

# **NEIGHBORS**

**JEREMY BATES**

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FIRST EDITION

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# CONTENTS

PROLOGUE .....	4
ONE DAY EARLIER.....	6
EPILOGUE .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
THE TASTE OF FEAR - PROLOGUE .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
CHAPTER 1 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
CHAPTER 2 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
CHAPTER 3 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

## PROLOGUE

Buddy saw the smoke from half a block away. It streamed up into the morning sky lazily in thick black billows. A siren wailed in the distance, punctuated by the deep blast of an air horn.

Buddy broke into a sprint, only slowing when he reached the crowd gathered in front of the burning apartment building. “Move!” he shouted, elbowing through the rubberneckers. “Move! Outta my way!” People cursed, a few cried out. Then he was at the front of the throng, next to a fire truck studded with a dozen flashing auxiliary lights. An American flag affixed to the back of it flapped in the warm air.

The building’s double front doors were wide open, likely left that way when the residents fled. Beyond them a furnace blazed, nothing visible except a wall of blustering flames. A firefighter in a tan Nomex suit with reflective stripes—“Boomer” written across the back of the jacket—was attacking the fire with a thick hose spraying a jet of water.

Buddy charged toward the building. Two burly cops blocked his way and seized him by the arms.

“Get back!” one of them snapped.

“My ma’s in there!” Buddy said. “She’s in a wheelchair!”

“You can’t go in,” the other one said.

“My ma’s in there!” he repeated, trying to twist free.

The cops led him away through the crowd, stopping at the rear of an ambulance. The cop on the right said, “Now take it easy, okay? You gonna be all right?” The ambulance’s cherry tops flashed rotating red light across his face. Grainy chatter from two-way radios seemed to originate from everywhere. A second fire truck rumbled to the scene, and someone on a bullhorn ordered everyone to move to the far side of the street.

“My ma’s in there,” Buddy said numbly. “She’s in a wheelchair. She’s trapped. She’s—” The words died on his lips. He was staring into the cargo area of the ambulance, where his neighbor, Dil Lakshmi, lay on a stretcher, an oxygen mask covering her nose and mouth. “No...” he mumbled, barely a whisper.

In the same moment Dil opened her eyes. For a second she stared at nothing, then her eyes fell on him. Something shifted in them, and she screamed.

The cops jumped. Buddy stumbled backward a step.

Dil tore off the mask and pointed a shaking finger at Buddy. “Him!” she said. “Him! Him! Him!”

“Miss, calm down,” one of the cops said, going to her.

“He kills people!” she wailed. “He kills them in his apartment! He tried to kill me!”

Both cops whirled to stare at Buddy. Their hands went to their holstered pistols.

Buddy was shaking his head. “Me?” he said, and his shock at seeing Dil gave way to anger. “*Me?* She’s a psychopath! She killed her boyfriend in Kentucky. That’s why she moved to New York. She did this! *She killed my mother!*”

Buddy lunged forward, to get to her.

The cops wrestled him to the ground, flipping him onto his chest and pinning him in place with their knees. The cold, sharp metal of handcuffs locked around his wrists.

“Not me, you fuckers!” Buddy shouted, his mouth squashed against the asphalt. “Her! Arrest her!”

The cops heaved him to his feet and shoved him into the back of a nearby patrol car.

## ONE DAY EARLIER

Holding back the blinds with one hand, Buddy Smith peered out the window at the yellow moving truck parked at the curb below. A wide ramp extended from the back of it to the road. Two men wearing matching red shirts were carrying a dresser between them up the path to the apartment building's front entrance.

"What's going on, dear?" his mother asked him. She was plunked in her wheelchair in front of the TV as usual, watching old movie reruns. When she was in her twenties, before Buddy was born, she'd starred in a few small budget movies herself. Critics had compared her to Kathryn Hepburn—her looks, not her acting. Her acting stank. Buddy had watched her old films. But he agreed that in her prime she'd resembled Kathryn Hepburn with her androgynous face, razor sharp cheekbones, and perfectly coiffed curls. She held onto her looks well into her fifties, but went downhill, fast, after her stroke at fifty-nine, which aged her decades in a month. Now, two years post stroke, she was a shrunken, wrinkled, decrepit old woman.

"Someone's moving in," he told her.

"Into Mrs. McGrady's?" she asked.

"I don't know."

Buddy dropped the blinds and turned away from the window. He glanced at his wristwatch. 7:15 a.m. He had to get a move on if he didn't want to be late for work.

In the kitchenette he opened the space-saver refrigerator and retrieved his lunch. It was packed in two Tupperware containers, which in turn were wrapped in a plastic bag from the dingy C-Town supermarket a block over. There were plenty of cafés and fast food joints near the bank where he worked. But Buddy was a simple guy, he preferred simple food, and he ate the same thing every day. A sandwich with meat, tomatoes, and mayonnaise; a raw carrot; a banana; a handful of almonds; and a hard-boiled egg. He would have been content with only the sandwich, but he wanted to make sure he checked off all the ticks of a well-balanced diet. The carrot was great for vitamin A, the banana for potassium, the almonds for vitamin E, and the egg because, the way he saw it, if it had all the ingredients inside it to make life, it had to be good for you. Yeah, some argued it was high in cholesterol, but he was twenty-five and in perfect shape. Fuck cholesterol.

Buddy stuffed his lunch into his leather attaché and returned to the living room. He stopped in front of the mirror hanging on the wall to study his reflection. He looked good, professional. His chestnut hair was cut short and combed smartly. His blue eyes were clear and bright. His skin was blemish free. He perfected the knot of his yellow tie. Then he leaned closer to the mirror, pulling his lips into a grimace to make sure there was nothing from breakfast stuck between his teeth.

"Today's a big day, Ma," he said, shifting his gaze in the mirror from himself to his mother. Faced away from him as she was, he could only see her sagging shoulders and the back of her

head, all white curls. *Romancing the Stone* was playing on the tube. “I think I’m going to be getting that promotion.”

“You think?” she said.

“I can’t read minds, Ma. But Gino’s told me I’ve been doing a good job. Everyone thinks I’m doing a good job.” Also, though Buddy didn’t say this, only one other employee at the bank had applied for the position, an asshole named Fernando, which gave him a fifty-fifty shot.

“I’m proud of you, dear. You work hard. You deserve a promotion.”

“I do, don’t I?” He glanced at his wristwatch again. “Okay, I gotta get going. Can’t be late, especially today.”

He secured a button on his single-breasted suit and went to the door.

“What time will you be home?” his mother asked.

“The usual,” he told her. “Love you, Ma.”

“Love you too, dear. Good luck today.”

Buddy stepped into the hallway, pulled the door closed behind him, and joggled the handle, to make sure it had locked securely.

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The door to what used to be Mrs. McGrady’s unit stood ajar. Buddy stopped before it, noting the triangular block of wood wedged beneath the sweep to prop it open. He looked inside. A mattress leaned against one wall. Several cardboard boxes formed a rough pyramid in the center of the living room. “LAKSHMI” was scrawled onto each in black marker.

“Bullshit,” Buddy muttered to himself as he continued to the stairway. Mrs. McGrady had been the perfect neighbor. She’d been somewhere in her eighties and never made a peep. She never had guests either, not even family. He only saw her every few weeks or so when she was coming or going from one of her doctor’s appointments. Then last month she’d had a medical emergency in the middle of the night. Luckily she wore one of those bracelets that could summon an ambulance with a push of a button, or she might have gone unnoticed, dead in her bed, until she started smelling up the floor. The firefighters made a racket banging on her door before they busted it open. Buddy stuck his head into the hallway and asked what was going on, but nobody wanted to tell him. He waited and watched as Mrs. McGrady was wheeled away on a stretcher, then he closed the door and went back to sleep. He learned the details the following day from the landlord, Mr. Wang, an industrious frog of a man who always seemed to be fixing something around the building. He’d been replacing Mrs. McGrady’s door when Buddy came home from work, and he gave Buddy all the details. Heart attack. Massive. No way she could go back to living on her own. If she survived the ICU, she’d get shipped to a hospice, so said the doctor Mr. Wang had spoken to when he rang the hospital to inquire whether Mrs. McGrady would be able to pay her rent on Tuesday.

