tree branches Thomas lay under.

The boy took his last breath as his heart stopped beating and fell from his enormous open wound, hanging from the crack it bobbed on his green and red covered body before breaking free from the clutches of muscles and arteries. It tumbled from his battered chest landing in a pool of merged crimson body fluid and poison. It lay diseased and foul next to the victim's dead arm.

In the hushed stillness of the walkway from the park Thomas Parker's infected, nauseating, dead body lay, tree branches swaying above him, its aroma rampant. Further darkness descended over the empty area where Thomas lay.

Beyond the park gates, where he'd been playing football, and then walked with the intention of making his way home, something scuttled through the blades of wet grass. Something wicked, something full of terror. It scurried, the pace of its movement remarkable. Incredibly it multiplied in an instant, both now scampering, hustling, full of evil.

Chapter 8: Death

The carriage clock on top of the fireplace struck nine o'clock at night. Michael had been home just over an hour. He sat sipping a red wine on the settee, legs outstretched on a cream poufy. His day had gone well so he felt he'd earned the alcoholic beverage and a relaxing evening. Walter hadn't bothered him all day and he'd caught up with paperwork as well as having been up dated on the latest projects from the testing area. He had also concentrated purely on his work; his mind hadn't wandered, nor had he lost focus, a good start to impressing Walter.

He watched Amelia tidying the kitchen through the half open door separating the room from the lounge. He had offered to "wash up" or "dry" but she insisted he unwind with a glass of wine and put his feet up. Considerate and caring, that was Amelia, he smiled to himself. Another reason that drew him to her, and of course, her attractiveness. He took another sip of the wine as he watched his wife disappear from his view.

Taking the now half full glass with him Michael rose from the settee. He rolled his head trying to loosen his muscles and yawned loudly. Casually walking over to the lounge window he put the glass down on the side board and peered out onto the lamp lit street. He glanced up to the dark sky, the round, glaring moon shone back at him eerily. Turning his attention back to the street he watched a car drive by before the area fell silent once more. The rain and wind had ceased at long last but the temperature had dropped further confirming winter was on the way. Michael shivered. He picked up the glass and drank some more before slowly replacing the glass back on the side board upon seeing another vehicle arrive in the street. His eyes widened as he stared harder, turning his head to follow its movement and to see where it would stop.

The police car pulled up outside Mr and Mrs Parker's house next door. Michael craned his neck some more as Amelia walked into the lounge from the kitchen.

'What you looking at?' she asked her husband as she poured herself a drink from the drinks cabinet.

'A police car has just parked outside the Parker's house.' Michael didn't turn away from the window as he spoke. 'Do you think everything's ok?'

Feeling tired she settled on the settee, uninterested in the police car instead hoping Michael would join her.

'I'm sure it's fine,' she replied yawning. 'It's probably nothing, come and sit down.'

'Yea, you're right, I'll be something or nothing, could be to do with the neighbourhood watch scheme,'

'Bound to be,' Amelia smiled.

Michael sat next to his wife, both curling up on the settee they talked and drank, unwinding and reminiscing about Kenya. 'Did you check on the *magical plants*?' asked Michael smirking, teasing his wife.

'I fell asleep until you came home, it was too dark by then to go out into the garden, I looked out of the window but I couldn't make much out, the storm has made it pitch black out there.'

Michael nodded at his wife then rested his head against the back of the settee and closed his eyes. 'Check in the morning,' he said sleepily, 'it'll keep.'

In the street two detectives got out of the police car. They glanced at each other, their expressions solemn, as they walked slowly towards the Parker's front door.

Mr and Mrs Parker sat on their sofa in shock, just staring in stunned silence. They gripped each other's hand, holding onto one another like their life depended on it. One life, however, didn't depend on anything anymore. Their son was dead. Their only boy gone, never to walk through the front door again.

'He said he would be home by five,' said Mrs Parker, her voice trembling. A single tear ran down her damp cheek. Her wavy shoulder length hair hung lifelessly around her long face, the whites of her hazelnut eyes now red from weeping.

Detective Kemp, sat on the opposite sofa, she smiled sympathetically as she passed Mrs Parker another tissue. *A pretty young girl* she thought as her shaky hand accepted the tissue, *her life ahead of her like my Thomas*. Tears wailed in her eyes once more. Kemp could have almost cried with her but she told herself to stay professional, being newly qualified she doubted her superior would be impressed by any lack of self-control. She tucked one side of her blond hair behind an ear; her attractiveness resembled the look of the American actress Scarlett Johansson, her features so stunning.

'Take your time Mrs Parker,' said Kemp softly, 'you're in shock.'

