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Opening Extract from...

Savage Lane

Written by Jason Starr

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Savage Lane

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For Chynna

'Dreams, you know, are what you wake up from.'
– Raymond Carver, *Cathedral*

1

AFTER THE DINNER party at the Lerners' new 2.6 million-dollar house in Bedford Hills, Mark Berman knew that his wife, Deb, was pissed off at him about something. He had no idea what he'd done, but after twenty-two years together – seventeen married – he didn't have to ask her if there was a problem. He just knew.

During the car ride home to South Salem, Deb was still acting weird, but Mark knew if he said something it would lead to a whole discussion, even a fight, so why go there? Instead he went on about the Lerners' house – 'Can you believe the size of that backyard? The freakin' Jets could play there. And the pool was sick.' – and then went over the schedule for tomorrow: Deb would take Justin to his swimming practice at nine, and he would drive Riley to her school play rehearsal at ten on his way to play golf at the country club, and then she would pick up Riley at noon on her way back from swimming. As he was talking, Deb nodded, said, 'Okay,' a couple times, but that was it.

A few minutes later they were driving along the dark, twisty Saw Mill River Parkway, and she was staring out the window, not saying anything. Sick of the silence, Mark turned on SiriusXM to the Classic Rewind channel – the chorus of 'Dream On.'

Then, after maybe thirty seconds, Deb, still looking out the window, said, 'I saw you.'

'What?' Mark had heard her; he just wanted to hear her say it again.

'I saw you,' she said.

'You saw me,' he said, not as a question. 'You saw me where?'

Looking out at the window, at the darkness, or maybe at her reflection, she didn't answer.

'I don't know what the hell you're talking about.' Actually Mark did know, but he didn't want to say it himself. If she wanted to say it, make an issue out of it, let her.

'You know what I'm talking about,' Deb said, turning toward him.

Though he was looking at the road, not at her, he knew exactly what expression she had – that one where she squinted and her nostrils flared and she looked like she wanted to rip his head off. Yeah, he'd seen that look a few hundred thousand times.

'No, I don't,' Mark said. 'I have no idea, okay?'

She turned away again.

Steven Tyler was screeching the chorus. Mark lowered the music, and said, 'I don't get this, you know? Everything's cool, we have a good night together, out with friends, and then out of nowhere you have to launch into me.'

'How'm I *launching* into you?'

He didn't like the way she'd said that, like she was mocking him. 'It's weird, okay?' He squinted because the guy driving toward him had his fucking brights on. 'I

mean this whole attitude of yours is weird. It's like you're looking for drama, like you *want* drama.'

'*I* want drama?'

'Like right now,' he said. 'Like the way you're repeating everything I say. You know it annoys the hell out of me, but you keep doing it anyway. It's like you get off on it or some shit.'

'I think you're the one causing drama in this marriage.'

'*What*?'

'I saw you, okay? I saw you.'

'Saw me?' He pretended to think about it. 'Saw me where?'

'Outside… in the backyard.'

There was no use denying it anymore. 'Oh, come on. Is that what this is all about?'

'I'm so angry at you right now,' Deb said.

'Nothing happened with Karen, okay?' Mark said. 'I can't believe you're actually accusing me of something. It's so ridiculous.'

Karen was a neighbor, a friend, who'd also been at the Lerners' dinner party.

'You were holding her hand,' Deb said.

'I was not holding her hand,' Mark said.

'You were holding her hand,' Deb said.

Mark let out an annoyed breath, shaking his head. 'I was not holding her hand, okay? Maybe we held hands for like a second, but –'

'It was longer than a second.'

'A few seconds, whatever, but it was totally innocent, okay? We were talking, just talking, and she was upset, you know, she's been having some financial trouble, that investment advisor fucked her over, and I was gonna put her in touch with my guy, *our* guy, Dave Anderson. That was who we were talking about – Dave, Dave Anderson.

Anyway, she was upset, and I was talking to her about it, giving her some advice, that's it, okay? And, yeah, maybe at one point I may have held her hand, just in a like friendly supportive way, but –'

'In a friendly supportive way,' Deb said.

'There an echo in here?' Mark asked.

'Look, I know what I saw, okay, so stop denying it. You were having a moment.'

'*What*?'

