BLAKE CROUCH

PERFECT LITTLE TOWN

A NOVELLA BY THE AUTHOR OF DESERT PLACES AND SNOWBOUND

THRILLER



Perfect Little Town

By Blake Crouch

Copyright © 2010 by Blake Crouch
SERIAL UNCUT copyright © 2010 by Blake Crouch and Joe Konrath
Cover art copyright © 2010 by Jeroen ten Berge
All rights reserved.

This novella is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For more information about the author, please visit www.blakecrouch.com.
For more information about the artist, please visit www.jeroentenberge.com.

-1-

They arrive midmorning, the Benz G-Class rolling down Main Street with its California tags and rear end sagging under the weight of luggage, and though the windows are tinted, we bet the occupants are smiling. Everyone smiles when they come to our town, population 317. It's the mountains and fir trees, the waterfall we light up at night and the clear western sky and the perfect houses painted in brilliant colors and the picket-fenced lawns and the shoppes we spell the olde English way and the sweet smell of the river running through.

Parking spaces are plentiful in the off-season. They choose a spot in front of the coffeehouse, climb out with their smiles intact, squinting against the high-altitude sun—a handsome couple just shy of forty, their fashionably-cut clothes and hair in league with their Mercedes SUV to make announcements of wealth that we all read loud and clear.

We serve them lattes, handmade Danishes from the pastry case, and they drop dollar bills into our tip vase, amused at the cleverness of the accompanying sign: "Don't be chai to espresso your gratitude." They lounge for a half hour in oversize chairs, sipping their hot drinks and admiring the local art hanging on the walls. As they finally rise to leave, the woman shakes her head and comments to her husband that they don't make towns like this anymore.

-2-

They wander through the downtown, browsing our shops as the sky sheets over with leaden clouds.

From us they buy:

a half-pound of fudge

five postcards

energy bars from the hiking store

a pressed gold aspen leaf in a small frame

They tell us what a perfect little town we have and we say we know. Everywhere they go, they ask exuberant questions, and we answer with enthusiasm to match, and in turn solicit personal information under the guise of chitchat—Ron's a plastic surgeon, Jessica a patent attorney. They drove from Los Angeles, this being their first vacation in four years.

We ask if they're enjoying themselves.

Oh yes, they say. Oh yes.

-3-

They each have a camera. They shoot everything:

The soaring, jagged mountains in the backdrop

Deer grazing the yard of a residence

The quaint old theatre

The snow that has just begun to fall and frost the pavement

They ask us to take pictures of them together and, of course, we happily oblige.

-4-

The day wears on.

The light fades.

It snows harder with each passing hour.

Up and down Main, Christmas lights wink on.

It is winter solstice, the darkest evening of the year, and when the Stahls attempt to leave town, they find the highway closed going both directions, the gates lowered across the road and padlocked, since what has become a full-blown blizzard is sure to have made high-mountain travel exceedingly dangerous.

Or so we tell them.

-5-

They approach the front desk.

"Welcome to the Lone Cone Inn." And we smile like we mean it from the bottom of our hearts.

Ron says, "It appears we're stuck for the night in Lone Cone. Could we have a—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, we're booked solid. I just sold our last room not two minutes before you walked in."

We watch with subtle glee as they glance around the lobby, empty and quiet as a morgue, no sound but the fire burning in the hearth.

The wife chimes in with, "But we haven't seen another tourist, and we've been here all day."

"I apologize, but—"

"Is there another hotel in town?"

"There's a motel, but it's closed for the season."

"What are we supposed to do?"

"I'm not sure I under—"

"It's a blizzard out there, the roads are closed, and now you're telling us you're the only game in town, and you're booked?"

"I'm really sorry."

"Where are we supposed to sleep? Our car?"

Jessica appears on the verge of tears.

We hand Ron a notepad and tell him to write down his cell phone number, promising to call if something opens up.

-6-

Ron and Jessica sit in their Mercedes, watching the snow accumulate on the windshield, piling up in the city park, a deep bluish tint settling over Lone Cone.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Ron?"

"I know."

"Do you? Because I thought you were the one who was supposed to call and get us room reservations."

"We weren't gonna stay here, Jess. Remember? Spend the day and drive to Aspen."

"Well it didn't work out that way, did it?"

"No."

"So maybe having reservations as a backup plan might've been a bright idea. Right, Ron?" He's been staring through the glass, his hands gripping the steering wheel, and now he glances over at his wife, into that wild-eyed, exacting glare he figures she terrorizes her firm's paralegals and secretaries with.

"What?" he says.

"Why didn't you take care of that?"

"I'm sorry."

"Fuck you, Ron. I don't want to sleep in my fucking car tonight. That isn't what I had in mind for my Christmas vacation while busting my ass these last—"

"I get it, Jess."

Ron pulls the key out of the ignition.

"What are you doing?"

"Baby, let's go get a big, hot meal, drink the best wine on the list, and forget about all this shit for a while, okay?"

Jessica pushes her short brown hair behind her ears, Ron feeling, hoping he's cut the right wire, disarmed the bomb.

"That actually sounds nice." He has, and he loves this about her—how she can go from psychobitch to DEFCON 5 in two nanoseconds.

"My cell phone's charged," he says, "so let's think positive thoughts. Maybe while we're eating, we get a call from the inn, saying they've had a cancellation. This whole thing might just work out."

Jessica's smile makes Ron slide his hand over the console, let it work down between her blue-jeaned thighs.

"Hey now," she warns. "You gotta earn that, big boy."

“You think so?”

Apparently not, because she pulls his hand into her crotch and moves her hips forward and Ron undoes the button on her jeans and pushes his fingers between cotton and skin, until he feels the warm, wet slick, wondering if that’s been there since the rage, has a hunch it has.

She moans, stretching for the button on his slacks. Pulls his hand out of her pants and leans across the console into his lap.

He reaches down and finds the right button and the seat hums back, giving Jessica more headspace between his stomach and the steering wheel.

The windshield cracks. Flinching, Ron’s eyes shoot open and Jessica bites down and then pops off, and they both say, “What the fuck?” in unison.

-7-

Spiderwebs of splitting glass expand at right angles across the windshield as Ron zips his pants, throws the door open, and climbs out.

Standing in the pouring snow, he glimpses three shadows bolting across the park, hears the high cackle of children’s laughter.

Jessica screams, “This is a hundred thirty-thousand dollar Benz, you little shits!” as Ron lifts the fist-size rock off the hood.

“Perfect little town, huh?” Jessica says.

“Damn.”

“What’s wrong?”

Ron rubs his crotch.

“Oh, I’m sorry, babe,” Jessica says. “Startled me when the rock hit.”