Detective Farrell shifted his body slightly as he sat next to Kemp on the settee. Although sensitive in his approach he always felt a little uncomfortable in these sort of situations, he was glad of a woman by his side to do what he called "the sympathetic stuff." He worked well with Kemp even if he did feel like he was trying to solve crimes with his daughter, such was the age gap. His grey balding hair and hefty midriff was significantly less attractive than his colleagues good looks, however, he was an experienced, well regarded detective, something Kemp was far from being as she was still in the early stages of her promotion. She had potential, he'd be the first to admit that, but respect and reputation had to be earned. Farrell knew she'd learn a lot from him and was prepared to help her but he was in charge and liked to be in control.

‘Was your son ill? Or has he been sick recently?’ asked Farrell firmly but with tact.

Gripping his wife’s hand, Mr Parker shook his head, his scraggy white hair swayed, his podgy face almost the same colour, shocked and confused.

‘No,’ he said, his eyes moist, ‘he was fine, fit and healthy, the perfect son.’ Mrs Parker cried into her tissue once more, her husband pulled her near, comforting her, holding her close hoping this was a dream, a nightmare, that he’d wake from any moment, find it was morning and Thomas was getting ready for school. But it was real, so real, their pain excruciating.

‘Why do you ask?’ asked Mrs Parker. The couple’s dreary, old fashioned front room seem to hang over the four people as if it was also mourning the loss. The detectives exchanged uncomfortable glances. Ferrell then took it upon himself to explain the horrific condition they’d found the Parker’s son in. The blood, the green substance, his chest broken almost in two, cracked and ripped. He tried to be tactful, not to be too graphic but he needed information from them. Did the boy have an illness no one knew of? Had that caused his horrendous death? Had someone attacked him? There wasn’t any sign of a struggle, no obvious stab wounds, the post-mortem would reveal more but had someone really done this to Thomas?

Kemp wanted to put her arms around Mrs Parker, she looked so devastated, heart broken by the loss of her son and by the way he died, but she knew Ferrell wouldn’t allow it, in her head she could hear him saying; *you’re a detective, not a counsellor*. Instead she looked at the pair with pity and sorrow.

‘Can you think of anyone who might have attacked Thomas?’ Ferrell continued, ‘was there anyone at school perhaps who he didn’t get on with?’

‘No, no one,’ replied Mr Parker, barely able to speak through upset and anger. Mrs Parker had given up trying to communicate, she just wept, holding onto her husband as if she

would never let go. Kemp gave her superior a slightly disapproving glance, not enough to get her into trouble with him but enough to say enough is enough. He nodded back at her.

‘Ok, I think that’s enough for now,’ the detective said making it sound like it was his idea to leave. He rose to his feet, Kemp followed, standing closer to the couple as Ferrell backed away.

‘Is there anyone you’d like us to call for you?’ asked Kemp delicately. Mr Parker shook his head.

‘I’ll send a support officer around within the next half an hour,’ Ferrell added. Mrs Parker forced a weak smile, her way of saying thank you without speaking. ‘I’m afraid one of you will have to formally identify the body, your support officer will talk you through this, we’ll see ourselves out.’

The detectives walked out into the drizzly, chilled night air. They didn’t speak as they made their way to the police car.

‘I’m glad that’s over,’ Ferrell finally broke the silence as he reached the driver’s door.

‘Your heart goes out to them doesn’t it?’ replied Kemp, her eyes watery, Ferrell couldn’t work out if it was tears or the breeze making them wet. Either way he was going to ignore it. ‘So tragic,’ added the female detective.

Ferrell didn’t answer; he got into the car, Kemp followed. Securing their seat belts they drove away from one dead person’s house passing another, Cedric Hawthorns.

They were multiplying frantically, more and more escaping, hurtling, absconding into unknown territory, ready to contaminate, releasing fatal venom.

A minute dark scarlet armour scuttling, being carried along by long threadlike pins. They could've flown but chose to stay on land, moving expeditiously over the ground. The body scaly, the fangs brutal, deadly, evil beasts.

Many stayed where they were created, others moved beyond the garden, some being transported to the parkland on human skin. The boy, the poor, helpless boy, without knowing, carried the wickedness with him. They'd killed him, the old annoying man too. They wanted more death. Their purpose was to kill.

Synopsis of the rest of the novel

The story continues with a series of horrific, random deaths of local people. Walter Gilman, Michael's boss, is also hospitalised with symptoms of this mysterious bug which is striking with venom across the city. The reader is led to believe Walter has the disease however, as a sub-plot to the main plot line; he has a brain tumour as is very ill leaving Michael with the chance to show him he can take charge of the lab and prove he is worth promotion.

As the massacre spreads further the police are baffled by the killings and are relying on Michael to work day and night in the lab until he finds answers. Who or what is causing such horrendous deaths? And how can it be stopped?