Anyway, Buddy had been hoping her unit would remain vacant for a while. The last month without a neighbor had been great. Not that he blasted his music or threw a big bender or anything like that. It was just nice to know he had the entire third floor to himself.

So who was moving in now? he wondered. Some burnout who'd have his buddies over all the time? Some immigrant couple with half a dozen noisy kids?

The name on the boxes had been Lakshmi. That was Pakistani or Indian, wasn't it?

"Bullshit," Buddy repeated, descending the staircase. One flight down he ran into the movers. He stepped into the second-floor hallway to let them pass. They were carrying a partially dismantled metal bed frame. They didn't say anything to him, didn't thank him for moving out of the way, and he was fine with that. He thought it was ridiculous you had to say something to someone else just because you came to within speaking distance. When people did this he always thought of grunting apes. He grew up in Calabasas, California, which had been full of grunting apes. You couldn't walk down the street without one grunting at you. They always said the same thing too. "Hi, Buddy" or "How's your mother?" or "Hot today, isn't it?" That last one pissed him off the most. He had a few pet peeves, but talking about the weather was number one. He knew when it was hot or cold, sunny or rainy. He didn't need someone pointing this out to him, thank you very much. Yeah, they were just breaking the ice, but that underscored the whole problem with small talk. The ice didn't need breaking. Silence was fine. Don't grunt at me, I won't grunt at you.

This was one of the reasons New York was great. People didn't grunt. They didn't even look at you. If someone did, they were either panhandling or selling something, and it was all but expected of you to ignore them.

Buddy reached the first floor. The double mahogany doors to the front of the building were propped open with more of those wood blocks. He squinted as he stepped outside into the morning sunlight. Then he sneezed four times. It was always four times, never five, never three, and always when he stepped from somewhere dark to somewhere bright. He used to think he had some freak allergy to the sun. But when he looked up the condition up on the internet he discovered it was due to his brain getting its wires crossed, a nerve in the nose getting mixed up with one in the eye. Some weird shit like that. Completely harmless, but pointless.

"Bless you," a woman said.

Buddy had been so busy sneezing he hadn't seen her until he was on the sidewalk a few feet away.

"Thanks," he said, continuing on.

"Hey," she said. "Do you live here?"

Buddy stopped and turned. The woman was brown-skinned, his age, or maybe a couple years older. She had a beauty mark on her left cheek, which made him think of Marilyn Monroe. The rest of her features could have been cut from a magazine: large brown eyes, sharp lips, strong yet feminine jawline.

Not a panhandler, he thought. Selling something then?

She wasn't holding a clipboard.



“Yeah,” he said hesitantly. “Why?”

“Cool! I’m Dil.”

“Dil?”

“Dilshad. But call me Dil.” She stuck out her hand.

Buddy stared at it for a moment, the long, bony fingers, then shook. “Buddy.”

“Nice to meet you, Buddy,” she said. “I was worried there wasn’t going to be anyone my age in this place.”

Buddy glanced at the moving truck, then at the silver Prius parked beside it. The car hadn’t been there when he’d looked out the window earlier. The hood and windshield were dusty, the bumper muddied. Kentucky plates.

“You’re moving in?” he said.

“Don’t sound so overjoyed,” she said with a smile.

She had straight, white teeth. Buddy liked that. He had a thing for nice teeth, a nice smile. Too bad about that beauty mole though. Some people liked them; he hated them. She should probably get it removed. Then again, what did he care? No way he was going to fuck her. Getting involved with a neighbor? Worst idea ever. Would never happen.

He said, “I was expecting... I don’t know.”

“Are there any roaches?”

“Huh?”

“Cockroaches. I hate them.”

“None that I’ve seen.” Buddy decided not to tell her about the mice. He’d caught one a while back, which he now kept in a cage and called Spot because of a black patch of fur on its back.

“Good,” she said. “I don’t know anything about this place. I found it online. Saw the pictures. The price was right. Spoke to the landlord, Mr. Wong...?”

“Wang.”

“Right. I spoke to him. He was nice. Or sounded nice. So I took a leap of faith. I was supposed to move in last night, but the movers delayed last minute, so I had to stay at a crummy hotel. I wasn’t going to sleep on the floor.” Just then the two movers emerged from the building. “Hey, that’s them. Hold on, Buddy, I’ll be right back.”

Buddy made a show of glancing at his wristwatch. “I actually have to get going to work. I’m going to be late.”

“Oh, right. I didn’t even think about that—but the suit and everything. Okay, well, listen, I’m in 3A. Knock on my door when you get home. Pizza and beers on me. Just chitchat, you know. I’d love to hear about the neighborhood.”

“I’m, um, probably going to be pretty late.”

“Sure, no problem. Swing by whatever time you get back.”

She gave him another smile and a wave, turned, and immediately whipped up a conversation with the movers.

Buddy watched her for a long moment, then he continued on his way to work.

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Buddy worked at a TD Bank branch on Fordham Road a few blocks from his building. He'd studied finance at college even though he'd had no idea then what he wanted to do when he graduated. But he figured if money made the world go round, then he should know something about it. He definitely never saw himself as a loan officer. Yet that was the first job he'd applied for, was hired for, and the rest was history. Four years now he'd been at it. Not a great gig, but not a bad one either. He had his own desk, a computer. He had to bullshit with a few applicants every day, explain to them the different types of loans and credit options that were available, but mostly he completed paperwork and updated files, stuff he didn't mind doing. The best part, he could bunker down in his office and not deal with his moronic coworkers, who could be just as bothersome as neighbors, always wanting to grunt about one thing or another.

And speaking of neighbors, what was up with that Dil girl? She had a yapper on her, that was for sure. Didn't shut up. She was going to be trouble. Probably come knocking on his door asking to borrow sugar and shit, or asking him to fix her blocked sink. Like he knew anything about fixing blocked sinks. Fuck. And inviting him over for pizza and beers? They'd known each other all of two minutes. Maybe Hickville, Kentucky, was like Calabasas, where everybody said "Hello neighbor!" to everyone else. But not New York. In New York you didn't go inviting strangers into your apartment. Not unless you wanted to get raped and cut up and left for dead. There were psychos in New York, lots of them. Neighbors included. After all, psychos had to live somewhere too.

Buddy had been walking with his head down, preoccupied with these thoughts, when he looked up to discover the bank twenty yards away, a bland, functional building in the middle of an empty parking lot. And there was Wilma Walters between him and the bank, ambling up to the front doors in that hippo shuffle of hers, giant ass flagging this way and that. She was in her sixties, a teller, been with TD since before there were computers. She was the only teller allowed to sit down behind the counter. She had a nice tall stool, with a nice cushion. It wasn't fair to the other tellers. What, just because you let yourself go you got special privileges? But Gino was too chicken shit to do anything about it. If he made her stand, and she toppled over and burst open like a gelatin-filled piñata, he'd cop the blame. Which meant his only option would be to fire her. Yet, in his words one evening when Buddy had stayed late and they got to grunting, how did you fire someone from a job they'd been doing long before you were even born?

Chicken shit.

Buddy thought about stopping and waiting until Wilma pulled farther ahead, because if he kept up his current pace, he was going to arrive at the bank doors right when she did. Then he would have to walk through the lobby with her, all the way to the teller counter.

Then again, if she glanced over her shoulder, or saw his reflection in the glass front of the building, and he was just standing there, she'd know he was trying to avoid her.