'It was what it was.'

'It was a conversation about mutual funds.' Mark made a sharp turn, too fast, around a bend. He had to be careful, there was a deer crossing around here, wasn't there? Then he slowed a little, and said, 'I can't believe I'm even talking about this right now. Karen's a friend, that's it.'

'Friends don't flirt the way you two always flirt.'

'*What*?'

'Can you watch the road?'

'I can't bel… I was helping her with a situation, okay, I wasn't flirting with her. You want to talk flirting, how about you and Tom?'

That was the way – put it on *her*.

'What about me and –'

'You flirt with him all the time.'

'When do I ever –'

'I even saw you hugging him tonight.'

After a pause, Deb said, 'You mean when I was saying *goodnight*?'

'You were hugging tightly,' Mark said, glad they weren't talking about him and Karen.

'Oh come on, that's –'

'Yeah, ridiculous, I know. But what if I tried to make a big production out of it? What if I was like, "How could

you flirt with Tom? You were having a moment? How could you do that"?'

'Don't try to deny what you did,' Deb said.

'I'm not –'

Raising her voice to smother his, Deb said, 'I didn't go off with him to a corner of the backyard, okay? If I did, what would you think? Would you think that was normal? Would you think, "Oh, Tom and Deb are just good friends, that's why they slipped away together to be alone"?'

'Are you drunk?' Mark asked.

'What?' Deb sounded shocked, but maybe she was just pretending. 'No, I am not drunk.'

'You sure? 'Cause you're acting drunk right now.'

'I had a couple of drinks.'

'You had more than a couple.'

'Look, I told you how I feel about you, you and that woman, but you don't seem to care. You just rub it in my face.'

'Karen is our *friend*. Since when is she *that woman*?'

'Since she started trying to steal my husband.'

'Oh, for god's sake, Deb, will you stop it? It was just holding hands –'

'So you admit it.'

'For a couple of seconds, for a couple of seconds, for god's sake.'

'It was more than the hand holding, okay? It's everything between you two. It's the way you look at each other, at dinner it was so obvious. And when you were telling that joke and Karen got up to go to the kitchen you waited, you *waited* till she came back to finish it.'

'It's called being polite,' Mark said.

'You wouldn't've waited if *I* left the table, or if anybody else left it. It was because of her. You waited because of her.'

'No, I waited because she hadn't heard the joke yet, you had, and she was interested, so I… Listen to you, just listen to you. Attacking me, launching into me 'cause I was polite when I was telling a joke, like I committed some kind of crime or something.'

'You know exactly what I'm talking about, okay?' Deb said. 'You won't stop, you just keep doing it, because you want to do it, because you… I don't know, you want to get a reaction from me or something, and you make it so obvious. I don't think you get how embarrassing this is to me.'

'What do you mean?' Mark looked away from the road, at Deb, for a second. 'Somebody said something?'

'No, nobody said anything, nobody had to say anything,' Deb said. 'But everybody saw it, everybody knows, and I'm sure they suspect something.'

'Suspect what?' Mark raised his voice. 'This is fucking ridiculous. Nothing is going on with me and Karen. Nothing at all!'

'I want you to stay away from her,' Deb said, 'or I'm going to say something to her.'

'*What*?' Mark's hands squeezed the steering wheel as if he were trying to strangle it. 'Can you just cool it, okay? This is getting out of control.'

'Why do you care?' Deb said. 'I mean, if nothing's going on, if it's all my imagination, what difference does it make to you?'

'Because she's a friend, she's our neighbor,' Mark said. 'Our kids are friends with her kids and… and you better not say anything, please don't do that. It'll just create drama. You don't want drama, do you?'

'I don't want to talk about it anymore.'

'Don't say anything to her, Deb. *Please*.'

'I said I'm done,' Deb said.

She said it in a loaded way, as if maybe she wasn't just done with the conversation, she was done with the whole marriage. Mark knew it was just an empty threat, of course. She was always getting melodramatic in arguments, then forgetting about it the next day. This would blow over too – well, it had better blow over. If she said something to Karen, confronted her in some way, Karen would freak, feel uncomfortable, and maybe would want to cut him off. Mark couldn't let that happen. Karen was one of his closest friends, probably his best friend; he didn't know what he'd do without her.