Within days the city is plunged into unprecedented chaos. Dead, limbless bodies are led in the gutter, people walking around like zombies, the panic and mayhem is horrendous. Michael thinks of the deaths of the people who he knew; his neighbours, Mrs Sigton, Thomas Parker and Cedric Hawthorne. Then he thinks of two delivery men who brought a new greenhouse that Amelia, his wife, ordered. Why did the disease strike these people down?

Michael eventually realises all these people have been near the bizarre ‘magic plants’ in his garden, could this be something to do with these people dying so suddenly and gruesomely? He takes some cuttings, from when he chopped down the plants, to the lab for tests...

At the beginning of the story the reader is told of a packet of seeds Amelia has bought on hers and Michaels recent holiday to Kenya. An African lady sold them to her telling her they were ‘magic’. Amelia plants them (chapter 2) but not all is as it seems as the plants grow at an alarming rate and look very strange. Even when Michael cuts them down they grow back, only do they finally appear to die off once Amelia wrenches at the roots leaving just weed like plants which, thankfully, do not grow any further, but the damage has already been done. Whilst growing, and before being chopped down, the plants spouted pods, in the pods killer insects developed, once created they break free from the pods carrying a deadly poison, they inject humans with their venom, which is what is causing all the horrific deaths and sending the city in turmoil. Michael observes the plant cuttings under a microscope and sees the strange looking insects, he’s certain this is what is behind the killer disease. He’s never seen anything like it before, a species unknown, until now. He knows he has to find a cure or a way of stopping these bugs from spreading their venom further.

As the story continues Michael and Amelia start to show signs of the symptoms of the disease, Michael is certain they have caught it and a terrible death is imminent. Nevertheless, they’re rushed to hospital, the insects are discovered in the blood samples but somehow, miraculously, they survive, they overcome the poison in their bodies. Michael’s baffled as to what Amelia and himself have done differently to all the other victims to make them survive. He’s equally puzzled when he’s told Walter, who is staying in hospital for treatment for his brain tumour, had the insects in his blood too, and, so far, has lived. Also, Walter’s nephew, Dominic, flies over from South Africa to see his Uncle and, as yet, has not caught the disease.

Michael goes back to the lab where he receives a text from Amelia. She's checking he's took his malaria tablet. For their holiday to Kenya the couple had to take malaria tablets before and after the trip. Living in South Africa Walter's nephew would've taken malaria tablets as would've Walter who was planning a holiday in the near future to see his nephew. (It was booked but he cancelled it due to work commitments before his brain tumour was discovered.) Michael realises the reason none of them have caught or died from the disease was because they have prevented it with the tablets.

Knowing he can't possibly give everyone still alive malaria tablets he has to set about finding another way to get rid of the bugs. From his discovery Michael knows the insects are some form of mosquito. Researching malaria and mosquitos he finds out labs in South Africa use gigantic traps containing carbon dioxide mixed with mosquito attractions such as perfume scents, water vapour or lactic acid to trap the insects. The traps can pull in the bugs from nearly as far as 100 meters so Michael will need a lot of traps to capture the bugs. He asks Walter's nephew if he can use contacts in South Africa to fly over as many traps as they have.

The traps are flown in; Michael prepares the mixture to put in them to hopefully attract the insects. As Michael and Walter's nephew are immune to the disease they order everyone still alive to stay indoors whilst they distribute the traps. During the wait for the traps to arrive, and the distribution, the temperature outside is dropping as winter takes hold. The insects are struggling to survive in the freezing conditions and start to die. The remainder of the insects are then sucked into the traps.

Returning to his house Michael looks out onto his garden to see the remaining bits of plants have shrivelled and died. This reaction tells Michael the disease must be dead. The plot which was once scattered with evil has now returned to bare soil patch.

Walter recovers from his brain tumour and is so pleased with Michaels handling of the disease and of killing it off he hands him the promotion he deserves.

Author biography

My name is Hannah Lawrence and I regularly write fiction stories for adults as well as children, poems and humorous articles. I partially like to write thriller, chiller and horror novels, taking inspiration from my favourite authors James Herbert and Graham Masterton.

I am currently completing a course with The Writers Bureau and have had a piece of work published by Viz magazine. Poems I have written have also featured in books published by United Press and The UK Poetry Library. I also have some of my short stories; 'Rail Hell' and 'Lake Snake' available for purchase on Amazon for Kindle.

Other pieces of my work can also be found on my website, which I have created through Weebly, I also have various poems and short stories online at Wattpad and The UK Poetry Library.

I write because I enjoy using my imagination to bring a story and characters to life, to keep the reader guessing until the end and simply because I find it fulfilling to think of an idea and create a tale from it through words alone. It is a hobby of mine that I would like to pursue to a professional level, such as having the opportunity to have my novel published by winning Richard and Judy's search for a bestseller competition.