BLAKE CROUCH

*69

BY THE AUTHOR OF
SNOWBOUND AND ABANDON

SHORT STORY



*69

a short story by

Blake Crouch

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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PRAISE FOR BLAKE CROUCH

Crouch quite simply is a marvel. Highest possible recommendation.
BOOKREPORTER

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

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*69

At nine-thirty on a Thursday evening, as he lounged in bed grading the pop quizzes he'd sprung on his 11th grade honors English class, Tim West heard footsteps ascend the staircase and pad down the hallway toward the bedroom.

His wife, Laura, appeared in the open doorway.

"Tim, come here."

He set the papers aside and climbed out of bed.

Following her down the squeaky stairs into the living room, he found immense pleasure in the architecture of her long legs and the grace with which she carried herself. Coupled with that yellow satin teddy he loved and the floral tang of skin lotion, Tim foresaw a night of marital bliss. Historically, Thursdays were their night.

Laura sat him down in the oversize leather chair across from the fireplace, and as she took a seat on its matching ottoman, it struck him—this fleeting premonition that she was on the verge of revealing she was pregnant with their first child, a project they'd been working on since last Christmas. Instead, she reached over to the end table beside the chair and pressed the blinking play button on the answering machine:

Ten seconds of the static hiss of wind.

A woman's voice breaks through, severely muffled, and mostly unintelligible except for, "…didn't mean anything!"

A man's voice, louder and distorted by static: "…making me do this."

"I can explain!"

"…late for that."

A thud, a sucking sound.

"…in my eyes." The man's voice. "Look in them! …you can't speak….but… listen the last minute…whore-life…be disrespected. You lie there and think about that while…"

Thirty seconds of that horrible sucking sound, occasionally cut by the wind.

The man weeps deeply and from his core.

An electronic voice ended the message with, "Thursday, nine-sixteen, p.m."

Tim looked at his wife. Laura shrugged. He reached over, played it again.

When it finished, Laura said, "There's no way that's what it sounds like, right?"

"There any way to know for certain?"

"Let's just call nine-one—"

"And tell them what? What information do we have?"

Laura rubbed her bare arms. Tim went to the hearth and turned up the gas logs. She came over, sat beside him on the cool brick.

"Maybe it's just some stupid joke," she said.

"Maybe."

"What? You don't think so?"

"Remember Gene Malack? Phys ed teacher?"

"Tall, geeky-looking guy. Sure."

"We hung out some last year while he was going through his divorce. Grabbed beers, went bowling. Nice guy, but a little quirky. There was this one time when our phone rang, and I picked it up, said, 'Hello?', but no one answered. The strange thing was that I could hear someone talking, only it was muffled, just like that message. But I recognized Gene's voice. I should've hung up, but human nature, I stayed on, listened to him order a meal from the Wendy's drive-through. Apparently, he'd had our number on speed-dial in his cell. It had gotten joggled, accidentally called our house."

One of the straps had fallen down on Laura's teddy.

As Tim fixed it, she said, "You just trying to scare me? Let's call your brother—"

"No, not yet—"

"No, you're saying that a man, who we know well enough to be on his speed-dial list, was killing some poor woman tonight, and he accidentally…what was the word?"

"Joggled."

"Thank you. Joggled his phone, inadvertently calling us during the murder. That where you're going with this?"

“Look, maybe we’re getting a little overly—”

“Overly, shit. I’m getting freaked out here, Tim.”

“All right. Let’s listen once more, see if we recognize the voice.”

Tim went over to the end table, played the message a third time.

“There’s just too much wind and static,” he said as it ended.

Laura got up and walked into the kitchen, came back a moment later with a small notepad she used for grocery lists.

She returned to her spot on the hearth, pen poised over the paper, said, “Okay, who are we close enough friends with to be on their speed-dial?”

“Including family?”

“Anyone we know.”

“My parents, your parents, my brother, your brother and sister.”

“Jen.” She scribbled on the pad.

“Chris.”

“Shanna and David.”

“Jan and Walter.”

“Dave and Anne.”

“Paul and Mo.”

“Hans and Lanette.”

“Kyle and Jason.”

“Corey and Sarah.”

This progressed for several minutes until Laura finally looked up from the pad, said, “There’s thirty names here.”

“So, I’ve got an unpleasant question.”

“What?”

“If we’re going on the assumption that what’s on that answering machine is a man we know murdering a woman, we have to ask ourselves, ‘which of our friends is capable of doing something like that?’”

“God.”

“I know.”

