Beach Road

James Patterson
with Peter de Jonge

Published by Headline

Extract

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First published in Great Britain in 2006
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A HEADLINE book

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7553 2311 4 (hardback)
ISBN 0 7553 2312 2 (trade paperback)

Typeset in Palatino by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

In the summer of 2003 there were three brutal and tragic murders in East Hampton, a wealthy beach community on Long Island, and two related murders in New York City. These were the subject of countless news stories, both in New York and nationally.

But the horror of the murders paled in comparison to the tension and social upheaval in the Hamptons leading up to and during the murder trial.

This is the story of what happened, and it is told from several points of view. Keep in mind that people often lie, especially in the current age, and that the full extent of their lies can be almost beyond our comprehension.

The players, in order of appearance:

Nikki Robinson, a seventeen-year-old part-time housemaid in East Hampton, Long Island
Tom Dunleavy, a former professional athlete, now a defense attorney in the Hamptons
Dante Halleyville, accused of four of the murders, one of the most talented schoolboy athletes in the country
Katherine Costello, another important defense lawyer in the murder trial
Loco, a drug dealer who supplied the Hamptons
Detective Connie P. Raiborne, a streetwise Brooklyn detective
Marie Scott, Dante's grandmother and his mentor in all ways

This is their story.

PROLOGUE

SOMEBODY ELSE'S SUMMERHOUSE

Chapter One

Nikki Robinson

Seventeen and criminally cute, Nikki Robinson sulks through the sultry afternoon trying to keep from staring at her useless shocking-pink cell phone. She hasn't heard from Feifer in three days and is getting the awful feeling she's already been dumped and just hasn't been told yet.

So when Nikki's cell rings while she's waiting in line to pay for her drink at Kwik Mart, her heart goes off with it. She grabs for the phone so fast her best friend, Rowena, behind the counter flashes her a disapproving look that says, 'Chill, girl.'

Rowena is all about maintaining dignity under romantic duress, and as usual, she's right. It's only Maidstone Interiors calling about a cleaning job for Nikki out in Montauk.

Nikki has been working for Maidstone all summer and likes it okay, but the thing about Maidstone is that she never knows where they're going to send her.

It takes Nikki forty minutes to drive from Kings Highway in Bridgehampton to Montauk, and another five to find the hilly neighborhood perched just above Route 27 where all the streets are named for dead presidents – and not the recent ones, the ones who have been dead awhile.

Forty-one Monroe is neither a mansion nor a dump, but somewhere in between, and as soon as she gets through the door, she sees it's nothing catastrophic and was probably rented by a couple, maybe a small family.

Besides the steady money, what Nikki likes best about this job is that she's alone. She may be cleaning white folks' houses, but at least they aren't standing over her shoulder, watching and supervising her every move. Plus she can dress how she wants, and so she pulls off her jeans and T-shirt, revealing a skimpy two-piece bathing suit underneath. She puts on her headphones and some R. Kelly, and gets busy.

Nikki starts with the ground-floor bedroom. She gathers the dirty towels and strips the sheets, balls them up in a giant damp pile and wrestles it down the steep basement staircase. She quickly gets the first load of wash running, then races all the way up to the second floor, and by now her dark skin, which she sometimes loves and sometimes hates, is shimmering.

When she reaches the landing, there's a funky smell in the air, as if someone's been burning incense or, now that she gets a better whiff, smoking reefer.

That's nothing too out of the ordinary. Renters can be stoners too.

But when Nikki swings open the door to the master bedroom, her heart jumps into her mouth, and yet somehow she manages to scream and to think, *The white devil.*

Chapter Two

Poised on the bed with a long, curved fishing knife in his hand, and wearing nothing but boxers and a twisted grin, is a skinny white guy who looks as though he just got out of prison. His hair is bleached white, and his ghostly pale skin is covered with piercings and tattoos.

But the scariest part, maybe even scarier than the knife, is his eyes. 'I *know* you, Nikki Robinson,' he says. 'I know where you live. I even know where you work.'

For a couple of seconds that feel much longer, those flat, horror-movie eyes freeze Nikki in the doorway and seem to nail her Reeboks to the floor.

Her lungs are useless now too. She can't even get enough air to scream again.

Somehow she breaks the paralyzing spell enough to lift one foot, then the other, and now she's moving, and *screaming,* running for her life toward the bathroom door at the far end of the hall.

Nikki is fast, a hurdler on the Bridgehampton High School varsity team, faster than all but a handful of the boys, and faster than this snaky, beady-eyed intruder too.

She reaches the bathroom door before him, and even though her hands shake, she manages to slam and lock it behind her.

Her chest heaving so hard she can barely hear his footsteps, she

leans her head against the door, her terrified reflection looking back at her in the full-length mirror.

Then turning and pressing her back against the door, she desperately scans the room for a way out.