Buddy kept walking and reached the front doors exactly when she did, like they'd goddamned choreographed it.

Wilma swiveled her head slowly toward him and smiled. She had a relatively thin face. Her neck and shoulders weren't that fat either. All her weight had simply parked itself in her trunk. "Good morning!" she sang—literally. *Guuuuuud morning!* She greeted everyone at the bank this way, all ten employees, five days a week. What was that? Twelve hundred singing good mornings a year? It was surprising she hadn't blown her head off with a shotgun by now.

"Morning, Wilma," Buddy said pleasantly, helping her with the door. She waddled past him inside. He followed, slowing to keep pace beside her. How she ever got anywhere, he didn't know.

"A bit chilly, isn't it?" she said. "And it's supposed to be spring!"

Buddy wasn't going down that road, so he merely nodded, and they walked in silence. The bank's layout was one big square. Teller counter straight ahead. Info booth and waiting area to the right. A string of four glass-walled offices to the left. Buddy's was the last one. Between it and the teller counter a door led to a staff-only area that contained a kitchenette, a stationary room, Gino's office, the vault, and the building's rear entrance.

Wilma said, "I hope they've fixed the photocopier. You know it hasn't been working for two days now. Did you know that? How long does it take to fix something around here—? *Guuuuuud morning!*"

Betty, a teller half Wilma's age and size, had emerged from the staff area. She had a nest of black Medusa curls and a permanently angry face. "Morning, you two."

Wilma said, "Now tell me this weather isn't normal for spring. Is it normal?"

"It's pretty cold, Wilm. Gotta wear a jacket."

Although only halfway across the lobby, Buddy felt Betty's arrival meant he could take his leave, and he veered away from Wilma toward his office. He flicked on the lights, powered on his computer, then went to the kitchenette. He opened the fridge, to deposit his lunch inside, and frowned. Betty had placed her lunch on the top shelf next to the butter and jam. Right where he always put his lunch. For four years now, every day. She had to know that. Was she just fucking with him? Or was she really that clueless? He moved her lunch—a plastic container filled with leftover spaghetti bolognese—to the bottom shelf, beside the milk, cream, and a two-liter bottle of Coke. He put his lunch in its place.

Back in his office Buddy slumped into his chair—and frowned again. His Empire State Building paperweight, which he'd bought from a going-out-of-business souvenir shop on the Upper West Side, was facing the wrong direction on his desk. As he swiveled it forward, he noticed the pencils and pens in his stationary cup were all upended, their tips pointed skyward.

"What the hell?"

Just then the front door to the bank opened and Fernando entered. He was Buddy's age, Hispanic, a major ass-kisser. If he got the promotion over Buddy today, it was only because he was sucking Gino's dick in his free time.

Wilma sang her idiotic welcome. Fernando grunted with her and Betty for a good minute before swinging by Buddy's office.

“Buddy!” he said, grinning. “What’s up, chico? And what’s up with those pencils? They all upside down or something.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Fuck you didn’t, you OCD freak!”

Laughing good naturedly, obvious to the fact Buddy wanted to cut his head off and shove it in a microwave, he went to his office, which was adjacent to Buddy’s.

Buddy left the pens and pencils how they were, to show Fernando his stupid gag didn’t bother him. Then he accessed the internet. Usually he would use the time before the bank opened to check his emails or to read the news online. Now, however, he logged into Facebook with his alias, Jennifer Walsh. He’d chosen a female name because he figured people, both men and women, would be more receptive to friending a female rather than a male they didn’t know. He also chose a hot no-name Filipina actress for his profile picture because the majority of the population was ugly, and everyone wanted good-looking friends to boost their self-esteem.

Buddy typed “Dil Lakshmi Kentucky” into the search box and pressed Enter.

And there she was, number one on the first page of results. He clicked her profile and jumped to her timeline.

Her most recent post read:

Going to the movies tonight. Twisted Jordon’s arm to see a rom-com.

It was dated March 14, 2014, more than a year ago.

Buddy chewed his lip, wondering at this. Had she started a new account? He was about to do another search for her name when a message popped up. It was from Fernando.

Hey! Long time. How have you been?

Buddy glanced at the moron through the glass wall dividing their offices. He was leaning close to his computer screen, one hand on his mouse, waiting for a reply.

Buddy had sent friend requests to everyone he worked with so he could spy on them, see what made them tick. Virtual stalking—it was a hobby of his. Most had accepted, and their lives were as boring as he’d imagined they would be. Fernando had been harassing “Jennifer Walsh” for a date ever since they friended.

Buddy typed: “I’m great, Fernando, thanks.”

“Listen...” he replied. “I was wondering if maybe you want to get a drink sometime?”

Buddy glanced at Fernando again. Still leaning close to the screen, but now tapping his foot anxiously.

Buddy finally turned the pens and pencils in his stationary cup tips down—they had been bugging the hell out of him—and typed: “When are you thinking?”

“Any time.”

“How about today? Say, five?”

“Perfect! Where’s convenient for you?”

Buddy thought for a moment, then typed: “Do you know the Mercury Lounge? Lower East Side. Great live music.”

Fernando didn’t hesitate, even though the bar was at least an hour away by train. “Works for me. But can we make it five thirty?”

“I’ll be wearing a red dress. See you then.”

Fernando hooted from his office. Then he was on his feet, doing a little dance and pumping his fists in the air. He saw Buddy watching him and added a few groin thrusts to his jig.

Buddy gave him a thumbs-up, then returned his attention to finding out more about his new neighbor. He performed a second search, but it didn’t appear she had any other Facebook accounts. He tried a Google search next with the same keywords—Dil Lakshmi Kentucky—to see if she was active on any different social media platforms.

Buddy’s eyes widened as he scanned the first few results. He clicked the top link, jumping to a story from the Cincinnati *Inquirer*:

### **Court in upheaval after woman found not guilty in death of boyfriend**

A jury tasked with deciding the fate of a woman accused of stabbing to death her boyfriend with a pair of garden shears has been found not guilty of both murder and manslaughter. The twelve jurors deliberated for more than seven hours before acquitting Dilshad Lakshmi, 27, in the 2014 slaying of restaurant manager Jordon Scott, 29.

Dilshad Lakshmi admitted to stabbing Jordon Scott six times, but pleaded not guilty to murder on the grounds she acted in self-defense.

Much of the packed courtroom in Newport, Kentucky, was filled with the victim’s family, including his parents and younger brother.

Relatives of Mr. Scott broke down into tears after the jury's verdict was read.

“I hope your children die the same way!” Mr. Scott’s mother, Naomi Scott, yelled at Ms. Lakshmi as she was led out of the courtroom, her face impassive. Mrs. Scott collapsed a few minutes later and was taken to a hospital in an ambulance.

Speaking outside the court, Mr. Scott’s aunt, Silvia Carey, said: “It’s a travesty. It sends out the message that it’s okay to kill someone if you have an argument with them. How can that woman walk free while my nephew is dead and buried underground? He had so much to live for.”

Ms. Lakshmi’s attorney, Monty King, claimed that Jordon Scott became aggressive toward his client after the couple returned home from a friend’s birthday party, accusing her of flirting with other partygoers. After a heated argument, he followed her to the backyard, where she’d gone to smoke a cigarette. When he began to physically assault her, she stabbed him with a pair of garden shears.

Prosecutor Mary Lindberg presented an entirely different version of events, asserting that Ms. Lakshmi was the one who turned violent when Mr. Scott attempted to end their

relationship. Relying on the testimony of forensic experts, the prosecution argued that Mr. Scott was stabbed while sitting down at the patio table. “The first wound destroyed the left ventricle in his heart,” she said. “There was no justification to continue stabbing him. That is cold-blooded murder.”

Monty King, however, invoked the “stand-your-ground” defense, arguing that because his client felt threatened she was not obligated to stop attacking Mr. Scott until she felt certain she was safe.