For a moment, their living room stood so quiet Tim could hear the second hand of his grandmother’s antique clock above the mantle and the Bose CD player spinning Bach up in their bedroom.

“I’ve got a name,” he said.

“Me, too.”

“You first.”

“Corey Mustin.”

“Oh, come on, you’re just saying that ‘cause he took me to that titty bar in Vegas, and you’ve hated him ever—”

“I hate most of your college friends, but he in particular gives me the creeps. I could see him turning psychotic if he got jealous enough. Woman’s intuition, Tim. Don’t doubt it. Your turn.”

“Your friend Anne’s husband.”

“Dave? No, he’s so sweet.”

“I’ve never liked the guy. We played ball in church league a couple years ago, and he was a maniac on the court. Major temper problem. Hard fouler. We almost came to blows a few times.”

“So what should I do? Put a check by their names?”

“Yeah…wait. God, we’re so stupid.” Tim jumped up from the hearth, rushed over to the phone.

“What are you doing?” Laura asked.

“Star sixty-nine. Calls back the last number that called you.”

As he reached for the phone, it rang.

He flinched, looked over at Laura, her eyes covered in the bend of her arm.

“That scared the shit out of me,” she said.

“Should I answer it?”

“I don’t know.”

He picked up the phone mid-ring.

“Hello?”

“Tiiiiiimmmmm.”

“Hi, Mom.”

“How’s my baby boy?”

“I’m fine, but—”

“You know, I talked to your brother today and I’m worried—”

“Look, Mom, I’m so sorry, but this is a really bad time. Can I call you back tomorrow?”

“Well, all right. Love you. Kisses and hugs to that pretty wife of yours.”

“You, too. Bye, Mom.” Tim hung up the phone.

Laura said, “Does that mean we can’t star sixty-nine whoever left the message?”

“I don’t know.”

“You think there’s some number you push to like, double star-sixty—”

“I don’t work for the phone company, Laura.”

“Remember, I suggested we buy the package with caller ID, but you were all, ‘No, that’s an extra five bucks a month.’ I think it’s time to call the police.”

“No, I’ll call Martin. He’ll be off his shift in an hour.”

A few minutes shy of eleven o’clock, the doorbell rang.

Tim unlocked the deadbolt, found his brother, Martin, standing on the stoop, half-squinting in the glare of the porchlight, his uniform wrinkled, deep bags under his eyes.

“You look rough, big bro,” Tim said.

“Can I come in or you wanna chat out here in the cold?”

Tim peered around him, saw the squad car parked in the driveway, the engine ticking as it cooled.

Fog enveloped the streets and homes of Quail Ridge, one of the new subdivisions built on what had been a farmer’s treeless pasture, the houses all new and homogenous, close enough to the interstate to always bask in its distant roar.

He stepped to the side as Martin walked into his house, then closed and locked the door after them.

“Laura asleep?” he asked.

“No, she’s still up.”

They walked past the living room into the kitchen where Laura, now sporting a more modest nightgown, had put a pot of water on the stove, the steam making the lid jump and jive.

“Hey, Marty,” she said.

He kissed her on the cheek. “My God, you smell good. So you told him about us yet?”

“Never gets old,” Tim said. “You think it would, but it just keeps getting funnier.”

Laura said, “Cup of tea, Marty?”

“Why not.”

Martin and Tim retired to the living room. After Laura got the tea steeping, she joined them, plopping down in the big leather chair across from the couch.

Martin said, “Pretty fucking quaint and what not with the fire going. So what’s up? You guys having a little crumb-cruncher?”

Laura and Tim looked at each other, then Laura said, “No, why would you think that?”

“Yeah, Mart, typically not safe to ask if a woman’s pregnant until you actually see the head crowning.”

“So I’m not gonna be an uncle? Why the hell else would you ask me over this late?”

“Go ahead, Laura.”

She pressed play on the answering machine.

They listened to the message, and when it finished, Martin said, “Play it again.”

After the message ended, they sat in silence, Martin with his brow furrowed, shaking his head.

He finally said, “I know you’re too much of a cheap bastard to have caller ID or anything invented in the twenty-first century, so did you star-sixty-nine it?”

“Tried, but Mom called literally the second I picked up the phone.”

Martin undid the top two buttons of his navy shirt, ran his fingers around the collar to loosen it.

“Could just be a prank,” he said. “Maybe someone held the phone up to the television during a particular scene in a movie.”

“If that’s what it is, I don’t recognize the movie.”

