

TAKEOUT DOUBLE

A BRIDGE MYSTERY

JIM PRIEBE



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CHAPTER 1

THE SMALL SALTBOX-STYLE HOUSE THAT BELONGED

to Jack Duffy and his wife, Helen, was in a quiet residential area of suburban Buffalo, New York. Like most of its neighbors, the house and driveway enjoyed the cover of the tall, mature trees that lined the street. The trees added beauty during the day, but by night, they shrouded the street lamps, cutting the intensity of the light and leaving the neighborhood in dark, heavy shadows.

The would-be intruder who arrived at nine one evening in early November noted the eerie appearance with satisfaction. Carrying out his task in near-darkness meant that chances of being spotted by a curious neighbor were virtually zero. The frozen state of the ground and the lack of snow also pleased him because it meant he would be leaving no footprints. His all-black clothing and blackened face would help to conceal his presence. A ski mask, covering his face completely, might have aroused suspicion, but the camouflage coloring would look natural to anyone except a close acquaintance. He was not expecting to encounter close acquaintances on this junket. Thin, black, leather gloves allowed a good sense of feel in his hands and would make sure he left no fingerprints. He had visited Jack and Helen several times and was familiar with the layout; he knew exactly how he was going to enter the house.

As he drove around the block twice, he noticed a light on in an upstairs window. What was that about? Jack, he knew, would be at the bridge club for another hour and a half. Had Helen decided not to take the kids out after all? He looked carefully, but there were no other signs of life; no flickering from a television, no other lights on downstairs. He decided that they probably left a light on whenever the family was out. The street was still empty and silent.

He selected the darkest spot he could find to park, well down the block from Jack's house but within a few seconds dash if he needed to reach his car quickly. On visits to Jack's parties, he had noticed that an

outdoor light attached to a motion sensor would pick up movement coming from the street. He had to approach the house through the western neighbor's lot so as to slip in under the sensor and get to the backyard. He managed that without incident, and pried open the window of the small washroom where he planned to enter. He opened the window as quietly as he could, but the noise from the wood splitting crackled in the cold air like a broken loudspeaker. His heart was beating well above its normal rate, and the exertion of forcing the window caused him to break out in a sweat in spite of the sub-zero temperature.

He paused. The task at hand, which had seemed so clear and simple during the planning phase, now seemed ill-judged and impossible to complete without detection. A sudden stab of panic tempted him to close the window and flee. Then he calmed himself. No one could possibly be aware of his presence. He reassured himself that his plan was a good one and that no one was going to catch him. He took a breath and continued. The opening was barely large enough for him to squeeze through, but he managed it, landing in an untidy heap on the floor below.

With his heart pounding, the intruder paused to look around, recalling the details of the house plan. He closed the window behind him and quietly made his way to the den. The den, which he knew Jack used as a home office, was almost certainly the room where Helen would store the box he was after. It was directly beside the downstairs washroom. He fiddled with his penlight for a few moments and managed to produce a small beam of light. That helped, and his eyes slowly adjusted to his surroundings. A few guarded steps gave him confidence, and he was soon able to move with caution around the house.

He followed his plan to set up a fast exit route. Emergency or otherwise, he thought. The patio doors along the back wall of the den were easy to locate, and he pulled the locking pin that secured them from outside entry. Then he unlocked the door, and carefully pulled it open a few inches. An icy blast of air forced him to close it almost all the way.

He began to look around and search for the carton he wanted. Where was the most logical place to put a box of books? Would Helen go to a lot of trouble to hide the package? He looked into a corner, and his heart jumped at the sight of a cardboard box. To his