“Bullshit,” Buddy said, filled with a zany kind of energy. He had never met a killer before—not even an acquitted killer. For a moment he wondered if it could be a different Dilshad Lakshmi. But how many Dilshad Lakshmis were there in Kentucky? And twenty-seven—twenty-eight now—would be roughly the age of his newest neighbor.

He returned to the search page and clicked on the second link:

After spending hours selecting a jury, attorneys for both sides in Dilshad Lakshmi’s murder trial delivered opening arguments in Campbell County Circuit Court.

Police say Dilshad Lakshmi stabbed boyfriend Jordon Scott six times out back of their East Row home in 2014.

Dilshad Lakshmi’s defense attorney, Monty King, began his opening statement by describing his client as a former honor student at the University of Kentucky with “no criminal record and a good head on her shoulders.” He also said that testimony from neighbors who heard Jordon Scott shout at her threateningly, and photographs of bruises on Dilshad Lakshmi’s arms and legs, will support Lakshmi’s assertion that she stabbed him in self-defense.

But according to WLWT News 5 investigative reporter Martin Armstrong, prosecutors aren’t buying it. Assistant Commonwealth Attorney Don Cormic said, “We believe the evidence will prove that any perceived abuse against Ms. Lakshmi did not rise to levels justifying stabbing someone six times.”

Prosecution also allege that Dilshad Lakshmi’s former cellmate at the Campbell County jail in Newport will testify to the court that Ms. Lakshmi showed no remorse over the death of her boyfriend, often joking about the stabbing. She will testify that Ms. Lakshmi originally planned to plead insanity, but when she realized she would come across as too intelligent, she decided to plead battered girlfriend syndrome instead.

“Bullshit,” Buddy said again, staring at the photograph that accompanied the article. No makeup, and a slack, expressionless face, but definitely the Dil Lakshmi he’d met this morning.

He returned to the search page and brought up a third article:

Detectives have charged a woman with murder following the death of a twenty-nine-year-old man on Saturday in the East Row Historic District of Newport, Kentucky.

A police media representative announced she was expected to appear in the Campbell County Circuit Court on Monday.

Talking to the media outside the taped-off home, Detective Milo Hoover said the man died under suspicious circumstances but was tight-lipped about details surrounding the death. He said the woman was assisting police with their inquiries.

A commotion caused Buddy to look up. Betty had just opened the front doors to the bank and the line of people who'd queued up poured noisily into the lobby, some going to the withdrawal tables, others to the teller counter.

Reluctantly Buddy closed the web browser, pushed thoughts of his psycho-bitch neighbor from his mind, and started preparing for the day.

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The morning was busier than usual. Buddy approved one loan applicant and rejected another. The latter was a thirty-something woman who gave him a sad sap story about needing ten grand to finance a trip to Denmark, to visit her ailing mother. Nevertheless, her debt-to-income ratio was way too high to meet the eligibility requirements, and his hands were tied. That was the thing, these people thought Buddy was God or something, could just grant a loan out of the goodness of his heart. But it wasn't up to him. He was just the smiling face of the bank, the guy who filtered out the losers with low credit scores. He forwarded all applications to the underwriting department, which made the final decision. Checks and balances to make sure bleeding hearts with puppy dog eyes didn't get loans they couldn't pay back. And he only forwarded what he thought would be approved, otherwise he ended up looking like a chump.

At noon Buddy ate his lunch at his desk as usual, then spent the afternoon looking busy reviewing account records in case Gino stopped by to tell him about the promotion. He also managed to squeeze in an hour of brainstorming his next novel. He was a writer, but he didn't tell anyone that because he hadn't published anything yet. And he knew what people thought of unpublished writers. They dismissed them immediately as hacks or "aspiring authors"—the latter insinuating that they were attempting something they could never achieve. Which was bullshit. After all, you didn't call a med school student an "aspiring doctor."

Buddy had started writing seriously after he graduated college, and by seriously he meant every day. He'd completed three manuscripts so far in as many years. He didn't write full drafts like they did in the old days. That was a consequence of the limitation of typewriters: you had to put down what you wanted on the first go because there was no Backspace or Delete key. With word processors, however, it was a different ballgame. Buddy, for instance, would get an idea for a chapter, dump as much nonsense onto the page as he pleased, mainly to feel as though he'd accomplished something, before going over the dribble, rewording it, erasing entire paragraphs, adding new ones, until it was close to how he wanted it. Then he'd move on to the next chapter. By the time he got to the end of the story he had a near perfect final draft.

Buddy's first novel was called *Fallen*. It was about a husband and wife who die in a car crash together. The man goes to heaven, while the woman, a former hooker, goes to hell. Nevertheless, the man still loves her, wants to spend eternity with her, so he returns to Earth and goes on a massive killing spree to piss off God and impress the Devil. In the end he gets condemned to hell—where he learns there's no such thing as love, only carnal desire, and spends eternity watching his wife fuck an endless supply of miscreants.

Buddy sent off query letters to a dozen agents and received form rejections from all of them save one, who mentioned he liked the idea, but fifty-thousand words was too short for a full-length novel. He encouraged Buddy to beef it up to eighty- or ninety-thousand words and resubmit.

Buddy didn't heed the advice. The story was perfect how it was. Anything he added would be fluff. Besides, by then he was already several chapters in to his next novel and wasn't looking back. The name of it was *Monsters*, and it started with a bang—a Boeing 747 goes down mysteriously in the Himalayas. A US-led search-and-rescue operation is put together, because the majority of the passengers were American, and they find the wreckage in remote mountainous terrain, as well as the cause of the crash: the remains of a fifty-foot-long dragon. The US secretly dispatches an eclectic group of scientists and soldiers to find and capture a living, breathing specimen. They succeed and bring a large male back to the States, where, naturally, it escapes and wreaks havoc on LA.

Buddy pitched the story as a modern-day *King Kong* with dragons. A handful of agents liked the idea enough to ask for sample chapters, but in the end they all passed.

Buddy didn't understand why. The story was a real corker. It had everything you could want. Action, mystery, science, folklore, even a romantic subplot for the female readers, because they comprised the largest reading demographic.

In the end the rejection only made him more determined to succeed with his third novel, *Prey*. The plot was dark and gritty, the most realistic yet: an American soldier stationed in Okinawa gets arrested for raping and killing a local Japanese girl. The US Army can't do anything to help him; he's beyond their jurisdiction. So while being transported to stand trial for his crimes, the soldier kills the guards and goes underground. But he soon learns there's no way to escape the island—ninety-nine percent of the population is Japanese, and his white face is all anyone's talking about—so he decides to make the most of his freedom before his inevitable capture by raping and killing as many locals as he can. The story has a Rambo-like vibe—one man against an entire police force—and ends with an equally spectacular climax.

Buddy was so confident it was a winner he initially sent query letters to only three agents at the top literary agencies in New York. When they passed, he sent queries to another six agents. When they passed, he began to freak out and spammed no less than fifty agents, pretty much everyone in New York that represented suspense and thriller novels.

No one was interested. It was a huge blow to Buddy's confidence, because he suddenly felt as though his career was moving backward. He became depressed and stopped writing for about a month, during which time he did a lot of soul searching, eventually deciding his writing had



grown too ambitious. After all, what did he know about dragons or covert government missions or Japan or soldiers? The old adage was true: you had to write what you knew about. Lawyers wrote legal thrillers; doctors wrote medical thrillers; cops wrote police procedurals. Problem was, Buddy wasn't an expert on anything. That's why, a couple weeks ago, he made the switch to the horror genre, because horror writers didn't need to be an expert on anything. Look at Stephen King. He bullshitted about kids finding a dead body, and rabid dogs, and crazy fans. The best horror was the mundane, stuff that could happen to anyone. All you had to do was know how to scare people. And that was something Buddy could do, no problem.

