



Something
Dreadful
Down
Below

QREADS

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Augusto Goleta could fix just about anything on wheels. Even as a kid in the Philippines he'd worked on his father's jeepney, a minibus taxi. Just five years ago, the family had moved to the United States. Now Gus was living in his own apartment in the city. Everything was fine—except for one small problem. Mr. Devorka, the manager of the building, kept snakes.

“It gives me the creeps that Mr. Devorka keeps snakes,” Gus complained to his girlfriend, Melita.

Melita giggled and said, “I didn't think you were afraid of *anything!*”

Gus shrugged, embarrassed by his fear.

But he really *was* worried about Devorka's little hobby. What if he woke up some night and found snakes in his room! He shuddered to think of it.

Gus had one good friend in the apartment building—his next door neighbor, Jack Hunter. Tonight they planned to watch a football game on Jack's new 60-inch TV. The little old lady across the hall, Mrs. Duncan, might complain if they got loud. Then they'd quiet down. Old Mrs. Duncan reminded Gus of his own *lola*, his grandmother. Back in the Philippines, she too had spied on everybody in the family compound. These days *lola* lived with Gus's parents in America.

Sometimes, when he visited his family, Gus brought back some *lumpia* for Mrs. Duncan. "My *lola* made this for you," he'd say.



Gus had a busy day. He fixed a fuel pump in one car, and put a rebuilt transmission in another. He tuned up several more cars and worked overtime. He was glad

for the extra money. It meant that he and Melita could be married that much sooner.

When he came home from work, Gus hurried down the hall and rang Jack's doorbell. The football game was about to start. Gus was surprised when no one answered. "Hey, Jack!" he shouted. "It's almost time for the game!"

The door across the hall opened and Mrs. Duncan peered out—as usual. "He didn't come home from work today," she said. "Your friend always whistles when he comes down the hall. But I didn't hear any whistling today."

"Yeah?" Gus said. "We're supposed to watch a football game in a few minutes." Impatiently, Gus hit the bell again. Nothing happened.

"Something funny's going on over there," Mrs. Duncan said. "I heard weird sounds this morning. It upset me so much I couldn't digest my oatmeal."

Gus stared at the door of Jack's apartment, suddenly afraid.



“**J**ack! You in there?” he shouted again. He turned the knob, but the door was locked. “Maybe he got sick or something and passed out.”

Mrs. Duncan frowned. “I don’t know,” she said as she was closing her own door, “but I don’t like it one bit.”

Gus sighed and went downstairs to Mr. Devorka’s apartment. It was in the basement. It made his skin crawl to go anywhere near that snake pit, but somebody had to check on Jack.

As he headed downstairs, Gus’s imagination began working overtime. Maybe one of those snakes had gotten out and come crawling up into Jack’s apartment. Maybe the poor guy had been bitten! It was *possible*. This rotting old building was riddled with cracks and holes. If the rent wasn’t so cheap, Gus would have moved out a long time ago.

Devorka denied that any of his snakes

were poisonous—but Gus always had suspected the man was lying.

Gus rang the door bell. “Yeah?” came the raspy, deep voice from inside the apartment. Devorka was lazy. He didn’t like to be bothered.

“It’s Gus Goleta,” Gus called through the closed door. “My friend, Jack Hunter, isn’t answering his door. We were supposed to watch the football game tonight. I’m worried.”

“So? What am I supposed to do about it?” Devorka demanded.

“I thought you could open Jack’s door and check on him,” Gus said. “Mrs. Duncan said she heard weird sounds in there this morning.”

“That old busybody is always imagining things,” Devorka growled as he opened the door. Inside, Gus could see snakes in stacked cages against the far wall. He was revolted. “Jack Hunter is a no-good punk,” Devorka grumbled. “He’s probably just out chasing girls and raising cain.”

“Maybe—but I still think you need to check,” Gus insisted.

Devorka grabbed his heavy ring of keys and went up the stairs ahead of Gus. "I'm not supposed to be going into tenants' apartments, you know," he complained.

"If you'll just open the door, I'll go in and check," Gus said. "Maybe Jack fell and hit his head or something. He might need help. He won't mind me checking up on him."

"It's against the law," Devorka said stubbornly. "I shouldn't be doing this. I could get in a lotta trouble."

As soon as they reached Jack's apartment, Mrs. Duncan's door opened a crack. She kept the chain on, but Gus could see her peering out. "Something is wrong over there," she called out. "I can feel it in my bones. Something bad has happened to your friend Jack!"

Devorka grumbled under his breath, "Old witch! She makes me sick. Why doesn't she mind her own business?"

Gus looked around the apartment. It seemed to be empty. For some reason, he had a strange feeling that he might never see Jack Hunter again.



“**J**ack?” Gus called out. He didn’t really expect his friend to answer—and he didn’t.

“Be quick about this,” Devorka said. “I tell you I don’t like it! We’re breaking into somebody’s apartment.”

Gus hurried to the bedroom. The bed was unmade, and there was a large brownish stain on the rug. Just last week Gus had helped Jack bring in a new mattress. The ugly stain hadn’t been there then.

“What’s that stain?” Gus asked.

Devorka snorted rudely. “He spilled coffee there, the slob. He said he’d get it cleaned. Have you seen enough? Let’s get out of here now. The guy is out carousing—that’s all.”

Gus went to his own apartment and called the computer repair store where Jack worked. They said he hadn’t shown up for work today and didn’t even call. Gus was worried. That wasn’t like Jack!

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