“And that’s what you do when you get startled? Bite?” Ron tosses the rock into the snow. “Let’s go get dinner.”

“No, let’s report this to the police—”

“Look, I’m cold and hungry and my penis hurts. Let’s go get drunk at a nice restaurant and deal with this tomorrow. Positive thoughts, remember?”

-8-

They walk holding hands up the sidewalk of Main, snow dumping through the illumination of streetlamps.

“What time is it?” Jessica asks.

Ron glances at his watch. “Seven-fifteen.”

“So where the fuck is everybody? This town’s dead.”

She has a point. Every store they visited in the afternoon has closed shop for the night, the storefronts dark, not a sound in Lone Cone save the streetlamps.

They pass a brewpub, boarded up for the winter.

A café called The Sandwich Shoppe that only opens for lunch.

A bistro that has gone out of business.

As they near the north end of Main, Jessica says, “Ron, nothing’s open.”

“Yeah, seems that way, huh?”

“I’m *starving*.”

Ron steps out into the middle of Main, looks up and down the street—nothing moving, not even tire tracks through the five inches of snow that has fallen since late afternoon.

“This is bad, Ron, very—”

“Wait.”

“What?”

He smiles, probably hasn’t noticed it because the lights are so dim, but one block down on the other side of the street, through the first floor windows of an old building, he spots candlelight and tables, the lowlit ambience of what can only be, of what has to be, a fine restaurant.

-9-

As they stand at the podium in Christine’s, waiting for the hostess, Jessica leans over and whispers into Ron’s ear, “Why do you have an erection darling?”

“It’s not new,” he says. “Since you um,” he clicks his teeth together, “it won’t go down.”

“Oh. Lovely.”

They’re shown to a table by a window with a view onto the street, where they sit waiting for their server and watching the snow fill in their tracks.

“Kind of slow, aren’t they?” Jessica says.

“Relax, babe.”

“We’re the only ones in the restaurant.”

Ron reaches across the table, holds his wife’s hand.

“Despite all the drama, it’s wonderful to be here with you.”

She smiles, eyes shining in the firelight, says, “We’ve worked hard for this trip.”

“Should’ve done this a long time ago.”

“Easier said than done for a couple of workaholics.”

“You been thinking about work?”

“Little. You?”

“Guilty.”

“All your patients are still gonna be there when you get back, especially the ladies. Oh, Dr. Stahl. Fix my nose, Dr. Stahl. Suck the fat off my legs, Dr. Stahl.”

They talk by candlelight as the storm rages on the other side of the glass, Ron in the middle of describing the book he's brought along to read, a biography of Calvin Coolidge, when Jessica's face suddenly darkens.

"What's wrong?"

"We've been sitting here fifteen minutes, and no one's even come over to bring us water."

They survey the restaurant, not another table occupied, no waiters to be seen, only the faintest sound coming from swinging metal doors that presumably lead to the kitchen.

"I'll go get someone," Ron says, rising from his chair.

He heads toward the back of the room, his face flushed with heat—anger—and just as he reaches the doors to the kitchen, a woman in a white oxford shirt and black apron bursts through carrying a tray of waters.

Ron sidesteps, avoiding a collision.

"I was just coming back to get someone," Ron says. "We've been sitting out here for fifteen minutes and nobody's—"

"I apologize for the delay," the waitress says.

"No, it's fine. Looks like you're slammed out here." Ron motions to the vacant restaurant.

The waitress laughs, just a teenager, and he feels bad for the sarcasm as he follows her back to their table and takes a seat.

"My name's Mary-Elise, and I'll be taking care of you. You folks decided on dinner yet?" She sets their water glasses on the table.

"We were only given the wine list," Jessica says.

The waitress runs to the podium, grabs a pair of menus, hustles them back to the table.

"Any specials tonight?" Ron asks.

"I'm afraid not."

The waitress turns to leave, but Jessica says, "No, honey. You wait right here. We won't be long in deciding."

The Stahls peruse the menu, place their orders, Ron buying a $175 bottle of Côtes du Ventoux, and everything seems temporarily better knowing food and wine is finally on the way.

-10-

The waitress presents the bottle to Ron, who holds it in his hands like a new baby and affirms that she brought the vintage he requested.

Mary-Elise finesses the corkscrew, expertly withdraws the cork, then pours a little wine into Ron's glass.

He swirls it, sniffs, says, “No, something’s off.”

“What?” Jessica asks.

“Here, smell.”

Jessica inhales a whiff. “Vinegar.”

Ron says, “This wine’s spoiled. Do you have another bottle of the Côtes?”

“I’m sorry, this was our last.”

“Then just bring the Bordeaux.”

-11-

Jessica smiles when the waitress presents her entrée.

“Tell the truth,” Ron says. “You got the chicken pot pie just because it was forty dollars.”

“It’s an intriguing price for such a simple dish.”

Outside, it still snows, impossibly harder than before, and with the waitress gone, they have the restaurant all to themselves.

“Looks good,” Ron says, pointing his fork at Jessica’s dish.

The chicken pot pie barely fits on the plate, the crust perfectly gilded, steam rising through tiny holes in the center.

“I’m so hungry,” Jessica says, piercing the crust with her fork, scooping out a bite. “My God, worth every cent. How’s yours?”

Ron swallows a bite of his penne pasta with scallops and clam sauce.

“Unreal. You know, if we had to go through all this shit today just to have this meal, it might actually have been worth it.”

He lifts his glass, and as he tilts it up, wine running down his throat, eyes shut with pleasure, trying to think of a toast to make, Jessica gasps.

Ron looks across the table, sees blood pouring down his wife’s chin, two fishhooks dangling from her bottom lip. She spits something onto the table—a half-inch black oval that he mistakes for a rock or a seedpod until it scampers away.

Other roaches crawl out of the pot pie, and Ron instinctively stands and steps back, noticing now that more than fishhooks and roaches fill the pie. Mixed in with the carrots and potatoes and chicken, shards of glass glint in the candlelight.

Jessica vomits on the floor, and Ron feels the urge as well, his mouth watering heavily.

He helps his wife to stand and they back away from the table, Ron wondering what might be lurking in the pearl-colored clam sauce of the dish he already took two bites from, decides not to even contemplate it.

Jessica trembles, tears streaming down her face.

“Calm down, baby. Let me look.” In the lowlight, he sees that one of the

hooks has barely lodged. “I can get this one out right now.”

Delicately, with surgeon’s hands, he works the hook out of the corner of her lip.

“This other one’s really embedded. I think the barb’s under the skin.”

“My tongue,” she cries.

“Let me see.”

She sticks it out, and even in the poor light, Ron can see the deep slice halfway up the right side of her tongue.

