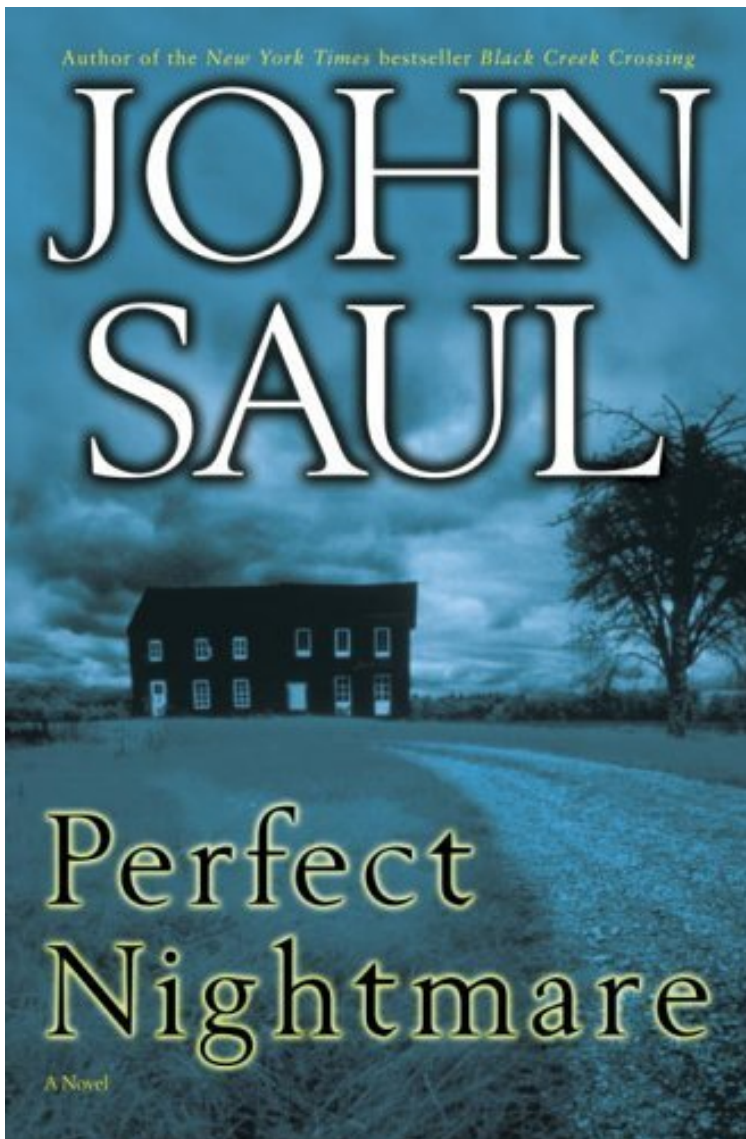


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Perfect Nightmare: A Novel



Par John Saul
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIf you open your house to strangers, who knows who might come in. And what they might be after. Or whom. Now, ponder the unthinkable and surrender to your darkest dread, as sinister storyteller extraordinaire John Saul weaves a heart-stopping tale of lurking terror and twisted intent. Every parents nightmare becomes reality for Kara Marshall when her daughter, Lindsay, vanishes from her bedroom during the night. The police suspect that the girl is just another moody teenage runaway, angry over leaving behind her school and friends because her family is moving. But Lindsays recent eerie claimthat someone invaded her room when the house was opened to prospective buyersdrives Kara to fear the worst: a nameless, faceless stalker has walked the halls of her home in search of more than a place to live. Patrick Shields recognizes Karas painand carries plenty of his own since he lost his wife and two

children in a devastating house fire. But more than grief draws Patrick and Kara together. He, too, senses the hand of a malevolent stranger in this tragedy. And as more people go missing from houses up for sale,