Rush was into 'Tom Sawyer' but Mark, not in the mood for music anymore, shut off the radio. Ah, finally, it was silent in the car. A few minutes later, they veered onto Savage Lane, a narrow road with seven houses along it including the one at the cul-de-sac where Mark, Deb, and their kids lived. Karen and her kids lived in the second house on the left and as Mark drove by he noticed – without actually turning his head to look – that the light on the second floor in Karen's bedroom was on. Karen had left the party about ten minutes before Mark and Deb, so it figured she was home already. Mark wondered what she was doing in her bedroom, if she was getting undressed, watching TV, or if she was on the phone, talking to that new guy she'd been dating. What was his name? Steven? Yeah, Steven. Mark hated the name Steven; it reminded him of Steven Litsky, a cocky kid in his sixth grade class in Dix Hills on Long Island, who had bullied him, making his life hell. Thinking about Karen and Steven, *this* Steven, talking on the phone, Mark felt a pang of nausea, jealous nausea, which was ridiculous, because what did he have to be jealous about? Mark was married – maybe not completely happily married but, yeah, solidly married – and it was true that he and Karen were nothing more than

friends. They had a connection, a *special* connection, but it wasn't anything more than that. Still, when he thought about her with Steven, or any other guy, he always felt that pang.

With the remote, Mark opened the garage door, then pulled in and cut the engine. Without a word, Deb got out and slammed the door and went into the house. When Mark got out, Casey, their golden retriever, came over to greet him, jumping up on him, panting excitedly, swiping his chest with his paws.

Thinking, *Well, at least somebody isn't mad at me*, Mark said, 'How ya doin', Casey? How ya doin', boy? How ya doin'?'

Casey, still breathing heavily, trailed Mark into the house.

Karen's kids, Elana and Matthew, were over. Elana, like Mark's daughter Riley, was sixteen, and they were hanging out in the living room watching a movie, something with that teenage girl actress Mark had seen before on TV and on the covers of magazines, but he could never remember her name. Matthew was ten, two years younger than Justin, but they'd always played well together, and they were up in Justin's room playing on the Xbox, Call of Duty; Mark knew because he heard the intermittent machinegun fire and explosions.

'Hey girls,' Mark said.

'Hey,' Elana and Riley said, without looking away from the TV.

Then Elana asked, 'My mom home yet?'

Mark saw Deb, who was looking through a pile of mail on a table in the foyer, give him a look right before she exited into the kitchen.

'Um, should be,' Mark said.

'I better go,' Elana said, getting up from the couch.

'FaceTime you later,' Riley said, still staring at the TV.

'Cool,' Elana said, then called upstairs, 'Matthew, we gotta go!'

'I think it'll take more than that to get him away from that game,' Mark said.

'Yeah, you're right,' Elana said as she went upstairs.

Mark went up too and went into his bedroom and shut the door. Then he texted Karen: **Great seeing you tonight! Hope you got home safe, sweetie.**

Mark texted with Karen all the time, especially since her marriage had ended. He texted with a lot of his friends too, but it was somehow much more fun to text with Karen. Maybe it was because they had the same sense of humor, they *got* each other. When he read some interesting article online, or something funny happened at work, Karen was always the first person he wanted to tell. He usually made sure to delete his texts to her, especially the ones where they called each other 'sweetie' or sometimes 'babe,' knowing that if Deb found them she'd get suspicious.

Mark stripped to his boxers and then washed up and got ready for bed. He knew he looked great for forty-four. He was losing some hair from the top and around the sides, and he probably needed to lose ten, okay fifteen, pounds, but he was definitely aging well, just starting to hit his prime. If he was single now, on those dating sites like Karen, man he would've cleaned up. How many guys his age even had hair? He didn't have a lot of wrinkles and a couple of women at work had complimented his eyes. What had Erica McCarthy, in HR, said? Oh, yeah, that he had 'a dark, brooding Javier Bardem look.' The comment had gone straight to Mark's head even though he had to Google Javier Bardem to make sure he knew who he was.

Mark looked out the bathroom window; too bad it was June and there were so many leaves on the trees. Even

though Karen lived a few houses away, in the winter Mark could see part of her house, including one of her bedroom windows – once he'd seen her naked, which was amazing – but now he couldn't see anything.