So far he had a few good ideas for his fourth novel, yet he was partial to a story he'd tentatively titled *The Pizza Guy*. The protagonist, Mac, is a pizza delivery driver. One night he delivers a pie to a very attractive woman named Desiree, and soon after he begins to stalk her. When she orders a pizza the following week, he laces it with Rohypnol, delivers it to her, then waits in his car outside her home. Thirty minutes later he knocks on her door. When she doesn't answer he breaks in through the back and finds her passed out in the bedroom. He strips her naked and is about to rape her when the front door opens. Some guy—her boyfriend most likely—catches him in the act and goes nuts. During the ensuing fight, Mac drives the heel of one of Desiree's stilettos into his eye, killing him instantly.

Mac decides he has to dispose of the body, so he pulls his car into the driveway, then goes back inside to collect the asshole—only to find Desiree awake and spazing out over her dead boyfriend. Mac sees no choice but to kill her too, and he strangles her to death with her laptop power cord.

He loads both bodies into the trunk of his car, and he's about to get the hell out of there when four more people arrive in a convertible, blocking him in the driveway. Mac tells them he's Desiree's friend from high school, she's gone to the liquor store, and invites them inside, where he kills them one by one in gory slasher movie fashion.

That's as far as Buddy's outline went. He still needed an ending. But he was stumped. Because now there would be blood throughout the house. Simply getting rid of the bodies would no longer be enough. When Desiree was reported missing, the police would treat the house like a crime scene. Mac's fingerprints would be everywhere, his hair would be in the carpet, all that *CSI* stuff.

Buddy was toying with the idea of having Mac bring Desiree and the boyfriend back inside and torching the place. The blaze would take care of the DNA problem nicely. Nevertheless, he wasn't sure whether this was original enough. He needed an ending that would blow the nerds at the literary agencies out of the water. Something really amazing. He was getting sick of rejection letters and didn't want to waste another year on a book that wasn't going to get picked up.

At three thirty in the afternoon, Buddy, running dry on inspiration, stretched and yawned. He closed the notepad in which he had been scribbling his ideas and glanced out his door at Betty and Wilma and the two other tellers. Gino was nowhere in sight, and Buddy wondered why he hadn't come to see him yet.

Had he simply forgotten about the promotion?

Was he waiting until the end of the day to deliver the news?

Buddy tapped his pen against his knee for several long moments. Then he got up and went to Gino's office.

The door was closed. He knocked.

"Yeah?" Gino called.

"It's Buddy."

"Yeah?"

"Can we talk for a sec?"

"Yeah, yeah. Come in."

Buddy entered. Gino's office was about twice the size of Buddy's, still not very big. Office Depot furniture, a calendar on the wall, a bottle of hand sanitizer on the desk, next to a framed photograph of his daughter. Gino himself was as insipid as his office. Middle aged, Italian, coarse gray hair parted far on the left side of his skull, bangs swept across his forehead. He wore thick-rimmed eyeglasses that did little to improve his pudgy, gnomish face, and an ill-fitting double-breasted navy suit with gray pinstripes. He was slumped in his Executive's chair, a cell phone stuck to one ear. His legs were crossed, the top one showing a hairy ankle between pant hem and sock. By the sound of the conversation, he was speaking to his wife.

"I'll be back around five," he told her, rubbing the back of his head. "Want me to pick up a pizza for dinner...? What do you want on it...? How about mushrooms...?"

Buddy waited patiently, hands clasped in front of him, while Gino spent another minute taking his wife's order. When Gino hung up he shook his head, saying, "Anchovies. I married the only person in the country who likes goddamn anchovies. What's on your mind, Buddy?"

Buddy glanced at the chair he wasn't offered to sit in, then back at Gino. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and said, "You mentioned you'd be deciding on that promotion today. Just wondering if you have any news?"

Gino sat straighter, adjusted his brown tie. "Actually, Buddy, I do. I've chosen Fernando."

Buddy blinked in surprise. His insides sank beneath an invisible weight.

"It was a tough decision," Gino went on. "You were both qualified. But there was only the one position. Tough decision." He gave Buddy a lame shrug.

"I've been at the bank for four years," Buddy said evenly.

Gino nodded. "You're a valuable member of the team, Buddy, no doubt about that."

"Fernando's been here for, what, one year?"

"Yeah, well, my decision wasn't based solely on experience." He cleared his throat. "Look at the big picture with me, Buddy. All banks have pretty much the same rates, right? So you have to ask yourself: why does someone come here? Why do they choose us? Some, because they live in the neighborhood. Others, because of relationships. They get to know us. Like us. Trust us. Not just Betty and the other tellers. You and Fernando too. Especially you and Fernando. When it comes to something like a loan, they want to know you're doing your best for them. Answering all their questions. Explaining all their available choices."

"I do that," Buddy said.

“I know you do, Buddy. I know you do. But there’s more to it. Like I said. Relationships. You need to...open up a bit. Give off friendlier vibes. A smile now and then wouldn’t hurt.”

“You don’t think I’m friendly?”

“Sure I do, sure. But Fernando, you know, you’ve seen him. He makes his clients feel at home, jokes with them, makes small talk. Consumer loans are one thing, Buddy. But mortgage loans, there’s a lot more on the line. A lot more money. Clients want to know they’re making the right choice. They need good gut feelings about their loan officers. Relationships, Buddy. Relationships. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Buddy balled his hands into fists. “You’re saying I’m not getting the promotion because I don’t grunt enough?”

Gino frowned. “Grunt?”

“Make small talk! Jesus.”

Gino stiffened at Buddy’s tone. “I’ve made my choice, Buddy. I think I’ve explained myself adequately.”

“Clients like me,” Buddy said. “Everyone at the bank likes me.”

“How many times did you leave your office today?”

“I was busy.”

“During lunch? Your breaks?”

“I eat at my desk, and I work through my breaks.”

“Look, Buddy. This isn’t the end of the road. There are plenty of options for advancement within the bank. Perhaps you could investigate transferring to a larger branch—”

“You want me to transfer?”

“That’s not what I’m saying—”

Buddy stepped forward. “Is he sucking your dick?”

Gino’s cheeks bloomed red. “What did you say?”

“Is that spic Fernando sucking your fucking dick?”

Gino’s face hardened. His jaw clenched. “You’ve just gone way overboard, Buddy,” he said in a quiet voice, adding, “You should go home now.” He paused. “And you know what, I don’t think you should come back on Monday.”

“You’re *firing* me? You can’t fire me. Due process—”

“Go home, Buddy.”

“You can’t fire me!”

“Get out of here!”

Buddy wanted to smash something. Instead he snatched the photograph of Gino’s blowfish daughter and launched it against the far wall. Glass exploded.

“Out!” Gino howled. “Get the hell out of my office right now!”

Buddy left.

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While walking home, Buddy composed in his head a dozen different ways to get back at Gino. These ranged from erasing his face with sandpaper, to breaking every bone in his body with a frying pan, to skinning him with a hunting knife. In every scenario he kept the asshole alive and conscious for as long as possible, so he would experience every excruciating second.

“Motherfucker,” he mumbled, turning down the walk to his apartment building.  
“Cocksucker, motherfucker, lowlife piece of shit.”

Buddy clomped up the stairs to the third floor and barely glanced at his psycho-bitch neighbor’s door when he passed it. At his unit he fumbled the key into the lock and stepped inside. It was dark, shadows piled upon shadows. The only light came from the gap between the blinds, a strip of white filled with dust motes. His mother said from her wheelchair in front of the TV, “You’re home early, dear.”

“I didn’t get the promotion,” he grumbled, dumping his keys and wallet on the small deal table, then going over to her and sagging to his knees. *Batman* was playing on the tube, the original one starring Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson. Buddy took his mother’s frail hand in his. Tears welled in his eyes, but he fought them back.