Martin quickly redid the buttons on his shirt, said, “What do you think you’ve got there?”

“I think someone’s phone got jiggled at the worst possible moment, and we were on their speed dial.”

“You call nine-one-one?”

“Called you.”

Martin nodded. “There’s gotta be a way to find that number. You know, something you dial other than star-sixty-nine.”

Tim said, “Star-seventy?”

“I don’t know, something like that.”

“We tried to call the phone company a little while ago, but they’re closed until eight a.m. tomorrow.”

Martin looked at Laura, said, “You okay, sweetie? You don’t look so hot.”

Tim saw it, too—something about her had changed, her face seasick yellow, hands trembling imperceptibly.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“You sure? You look like you’re about to blow chunks all over your new carpet.”

“I said I’m fine.”

Martin stood. “I need to use the little girl’s room.”

Laura watched him walk out of the room and down the first-floor hallway, and only when the bathroom door had closed, did she look back at Tim and whisper, “You see it?”

“See what?”

“When he unbuttoned his shirt a minute ago, it exposed his white tee-shirt underneath.”

“So?”

“So I saw blood on it, and I think he saw me looking at it, because he buttoned his shirt up again real fast.”

Tim felt something constrict in his stomach.

“Why does he have blood on his shirt, Tim?”

The toilet flushed.

“Listen, when he comes back out, you say since you aren’t feeling well, you’re going to bed.” The faucet turned on. “Then go upstairs and wait several minutes. I’m gonna offer Martin a drink. We’ll sit in the kitchen, and you sneak back down and go outside, see if you can get into his squad car.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think he brought his cell phone inside with him. He usually keeps it in a little pouch on his belt. Probably left it in the car. Get it, and look back over the outgoing history. If he called our house at nine-sixteen tonight, we’ll know.”

“And then what?”

The bathroom faucet went quiet.

“I don’t know. This is my brother for Chrissakes.”

Tim opened one of the high cabinets above the sink and took down a bottle of whiskey.

“Old Grandad?” Martin asked.

“What, too low-shelf for you?”

“That’s what Dad used to pass out to. Let me see that.” He grabbed the bottle out of Tim’s hands, unscrewed the cap, inhaled a whiff. “Jesus, brings back memories.”

“You want ice or—”

“Naw, let’s just pass it back and forth like old times in the field.”

They sat at the breakfast table, taking turns with the fifth of Old Grandad. It had been several months since the brothers had really talked. They’d been close in high school, drifted in college, Martin only lasting three semesters. Tim had come home two years ago when Dad’s liver finally yelled uncle, found that something had wedged itself between him and his brother, a nameless tension they’d never acknowledged outright.

And though all he could think about was the message and Laura, he forced himself to broach the subject of Mom—hostile territory—asked Martin if he thought she seemed to be thriving in the wake of Dad’s passing.

“That’s a pretty fucked-up thing to say.”

“I didn’t mean it like—”

“No, you’re saying she’s better off without him.”

Beyond the kitchen, Tim heard the middle step of the staircase creak—Laura working her way down from the bedroom—and he wondered if Martin had heard it. The last two steps were noisy as well, and then came the front door you

could hear opening from Argentina. Nothing else to do but get him riled and noisy.

“Yeah, Martin, I guess I am saying she’s better off without him. What’d he do these last five years but cause us all a lot of heartache? And what’d you do but step in as Dad’s faithful apologist?”

Another creak.

“Ever heard of honor thy father, Tim?” Martin’s cheeks had flushed with the whiskey and Tim wondered if he’d intended to raise his voice like he had. His brother’s back was to the archway between the kitchen and the living room, and as Tim saw Laura enter the foyer and start toward the front door, he tried to avert his eyes.

“You know he beat Mom.”

“Once, Tim. One fucking time. And it was a total accident. He didn’t mean to shove her as hard as he did.” Laura turning the deadbolt now. “And it tore him up that he did it. You weren’t here when it happened. Didn’t see him crying like a goddamn two-year-old, sitting in his own vomit, did you?” Tim could hear the hinges creaking. “No,” Martin answered his own question as the front door swung open, cold streaming in. “You were in college.” Laura slipped outside, eased the door closed behind her. “Becoming a teacher.” Any curiosity Tim had harbored concerning his brother’s opinion of his chosen profession instantly wilted.

“You’re right,” Tim said. “Sorry. I just…part of me’s still so pissed at him, you know?”

Martin lifted the bottle, took a long drink, wiped his mouth.

“Of course I know.”

