

BLAKE CROUCH REMAKING

SHORT STORY BY THE AUTHOR OF
SNOWBOUND AND ABANDON



REMAKING

a short story by

Blake Crouch

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Crouch quite simply is a marvel. Highest possible recommendation.

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Blake Crouch is the most exciting new thriller writer I've read in years.

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REMAKING

Mitchell stared at the page in the notebook, covered in his messy scrawl, but he wasn't reading. He'd seen them walk into the coffeehouse fifteen minutes prior, the man short, pudgy, and smoothshaven, the boy perhaps five or six and wearing a long-sleeved Oshkoshbgosh—red with blue stripes.

Now they sat two tables away.

The boy said, "I'm hungry."

"We'll get something in a little while."

"How long is a little while?"

"Until I say."

"When are you gonna—"

"Joel, do you mind?"

The little boy's head dropped. The man stopped typing and looked up from his laptop.

"I'm sorry. Tell you what. Give me five minutes so I can finish this email, and we'll go eat breakfast."

Mitchell sipped his espresso, snow falling beyond the storefront windows into this mountain hamlet of eight hundred souls, Miles Davis squealing through the speakers—one of the low-key numbers off *Kind of Blue*.

Mitchell trailed them down the frosted sidewalk.

One block up, they crossed the street and disappeared into a diner. Having already eaten in that very establishment two hours ago, he installed himself on a bench where he could see the boy and the man sitting at a table by the front window.

Mitchell fished the cell out of his jacket and opened the phone, scrolling through ancient numbers as the snow collected in his hair.

He pressed talk.

Two rings, then, “Mitch? Oh my God, where are you?”

He made no answer.

“Look, I’m at the office, getting ready for a big meeting. I can’t do this right now, but will you answer if I call you back? Please?”

Mitchell closed the phone and shut his eyes.

They emerged from the diner an hour later.

Mitchell brushed the inch of snow off his pants and stood, shivering. He crossed the street and followed the boy and the man up the sidewalk, passing a candy shop, a grocery, a depressing bar masquerading as an old west saloon.

They left the sidewalk after another block and walked up the driveway to the Antlers Motel, disappeared into 113, the middle in a single-story row of nine rooms. The tarp stretched over the small swimming pool sagged with snow. In an alcove between the rooms and the office, vending machines hummed against the hush of the storm.

Ten minutes of brisk walking returned Mitchell to his motel, the Box Canyon Lodge. He climbed into his burgundy Jetta, cranked the engine.

“Just for tonight?”

“Yes.”

“That’ll be \$69.78 with tax.”

Mitchell handed the woman his credit card.

Behind the front desk, a row of Hummels stood in perfect formation atop a black and white television airing “The Price is Right.”

Mitchell signed the receipt. “Could I have 112 or 114?”

The old woman stubbed out her cigarette in a glass ashtray and reached for the key cabinet.

Mitchell pressed his ear to the wood paneling.

A television blared through the thin wall.

His cell phone vibrated—Lisa calling again.

Flipped it open.

“Mitch? You don’t have to say anything. Please just listen—”

He powered off the phone and continued writing in the notebook.

Afternoon unspooled as the snow piled up in the parking lot of the Antlers Motel. Mitchell parted the blinds and stared through the window as the first intimation of dusk began to blue the sky, the noise of the television next door droning through the walls.

He lay down on top of the covers and stared at the ceiling and whispered the Lord's Prayer.

In the evening, he startled out of sleep to the sound of a door slamming, sat up too fast, the blood rushing to his head in a swarm of black spots. He hadn't intended to sleep.

Mitchell slid off the bed and walked to the window, split the blinds, heard the diminishing sound of footsteps—a single set—squeaking in the snow.

He saw the boy pass through the illumination of a streetlamp and disappear into the alcove that housed the vending machines.

The snowflakes stung Mitchell's cheeks as he crossed the parking lot, his sneakers swallowed up in six inches of fresh powder.