“Jesus, it’s bad. Do you think you swallowed any glass?”

“I don’t know.”

“All right, stay here.”

“Where are you going?”

“To hurt somebody.”

“No, wait.” Her mouth has already begun to swell, blunting the sharpness of her consonants.

“Why?”

“Let’s just go find the sheriff.”

“No, fuck that.”

Ron rushes toward the back of the restaurant, his fists already clenched as he kicks open the metal doors.

The kitchen stands dark.

He says, “Anybody in here?”

-12-

They arrive at the front desk of the Lone Cone Inn, find the same stodgy clerk who they spoke with earlier in the day leaning back in a swivel chair, engrossed in a paperback romance.

“Excuse me?” Ron says, the clerk startling.

“Yes?”

“Where’s the hospital?” He gestures to Jessica, holding a burgundy cloth napkin over her mouth. “My wife needs medical attention.”

“I’m sorry, we only have a clinic, and it’s closed.”

“No hospital?”

“Nearest one’s thirty miles away, and as you know, the passes are closed tonight.”

“Okay, how about a sheriff?”

“Yes, but I’m sure his office is closed as well. It’s almost nine.”

“What’s your name?”

“Carol.”

“Tell me, Carol, what do the residents of this town do when they need an officer of the fucking peace?”

“Did something happen?”

“Yeah, something happened.”

“I guess I could try Sheriff Hanson at his home.”

“Really? I mean, I don’t want to put you out or anything just ‘cause someone put glass and hooks and roaches in my wife’s fucking dinner and almost cut her tongue in—”

“It’s not her fault, Ron.”

Carol lifts the phone, dials a number, after a moment, says, “Arthur? Hey it’s Carol. I’ve got the couple from out-of-town standing here at my desk, and I think they need your help…I don’t know…yeah, I think so…okay.”

She hangs up the phone.

“He’s coming down.”

“Thank you,” Ron says. “Now we were hoping you might have some other good news for us.”

“Like what?”

“We’ve had a really rough evening, and we need a…”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, we’re booked.”

“I’ll pay double. Triple. I don’t—”

“Sir, what do you want me to do? Kick someone out? I’m sorry, there’s no vacancy.”

-13-

They sit in the leather sofa by the fireplace, Ron holding Jessica, running his fingers through her hair, thinking they should be sitting in this lobby under completely different circumstances, cuddling by the fire with glasses of wine, musing on what the future has in store. In those rare moments when his mind cleared of all the things he needed to do, he’d come close to admitting to himself that despite all the money he and Jessica were accumulating, they were sacrificing the primes of their lives—him for the superrich and the ultra-shallow, that elite class who could drop seventy-grand to buff a few dents out of their noses, Jessica for faceless pharmaceutical companies in pursuit of the next billion-dollar drug. Between the ninety-hour workweeks and all the Saturdays in the office, even in those fleeting idle moments, he had to remind himself to look around and enjoy what he had, to tell himself how good he had it—the Lotus, the collection of ancient single malts, the four point two million dollar view of the Valley from his Mulholland mansion.

“I’m gonna need something for the pain,” Jessica whimpers.

“Soon as we talk with the sheriff, we’ll head down to the Benz. I’ve got Lortab in my suitcase. Jess, can you hang here on your own for just a second?”

“Why?”

“I want to go upstairs and check on something.”

“Please hurry back.”

He moves through the empty lobby, the walls adorned with stuffed, dead animals—an elk head over the hearth flanked by coyotes, a large brown bear standing on its hind legs, encased in glass, birds of prey frozen in mid-flight from wires in the ceiling.

Ron takes the steps to the second floor two at a time, emerging into a long corridor warmed by light from faux-lanterns mounted to the wall between the doors.

He walks a third of the way down the corridor and stops.

He approaches the nearest door, leans in, his ear pressed against the wood, hears only the bass throb of his heart.

Three rooms down, he drops to his knees and looks through the slit between the bottom of the door and the hardwood floor—darkness.

He stands, knocks on the door, no answer.

Goes to the next door and knocks even harder.

Pounds on the third.

“*Is anyone on this floor?*” he shouts.

-14-

The desk clerk glances up as Ron storms over.

“You wanna tell me what the hell’s wrong with you?”

Her eyes widen and she sets her book down spine-up and rises out of her chair. Short, heavy, late-fiftyish, her big eyes magnified through the thick lenses.

“I don’t care for that tone of voice even a little—”

“I don’t give a fuck what you don’t care for. I just came down from the second floor. It’s empty.”

“No, it’s not.”

A noise like a distant explosion briefly derails Ron’s train of thought.

“The rooms are all empty and dark.”

Jessica rises from the couch, coming toward them now.

“Did it occur to you that our guests are sleeping? Or perhaps having a late dinner out?”

“Every single one of them? Why won’t you give us a room? What have we done to you to—”

“I told you. I don’t have any rooms available.”

Jessica reaches the front desk, stands beside Ron, says, “What’s going on?” with her swollen lisp.

“They’re fucking with us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Baby, I just walked up to the second floor. There isn’t a single room occupied.”

Jessica focuses a smoldering gaze on the clerk. “Is that right?”

“Of course not.”

“Show us.”

“Excuse me.”

Jessica leans forward, lowers the napkin so the clerk can see the fishhook still embedded in her bottom lip.

“Show us.”

“I don’t have to show you any—”

“Bitch, I am an attorney, and I will make you a solemn promise right now. When I get back to LA, the very first thing on my agenda will be to call the top law firm in Denver, hire the meanest motherfucker on the letterhead, and sue your ass and this honkytonk piece of shit hotel for every last fucking cent.”

Ron feels so sure the desk clerk is on the brink of tears, it surprises him all the more when she leans forward and smiles at Jessica, her lips parting to speak.

The lobby doors squeak open, drawing everyone’s attention.

He wears a voluminous black parka dusted with snow, a sheriff’s star embroidered onto the lapel, smiling as he shelves his hat, clumps of snow dropping on the hardwood floor.

“Evening folks,” he says, striding toward them.

“Oh, Arthur.” The desk clerk bursts into tears. “They’ve been so mean to me.”

The sheriff arrives at the front desk. “What are you talking about, Carol?”

“This woman has been verbally abusive. Called me a cunt. Threatened to sue __”

Jessica says, “Wait just a—”

“You’ll get your turn.” To Carol: “Tell me what happened.”

“I tried to explain to these folks that we don’t have any room avail—”

“She’s lying!” Ron yells.

“Ya’ll need to take a walk,” the sheriff says, motioning toward the front doors. “Right over that way.”

Ron holds up his hands in deference, and he and Jessica backpedal toward the entrance.