His phone chimed – a text arrived from Karen: **Yep thanx gnight!!**

He always loved getting texts from Karen, even when they were munutiae. He responded, **Awesome babe xoxox**, then deleted the entire thread.

In bed, he watched TV – a little *Sports Center*, part of a rerun of *The Office*, and then some guy doing standup on Comedy Central. Mark worked his ass off all week as a Systems Analyst for CitiBank, sometimes staying at the office in Manhattan late, not getting home till nine or ten, and his favorite thing to do at night was to sit on the couch or lie in bed and stare at the TV. It didn't really matter what he was watching – sports, talk shows, sitcoms, reality TV – as long as it didn't take up too much brain energy. He used his brain all day, managing trading systems on three continents, so when he was home at night, and especially on weekends, the last thing he wanted to do was think too hard. He just wanted to stare, zone out, disappear. He liked movies, but they had to be funny or have action, no period bullshit. Deb once took him to some Jane Austen movie and it was freakin' painful, and he said to her afterwards, 'No more period movies – period.' And reading, that was the worst. Mark didn't get why people liked reading, why they wanted to spend their free time, concentrating, staring at words in a book. Jesus, why not lie on a bed of nails or get in a bath with a bunch of rattlesnakes while you were at it. Okay, maybe if you're a teacher or you were in school, if you *had* to do it, but in your free time, for *pleasure*? Deb always had a stack of books next to her bed, went to book club

meetings – god knows why. Talking about books and having to spend time with those yentas? The only books Mark read were on the stock market or sports, but even those were sometimes painful to get through. He didn't want to feel like an idiot, though, so Mark had read one book about fifteen years ago, *The Firm* by John Grisham, because he'd liked the Tom Cruise movie. The book was worse than the movie but now, whenever he was at parties or at work meetings, when somebody asked him if he'd read any good books lately he said, 'You ever read *The Firm*? That was pretty good,' and it was enough to get by.

Mark had heard a flush from the kids' bathroom and music in Riley's room, so Riley and Justin were probably getting ready for bed. Deb hadn't come upstairs yet, but this wasn't necessarily because she was still angry. She usually hung out downstairs late at night, watching TV or reading, and downing a nightcap or two.

The comedian was talking about his divorce, making fun of his ex, and Mark laughed out loud a couple of times, and then he remembered Deb in the car, saying, 'I'm done.' It had definitely been a fake threat. She'd told him just last month, 'We're stuck with each other, let's face it,' and that was pretty much how he felt. Even when they were fighting, or just not getting along, things weren't *so* bad. There was no violence or major problems. They had a good, comfortable life – a big house, country club membership, two healthy kids, some money put away, no debt. What more could you want? Yeah, maybe the sex wasn't as good as it used to be, but it wasn't bad. At least they still did it a lot – at least a few times a month anyway, which was more than a lot of couples Mark knew. But, most importantly, they were good parents. Riley and Justin were great, happy kids and, as far as Mark was concerned,

things with Deb would have to become unbearable before he'd ever seriously consider putting his kids through the pain of a divorce.

But, just for the hell of it, Mark imagined what it would be like if Deb hadn't been joking – if she really did leave. He'd played these 'what if?' games before; it was just harmless fantasizing. If his marriage ended, Mark knew he'd wind up with Karen. He'd move into her house, and the kids could go back and forth, right on the same block, how convenient would that be? It would be an easy divorce, there wouldn't be any bitterness or drama; everyone would get along. It would be even better for the kids because they could be step-brothers and sisters with their best friends. Meanwhile, not only would Mark be with his best friend all the time, he could have sex with his best friend. Karen had looked so amazing at the club last summer wearing bikinis at the pool. How many women her age, forty-two, with two kids could pull off a bikini? She had perfect natural breasts and the sexiest arms and back. Oh, and he loved her lips. What would it feel like to kiss her? He knew she'd be incredible in bed; she had to be. Holding her hand tonight, her skin had felt so warm, so smooth; he bet her whole body felt that way. What if she was in bed with him right now – in that little blue dress she wore tonight; no, in the bikini, yeah, the bikini. They would've just got back from the pool, still wet. He'd kiss her – god, those lips, the way the lower one was thicker than the upper so it seemed like she was permanently pouting – and feel her smooth toned arms, her smooth fatless back, and then he'd undo her bikini top and let it fall off and then cup his hands over her breasts, feel her nipples harden against his palms. Then they would be in bed, he'd be on top of her, untying her bikini bottom, and licking the insides of her

thighs, listening to her moan – *Mark, Mark, Oh, Mark*…

'Mark.'

