

The Lightning Bug

Brief - A fork of lightning cracks across the sky; and in a flurry of sparks and burned-out wires, a new computer virus is born. Robert Hoffner and Peter Burks have been waiting to see its unique signature on the World Wide Web for years. Now, they must track down the original author of this deadly worm and help him disable it. If they fail, the Information Age will come to an abrupt end.

The trouble is, Dan Becker is already dead. Harvey Becker, his twelve-year-old son, has just witnessed his brutal murder in the front room of their south London home. But the nightmare-ride of his life is only just getting started. Within hours he will have seen the inside of Belgravia Police Station, the outside of an airplane hanger at Heathrow and the underside of a hotel lift in Zurich. He'll have crossed swords with a Canary Wharf billionaire and gotten his name on the CIA's most-wanted list.

Trying to reverse the effects of the Lightning Bug will take him to a hundred places he never knew existed; a luxury hotel, a sprawling factory and an oozing, Georgia swamp. But eventually, he will silence his father's legacy and avenge his untimely death.

Why the Lightning Bug? - I wanted to write an honest, straightforward pre-teen thriller with a great cast of baddies. If I could drag in a Swiss hotel for the super rich, a stunning London skyscraper and a monstrous, four-cylinder motorbike then so much the better. I loved the idea of a latent virus, present in some popular operating system, triggering the end of the Information Age. Choosing a bolt of lightning as the catalyst for this disaster was a revelation one long and weary evening...

Chapter 1 - Harvey Becker stood beside his dad on their leafy, tarmac drive. The two of them looked very much alike. Both had strong, square jaws. Both had piercing green eyes and short, brown hair. And both had Arai crash helmets slung under their right arms.

Opposite them sat a sleek, black motorbike. Harvey's dad threw his leg over it. He kicked up the side-stand and turned the keys in the ignition. Harvey climbed on behind him. He found the stubby pegs for his feet and flicked them down. They both put their helmets on, black to match the bike but with streaks of silver to make them stand out on the road.

A shiver of excitement floated up Harvey's spine. He tapped his dad on the shoulder, telling him he was all set and waited. There was a moment's silence in which Harvey craned his neck over his dad's shoulder to see the instrument panel in front of him. The rev counter red-lined at 11000 RPM, the speedo read 100 MPH at 12 o'clock.

His dad pressed a little red button on the handlebars with his right thumb and the bike roared into life. Harvey found the grab rail behind him and clung on. With a last wave and an I'm-shutting-my-visor-now salute, he said goodbye to his mum. His dad pulled them forwards, revving all the time, letting the engine warm up. They rested for a moment with just the front wheel on the road, and then, raced away. Harvey caught a glimpse of them, a blurred reflection in the blacked out windows of a Transit van parked opposite their house. The bike was fully faired so that his dad's legs seemed to merge into its frame. Its twin headlights were on, burning like the fierce eyes of a big cat. Its chrome exhausts shone white-hot in a brilliant shaft of sunlight filtering through the city smog.

-Abridged-

It was nearly midnight in London now. Tendrils of rain writhed their way down Harvey Becker's window pain like snakes in a jam jar. He could feel the wind buffeting the house even through the double-glazing. A spine-tingling fork of lightning exploded across the heavens right in front of him and, like something out of a Hollywood disaster movie, all the lights went out over the city.

Gripped by the intense atmosphere the storm was generating, Harvey stayed glued to the window. As he stared into the blackness, still blinking, a car turned into his street. Its misaligned headlights screamed for his attention as they accelerated towards him.

Harvey could see the windscreen wipers sweeping backwards and forwards like frantic robot arms through the driving rain. But he couldn't see the driver's face.

Slap! Slap! Slap! He could almost hear the wiper blades as the sleek, silver saloon approached. Slap! Slap! Slap! But he couldn't see the driver and that bothered him. He didn't know why. He didn't recognise the car or expect to know its occupant but something seemed wrong somehow, like an out of place shadow or an unexpected echo. Something about the scene didn't make sense.

And then, all the lights in the street flashed suddenly back to life. In the same instant, a figure darted into the road. The car's brakes screamed, it swerved violently to avoid the pedestrian and mounted the pavement. Doing thirty or forty miles an hour, it ploughed into the railings that enclosed Swinstead Park to Harvey's left.

Harvey's eyes followed it in disbelief as it came to rest under the children's swings by the Sports Pavilion. For a moment, his focus flicked back to the twisting threads of rain on his window pain. Outside in the street, nothing was moving. Not a single plane blinked its way across the night sky. Not a single piece of litter drifted into the gutter. No one came to see what had happened and no one climbed out of the wrecked car. The person who'd fallen into its path a moment earlier seemed to have disappeared.

In a trance, Harvey watched the rain, like beads of sweat, crawling over the car's bonnet. Then, he woke up to himself. He had to go outside, immediately, go outside and see if anyone was hurt.

He stepped off the edge of his bed, grabbed his coat from the back of his bedroom door and ran downstairs. His dad was asleep on the sofa. His mum was working nights.

Putting the front door on the latch, Harvey carefully let himself out. The rain had gotten worse. He put his hood up and stepped into it.