The desk clerk points at Ron. “And that gentleman went up to the second

floor and started banging on the guests' rooms, screaming so loud I could hear him from down here. I've had numerous complaints."

"And then his wife started swearing at you?"

"Him, too."

"What'd he say?"

"I don't remember exactly but he used the F-word a lot. They both did."

Ron sees the sheriff reach across the desk and squeeze Carol's hand. "I'm sorry, Carol. I'll handle this."

"Thank you, Arthur."

The sheriff puts on his Stetson, turns, and advances toward the Stahls, a hybrid of a sneer and a scowl overspreading his face.

He stops, the steel tips of his boots two feet from the tips of Ron's sodden sneakers.

"Sir, did you go upstairs and disturb the guests? Swear at—"

"I can explain—"

"No, don't explain. Just answer the question I asked you. You and your wife do these things?"

"There isn't a soul in this hotel but the four of us in the lobby, and that woman won't sell us a room. Please. Just go up and look."

Sheriff Hanson tilts his neck, vertebrae cracking, says, "Sir, you're beginning to make me angry."

"I'm not trying to make you angry, officer, I just—"

"Sheriff."

"What?"

"Sheriff, not officer."

"Look, we've had a terrible few hours here, Sheriff, and we're just—"

The sheriff moves forward, a good four inches on Ron, backing him up against the wall, his breath spiced with cinnamon Altoids.

"You will answer my question. Did you do the things Carol said you did?"

"You don't understand, she's—"

The sheriff pinches Ron's nose between the nostrils, fingernails digging into the cartilage, tugging him along toward the doors, kicking them open with his right boot, Ron losing his footing, the sheriff shoving him completely across the sidewalk into the foot of snow that has piled up in the empty parking space.

He hears Jessica say, "Don't you fucking touch me."

"Then walk."

She runs over and helps Ron sit up in the snow, his nose burning, both of them glaring at the sheriff who stands under the canopy of the Lone Cone Inn, smoothing the wrinkles out of his parka.

“Take a guess what’ll happen if I see either of you again tonight?”

“You’ll throw us in jail?” Jessica mocks.

“No, I’ll beat the shit out of you. Both of you.”

Jessica scrambles to her feet and marches over to the sheriff.

“You see this?” she screams, pointing at her bottom lip.

“Yeah, you got a fishhook in your lip.”

“Your little restaurant over there—”

“I don’t give a shit. You’ve blown through all my good will. Now I own a blazing hot temper, and you’d do well to get out of my face right now.”

“Please, we just—”

“Right. Now.”

Ron has rarely seen Jessica ever back down, but something in the sheriff’s tone convinces her to retreat from the sidewalk—maybe the possibility that she might get slapped or worse.

“Let’s go, Ron.” She bends down, gives him a hand up, and he slides his arm around her waist as they start into the street.

Jessica glances back over her shoulder, yells out, “This isn’t over! You know that, right?”

“Best keep walking!”

-15-

“How’s the pain, Jess?”

“Bad.”

They trek down the middle of Main in the single set of tire tracks. Jessica walks ahead of Ron, crying, but he doesn’t dare attempt the distribution of comfort. He made that mistake the last time she was passed over for partner, and like an injured animal, the fear and sadness instantly metastasized into rage.

“I’m freezing, Ron.”

“I’m thinking.”

“You’re *thinking*?”

“I’ve been trying, but there’s no cell service in this valley.”

“Right.”

“No place to stay for the—”

“Quit telling me shit I already know.”

“Let’s just get back to the Benz. I have Lortab in my bag. We’ll tilt the seats —”

“We’re sleeping in our car now?”

“Baby, when the Lortab hits, you won’t know the difference from that seat and a bed at the Waldorf-Astoria. We’ll crank the heat, get it warm and toasty

inside."

"Jesus, Ron."

"It's the best I can do, Jess. They'll probably have the roads plowed when we wake up, and then we'll get the fuck out of this town."

They near the end of Main, every building dark, no light but the muted glow of the streetlamps. A quarter mile ahead, Ron sees the gate lowered across the highway that climbs north out of town toward the pass.

Jessica says, "See that?"

On past the buildings of Main, near the city park, a bonfire shoots ribbons of flame into the sky.

They improve their pace, Ron noting a jolt of hope, thinking this could be a party of some sort, attended by people who might help them, but as he opens his mouth to suggest this to Jessica, she shrieks and starts running toward the flames.

-16-

Speechless, they stand thirty feet back, the Italian leather seats charred beyond any hope of salvation, the glass blown out, flames licking through the windows, the dashboard boiling, the scorching tires pouring black smoke up into the falling snow. Ron's face tingles in the warmth, and it occurs to him that frostbite might be an appropriate concern.

"Why are they doing this to us?" Jessica asks.

"I don't know."

And he realizes that his wife doesn't sound angry anymore, just confused and scared, and for the first time he feels it, too—not annoyance or frustration, but real tangible fear.

He puts his hands on her shoulders, and she lets them stay for a moment, then turns and faces him, the firelight refracting off the tears in her eyes.

"Hold me."

As he embraces her, the lamps up and down Main wink out, and the drink machines at the visitors' center across the street go dark and quit humming, and an oppressive silence blankets the town, nothing beyond the whisper of snow collecting on their jackets and the quiet hisses and exhalations from the burning Benz.

"Something's happening," she says. "Isn't it?"

"It's probably from the storm."

"Do you really believe that, Ron?"

-17-

They walk up a side street lined with quaint Victorians buried under loads of powder, not a light in operation as far as they can see.

Ron opens the gate of a picket fence, and they trudge through snow to the front porch.

“What are you gonna say?” Jessica whispers.

“Tell them the truth. We need help.”

He grasps the brass knocker, raps it three times against the door.

A moment passes.

No one comes.

“Let’s try another house,” Ron says.

They try five more on that street, three on the next one over, but despite the vehicles in the driveways, proximate tracks in the snow, and other signs of habitation, every house they approach stands vacant.

-18-

Ron’s watch beeps 11:00 p.m. as they come to the corner of Main and 12th, he and Jessica both shivering, the snow still dumping, and little to see but the impression of buildings and storefronts with the streetlamps out.

“We’re gonna die if we stay out here,” Jessica says, her teeth chattering.

Ron looks up and down the street, well over a foot of snow now on the pavement, the tire tracks completely covered, just a smooth sheet of snow across the road, the sidewalks, everything.

“Ron?”

A block down, on the outskirts of perception, he thinks he sees movement—figures draped in white.

“Ron! I’m freezing to death standing—”

“I have an idea.”

They cross the street and start south down the sidewalk.

“I can’t feel my feet, Ron.”

“Then you’re lucky. Mine are burning.”