The hum of the vending machines intensified, and he picked out the sound of coins dropping through a slot.

He glanced once over his shoulder at the row of rooms, the doors all closed, windows dark save slivers of electric blue from television screens sliding through the blinds.

Too dark to tell if the man was watching.

Mitchell stepped into the alcove as the boy pressed his selection on the drink machine.

The can banged into the open compartment, and the boy reached down and claimed the Sprite.

"Hi, Joel."

The boy looked up at him, then lowered his head like a scolded dog, as though he'd been caught vandalizing the drink machine.

"No, it's all right. You haven't done anything wrong."

Mitchell squatted down on the concrete.

"Look at me, son. Who's that man you're with?"

The voice so soft and high: "Daddy."

A voice boomed across the parking lot. "Joel? It don't take this long to buy a can of pop! Make a decision and get back here."

The door slammed.

"Joel, do you want to come with me?"

"You're a stranger."

“No, my name’s Mitch. I’m a police officer actually. Why don’t you come with me.”

“No.”

“I think you probably should.” Mitchell figuring he had maybe thirty seconds before the father stormed out.

“Where’s your badge?”

“I’m undercover right now. Come on, we don’t have much time. You need to come with me.”

“I’ll get in trouble.”

“No, only way you’ll get in trouble is by not obeying a police officer when he tells you to do something.” Mitchell noticed the boy’s hands trembling. His were, too. “Come on, son.”

He put his hand on the boy’s small shoulder and guided him out of the alcove toward his car, where he opened the front passenger door and motioned for Joel to get in.

Mitchell brushed the snow off the windows and the windshield, and as he climbed in and started the engine, he saw the door to 113 swing open in the rearview mirror.

“You eaten yet?”

“No.”

Main Street empty and the newly-scraped pavement already frosting again, the reflection of the high beams blinding against the wall of pouring snow.

“Are you hungry?”

“I don’t know.”

He turned right off Main, drove slow down a snow-packed side street that sloped past little Victorians, inns, and motels, Joel buckled into the passenger seat, the can of Sprite still unopened between his legs, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Mitchell unlocked the door and opened it.

“Go on in, Joel.”

The boy entered and Mitchell hit the light, closing and locking the door after them, wondering if Joel could reach the brass chain near the top.

It wasn’t much of a room—single bed, table, cabinet housing a refrigerator on one side, hangers on the other. He’d lived out of it for the last month and it smelled like stale pizza crust and cardboard and clothes soured with sweat.

Mitchell closed the blinds.

“You wanna watch TV?”

The boy shrugged.

Mitchell picked the remote control off the bedside table and turned it on.

“Come sit on the bed, Joel.”

As the boy climbed onto the bed, Mitchell started flipping.

“You tell me to stop when you see something you wanna watch.”

Mitchell surfed through all thirty stations twice and the boy said nothing.

He settled on the Discovery Channel, set the remote control down.

“I want my Dad,” the boy said, trying not to cry.

“Calm down, Joel.”

Mitchell sat on the bed and unlaced his sneakers. His socks were damp and cold. He balled them up and tossed them into the open bathroom, staring now at his pale feet, toes shriveled with moisture.

Joel had settled back into one of the pillows, momentarily entranced by the television program where a man caked in mud wrestled with a crocodile.

Mitchell turned up the volume.

“You like crocodiles?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“You aren’t scared of them?”

The boy shook his head. “I got a snake.”

“Nuh uh.”

The boy looked up. “Uh huh.”

“What kind?”

“It’s black and scaly and it lives in a glass box.”

“A terrarium?”

“Yeah. Daddy catches mice for it.”

“It eats them?”

“Uh huh. Slinky’s belly gets real big.”

Mitchell smiled. “I bet that’s something to see.”

They sat watching the Discovery Channel for twenty minutes, Joel engrossed now, Mitchell with his head tilted back against the headboard, eyes closed, a half grin where none had been for twelve months.