“What happened, dear?” she asked in the soft rasp that passed for her voice. “Why didn’t you get the promotion?”

“I was fired.”

“Fired?” she said, surprised. “Whatever for?”

Buddy only shook his head. “What am I going to do, Ma?”

“You’ll start looking for another job on Monday, that’s what you’ll do.”

“What if no one wants to hire me?”

“Why wouldn’t anyone want to hire you? You’re young, you’re smart—”

“I’m not social.”

She paused. “Is that what that manager of yours told you?”

Buddy shrugged. “In a nutshell.”

“Ptooeey! What does he know anyway?”

“I can’t use the bank as a business reference.”

“Does that matter?”

“If I want to work in another bank it does.”

“Do you want to work in another bank?”

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“You can do whatever you want, dear.”

“And start from scratch again? I already have four years of experience.”

“Better starting over now than in ten years from now.”

“But I liked the bank.”

“Did you?”

“Well, it was easy.” He shrugged. “I had a lot of time to do my writing.”

“You know, Buddy, maybe getting fired was a blessing in disguise, because now you can write fulltime.”

“But I need money now, Ma. I need to pay the rent next month.”

“I’m sure Mr. Coolabah at the C-Town will give you a job. He always has different boys in there stocking the shelves.”

“I can’t stock shelves! I’m twenty-five.”

“You could do it part-time, just enough to pay the rent. And it would only be temporary. Until you finish your new book. How far are you along on it?”

“I haven’t started yet. I’m still working out the plot. And I need an ending—”

A knock at the door made Buddy start. Frowning, he stood and cocked his head, waiting, listening. Another knock. He went to the door cautiously and said, “Who is it?”

“Dil!”

Cursing to himself, Buddy opened the door a wedge. He squinted against the brightness of the hallway, then sneezed four times.

“Bless you!” Dil said, giggling. “That’s the second time today! Are you allergic to me or something?”

“It’s the light—going from dark to light. A nerve in my nose…” His eyes narrowed suspiciously. “How did you know I lived in this unit?”

“Mr. Wang told me. He came by this afternoon to make sure I was settling in okay. He’s such a sweet man.”

Buddy nodded but didn’t say anything. He was hoping the awkward silence would scare her off.

Undeterred, Dil said, “Um, so what are you up to?”

“I just got home,” he said. “I was going to take it easy tonight.”

“Oh.” Her face dropped. “So you don’t want to come by for a beer or anything?”

“I’ve had a long day.”

“Yeah, right, okay. I understand… Next time.”

Buddy closed the door, locked it, and returned to his mother, though he remained standing.

“Who was that?” she asked him.

“The new neighbor,” he said. “You were right this morning. She moved into Mrs. McGrady’s.”

“She sounded nice. You should go spend some time with her.”

“No way, Ma. I don’t want her thinking we’re friends or something. She’ll be knocking on the door all the time.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“Yeah, it would be bad. It would be terrible.”

“You could use a nice girlfriend—”

“Don’t start, Ma,” he growled.

“I’m just saying, if you had a nice girlfriend, you might not need all those other women that want you to pay for—”

“She’s a murderer! Yeah, your nice little neighbor is a murderer! She killed her boyfriend. You still think she’d be good for me?”

“Whatever are you talking about?”

Buddy told her, summarizing everything he’d read online.

“My oh my,” his mother said when he’d finished. “That’s something, isn’t it?”

“I know. I should write a book about it. Psycho neighbor moves in and—”

“What is it, dear?”

But Buddy barely heard her. He felt as though someone had just plugged a live wire into his brain. His mind raced, the story coming together with effortless ease.

The protagonist would be a writer—a frustrated writer. Even better, an eccentric hermit. Yeah, make him complex. He hides away in his apartment all day, trying to write the next Great American Novel or some bullshit. Then, out of the blue, he gets a new neighbor. That’s where Buddy could start the story. Just like it happened today. The protagonist is peering out the window, sees her moving in. Then, later, he bumps into her somewhere around the building. Maybe she knocks on his door to ask for sugar. She invites him over for pizza and beer. He doesn’t want to go, he’s a loner remember, but she’s persistent. Finally he says okay, to shut her up. But before he goes he spies on her on Facebook—no, that’s no good. The hero needs to be sympathetic. So maybe he tries to friend her for real? Yeah, that’s better. He tries to friend her, but she’s stopped using Facebook for a year. He looks her up on other social media and comes across a story about her trial in Kentucky. No, gotta change that. Cleveland or Seattle or somewhere. Doesn’t matter. So he learns she’s a killer. Murdered her boyfriend. Stabbed—no, shot him right in the face. More dramatic that way. But she got off. Not like Dil. Can’t make her innocent. More like OJ. She got off on a technicality. She has to be a real killer. Anyway, even after reading this, he goes over for pizza and beer, because he’s curious, he’s never met a killer before, so he goes over, and he ends up sleeping with her—yeah, a romantic subplot for the women readers. But then what? Conflict, need conflict... Okay, she starts acting strange—*Single White Female* strange. Sure. Maybe some of the pets go missing around the building, the dogs and cats? Then the *landlord* goes missing. Yes! Nobody suspects anything—nobody except Buddy, or at least the character based on Buddy. Damn right! Then what? He goes to the police, but they won’t do anything without evidence of a crime. They think the landlord’s just gone away on a vacation or something. So it’s up to him, good old Buddy—no, he needs a name. Dave? Don? Sure, Don. It’s up to Don to save the day, to uncover proof that Dil killed him. Or not Dil, whoever. Wendy. Yeah, Wendy’s an okay name. All right, this is good, it’s great, but there needs to be a twist too. Maybe *she* knows that *he* knows she killed the landlord. Maybe...maybe in the big finale, while he thinks he’s laying a trap for her, she’s actually laying a trap for him? Nice one, Buddy! The climax will have to involve something big, something dramatic. Maybe a car chase. Or maybe a fight on the roof of the building. Yeah, that would work. He could knock her over the edge. She could be hanging there, fifty feet above the ground, and he could offer her his hand, because some part of him still loves her—? No, too cliché.

Nevertheless, it didn’t matter. Buddy didn’t need the ending right now. He had the rest of the story. And what a corker of a story it was!

“Buddy?” his mother was saying. “Buddy, what’s wrong? What’s the matter?”

“I have a new idea for my book, Ma!” he exclaimed. “It’s The One. I know it is!”

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Buddy spent the next two hours at his desk in his bedroom, in front of his laptop, writing like a demon. Words had never come so easy to him before. He wasn’t simply dumping crap onto the page either, to make him feel productive. It was all top notch stuff, final draft quality stuff. And he already had close to five thousand words. Five thousand!

He was up to the point where Don goes to Wendy’s for pizza and beers. He typed:

Don walked down the hallway to Unit 3A, the floorboards creaking ominously beneath his weight. He stopped in front of his new neighbor’s door and raised his fist to knock. He wasn’t sure why he had agreed to come. He liked his privacy. He didn’t want her coming by and asking for sugar and shit. He didn’t want her thinking they were friends. But she had been so persistent. He didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

He knocked, three times, loudly. The silver skull ring on his middle finger added a sharp wrap sound, like a bone striking wood.

Wendy opened the door and gave him a winning smile. “Don! Thanks for coming.”

“I can never say no to beer and pizza,” he said.

She ushered him into the living room, which was impersonal, like a prison cell. The walls were practically begging for a picture. They probably wouldn’t even mind a ratty poster. The sofa was the only piece of furniture. It sat alone in the middle of the room, like somebody wondering where all their friends had gone. Cardboard boxes were piled high on the floor. Don didn’t blame her for not unpacking them. After all, she had only just moved in this morning.

“I didn’t think you were going to come,” Wendy said, still smiling at him. “You seemed hesitant when I invited you earlier.”

“Not at all,” he lied smoothly. “I was probably just thinking about the novel I’m working on.”