Patrick's suspicion, like Kara's, blooms into horrified certainty. Someone is trolling this peaceful community undetected and undeterred, harvesting victims for a purpose no sane mind can fathom. Someone Kara and Patrick, alone and desperate, are determined to unmask. Someone who is even now watching, plotting, keeping a demented diary of unspeakable deeds . . . and waiting until the time is ripe for another fateful visit. From the Hardcover edition. Extrait Chapter One Kara Marshall glanced surreptitiously at her watch and wondered if there were any way any tactful way to get Claire Sollinger to eat just a little faster. But of course there wasn't; everyone in Camden Green knew that if you had lunch with Claire, it was going to be at least a two-hour event. Not that Kara minded. She and Claire had known each other ever since Claire had turned up as a volunteer for her project to restore the old town square to the park it had been before succumbing to the modernization of the post-World War II era when Camden Green, along with a dozen other towns along the north shore of Long Island, had decided to pin their future to the automobile and ripped out the old square in favor of a parking lot. The plan hadn't worked: ten years after the lot went in, so did the mall on the southern edge of town, and parking lot or not, Camden Green's downtown had gone the way of dozens of others. At least it had until she and a few of her friends decided to change things, and organized a committee to rebuild the square in an effort to revitalize the town. Claire Shields Sollinger had shown up at that first meeting. A silence fell over the room when she walked in, for no one expected anyone from the huge mansions in the Flinders Beach area along the shore to come to the meeting. Give money, yes.

But not come to the meetings, let alone do any actual work. But there Claire had been, and after looking around at the shocked faces, she'd raised a sardonic eyebrow and spoken directly to Kara. It seems my husband has traded me in for his secretary, which means I have a lot of time on my hands. I'm a good gardener, and I don't mind getting my hands dirty. So how can I help? By directly confirming the gossip that had been running through the town for weeks, she utterly disarmed everyone in the room, and she'd proven as good as her word, showing up at every work party in the square, helping Kara find (and paying for) a landscape architect to re-create the square as it had looked decades earlier, and generally making herself useful. Except that the lunches tended to drag on, and even after ten years, neither Kara nor anyone else had worked up the courage to tell Claire Shields Sollinger that they had other things they needed to do. Now, Claire's head was cocked and she was frowning, and Kara knew she'd been caught glancing at her watch. I'm keeping you, Claire said, making it a statement rather than a question. As Kara searched for an answer that wouldn't be offensive, Claire signaled the waiter for the check. Haven't we known each other long enough for you to tell me when I'm dragging lunch on too long, Kara? You're not Kara began, but Claire cut her off. Of course I am I always do. After all, it's not like I have much else to do, do I? And it's all your fault, you know. My fault? Kara echoed. Claire, what are you talking about? Your committees, Claire said as she dropped her credit card on the waiter's tray without so much as a glance at the check. You haven't formed a new one in months, and I have to tell you, I'm getting bored. And when I get bored, I keep everyone at lunch too long. Kara took a deep breath, deciding she might as well come clean with Claire now, rather than put it off any longer. Well, I'm afraid you're going to have to start organizing things yourself, then. I have an appointment with a real-estate agent. Claire's eyes widened. You're moving? To the city. Steve and I just don't have enough time together, and Kara cut herself off, remembering the circumstances a decade ago that had left Claire Sollinger with too much time for lunch. And you don't want your marriage to end the way mine did, Claire finished for her. Well, we'll miss you. At least I will. Kara tilted her head. That's it? Not going to try to talk me out of it? Claire shook her head. Not after what happened to me. If you love Steve which I know you do you need to be with him. At least, if he wants to be with you, which I assume he still does. Unlike Phillip Sollinger. The waiter returned with Claire's credit card, and she added a generous tip and signed the voucher, still without checking the figures. What about Lindsay? she said as she stood and picked up her purse. She'll get used to the idea, Kara replied. They left the restaurant and stepped out into the bright spring afternoon. She'll have to. Not necessarily, Claire said as they walked to the parking lot tucked well out of sight a block south of the village, which, after a decade of ministrations by Kara Marshall, Claire Sollinger, and a dozen other women, now looked much as it had a century earlier. The last trace of modernism had vanished last year when the electric street lamps were replaced with replicas of the old gas fixtures. At Lindsay's age, a year is a long time, especially when it's your senior year. I remember when Chrissie Now it was Claire who fell silent, but Kara didn't finish her thought, as Claire had finished her own a few minutes ago. It had only been a few months since her niece died in a fire at the Shields's ski cabin in Vermont, and Claire still found it