At 8:24 p.m., the cell vibrated against Mitchell’s hip. He opened the case and pulled out the phone.

“Hi, Lisa.”

“Mitch.”

“Listen, I want you to call me back in five minutes and do exactly what I say.”

“Okay.”

Mitchell closed the phone and slid off the bed.

The boy looked up, still half-watching the program on the world's deadliest spiders.

He said, "I'm hungry."

"I know, sport. I know. Give me just a minute here and I'll order a pizza."

Mitchell crossed the carpet, tracking through dirty clothes he should've taken to the laundry a week ago.

His suitcase lay open in the space between the dresser and the baseboard heater. He knelt down, searching through wrinkled oxfords and blue jeans, khakis that had long since lost their creases.

It was a tiny, wool sweater—ice-blue with a magnified snowflake stitched across the front.

"Hey, Joel," he said, "it's getting cold in here. I want you to put this on." He tossed the sweater onto the bed.

"I'm not cold."

"You do like I tell you now."

As the boy reached for the sweater, Mitchell undid the buttons on his plaid shirt and worked his arms out of the sleeves. He dropped the shirt on the carpet and rifled his suitcase again until he found the badly faded T-shirt he'd bought fifteen years ago at a U2 concert.

On the way back to the bed, he stopped at the television and lifted the videotape from the top of the VCR, pushed it in.

"No, I wanna watch the—"

"We'll turn it back on in a minute."

He climbed under the covers beside the boy and stared at the bedside table, waiting for the phone to buzz.

"Joel, I'm gonna answer the phone. I want you to sit here beside me and watch the television and don't say a word until I tell you."

"I'm hungry."

The phone vibrated itself toward the edge of the bedside table.

"I'll buy you anything you want if you do this right for me."

Mitchell picked up the phone.

Lisa calling.

He closed his eyes, gave himself a moment to engage. He'd written it all down months ago, the script in the bedside table drawer under the Gideon bible he'd taken to reading every night before bed, but he didn't need it.

"Hi, Honey."

"Mitch, I'm so glad you—"

“Stop. Don’t say anything. Just hang on a minute.” He reached for the remote control and pressed play. The screen lit up, halfway through the episode of Seinfeld. He lowered the volume, said, “Lisa, I want you to say, ‘I’m almost asleep.’”

“What are you—”

“Just do it.”

A pause, then: “I’m almost asleep.”

“Say it like you really are.”

Mitchell closed his eyes.

“I’m almost asleep.”

“We’re sitting here watching Seinfeld.” He looked down at the top of Joel’s head, his hair brown with gold highlights, just the right shade and length. He kissed the boy’s head. “Our little guy’s just about asleep.”

“Mitch, are you drunk—”

“Lisa, I will close this fucking phone. Ask how our day was. Do it.”

“How was your day?”

“You weren’t crying that night.” He could hear her trying to gather herself.

“How was your day, Mitch?”

He closed his eyes again. “One of those perfect ones. We’re in Ouray, Colorado now. This little town surrounded by huge mountains. It started snowing around midday as we were driving down from Montrose. If they don’t plow the roads we may not be able to get out tomorrow.”

“Mitch—”

“We had a snowball fight after dinner, and our motel has these Japanese soaking tubs out back, full of hot mineral water from the springs under the town. Say you wish you were here.”

“That’s not what I said that night, Mitch.”

“What did you say?”

“I wish I could be there with you, but part of me’s so glad you two have this time together.”

“There aren’t many days like this, are there?”

“No.”

“Now, I just want to hear you breathing over the phone.”

He listened. He looked at the television, then the boy’s head, then the ice-blue sweater.

Mitchell held the phone to Joel’s mouth.

“Say goodnight to Mom, Alex.”

“Goodnight.”

Mitchell brought the phone to his ear. “Thank you, Lisa.”

“Mitch, who was that? What have you—”

He powered off the phone and set it on the bedside table.