The window leads to a roof. If she can get on the roof, she can find a way down, or if she has to, jump.

And then she sees it. But she sees it too late.

The brass doorknob twists in the light.

Not the doorknob that's pressing into her back, either. A second doorknob on the other side of the sink, attached to another door, a door she didn't know was there because she's never been to this house until now, a door that leads directly from the bedroom.

As she stares in horror, the doorknob stops turning and the door slowly pushes open, and he's in the tiny bathroom with her. The white devil.

There is *nowhere to go, nowhere to go, nowhere to go,* she thinks, her terror bouncing back at her from every mirror.

And now the devil is pressed up against her, breathing in her ear, the razor-sharp blade tracing a line into her neck. When she looks down he pulls her hair back until their eyes meet in the mirror.

'Don't cut me!' she begs in a weak whisper. 'I'll do whatever you want.'

But nothing she says means a thing, and those pitiless eyes laugh at her as he pushes her shoulders and stomach down over the sink and roughly pulls her bikini bottom to her knees.

'I know you'll do whatever. Don't stop looking.'

Nikki looks at him in the glass just as she's been told to and takes a shallow breath. But when he pushes himself inside her, he shoves so hard her head hits the mirror, and it falls into a million pieces. And even though the blade is pressed against her throat, and she knows it's against the rules, she can't keep herself from moaning and begging him to never stop. But it's not till he's finished that Nikki leans into

the mirror and says, 'Feif, I love it when you come up with this freaky romantic role-play shit. You *are* the devil.'

It's not until twenty minutes after that, when they're both lounging around on one of the stripped-down beds, that he tells her the smell in the room isn't reefer, it's crack.

And that's how the story begins – with Feif and Nikki, and the crack they smoke that lazy afternoon at somebody else's summerhouse in the Hamptons.

PART ONE

MURDER ON BEACH ROAD

Chapter Three

Tom Dunleavy

It's Saturday morning on Labor Day weekend, and I'm rolling down what some might call the prettiest country lane in America – Beach Road, East Hampton.

I'm on my way to meet four of my oldest pals on the planet. The '66 XKE I have been working on for a decade hasn't backfired once, and everywhere I look there's that dazzling Hampton light.

Not only that, I've got my loyal pooch, Wingo, right beside me on the passenger seat, and with the top down, he hardly stinks at all.

So why don't I feel better about another day in paradise?

Maybe it's just this neighborhood. Beach Road is wide and elegant, with one ten-million-dollar house after another, but in a way, it's as ugly as it is beautiful. Every five minutes or so a private rent-a-cop cruises by in a white Jeep. And instead of bearing the names of the residents, the signs in front of the houses belong to the high-tech electronic security companies that have been hired to keep the riffraff out.

Well, here comes some prime riffraff, fellas, and guess what you can do if you don't like it?

As I roll west, the houses get even bigger and the lawns deeper

and, if possible, greener. Then they disappear completely behind tall, thick hedges.

When that happens, Wingo and I have put the sorry land of the multimillionaire behind us and have crossed, without invitation, into the even chillier kingdom of the billionaire. In the old days, this would be where the robber barons camped out, or the guys who had invented something huge and life-enhancing, like the refrigerator or air-conditioning. Now it's reserved for the occasional A-list Hollywood mogul, or the anonymous mathematicians who sit in front of their computer screens and run the hedge funds. A mile from here, Steven Spielberg slapped together three lots on Georgica Pond, then bought the parcel on the other side so he could own the view too.

Before I get pulled over for rubbing the rich the wrong way, or being a grouch for no good reason, I spot a break in the hedges and rumble up a long, pebbled drive.

Beyond a huge, sprawling manor built in – no, decorated to look like it was built in – the 1920s is a shimmering pack of cars parked on the grass, each one chromed and accessorized.

Just beyond them is the reason they're here, and the reason I'm here too – a brand-new, custom-built, state-of-the-art, official NBA-length-and-width basketball court.

But if there's a Hampton sight more welcome and less expected than a full-size basketball court with an ocean view, it's the dozen or so people hanging out beside it, and they immediately come over to greet us – the guys lavishing attention on my vehicle, the ladies giving it up for my faithful dog, Wing Daddy.

'This baby is pure class,' says a hustler named Artis LaFontaine as he appraises my antique Jag.

'And this baby is pure cute!' says his girl, Mammy, as Wingo gets up on his hind legs to lay a big wet one on her pretty face. 'Can I adopt him?'

The warm way they all greet me feels as terrific as always – and not just because I'm the only white person here.

Chapter Four

Tom

I don't have the honor of being the sole Caucasian for long.

In less than five minutes, Robby Walco arrives in his mud-splattered pickup, WALCO & SON, the name of his and his old man's landscaping company, stenciled on the cab.

And then my older brother, Jeff, the football coach at East Hampton High, shows up with Patrick Roche in his school-issued van.