“You’re a writer?” Her eyes bugged out of her head with admiration. “I’ve never met a famous writer before!”

“Well, I’m not really famous. Writing takes a lot of practice

Buddy slammed the keyboard without finishing the sentence. The dialogue wasn’t right. It was stilted, fake.

He deleted the last few lines, rewrote them, deleted them again, tried a third time.

Still crap.

“Bullshit!” he said, shoving himself to his feet and pacing back and forth in the small room. For the first time since he’d sat down two hours before, writing had become an effort again.

What happened to his muse, his creative juices?

He thought he knew.

Up until that point in the story, everything he'd written had actually happened. Seeing the moving truck out his window. Bumping into Dil outside the building. Checking her up on Facebook. Hell, he'd practically rehashed the newspaper stories about her verbatim.

Nevertheless, now he was back to making shit up. And that was no good. It wasn't real.

"I need more material," he muttered to himself.

Buddy glanced at his wristwatch. It was a bit past seven o'clock. Not too late to still go by Dil's place? He didn't have to stay long. Just have a look around, bullshit a bit, get the material he needed to continue writing tomorrow...

Decided, Buddy yanked off his tie, his dress shirt, his pants, tossing them all on the bed. He rolled a stick of deodorant beneath his armpits, then pulled on a pair of jeans and a white tee. In the bathroom he splashed cold water on his face and brushed his teeth.

Back in the bedroom, he closed the laptop lid, plunging the room into darkness. He went to the living room, which was equally dark save the eerie glow from the television. He padded quietly across the floor so as not to wake his mother. He thought about slipping on shoes but decided there was no need. He was only going down the hall. He collected his keys from the deal table, then his wallet too, in case he had to pay for the pizza. He stepped into the hallway and sneezed four times. A fifth sneeze tickled his nose but retreated. He closed and locked the door, then went to Dil's unit.

He knocked.

"Coming!"

A moment later the door swung inward, and Dil stood across the threshold, all dark hair and big black eyes, wearing nothing but a smile and a white terrycloth towel.

"Buddy!" she said. Then, addressing his roving gaze, she added, "I was just about to have a shower. What's up?"

"I'm feeling a bit better and was wondering if you still want to have a beer?"

"Definitely!" she said. "But I've already had a couple, so you're going to have to catch up."

"Do you want me to get some more? I can—"

"No, no, I bought a whole case from that supermarket a block over. How convenient is that? I think I'm going to love New York. Come in."

Buddy followed her inside and looked around, amazed. Her place was like nothing he'd imagined; in fact, it was as if she'd been living here for months, not hours. There were laminated prints on the walls—Van Gogh, Matisse, Rousseau—books on the bookshelf, a vase of flowers on the coffee table, a basket of fruit on the kitchen counter, two potted palms bookending the sofa. A scattering of candles, all lit, perfumed the air with a vanilla scent.

"You've been busy," he said.

"I just finished, and I smell like a pig. I still need that shower. But make yourself at home. Beer's in the fridge. I won't be long."

She disappeared into her bedroom.

Buddy went to the kitchenette. Through the glass-fronted cupboard doors he could see stacks of plates, bowls, mugs, glasses. They made his cupboards seem barren in comparison. He opened



the fridge and found it bursting with food. Eight bottles of Carlsberg lined the door shelf. Another six or so shared the crisper with a bunch of celery, a bag of baby carrots, and a variety of leafy green vegetables.

Buddy made a mental note of all this—when it came to writing, the devil was in the details—then retrieved a beer. He twisted off the cap and took a sip. Next to the basket of fruit, he noticed, was a wood knife block from which protruded seven handles. He withdrew a seven-inch cook's knife and turned it over in his hand. Stainless steel, hollow handle, well-balanced. He replaced it, already wondering how he could incorporate it into his story.

Buddy returned to the living room. He shuffled through the magazines on the table. *Seventeen, People, National Inquirer*. A large picture frame stood beside the TV, displaying four individual prints. They were all of Dil and what appeared to be family. No friends, no dead ex.

He went to the bookcase, reading the spines of the books. There were a lot of romance novels by authors he'd never heard of, a few cooking books, and some biographies.

Buddy decided he'd load Wendy's bookshelf with horror titles instead, maybe even add some true-life crime. Hint at her homicidal side.

Whistling gaily—his mood had done a full one-eighty from what it'd been after his blow up in Gino's office—he went to the easel in the corner, on which sat a blank canvas. No, not blank, he realized. Dil had sketched a pencil outline on it. So was she an artist? Another great detail. A killer with an artistic side. How could he work this into the story? Maybe Don finds drawings Wendy did of her ex-boyfriend, sick, gruesome ones celebrating his death?

Goddamn! Buddy thought. This was so much easier than staring at a computer screen and making everything up. It was all laid out right before him.

The door to the bedroom opened and Dil appeared, now wearing a red satin robe over a matching slip, the hem of which stopped a little above her knees. She unwrapped the towel from her head and shook her dark, damp hair out, so it cascaded over her shoulders.

Buddy felt an awakening in his groin and mentally doused it with cold water. He wasn't there to get laid. Research. That was all. Then he was gone.

"So what do you think?" she asked.

"Good color on you."

"Not me, Buddy!" she said, closing the robe and tying the sash. "The apartment. Not bad, huh? It was just so sterile, cold. I need a homey place."

"You draw?" he said, indicating the canvas.

"I paint—oils. I sketch the picture first in pencil. That's a spot in the country where I liked to go to."

"Yeah?" he said. "What did you do there?"

"Just sat around. It was quiet, beautiful."

"You went by yourself?"

"Sometimes," she said. "Do you have a spot like that?"

"Where I go to be by myself? Not really."

"Not really?"

“I don’t know. Sometimes I go to the roof.”

“This building’s roof?”

He nodded. “If you continue up the stairs one more flight you come to this little storage room. There’s a door that leads to the roof.”

“We should totally bring some chairs up there! Make a chill-out zone. Hey, I know this is out of the blue, but do you smoke pot?”

“Pot?” Buddy repeated, surprised. “No, not for a while.”

“I thought everyone in New York did?”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Well, whatever, do you want to? I brought some from Kentucky.”

Without waiting for his reply, she went to the kitchenette, opened the freezer, and produced from behind a box of frozen blueberries what must have been an ounce of marijuana in a Ziploc bag.

“So?” she said, holding it up for him to see.

“Sure,” he said.

“Awesome! Now where did I put it?” She opened the cupboard below the sink. “Ah!” She set an electric coffee grinder on the counter and plugged it into a wall socket. “Way better than scissors.” She dumped a few green-brown buds into the grinder, clapped the top on, and twisted it. The whirling blades made a hungry buzzing sound. After a few seconds she removed the top and tapped the finely ground marijuana onto the counter. “Neat trick, huh? My ex taught me it.”

“Were you guys together long?”

“Four years or so.”

“He’s still in Kentucky?”

“Yeah. Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Yeah, he’s still there.” She’d taken a pack of rolling papers from the Ziploc bag, stuck two together in an L shape, and was now in the process of rolling a massive joint.

“Why’d you break up?”

“I don’t like talking about him, Buddy. He was an asshole, and he totally screwed up my life. I shouldn’t have mentioned him.”

Buddy was watching her closely. Anger, definitely. But where was the remorse? The sadness?

Dil must have felt his eyes on her because she looked up from the joint and held his gaze.

Buddy smiled, finished his beer, and got another from the fridge. “You want one?” he asked her.

“Yes, please,” she said.

Buddy twisted off both caps and set her bottle on the counter. She licked the strip of glue on the paper, then lit the joint with a yellow Bic lighter that had been amongst the apples and oranges in the fruit basket. “Man,” she said, exhaling toward the ceiling. “I’ve been waiting all day for this.”