When the boy was finally asleep, Mitchell turned off the television. He pulled the covers over the both of them and scooted forward until he could feel the hard ridge of the boy’s little spine press against his chest.

In the back window, through a crack in the closed blinds, he watched the snow falling through the orange illumination of a streetlamp, and his lips moved in prayer.

The knock finally came a few minutes after 3:00 a.m., and nothing timid about it—the forceful pounding of a fist against the door.

“Mitchell Griggs?”

Mitchell sat up in bed, eyes struggling to adjust in the darkness.

“Mr. Griggs?”

More pounding as his feet touched the carpet.

“Griggs!”

Mitchell made his way across dirty clothes and pizza boxes to the door, which he spoke through.

“Who is it?”

“Dennis James, Ouray County sheriff. Need to speak with you right now.”

“Little late, isn’t it?” He tried to make his voice sound light and unperturbed. “Maybe I could come by your office in the—”

“What part of right now went past you?”

Mitchell glanced up, saw the chain still locked. “What’s this about?” he asked.

“I think you know.”

“I’m sorry I don’t.”

“Six-year-old boy named Joel McIntosh went missing from the Antlers Motel this evening. Clerk saw him getting into a burgundy Jetta just like the one you drive.”

“Well, I’m sorry. He’s not here.”

“Then why don’t you open the door, let me confirm that so you can get back to sleep and we can quit wasting precious minutes trying to find this little boy.”

Mitchell glanced through the peephole, glimpsed the sheriff standing within a foot of the door under one of the globe lights that lit the second-floor walkway, his black parka dusted with snow, his wide-brimmed cowboy hat capped with a half-inch of powder.

Mitchell couldn't nail down the sheriff's age in the poor light—late sixties perhaps, seventy at most. He held the forend stock of a pump-action shotgun in his right hand.

"I've got two deputies out back on the hill behind your room if you're thinking of—"

"I'm not."

"Just tell me if you have the boy—"

A radio squeaked outside.

The sheriff spoke in low tones, then Mitchell heard the dissipation of footsteps.

A minute limped by before the sheriff's voice passed faintly through the door again.

"You still there, Mitch?"

"Yeah."

"If it's all right with you, I'm gonna sit down. I been walking all over town since seven o'clock."

The sheriff lowered out of sight, and through the peephole, Mitchell could only see torrents of snow dumping on the trees and houses and parked cars.

He eased down on the carpet and leaned against the door.

"I was just speaking with your wife. Lisa's concerned for you, Mitch. Knows why you're here."

"She doesn't know any—"

"And so do I. You may not know this, but I helped pull you and your son out of the car. Never forget it. Been what, about a year?"

"To the day."

Drafts of frigid air swept under the door, Mitchell shivering, wishing he'd brought a blanket with him from the bed.

"Mitch, Lisa's been trying to call you. You have your cell with you?"

"It's turned off, on the bedside table."

"Would you talk to her for me?"

"I don't need to talk to her."

"I think it might not be a bad—"

"I had a meeting the next morning in Durango. Had brought him along, 'cause he'd never seen the Rockies. That storm came in overnight, and you know, I just...I almost waited. Almost decided to stay the day in Ouray, give the plows a chance to scrape the pass."

"I got a boy of my own. He's grown now, but I remember when he was your Alex's age, can't say I'd have survived if something like what happened to your son happened to him. You got a gun in there, Mitch?"

In the back of Mitchell's throat welled a sharp, acidic tang, like tasting the connectors of a nine-volt battery, but all he said was, "Yeah."

"Is the boy all right?"

Mitchell said nothing.

"Look, I know you're hurting, but Joel McIntosh ain't done a thing to deserve getting dragged into this. Boy's probably terrified. You thought about that, or can you not see past your own—"

"Of course I've thought about it."

"Then why don't you send him on out, and you and me can keep talking."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I just...I can't."