Four blocks up, they cross 8th, and Ron stops under a canopy with “Out There Outfitters” in block letters stitched into the façade of the canvas, the snow having blown against the cloth, covered most of the words.

“Why are we here?” Jessica asks.

“If we don’t get out of the elements, we’re going to die. I figure it’s better to break into a commercial space than a private residence, right, counselor?”

She stares at him like he’s lost his mind.

“Honey, you got a better idea?”

“No.”

“Then keep a lookout and pray this place doesn’t have an alarm.”

Ron lifts the chrome, cylindrical trashcan topped with a little cigarette butt-filled sand pit over his shoulder and runs at the storefront glass. The first strike sends a hard recoil back through the trashcan, which flies out of Ron’s grasp and smashes into the snowblown sidewalk, the glass still intact, unblemished. He lifts the trashcan and goes at it again, the next impact causing crystalline-shaped fractures to spread like a virus through the tall window. This time, Ron steps back and hurls the twenty-pound trashcan at the cracking glass.

It punches through, the window disintegrating.

Ron and Jessica wait ten seconds, eyes locked.

She says finally, “No alarm.”

“Or maybe it’s disabled ‘cause the power’s out.”

-19-

They climb down out of the storefront and walk past the cash register. Up ahead, a group of figures congeal Ron’s blood and he freezes, lets out a tiny gasp.

Jessica says, “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

Just a trio of mannequins outfitted in fly-fishing gear.

They move on past the display cases containing rock climbing hardware and an array of ice axes.

Against the back wall, mummy bags dangle from the ceiling, flanked by dozens of external and internal frame backpacks.

They pass through a rear doorway into a dark, narrow hall. Jessica tries the door to the bathroom, but it’s locked.

“Damn.”

“You gotta go, babe?”

“Yeah.”

“You should squat right in front of the cash register.”

“You’re a child, Ron.”

They head back into the store.

“There it is,” Ron says.

“Where?”

The darkness makes it nearly impossible to see, but in the middle of the room, between racks of overpriced Patagonia shirts and Columbia down jackets, a diorama has been constructed—dormant campfire ring, mannequins in sandals and tank tops cooking dinner in a camp stove, their backs to a two-man tent.

Ron and Jessica untie their shoes and strip out of their wet jackets and pants

and crawl into the tent, into the sleeping bags, zip themselves up.

After several minutes of intense shivering, Ron notes the return of warmth—the electricity of pins and needles in his extremities, the burn of mild frostbite on his cheeks.

"You getting warm?" he asks.

"Little by little."

He scoots his bag toward Jessica's until he feels her breath in his face.

"How's the pain?"

"Quit asking."

"Sorry, I'm a doctor, it's in my—"

"You're a plastic surgeon."

"Ouch."

"I didn't mean that. I'm just in a ton of pain here."

"You think this is one of those experiences we're gonna be able to look back on and—"

"Are you kidding?"

They lie in the dark, listening to the low moan of wind pushing through the broken glass of the storefront.

At length, Jessica sits up, says, "I can't sleep. I'm too thirsty, Ron. All that wine and walking around—I just got dehydrated."

"All right, you know that pot sitting out there in the fake campfire ring?"

"Yeah."

"Take it out onto the sidewalk and fill it with snow. You'll have to pack it in really tight. I'll see if I can fire up the camp stove."

-20-

Before starting his practice thirteen years ago, Ron was an avid outdoorsman, spending countless weekends in the Cascades, even squeezing in a weekend a month outdoors during the slog of med school. As he kneels by the fire ring in the dark and fumbles with the camp stove, he realizes how much the gear has changed in over a decade, evidenced by the five minutes it costs him to unravel the mystery of attaching the red canister of white gas.

As he screws it in, he hears Jessica climbing back through the storefront, pushing her way between clothing racks.

"How's it going?" she asks.

He strikes the match, holds it to the burner.

The stove flares up.

As the fire burns down, quickly consuming the modicum of propane, he opens the gas, the lazy orange flame transformed into a low blue roar.

“Put it right here.”

She sets the pot down on the stove.

“Why don’t you get three water bottles—I saw them by the daypacks—and fill them up. It’s gonna take a lot of melted snow to fill this pot.”

While Jessica goes for more snow, Ron sits beside one of the mannequins, monitoring the stove, the heat cranked up to high, using a plastic spoon to stir the snow.

It takes longer than he anticipates, but soon he has half a pot of slush, which he pulls off the heat and transfers into a water bottle that formerly belonged to the cute blond mannequin in the tight pink sports bra.

He says, “Jess, what’s taking?”

Another minute crawls by.

He puts on his jacket and cold, wet shoes.

Turning down the heat, he stands and walks toward the front of the store, past the cash register, into the storefront.

Snow blows in through the shattered window.

Ron steps down onto the sidewalk.

“If you’re fucking around here, Jess, I will divorce you, ‘cause this isn’t even remotely…”

No response but the quiet patter of snowflakes on his jacket.

Ron glances down at the three water bottles lying in the snow, then the multiple sets of tracks leading up the sidewalk.

Twenty feet ahead, darkness and snow obscure everything.

His watch beeps midnight, and for a moment he feels sick with fear, sick to the point of vomiting, but he shoves it back into that long-forgotten nook in the pit of his stomach that he hasn’t needed since med school—those nights he woke in cold sweats in the dark, convinced he didn’t have the hardwiring to pass the boards.

-21-

In the cold, snowy silence, Ron walks up the sidewalk, his cheeks beginning to burn again, clutching in his right hand a wicked-looking ice ax with the price tag still dangling from the blade.

He’s slept outdoors in the desert waste of Canyonlands National Park, in the immense sweep of Denali where it got so quiet those Alaskan autumn nights (after the mosquitoes finally shut up) that he imagined he could hear the stars humming like distant generators.

The silence this winter solstice as he walks the empty streets of Lone Cone seems something else entirely—more a mask than an absence, and not a shred of

peace contained within it.

The tracks turn down 3rd Street, Ron's legs aching as the snow melts and seeps through his khaki slacks. He wishes he'd thought to outfit himself in new, dry clothes from the hiking store, but it's too late for that now.

Around the back of a late Nineteenth-Century brick building, he turns into an alley, and after twenty feet, arrives at a pair of doors without handles—the termination of the four sets of tracks.

He beats his fists against the doors, shouting, "Jessica! *Can you hear me?*"

If she can, she makes no answer.

Ron spins around, stares at a Dumpster capped with snow, at the power lines above his head, dipping with the weight of several fragile inches that have collected on the braided wire, hears a rusty door several blocks away swaying in the wind, hinges grinding.

It occurs to him that he might be losing his mind, and he sits down against the building and buries his head between his knees and prays for the first time in many, many years.