He'd been masturbating under the covers, but it was dark in the room, the only light coming from the TV. Just in case, he shifted onto his side.

'Yeah?' he said.

'Were you sleeping?' Deb asked.

'Um, yeah, just starting to.'

'Can we talk for a sec?'

Maneuvering again, he said, 'Yeah, sure.'

Still in the dress she'd worn to the party, Deb sat at the foot of the bed, and said, 'I just want to say sorry for the way I acted in the car. I had no right to jump down your throat like that.'

Mark could smell rum.

'Never mind,' he said. 'It's no big deal.'

'No, it is a big deal,' she slurred. 'I know we haven't been getting along lately, but I don't really think anything's going on with you and Karen, and I won't talk to her, so you don't have to worry about that. I just… I just don't wanna be like this anymore. Seriously, I don't wanna be like this. D'you wanna be like this?'

Mark imagined licking the insides of Karen's thighs. 'Can we talk about this tomorrow?'

With the remote he flicked off the TV. It was pitch dark in the room now.

'Let's go away somewhere,' Deb said. 'A trip, just the two of us. The kid's're gonna be away at camp in July, let's plan something. We never went to Italy. We said we wanted to go to the Amalfi Coast someday, let's just do it, let's go for two weeks, have a real adventure together.'

Imagining how frustrating it would be to go away for two weeks and be so far from Karen, he said, 'Let's think about it.'

'That's what we always say, but we never go. Why not just do it?'

'We already paid for the country club for the summer,' Mark said.

'We always pay for the country club,' Deb said. 'I'm talking two weeks, just two weeks. Come on, the kids're older now – this is it, this is someday.'

'I've got that big project next week,' Mark said, 'people in from Hong Kong.'

'That's next week,' Deb said. 'I'm talking about *July*. Will you look online with me tomorrow? Can we look *together*?'

Just to end the discussion Mark said, 'Okay, fine, we'll look, we'll look.'

'Thank you.' Deb leaned over Mark and kissed him, and then she felt him through the blanket and said, 'Ooh, I guess you really *are* excited about Italy.' She sat up again, turning her back to Mark and said, 'Undress me.'

More disappointed than excited, Mark unzipped Deb's dress. Then she stood, kicked off her heels and wriggled until she was naked. A few moments later, she was in bed with him.

'Kiss me,' she said.

Mark kissed her, tasting rum. He couldn't stop thinking about Karen in her wet bathing suit. He imagined pulling the knot off the bottom, how it would come right off.

'Kiss me like you want to kiss me,' Deb said.

Mark continued kissing her, using more tongue, tasting more rum. He closed his eyes, imagining he was kissing Karen. His hands would be on her ass – her smooth, firm ass.

Then Deb got on top, but it was Karen. How would it feel to have Karen on top, riding him? He pictured her arching her back, her bikini top off, his hands over her breasts now.

'Never mind,' Deb said and got off him.

Mark had no idea what was wrong. 'What is it?' he asked.

Deb was lying next to him, turned away, and pulled the covers up to cover her head.

Now Mark was getting seriously paranoid. Had he said Karen's name out loud?

His pulse pounding, he asked, 'Come on, what's wrong? What did I do?'

Deb was silent for a while, then he heard sniffling. Shit, she was crying. He must've said the wrong name. Why else would she be acting this way?

'Come on, just tell me,' he said. 'I have no idea what's going on here.'

'Forget it,' she said. 'Everything's so… never mind.'

'Everything's so what? What is it?'

'Nothing,' she said. 'Forget it, okay? Just forget it.'

Frustrated, Mark turned away in the other direction. He was trying to picture Karen naked again, but it was foggy now. He couldn't even imagine what her face looked like. He could see her eyes, her lips, her hair, but he couldn't see *her*.

He kept trying, though, until he finally fell asleep.