Mitchell heard footsteps outside the door. He got up quickly, glanced through the peephole just in time to see the battering ram swing back.

He stumbled toward the bed as the door exploded off its hinges and slammed to the floor, two men standing in the threshold—the sheriff with the shotgun trained on him, a deputy with a flashlight and a handgun.

Mitchell shielded his eyes, specks of snow blowing in, luminescent where they passed through the LED beam, couldn't see the man behind the light, but the sheriff's eyes were hard and kind. He could tell this even though they lived in the shadow of a Stetson.

The sheriff said, "I don't see the boy, Wade. Mitchell, let me see those hands."

Mitchell took a deep, trembling breath.

"Come on, Mitch, let me see your hands."

Mitchell shook his head.

"Goddamn, son, I won't tell you—"

Mitchell swung his right arm behind his back, his fingers wrapping around the remote control jammed down his boxer shorts, the room fired into blue by the illumination of the television, the laugh track to Seinfeld blaring, Wade screaming the sheriff's name as a greater light bloomed beside the lesser.

Sheriff James flicked the light, felt the breath leave him, blinking through the tears.

He leaned the shotgun against the wall and stepped inside the bathroom.

The cheap fiberglass of the tub had been lined with blankets and pillows, and the little boy was sitting up staring at the sheriff, orange earplugs protruding from his ears.

The sheriff knelt down, smiled at the boy, pulled out the earplugs.

“You okay, Joel?”

The boy said, “A noise woke me up.”

“Did he make you sleep in here?”

“Mitchell said if I was a good boy and kept my earplugs in and stayed in here all night, I could see my Daddy in the morning.”

“He did, huh?”

“Where’s my Daddy?”

“Down in the parking lot. We’ll take you to him, but I need to ask you something first.” The sheriff sat down on the cracked linoleum tile. “Did Mitchell hurt you?”

“No.”

“He didn’t touch you anywhere private or make you touch him?”

“No, we just sat on the bed and watched about spiders and stuff.”

“You mean on the TV?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s that?” The sheriff pointed to the notebook sitting on a pillow under the faucet.

“Mitchell said to give this to the people who came to get me.”

Wade walked into the bathroom, stood behind the sheriff as he lifted the spiral-bound notebook and opened the red cover to a page of handwriting in black ink.

“What is it?” Wade asked.

“It’s to his wife.”

“What’s it say?”

The sheriff closed the notebook. “I believe that’s some of her business.” He stood, faced his deputy, snow melting off his Stetson. “Get this boy wrapped up in some blankets and bring him down to his dad. I gotta go call Lisa Griggs.”

“Will do.”

“And Wade?”

“Yeah?”

“You throw a blanket over Mr. Griggs before you bring Joel out. Don’t want so much as a strand of hair visible. Shield the boy’s eyes if you have to, maybe even turn the lights out when you carry him through the room.”

The deputy shook his head. “What the hell was wrong with this man?”

“You got kids yet, Wade?”

“You know I don’t.”

“Well, just a heads up—if you ever do, this is how much they make you love them.”

BLAKE CROUCH is the author of DESERT PLACES, LOCKED DOORS, and ABANDON, which was an IndieBound Notable Selection last summer, all published by St. Martin's Press. His newest thriller, SNOWBOUND, also from St. Martin's, was released in June 2010. His short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Thriller 2*, and other anthologies, including the new Shivers anthology from Cemetery Dance. In 2009, he co-wrote "Serial" with J.A. Konrath, which has been downloaded over 250,000 times and topped the Kindle bestseller list for 4 weeks. That story and DESERT PLACES have also been optioned for film. Blake lives in Durango, Colorado. His website is www.blakecrouch.com.

Blake Crouch's Works

Andrew Z. Thomas thrillers

Desert Places

Locked Doors

Other works

Draculas with J.A. Konrath, Jeff Strand and F. Paul Wilson

Abandon

Snowbound

Luminous Blue

Perfect Little Town (horror novella)

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