-22-

As he rounds the corner of Main and 3rd, searching for something with which to break through the front of that brick building his wife has disappeared inside, light just ahead stops him in his tracks.

He feels certain it wasn't there before, this soft glow of firelight flooding through windows onto the snow, and at least fifty pairs of skis leaning against the front of the building.

Ron jogs over, glancing up at "Randolph Opera House" painted in ornate red lettering that arches over the entrance, and the marquee above it which displays: "Dec. 22 - Midvinterblot."

Through the windows that frame the doors, he glimpses an empty lobby illumined by candelabras.

The doors are unlocked, and he steps inside onto red carpeting darkened by the soles of wet shoes, sees a vacant concessions booth, coat closet, walls covered in framed posters advertising stage productions, autographed photos of musicians of modest fame who've played this opera house over the years.

He proceeds through the lobby into a darker corridor lined with closed doors that access the theatre, hurries through an archway on the right, and quietly ascends two flights of squeaky steps.

-23-

The balcony is sparsely peopled.

He slides into a chair in the front row, peers down through the railing, the opera house lit by three hundred points of candlelight, the lower level packed with what Ron estimates to be the entire population of Lone Cone, everyone extravagantly, ridiculously costumed as if they've come to a carnival or a masque—headdresses of immense proportion, the details lost in the lowlight, only profiles visible, and the room redolent of whiskey and beer and the earthy malt of marijuana smoke that seems to hover in the aisles below like mist in a hollow.

The stage is the spectacle, forested in real, potted fir trees, with a painted backdrop of the mountains enclosing Lone Cone in every season, all surrounding the strangest object in the theatre—a life-size golden bear which appears to have been forged of solid bronze.

It stands on its hind legs in a metal recess at center stage, and a line of people shuffle past, contributing pieces of firewood to the pit before returning to their seats.

This goes on for some time, while on stage left, a trio of men on guitar, fiddle, and mandolin enliven the theatre with bluegrass.

When everyone has taken their seats and the musicians abandoned their instruments, a tall man rises from the audience and takes the stage. Clutching a long candle and costumed like a Spanish conquistador, even though his silver helmet conspires to mask his identity, Ron pegs him for the sheriff who threw him out of the Lone Cone Inn several hours ago.

The conquistador raises his arms and shouts, "Come forth!"

At stage right, the red curtains rustle, then part, and two figures emerge dressed all in white, even their hoods, each holding an arm of Jessica Stahl, and at the sight of her, the crowd roars, Ron feeling a ripple of nausea until he notices his wife smiling, thinking, *Has this all been some devious game?*

They escort Jessica around to the back of the golden bear, step down into the pit, and one of them lifts a hatch in the back of the beast, while the other whispers something in her ear. She nods, accepting a clear mask attached to some kind of tank.

Jessica holds the mask to her mouth for a moment, then stumbles back, the crowd cheering, and she waves to the audience and blows kisses, the applause and whistles getting louder, long-stemmed roses spitting forth from the front rows onto the stage.

Jessica climbs into the golden bear, and the men in white close the hatch and return the way they came, vanishing through curtains off the stage.

The sheriff-conquistador raises his arms again.

The audience hushes.

He turns and approaches the golden bear, ducks down into the recess.

After a moment, he climbs back onto the stage and strides across to the left side, where he grabs a thick rope and pulls.

A trapdoor in the ceiling swings open, snowflakes drifting down onto the golden bear.

“Lights!”

A collective exhalation sweeps through the theatre, candles extinguished, the room pitch black.

Ron leans forward, squinting to raise some detail in the dark. A moment ago, he felt a passing twinge of relief, thinking there was some reason or logic behind this bizarre, awful night, but that is falling out of orbit now.

The room becomes silent, no sound but the occasional whisper flickering down below.

At first he mistakes them for lightning bugs—motes of ascending light down where the stage should be, but the snap of boiling sap and the sudden odor of woodsmoke corrects the error.

Out of the darkness surfaces a single image—the golden bear—though it’s no longer golden but the deeper reddish hue of molten bronze, and as the flames underneath it intensify, the bear glows brighter and brighter.

Ron says, “Oh, Christ.”

The bear bellows, a high-pitched, Jessica-sounding roar, her voice channeled through a complex of tubes that curl to the right of the bear’s glowing head like a brass tumor, and words mix in with the screams, but the tubes and the pain slur them into nonsense, the bronze clanging now like a huge cymbal as Jessica desperately beats against it from inside, her juices dripping through holes in the bear’s haunches, sizzling on the stage.

Someone in the crowd shouts, “Another year of plenty!”

“No avalanches!”

“No cancer!”

“More tourists!”

And they are clapping now, down below, the applause building, stoned and drunken toasts being proffered from every corner of the theatre, fighting to be heard amid the tortured commotion emanating from the stage, the golden bear smoking as snowflakes fall through the ceiling onto the brilliant bronze, instantly vaporizing.

Somewhere in the darkness behind him, a woman weeps, and a man whispers, “Shut the fuck up!”

Ron jumps out of his seat and stumbles back down the stairwell, spewing vomit on the walls, reemerging into the dark corridor, racing toward the nearest

door, throwing it open to wafts of woodsmoke and a sweeter-smelling incense that he knows is his wife, roasting inside the golden bear.

He starts into the theatre into an awful, disengaged clarity rooted in shock—people turning away from the horror onstage to see this uncostumed tourist with vomit down his jacket, barging in like he's come to fuck up a wedding.

The screaming of the bear has become harsher, the voice inside blown out, winding down, and Ron sees those white-masked executioners break through the curtains on stage right and rush down the steps into the outer aisle.

Something inside him screams *Run.*

-24-

Ron crashes into the doors of the Randolph Opera House and bursts out of the theatre, back down the sidewalk, kicking up clouds of snow as he runs toward the north end of town.

After three blocks, he glances over his shoulder at the hordes of people spilling out of the theatre, a handful stepping into skis, flashlight beams arcing toward him.

He turns left onto 7th and runs so hard he can't think about anything but the incomprehensible pressure in his lungs, sprinting past a chocolate shop, a closed hostel, the street taking a steep pitch as it descends toward a spread of ground so level, it can only be a frozen pond.

Behind him comes a *whoosh*—a shirtless twentysomething, her long blond hair flowing in her wake and dressed like some Viking goddess right down to the horned helmet, gliding toward him on a pair of skis, accelerating as the street steepens, five seconds away at most.

Ron digs his heels into the snow and slides to a stop and turns, the skier racing toward him, inside of ten feet.