Tim pulled Old Grandad across the table, wondering how long it would take Laura. If the cruiser was locked, there’d be nothing she could do but come right back inside. If it was open, might take her a minute or two of searching the front seats to find the phone, another thirty seconds to figure out how to work Martin’s cell, check his call history.

He sipped the whiskey, pushed the bottle back to Martin.

“Wish you’d come over more,” Tim said. “Feel like I don’t see you much these days.”

“See me every Sunday at Mom’s.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Tim wanted to ask Martin if he felt that wedge between them, met his brother’s eyes across the table, but couldn’t bring himself to say the words. They didn’t operate on that frequency.

A frigid mist fogged Laura's glasses, and with the porchlight out, she took her time descending the steps, the soles of her slippers holding a tenuous grip on the wet brick. The fog had thickened since Martin's arrival, the streetlamps putting out a glow far dimmer and more diffused than their normal sharp points of illumination—now just smudges of light in the distance.

She hurried down the sidewalk that curved from the house to the driveway.

Martin had parked his police cruiser behind the old Honda Civic she'd had since her junior year of high school, over 200,000 miles on the odometer and not a glimmer of senility.

Laura walked around to the front door on the passenger side, out of the sight-line of the living room windows. She reached to open the front passenger door, wondering if Martin's cruiser carried an alarm. If so, she was about to wake up everyone on the block, and had better prepare herself to explain to her brother-in-law why she'd tried to break into his car.

The door opened. Interior lights blazing. No screeching alarm. The front seat filthy—Chick-Fil-A wrappers and crushed Cheerwine cans in the floorboards.

She leaned over the computer in the central console, inspected the driver seat.

No phone.

Two minutes of leafing through the myriad papers and napkins and straws and stray salt packets in the glove compartment convinced her it wasn't there either.

She glanced back through the partition that separated the front seats from the back.

In the middle seat, on top of a Penthouse magazine, lay Martin's black leather cell phone case.

"Yeah, I was seeing this woman for a little while."

"But not anymore?"

Martin took another long pull from Old Grandad, shook his head.

"What happened?"

"She wanted to domesticate me, as they say."

Tim forced a smile. "How so?"

"Tried to drag me to church and Sunday school. Anytime we'd be out and I'd order an alcoholic beverage—her term—she'd make this real restrained sigh, like her Southern Baptist sensibility had been scandalized. And in bed…"

Laura opened the door behind the front passenger seat and climbed into the back of the cruiser. Wary of the interior lights exposing her, on the chance

Martin happened to glance outside, she pulled the door closed.

After a moment, the lights cut out.

She picked up the leather case, fished out Martin's cell phone, and flipped it open, the little screen glowing in the dark.

"…I'd gotten my hopes up, figured she's so uptight about every other fucking thing, girl must be a psychopath between the sheets. Like it has to balance out somewhere, right?"

As he sipped the whiskey, Tim glanced around Martin toward the front door.

"Sadly, not the case. When we finally did the deed, she just laid there, absolutely motionless, making these weird little noises. She was terrified of sex. I think she approached it like scooping up dogshit. Damn, this whiskey's running through me."

Martin got up from the table and left the kitchen, Tim listening to his brother's footsteps track down the hallway.

The bathroom door opened and closed.

It grew suddenly quiet.

The clock above the kitchen sink showed 11:35.

Laura stared at the cell phone screen and exhaled a long sigh. Martin's last call had gone out at 4:21 p.m. to Mary West, his and Tim's mother.

She closed the cell, slipped it back into the leather case, sat there for a moment in the dark car. She realized she'd somehow known all along, and she wondered how she'd let Tim know—maybe a shake of the head as she crept past the kitchen on her way up the stairs. Better not to advertise to Martin that they'd suspected him.

She searched for the door handle in the dark, and kept searching and kept searching. At least on this side, there didn't seem to be one. She moved to the other door, slid her hand across the vinyl. Nothing. Reaching forward, she touched the partition of vinyl-coated metal that separated the front and back seats, thinking, You've got to be kidding me.

Ten minutes later, flushed with embarrassment, Laura broke down and dialed her home number on Martin's cell. Even from inside the car, she could hear their telephone ringing through the living room windows. If she could get Tim to come outside unnoticed and let her out, Martin would never have to know about any of this.

The answering machine picked up, her voice advising, "Tim and Laura aren't here right now. You know the drill."

She closed Martin's cell, opened it, hit redial—five rings, then the machine again.

The moment she put the phone away, Martin's cell vibrated.