'Where the hell is Feif?' asks Artis. Artis has never actually volunteered what he does for a living, but the hours are highly flexible, and it pays well enough to keep his canary-yellow Ferrari in twenty-two-inch wheels.

'Yeah, where's the white Rodman?' asks a dreadlocked dude called Marwan.

Artis LaFontaine and crew can't get enough of Feif, with his bleached-white hair, the piercings and tats – and when he finally rolls in barefoot on his *bicycle,* his high-tops dangling like oversized baby shoes from the handlebars, they practically give him a standing ovation.

'Be careful with this one, fellas,' says Feif, meticulously lowering his kickstand and parking his eight-dollar bike between two hundred-thousand-dollar cars. 'It's a Schwinn.'

I've depended on Jeff my whole life, but all these guys are indispensable to me. Roche, aka Rochie, is the deepest soul I know, not to mention a terrible sculptor, a mediocre poker player, and a truly gifted bartender. Walco is pure, undiluted human earnestness, the kind of guy who will walk up to you and, apropos of nothing, pronounce Guns N' Roses the greatest rock-and-roll band of all time, or Derek Jeter the finest shortstop of his generation. As for Feif, he's just special, and that's immediately obvious to everyone, from the Dominican cashier at the IGA to your grandmother.

This whole place is owned by the movie star T. Smitty Wilson, who bought it five years ago. Wilson wanted to show his fans he was still keeping it real, so after dropping $23 million for a big, Waspy house on four acres, he dropped another half mil on this sick basketball court. He used the same contractor who built Shaq's court in Orlando, and Dr Dre's in Oakland, but he hired Walco & Son to do the landscaping, and that's how we found out about it.

For a month, we had the court to ourselves, but when Wilson invited his celebrity pals out to the country, it got to be even more fun.

First came a handful of actors and pro athletes, mainly from LA and New York. Through them word leaked into the hip-hop crowd. They told their people, and the next thing you know this court was the wildest scene in the Hamptons – *ever* – a nonstop party with athletes and rappers, CEOs and supermodels, and just enough gangsters to add some edge.

But as the celebs thinned out, one of the most expensive residential acres on Beach Road was starting to seem like a playground in a South Bronx housing project.

At that point, Wilson made his retreat. For weeks he barely ventured from the house; then he began to avoid the Hamptons altogether.

Now about the only person you can be sure of not running into at T. Smitty Wilson's Hamptons compound is T. Smitty Wilson.

Chapter Five

Tom

Me, Jeff, Fief, Walco, and Rochie are stretching and shooting around one basket when a maroon SUV rumbles up the driveway. Like a lot of cars here, it looks as if it just rolled off a showroom floor, and its arrival is announced well in advance by five hundred watts of teeth-chattering hip-hop.

When the big Caddy lurches to a stop, three doors swing open and four black teens jump out, each sporting brand-new kicks and sweats.

Then, after a dramatic beat or two, the man-child himself, Dante Halleyville, slides out from the front passenger side. It's hard not to gawk at the kid.

Halleyville is the real deal, without a doubt the best high-school player in the country, and at six foot nine, with muscled arms and chest tapering to a tiny waist and long, lean legs, he's built like a basketball god. Dante is already being called the next Michael Jordan. Had he declared himself eligible for this year's NBA draft, he would have been a top-three pick, no question, but he promised his grandmother at least one year of college.

The reason I know all this is that Dante grew up nine miles down the road, in Bridgehampton, and there's a story about him every other

day in the local paper, not to mention a weekly column he writes with the sports editor called Dante's Diary. According to the stories, which suggest that Dante is actually a pretty sharp kid, he's leaning toward Louisville – so rumor has it that's the academic institution that leased him the car.

'You fellas want to have a run?' I ask.

'Hell, yeah,' says Dante, offering a charismatic smile that the Nike people are just going to love. 'We'll make it quick and painless for you.'

He slaps my head and bumps my chest, and thirty seconds later the crash of collapsing waves and the squawking of gulls mix with the squeak of sneakers and the sweet *pock* of a bouncing ball.

You might think the older white guys are about to get embarrassed, but we've got some talent too. My big brother, Jeff, is pushing fifty but at six five, two-seventy, he's still pretty much unmovable under the boards, and Walco, Roche, and Feif, all in their early twenties, are good, scrappy athletes who can run forever.

As for me, I'm not as much of a ringer as Dante, and I'm pushing thirty-five – but I can still play a little.

Unless you're a basketball junkie you haven't heard of me, but I was second-team All-America at St John's and in '95 the Minnesota Timberwolves made me the twenty-third pick in the first round of the NBA draft. My pro career was a wash. I blew out my knee before the end of my rookie season, but I'd be lying if I told you I still couldn't hold my own on any playground, whether it's a cratered cement court in the projects or this million-dollar beauty looking straight out at the big blue sea.