He swings, the serrated blade punching through the side of her neck, Ron temporarily blinded by warm mist from the severed artery, the ice ax all the way through. He tries to grip the rubber-coated handle to rip it out, but the blood has made it slippery and the Viking Goddess slides away from him, still skiing down the street, her hands trying to extract the blade.

Ron wipes the blood out of his eyes, and fifty yards up the street, sees a herd of people make a wide, sliding turn around the corner of Main and 7th, a crowd of thirty or forty tearing down the street after him, screaming, shouting, yeehawing, laughing like a throng of revelers cut loose from the world below.

He runs down to the skier who has fallen over in the snow, sticks his foot against her head for leverage, and jerks the ice ax out of her throat.

Then running again, falling, scrambling back onto his feet, veering into the

yard of a private residence, a dog accosting him through a bay window, thinking if he doesn't find some way to escape his tracks he doesn't have the faintest hope.

Up ahead, more shapes materialize out of the dark, a dozen perhaps, and smaller, their voices high-pitched—a band of children tramping toward him through the snow.

Ron looks back, can't see the pursuing crowd through the blizzard, but he can hear them calling out to him.

Twenty feet ahead, on the shore of that frozen pond, his eyes lock on the remnants of a recent battle—saplings thrust into the snow supporting handmade flags (Stars and Stripes vs. the Jolly Roger) and opposing snow forts, their features smoothed and hidden by the storm.

-25-

Ron crawls through a snow trench, his hands aching in the cold, somehow manages to still himself as a collection of footsteps approach.

"I'm cold."

"Shut up, pussy, if we find him, you know how sweet Christmas will—"

"I'm not a pussy."

"Okay, twat. Wait, look."

"That's just the others."

An adult male voice shouts, *"Hey, who's there?"*

"Just us!"

"Us who?"

"Chris, Neil, Matt, Jacob—"

"What are you kids doing?"

"Helping."

"No, you're fucking up the tracks. Shit."

"What's wrong, Dave?"

More footsteps arrive.

Ron crawls a little further through the trench, his hair, eyelashes, eyebrows snow-matted, too scared to even register the cold.

The trench leads into a small cave constructed of cantilevered bricks of packed snow, the voices muffled now.

Ron rises up shivering onto his knees. There had been a lookout window, but it's buried in new snow. He reaches forward, pokes his finger through the soft powder, which all falls in at once.

He ducks down, the voices audible again.

"…little organization would go a long fucking way."

“Hey, watch the language around the kids, bro.”

“You understand what’ll happen if—”

A woman breaks in, “You’re not thinking, Dave.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What’s his primary objective right now?”

“I don’t know…getting out of town?”

“How? In this storm? With his car toasted? No, he needs to get out of this miserable weather or he’ll freeze to death.”

The voices begin to fade, Ron lifting up, peering through the window, watching the crowd move by, down toward the frozen pond.

Light passes through the window, and he prostrates himself on the floor of the snow cave, listening for some indication he’s been seen.

After a while the voices have vanished completely, and he looks out the window again, the crowd nothing but distant, restless lightbeams, barely visible in the storm.

-26-

Ron massages his bare, blistered feet to get the blood circulating, colder than he’s ever been in his life, though he doesn’t think he’s freezing to death. This little snow fort is actually warm.

He wonders how long he’s been inside—thirty minutes, forty-five tops—and he’s spent most of it trying to convince himself this can’t possibly be happening. He’s had “horror dreams” before—car accidents, the death of friends and family, being chased by a murderous street gang through a parking garage, life in prison for a crime he didn’t commit—but he always wakes up and the fear always leaves.

Even as he sits there, rubbing his cold, wet feet, he has a rock-solid premonition that in mere moments he will wake in that hotel in downtown Flagstaff he and Jessica checked into a little over twenty-four hours ago. It was their first night on the road, and they dined at a gem of a pizza joint near the university, went straight to the hotel, made love, and crashed, tired and giddy with the thrill of finally being on vacation, next stop Colorado.

He tells himself, and he believes, that he still sleeps in that hotel room. He’s really tossing in bed as he hides in this snow cave, Jessica probably kicking him under the covers, swearing at him in that sexy, sleepy voice of hers to quit moving or take his restless ass over to the sleeper sofa.

-27-

Ron inhales the scent of hotel linens and forced air from an unfamiliar central

heating system, the covers soft between his legs.

He throws an arm across the mattress, feels the figure of his wife asleep beside him, her naked back rising and falling against his hand.

Later, they sit at breakfast, cream-cheesing bagels.

The light that blazes into the room washes out everything on the periphery and even the rogue strands of Jessica's hair glow like incandescent silk.

"I had the worst dream last night," Ron says.

"Tell me about it."

He thinks for a moment, says, "I forgot."

"Chilly in here." As Jessica rubs her arms, Ron notices her breath clouding. He's grown cold as well. He reaches down to lift his bagel, and it looks like a bagel, the circumference lightly browned, the lox spread warming on the surface, but when he touches it, it crumbles in his fingers like snow, freezing to the touch.

He says, "Oh, shit."

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Nothing, it's…everything's fine."

"I'm so glad we came on this vacation," Jessica says, but she's turned into the Viking Goddess, the ice ax run through her throat, blood pulsing out of the side of her neck and making a sound exactly like a lawn sprinkler.

Ron tries to stand, thinking if he can walk outside into that clear morning light and climb into his Benz, Jessica will be there. He can make this real.

"We have to stretch this out," he says, but the light passing through the windows has already begun to erode, the darkness encroaching so fast he can no longer see across the table, and then he's back in the snow cave, curled up against the freezing wall, and so despairing, he believes he's gone to hell, recalling from his collegiate reading of Dante's *Inferno* (as if his subconscious has retrieved the most horribly perfect memory shard just to fuck with him) that the innermost circle of the underworld is built of ice.

-28-

Ron rises up slowly out of the trench.

It has stopped snowing, the sky blackish-cobalt, infected with stars.

He thinks he hears voices on the far side of town, but as he spins slowly around, he sees nothing but dark houses, smoke the only movement, trickling out of chimneys.

-29-

The snow comes to his knees.

He jogs through the powder, staying on the west edge of town where

backyards border a stream that has all but frozen over, eyeing the dark windows of the houses he runs by.

The stream curves him back toward Main as he approaches the north edge of town, and ten minutes after striking out from the snow fort, he moves past the city park and the torched Benz, the frame of the SUV having cooled just in time to allow for the collection of a delicate half-inch of powder.

-30-

The sign reads, “Road Closed Due to Hazardous Driving Conditions.”

Ron swings a leg over, briefly straddling the yellow gate.

He falls onto the other side, engulfed by snow, stands up and brushes his clothes off as best he can, his fingers stiff, on a welcome descent from excruciating toward a beautiful numbness.