Laura opened the case, opened the phone—her landline calling, figured Tim had star-sixty-nined her last call.

Through the drawn shades of the living room windows, she saw his profile, pressed talk.

"Tim?"

"Thank God, Laura." Marty's voice. "Someone's in the house."

"What are you talking about? Where's Tim?"

"He ran out through the backyard. Where are you?"

"I um…I'm outside. Went for a late walk."

"You on your cell?"

"Yeah. I don't understand what's—"

"I'm coming out. Meet me at the roundabout and we'll—"

Martin's cell beeped three times and died.

The whiskey had made Tim thirsty, and Martin was taking his sweet time in the bathroom.

Tim went over to the sink, held a glass of water under the filter attached to the faucet.

He heard the creak of wood pressure—Marty walking back into the kitchen—and still watching the water level rise, Tim said, "Let me ask you something, Marty. You think whoever left that message knows they left it?"

"Yeah, Tim, I think they might."

Something in Martin's voice spun Tim around, and his first inclination was to laugh, because his brother did look ridiculous, standing just a few feet away in a pair of white socks, a shower cap hiding his short black hair, and the inexplicable choice to don the yellow satin teddy Laura had been wearing prior to his arrival.

"What the hell is this?" Tim asked, then noticed tears trailing down Martin's face.

"She'd gone to the movies with Tyler Hodges."

"Who are you talking—"

"Danielle."

"Matson?"

"Yeah."

"She's a junior in high school, man."

"You know what she did with Tyler after the movie?"

"Marty—"

“She went to the Grove with him and they parked and the windows were steamed up when I found them.”

“Look, you can have the tape from our answering—”

“They’d trace the call,” Martin said. “If you were to encourage them.”

“We wouldn’t.”

“I can see the wheels turning in your eyes, but I’ve thought this through quite a bit more than you have. Played out all the scenarios, and this is—”

“Please, Marty. I could never turn you in.”

Martin seemed to really consider this. He said, “Where’s Laura?”

“Upstairs.”

Martin cocked his head and shifted into his right hand the paring knife he’d liberated from the cutlery block.

“Don’t fuck with me. I was just up there.”

“You need help, Marty.”

“You think so?”

“Remember that vacation we took to Myrtle Beach? I was twelve, you were fourteen. We rode the Mad Mouse roller coaster eight times in a row.”

“That was a great summer.”

“I’m your brother, man. Little Timmy. Look at yourself. Let me help you.”

As he spoke, Tim noticed that Martin had gone so far as to put on black glove liners, and there was something so clinical and deliberate in the act, that for the first time, he actually felt afraid, a sharp plunging coldness streaking through his core, and he grew breathless as the long-overdue shot of adrenaline swept through him, and it suddenly occurred to him that he was just standing there, leaning back against the counter, watching Marty shove the curved paring knife in and out of his abdomen—four, five, six times—and he heard the water glass he’d been holding shatter on the hardwood floor beside his feet, Martin still stabbing him, a molten glow blossoming in his stomach, and as he reached down to touch the source of this tremendous pain, Martin grabbed a handful of his hair, Tim’s head torqued back, staring at the ceiling, the phone ringing, and he felt the knifepoint enter his neck just under his jawbone, smelled the rusty stench of his blood on the blade, and Martin said as he opened his throat, “I’m so sorry, Timmy. It’s almost over.”

The taste of metal was strong in Laura’s mouth, even before she saw the shadow emerge from the corner of the garage, the floodlights sensor triggered, Martin jogging toward the cruiser.

She ducked down behind the seats and flattened herself across the floorboards, her heart pounding under her pajama top.

The front driver side door opened.

Light flooded the interior.

Martin climbed in, shut the door, sat motionless behind the wheel until the dome light winked out.

At last, Laura heard the jingle of keys.

The engine cranked, the car backing down the driveway and tears coming, her eyes welling up with fear and something even worse—the uncertain horror of what had just happened in their home while she was locked in the back of this car.

She reached up, her fingers grazing the backseat upholstery, just touching the leather cell phone case.

When Martin spoke, it startled the hell out of her and she jerked her arm back down into her chest.

“Hey guys, it’s Marty. Listen, I’m really concerned based on my conversation with Tim. I’m coming over, and I hope we can talk about this. You know, I still remember your wedding day. Been what, eight years? Look, everyone goes through rocky patches, but this…well, let’s talk in person when I get there.”

Laura stifled her sobs as the car slowed and made a long, gentle left turn, wondering if they were driving through the roundabout at the entrance to the subdivision.