difficult to talk about it. Im going to miss you, Claire sighed, just as the silence seemed to stretch on too long. Anyone else would have tried to find the right thing to say when there is no right thing to say. As they came to their cars, Claire laid a hand on Karas arm. If I can help you out with anything, just call, all right? Dont you think Ive called you enough over the last ten years? That was for the common good, Claire replied, emphasizing the last two words just enough to make both women smile. This is for you. Anything you need, you just call. Just keeping your house straight so it can be shown will be a full-time job, and since I hire people to take care of my own house, I might as well help take care of yours. As long as its not windows. Ill keep that in mind, Kara said. And thanks. She got into the car, started the engine, and pulled out of the lot, but instead of turning left on the most direct route home, she found herself turning right and driving through the streets of the town shed lived in for so many years. The town shed help to make what it was today. The trees were leafing out, and the flowers in the square were coming into bloom. In another month the tourists who had begun discovering Camden Green over the last few years would begin to wander around the street that no longer looked like just another Long Island town full of strip malls and shopping centers, but more like the main street of one of the small New England villages in rural Vermont or New Hampshire that time seemed to have forgotten. In a few years, perhaps, it would become overrun with tourists, and be well on its way to being ruined again. But for right now, it was exactly what Kara had always wanted it to be. A charming little town, where everyone got along with everyone else, the kids didnt have drug problems, and the streets were safe at night. The kind of small town that Ronald Reagan had always talked about, but hardly existed anywhere at all. And now she was going to have to leave it. And move to the city. Kara hated the whole idea of it. Hated having to sell her house, hated having to find an apartment, hated the thought of moving to the city. But she knew it had to be done, so she would do it. She and Lindsay both. And the family would survive. Lindsay Marshall did her best to control the anger that had been building in her since breakfast, but even so, she jerked open her locker to throw her books inside, then slammed it loudly. Her parents were ruining her life, and until she was eighteen and out of school, she had to do what they wanted her to do. But it wasnt fair. How could her mother have been so casual about it? Im meeting with an agent today, shed said, like it was no big deal. Your father and I are thinking of selling the house and moving to the city. Lindsay had stared at her mother in openmouthed astonishment. Just before my senior year? Itll be fine, her mother said. Itll be fine? Itll be fine? Lindsay hadnt been able to think of anything else all day. The phrase kept going through her head and she couldnt stop it. Itll be fine. Life as she knew it was about to be ripped out from underneath her, and no matter what her mother said, it would not be fine. Now she sat on the bench in the locker room, adjusting her sports bra and putting on her white socks and Nikes, unable even to listen to the rest of the girls. Their chatter usually cheered her up, but today it seemed totally frivolous in the face of the disaster that had struck at breakfast. Hey, Linds. Dawn DAngelo opened the locker next to hers, threw her backpack inside, and pulled out her practice clothes. Dawns big chestnut eyesthe same color as her long wavy hairwere a perfect contrast to Lindsays blue eyes and blond hair. But though the two girls had opposite coloring, that was the end of their differences theyd been best friends since kindergarten. Hey, Lindsay sighed, making no attempt to mask her mood from Dawn. One of Dawns brows lifted. Whats up with you? You feeling all right? Im okay. Dawn looked doubtful. I hope it isnt the flu. My brothers got it. He puked all last night. Not the flu, Lindsay said as she finished lacing up her shoes. The coachs whistle blew from the gym, and she lifted herself off the bench to follow the rest of the cheerleaders out of the locker room, eager to work off some of her anger. The varsity squad was just back from Florida, where theyd come in second in the regional championships held at Daytona. Until this morning, Lindsay had dreamed of being on that team next year. Now that was simply not going to happen. Inside her head, the endlessly repeating chorus of Itll be fine turned into Whats the use? and her anger dissolved into hopelessness. In another two weeks the graduating cheerleaders would choose next years squad and most important name the head cheerleader, but what did it matter now? Even if she performed perfectly today, with the entire varsity squad watching, it wouldnt matter. Her dream of trading in her black JV uniform for the red varsity uniform had been thoroughly crushed at breakfast this morning. Her mother had been a cheerleader she should understand how important this was! How could she have been so casual about it? Like it just didnt matter? Lindsay tried to concentrate on the exercises, but kept losing count and getting off rhythm. Even worse, she was finding it impossible to finish with the grand gesture and big smile that was as important as the stunts themselves. Smile, girls, the coach always said. This isnt just a cheerleading practice, its smile practice, too! 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