She took another toke, then handed the joint to him. He pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and inhaled deeply, watching the cherry flare. He held the smoke in his lungs for all of two seconds before lurching forward in a fit of coughs.

Dil giggled. "When was the last time you smoked?"

"College," he managed, passing the joint back.

"What subject did you take?"

"Finance."

"God, why would you take *that*?"

Buddy chugged a mouthful of beer to soothe his throat. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"What do you do?" she asked. "Wait, let me guess. You work at a bank or something?"

Buddy frowned. "How'd you know that?"

"Lucky guess," she said.

"I'm serious."

"Come on, Buddy. You studied finance. You wear a suit. Where else would you work?"

"I could have been a manager somewhere, like at a travel agency."

"Well, a manager of a travel agency's not what came to mind. A bank did. Here."

They passed the joint back and forth a few more times, Dil doing most of the talking, before she tapped it out in the sink.

"Anyway," Buddy said, gripping the counter. He definitely felt the effects of the pot: woozy, giddy, relaxed. "I don't work at a bank anymore. I was fired today."

Dil's eyebrows went up. "Fired?"

"I called my boss a cocksucker."

"Shut up!"

"Yeah," he said, smiling at the memory. "Then I tossed a photo of his daughter across the room."

"You did not."

"Yeah, I did. Fucking gnome deserved it."

"Why would you ever do that?"

"He passed me up for a promotion."

"So you called him a cocksucker and busted a picture of his daughter?" She seemed like she wanted to laugh but held it inside instead. "Shoot, Buddy...that really sucks. Fired...wow..." She chewed on this for a moment, then added, "Hold on, we need some music to lighten the mood." She went to a stereo system that sat on a low table beneath the window. Buddy watched her, noting the way the thin fabric of the robe hugged her thighs, her butt. She scooped up a handful of CD cases and shuffled through them. "Do you like Michael Jackson?"

Buddy didn't but said he did.

Dil slipped a disc in the stereo and pressed Play. A moment later the opening drumbeat of "Billie Jean" blared through the speakers. She turned down the volume slightly. Then she moonwalked into the middle of the living room, her feet sliding magically over the floor.

The spectacle was so absurd Buddy chuckled.

“What?” she said. “This is how I walk.” She moonwalked to the bookcase and grabbed a romance novel, which she pretended to read. Then she moonwalked back to him, looking over her shoulder to make sure he was paying attention.

“Not bad, huh?” she said, grinning. “When I was in grammar school, my best friend used to have these really waxy floors in her basement. Every time I went over to play with her, we’d practice moonwalking. I could do it better if I had socks on.”

“It was good,” he assured her.

Dil picked up her beer, then clinked it against his. “Cheers, neighbor,” she said.

“Cheers,” Buddy said—even as a voice in his head told him to stop dicking around and get down to business. He needed material for the book.

After all, he wasn’t going to write an entire chapter about the two of them standing around getting high in her apartment.

Nevertheless, before he could think of a suitable question, Dil opened the fridge and said, “Hey, do you remember that scene in *Ghostbusters* when Sigourney Weaver opens her fridge and it leads to a different dimension? How trippy would that be?”

“I had a dream like that once,” he told her. “But my fridge didn’t lead to a different dimension. It led to hell.”

“Holy shit, Buddy! That’s not trippy. That’s freaky. Did you see the devil?”

“In my fridge?”

“In your fridge in your dream.”

“I don’t remember. I think I just saw flames.”

“Well, that’s still freaky. Are you hungry? I’m starving.”

“Didn’t you want to order a pizza?”

She made a face. “Oh, right...”

“You don’t want to?”

“Do you?”

“Up to you.”

She shrugged. “It just feels like a lot of work.”

“A lot of work?”

“Do you know any pizza numbers off by heart?”

“No.”

“Well, that means we have to find the number for one. Then we have to call them and tell them what we want on it.”

“That’s not that hard.”

“Yeah, but then you have to give them your address, and they always repeat it like three times, spelling out everything. Then you have to wait like thirty minutes, maybe longer, for it to arrive. Then you have to pay the delivery guy. And you have to leave him a tip. I hate leaving tips. He’s going to know I’m high. No—forget it. I’m not calling.”

Buddy mulled that over. “I guess it is a lot of work, isn’t it?”

Dil's eyes lit up. "What about a cake? Do you want to bake a cake?"

"That's way more fucking work than ordering a pizza."

"Come on, let's make one! It'll be fun. I bought flour and sugar and everything today too."

Dil went to the pantry cupboard to gather what they would need. After a moment, Buddy joined her.

While they went about mixing the ingredients together in a large glass bowl, Buddy contemplated the surreal course the evening had taken. A couple hours ago he'd wanted nothing to do with his psycho-killer neighbor, and now here he was in her kitchen, blitzed out of his mind, listening to Michael Jackson, and baking a goddamn cake.

Even so, Buddy had to admit he was having a good time. In fact, he couldn't remember when he last had this much fun.

When the cake was in the oven baking, he said, "So what do we do now?"

"Lick the spoon, obviously." Dil held up the large wooden spoon they'd used, which was covered in gunky chocolate cake mix.

"Forget it."

"Didn't your mom ever let you lick the spoon when you were a kid?"

Buddy shook his head. "My mom was a progressive liberal actress. She thought a woman cooking and baking and cleaning and all that crap was too nineteen fifties."

"An actress!" Dil said. "Was she in anything I would have seen?"

Buddy shook his head again. "Just some real old stuff before I was born. You wouldn't know it."

"Did she used to live in LA?"

"That's where I was born," he told her. "My dad was a production assistant. He met my mom on the set of one of her movies. They got married and were pretty good together until he was busted sexually assaulting some underage actress. He went to prison. My mom and I moved to New York to live with her sister. She didn't work because the child support she was getting was enough for both us to live on. When I turned eighteen, and the money stopped coming, she mooched off her sister while I went to college. I didn't see her much after that until she had her stroke."

"Oh, Buddy..."

"Her sister put her in a nursing home. Medicare covered the first hundred days, but when that ran out some administrative asshole said they had no permanent beds free and she had to leave. Her sister didn't want to take her back, so I moved her in with me."

"Does she still live with you now?" Dil asked, surprised.

Buddy nodded but didn't say anything more. The memories were bringing up all sorts of emotions he didn't care for. And what the hell was he doing telling Dil his goddamn life story? This was exactly why he hadn't wanted anything to do with her. He was getting too close. She was going to think they were friends or some shit. She would start coming by. Soon they'd be fucking BFFs...

"I should go," he said. "I have stuff I have to do."

Dil touched his arm. She was looking at him with her big black eyes, sadly, sympathetically, and then she was stepping toward him, and to hell if she was going to do it... She was! She leaned in, tilting her chin up—and then they were kissing. He heard the wooden spoon clatter onto the counter, felt her breasts press against his chest.

After a moment, Buddy ran his hands over the smooth satin of her robe, up and down her thighs. They were firm. So was her butt, firm, toned, like she worked out.

A voice in his head was telling him this was wrong, this was bad, and he was about to put an end to it when Dil undid his jeans, slipped her hand down the front of his boxers.

He fumbled opened her robe, peeled it off her shoulders. She was breathing hard, her cleavage heaving, fucking *heaving*, like they were acting out something from one of those romance novels on her bookshelf. His hands took on a life of their own, exploring everywhere, squeezing, pinching, plying. He was rock hard now. She knew that. She was arcing her crotch into his. And right then he wanted to fuck her more than he'd ever wanted to fuck anyone.

Their mouths locked, their tongues danced. He drove her backward into the counter, hiked her onto it. She moaned, which made him all the more frenzied. He tried pulling the slip over her head, but she mumbled something that sounded like “no.” He stepped back, his heart pounding. Her eyes sparkled like chips of obsidian, wild, carnal. Her lips curled into a grin.

She slid off the counter, took his hand in hers, and led him to the bedroom.