

# —CRUSHED NEEM

by Kim Despina

Only his front door stands between Sam and a million dollars. The odor of garlic seeps into his apartment through the sliver of darkness between the bottom of the door and the floor. Sam recognizes the smell of Mr. Calabria's notorious sausages from down the hallway. He makes them every Monday. In an hour or so, Mrs. Calabria will yell at him for clogging his arteries and filling their living room with his gastrointestinal fumes. Sam checks his watch. Their argument, he calculates, will interrupt the evening news. He looks down at the scrap of paper in his hand. His thumbnail, ravaged by his gnawing, presses into the crinkled white paper and leaves behind a dot of crimson. "I won't be here for the evening news," he says, the volume of his voice startling him in the empty apartment. He faces the door, struggling with a fear he's decided has gone on too long. *I'm too young to be a shut-in.* He's told himself this hundreds of times, but there has always been an excuse.

He hasn't opened his front door in almost three years. When Brent delivers groceries and his mail, Sam unfastens the chain and goes into the living room, fleeing the panic that begins with the first turn of the lock as the gangly college freshman lets himself in. Sam had placed an ad in the student newspaper in the Fall, and Brent had answered. His height--six-ten, he'd told Sam--had been startling at first. Sam thought he might actually last in this job, that his size might make him less of a target. In the end, he lost Brent not to the spirits that kept him trapped in his apartment--they had never bothered the kid--but rather to summer break.

Brent delivered his final order of groceries and fresh neem last week. As Sam tied the leafy fronds together and hung them from a nail next to the front door, he noticed a string of spidery white blooms among the slim leaves and pulled the flowers to the front.

"Why do you hang that stuff?" Brent asked. He'd posed the same question almost monthly in the nine months he'd been delivering groceries, and Sam had yet to tell him the truth.

"I like the way it looks."

"My grandma told me people in India use neem to ward off evil spirits," Brent said, and touched Sam on the shoulder, making him jump as he adjusted the leaves. "There's nothing out there, you know. Nothing that will hurt you."

"Yeah, I know." The kid had never spent more than fifteen minutes in the building; he couldn't know what went on in the halls. Four years ago, not long after the burned-out warehouse had been renovated into apartments, Sam and his

## CRUSHED NEEM

neighbors had met, talked about the problem and possible solutions. But, one by one, his neighbors stopped coming to the meetings. Gradually more people locked themselves behind the neem leaves suggested by the tiny Indian woman in 4C. After so much time, all Sam could remember of her was that she always smelled like turmeric and that she'd been right about the neem.

Sam picked up a shopping bag and carried it into the kitchen. Brent followed and piled groceries and mail on the counter. He brushed the dark hair out of his eyes and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Anyhow, today's my last day," he said, handing Sam a piece of paper. "I wanted to say thanks." It was a lottery ticket.

"For what?" Sam asked.

"It was only a dollar." Brent shrugged, color creeping into his cheeks and deepening the red in the festering cluster of pimples on his forehead. "Who knows, maybe you'll win. It's really nothing though."

Sam thanked Brent and wished him a relaxing summer. He really would miss the kid, even if he didn't know anything more than his first name. He was Sam's only link to the world outside, and he never liked breaking in a new link.

Brent wished him luck in the lottery. "Maybe you'll win and have to finally go out," he said. Sam just nodded and retreated into the living room while Brent let himself out for the last time.

The next day he watched the lottery drawing with the skepticism of one who'd never even won a consolation prize. When the numbers on the television matched the numbers on his ticket, Sam shouted and leapt around the living room-- couch to chair, chair to ottoman, and back--until Mrs. Calabria pounded on the wall. A million dollars would change his life--plasma big-screen, surround sound. In his excitement, he went for the front door. He had the chain unlatched and the deadbolt unfastened before he realized what he was doing. Then he heard someone in the hall outside.

The loud *whump* started at the far end of the hall and rhythmically approached his apartment until it rattled his nearly-unlocked door. Outside, someone slammed something-- Sam didn't want to think what--against the wall, first one side, then the other. The plaster-shattering sound crept closer. With trembling fingers, Sam tried to secure the chain. His first attempt coincided with a *whump* that shook his door. During the silences between, Sam imagined he could hear the footfalls closing in on his unlocked apartment door. He sucked in his breath and held it. The chain dropped from his hand and clattered against the wall, taking a chip out of the brown paint. The sound stopped. He snapped the deadbolt into place and slid the chain home. Afterwards, he sat against the wall opposite the door and waited. The disappointment oozing under the door felt palpable. Sam wanted to blame his imagination, but knew all too well what haunted the hallway.

When he called about collecting his fortune, a woman on the other end delivered devastating news. He couldn't fax it or mail it. The ticket had to be presented "in person," she said. Would they come to him, he asked. "No."

Now, Sam stands in his entryway, holding the ticket in front of his face. With money as his motivator, it's taken him only a week to make another attempt. His thumb leaves a sweaty smudge and that pinprick of crimson on the paper, but he's careful not to touch those precious numbers. The ticket is slightly crumpled, but the black ink is as dark and crisp as the day Brent handed it to him. His gaze never leaves