Under his breath, Martin sighed, said, “Where the fuck are you?”

She grabbed the leather case off the seat, pried out the phone in the darkness.

The screen lit up. She dialed 911, pressed talk.

The cruiser eased to a stop.

“Connecting…” appeared on the screen, and she held the phone to her ear.

The driver door opened and slammed, Laura’s eyes briefly stinging in the light. She heard Martin’s footsteps trail away on the pavement and still the phone against her ear had yet to ring.

She pulled it away, read the message: “Signal Faded Call Lost.”

In the top left corner of the screen, the connectivity icon that for some reason resembled a martini glass displayed zero bars.

The footsteps returned and Martin climbed back in, put the car into gear.

The acceleration of the hearty V8 pushed Laura into the base of the backseat.

Martin chuckled.

Laura held the phone up behind Martin’s seat, glimpsed a single bar on the screen.

“Laura?”

She froze.

“You have to tell me what that skin cream is,” he said. “Whole car smells like it.”

She didn’t move.

“Come on, I know you’re back there. Saw you when I got out of the car a minute ago. Now sit the fuck up or you’re gonna make me angry.”

That lonely bar on the cell phone screen had vanished.

Laura pushed up off the floorboard, climbed into the seat.

Martin watched her in the rearview mirror.

They were driving through the north end of the subdivision, the porchlights as distant as stars in the heavy, midnight fog.

Martin turned onto their street.

“What’d you do to my husband?” Laura asked, fighting tears.

The phone in her lap boasted two strong bars and very little battery.

She reached down, watched 9-1-1 appear on the screen as her fingers struggled to find the right buttons in the dark.

“What were you doing in my cruiser?” Martin asked. “Looking for this?”

He held up his second cell phone as Laura pressed talk.

Through the tiny speaker, the phone in her hand began to ring.

She said, “When did you know?”

“When you played the message.”

Martin turned into their driveway.

“I’m really sorry about all this, Laura. Just an honest to God…” He stomped the brake so hard that even at that slow rate of speed, Laura slammed into the partition. “You fucking bitch.”

Faintly: “Nine-one-one. Where is your emergency?”

Martin jammed the shifter into park, threw open the door.

“Oh, God, send someone to—”

The rear passenger door swung open and Martin dove in, Laura crushed under his weight, his hand cupped over her mouth, the phone ripped from her hand, and then the side of her head exploded, her vision jogged into a darkness that sparked with burning stars.

Laura thought, I’m conscious.

She felt the side of her face resting against the floor, and when she tried to raise her head, her skin momentarily adhered to the hardwood.

She sat up, opened her eyes, temples throbbing.

Four feet away, slumped on the floor beside the sink, Tim lay staring at her, eyes open and vacant, a black slit yawning under his chin.

And though she sat in her own kitchen in a pool of her husband's blood, legs burgundy below the knees, hair matted into bloody dreads like some demon Rasta, she didn't scream or even cry.

Her yellow teddy was slathered in gore, her left breast dangling out of a tear across the front. She held a knife in her left hand that she'd used to skin a kiwi for breakfast a thousand years ago, Tim's .357 in her right.

The front door burst open, footsteps pounding through the foyer, male voices yelling, "Mooresville Police!"

She craned her neck, saw two cops arrive in the archway between the kitchen and the living room—a short man with a shaved head and her brother-in-law, wide-eyed and crying.

The short man said, "Go in the other room, Martin. You don't need to see—"

"She's got a gun!"

"Shit. Drop that right now!"

"Come on, Laura, please!"

"You wanna get shot?"

They were pointing their Glocks at her, screaming for her to drop the gun, and she was trying, but it had been super-glued to her hand, and she attempted to sling it across the room to break the bond, but even her pointer finger had been cemented to the trigger, the barrel of the .357 making a fleeting alignment on the policemen, and they would write in their reports that she was making her move, that deadly force had been the only option, both lawmen firing—Officer McCullar twice, Officer West four times—and when the judgment fell, both men were deemed to have acted reasonably, the hearts of the brass going out to West in particular, the man having found his little brother murdered and been forced to shoot the perpetrator, his own sister-in-law.

All things considered, a month of paid leave and weekly sessions with a therapist was the very least they could do.

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

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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)
Serial Uncut with J.A. Konrath and Jack Kilborn
Serial with Jack Kilborn
Bad Girl (short story)
Four Live Rounds (collected stories)
Shining Rock (short story)
*69 (short story)
On the Good, Red Road (short story)
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