Beyond exhaustion, he sets off at the fastest walk he can manage, while in the east, the sky lightens above a skyline of jagged peaks—a warm lavender that chokes out the stars.

He trudges on through the predawn silence, crying, thinking, *Jess is dead*.

Passes another sign: “Aspen 23.”

The road climbs at a five percent grade, and he stops, breathless after an hour of walking, looks back, sees the valley the town rests in five hundred feet below where he stands.

He inhales a shot of cold, thin air. The spruce trees on the left side of the road droop with snow. Off the right shoulder, the mountainside falls away in a series of cliffs and steep forest, a thousand feet down to a frozen river.

He hears a distant growl.

The way the echo carries, it sounds like a vehicle coming down the mountain, but the lights—four of them—race up the road out of Lone Cone.

In the calm, subzero air, he studies the tone of their motors, the velocity with which they travel over the buried highway.

Snowmobiles.

He starts running, gets ten steps, then stops, looks back down the road—a narrow plane descending into Lone Cone, his tracks as clear as day.

Up ahead, the road makes a sharp left turn with the contour of the mountain.

Nothing to do but run, his arms pumping again, the momentary adrenaline charge making up for the loss of air.

The whine of the motors sounds like a swarm of giant bees closing in as he reaches the curve in the road, the noisy snowmobiles dropping into silence as he puts the mountain between them and himself.

He looks back over his shoulder trying to—

A horn screams.

He turns back to face a huge orange truck, ten feet and closing.

Ron bee-lines for the left shoulder and dives into a snowbank as the plow rushes by, burying him under sixty pounds of snow as the blade scrapes the powder off the road.

-31-

Ron lies on his back, suffocating in darkness, clawing at the snow and on the verge of losing consciousness.

His hand breaks through, fresh air flooding in, accompanied by idling snowmobiles and nearby voices.

He pulls his hand back into his chest, wondering if he's been seen, enough of the snow on top of him pushed away to glimpse a piece of the morning sky and an overhanging fir tree.

Two helmeted figures walk into view, Ron praying he won't have to fight, his fingers so numb he can't even feel them holding the ice ax.

The two figures gaze up the mountainside for several minutes.

One of them shrugs.

Then they walk back into the road, out of view.

He can hear them talking, can't pick out a single word.

After a while, the snowmobiles wind up and speed away.

-32-

By midmorning Ron has covered three miles. It should have been easier traveling on the plowed highway, but his legs hurt so much the improvement is negligible. The exquisite pain makes concentrating difficult, and sometimes he forgets to listen for the distant, insect-whining of the snowmobiles.

-33-

At eleven a.m. he crawls up the highway, the pavement sun-warmed under his swollen, frostbit hands that have turned the color of ripe plums.

-34-

Ron lifts his head off the road, the surrounding snow so brilliant under the midday sun, like diamonds, he can't see a thing but brightness.

He might have been hallucinating, but he feels reasonably sure that something's approaching, can't tell from which direction or the size of the incoming vehicle, realizes that a part of him (gaining greater influence by the minute) no longer cares if they find him.

The next time he manages to raise his head, he's staring into the grill of a Dodge Ram, hears the sound of a door swinging open, glimpses heavily-scuffed cowboy boots stepping down onto the road.

-35-

The exchange of light and darkness as the firs scroll by and the sun blinking at him between the trees has the same discombobulating effect as a strobe light.

Ron pulls his forehead off the glass and looks across the cab at the grizzled driver—long, gray hair, a beard as white as a sunbleached skull, black sunglasses, and beneath all that ancient hair, a face so gaunt it does more to underscore the bones beneath.

He looks over at Ron, back at the road.

Ron whispers, "Where are we going?"

"Huh?"

"Where are we going?"

"What were you doing laying in the middle of the road, son?"

Ron feels exceedingly strange, a degree of weakness worse than the recovery following the three marathons he'd run in his twenties combined.

He wants to answer the man, but with the lightheadedness, he fears he might say the wrong thing, if there is a wrong thing to be said, so he just repeats himself: "Where are we going?"

"You were in Lone Cone last night?"

Ron sits up a little straighter, strains to buckle his shoulder harness.

"Yes. My wife and I."

"Where's she?"

Ron blinks through the tears that well up instantly in his eyes.

"You ain't saying nothing," the old man says, "but it's plenty."

They ride on in silence.

Another sign: "Aspen 10."

"Used to live in Lone Cone," the old man says. "Beautiful place. Moved up the road a ways fifteen years ago. Couldn't take another winter solstice. I ain't saying it's wrong or right, or hasn't had something to do with keeping that town like it is, but for me…I couldn't do it no more. Every year, there's talk of quitting the blot altogether. Probably happen someday. God, I miss that town."

-36-

The truck stops under the emergency room entrance of the Aspen Valley Hospital, and the old man shifts into park.

"I can't go in there with you," he says.

Ron reaches down and unbuckles his seat belt, puts his hand on the doorknob.

"Hold on there a minute, son." Ron looks up at the old man, who removes his shades and stares back at him through one bloodshot, jaundiced eye, one perfectly clear and perhaps a size too large—glass. "It ain't often someone manages to slip away."

"I just left her."

"Wasn't a thing you could've done, so you might as well start letting that go. But what I'm trying to tell you is this. Twenty years ago, a woman got away. She went to the Aspen police, told them everything that was done to her, how they murdered her husband, and you wanna know what happened?" The old man points a long, dirty finger into Ron's shoulder. "She died in prison four years ago. Convicted of drugging her husband and setting him on fire in their car while on vacation in the peaceful town of Lone Cone. You can't go up against a whole town, son. You hear what I'm saying? They're already preparing for you to come back with law enforcement making crazy claims. Don't do it. Don't ever go back there. You walk into that hospital and tell them you and your wife got lost in the mountains, and you barely made it out."

"I can't."

"It's the only chance you got."

Ron opens the door, climbs down out of the enormous truck.

As he turns back to close the door, the old man reaches across the seat and slams it shut himself.

The truck's knobby tires squeal as it roars away from the hospital.

-37-

Ron stands once more on the corner of Main and 3rd.

He squeezes his wife's hand, says, "I'm gonna go in here for a minute."

"I'll walk down to Starbucks. You'll come meet me?"

It feels good stepping out of the maddening August heat and into the theatre—a hundred and fifty-two years old according to the plaque on the brick beside the entrance.

Ron passes through the lobby, through the archway, and climbs two flights of stairs on his tired legs.

He doubts he's plopped himself down in the same seat he occupied that night, but the view down onto the stage looks exactly like the dreams that still plague him.

Below, a janitor emerges from underneath the balcony, pushing a mop bucket down the center aisle.

"Excuse me, sir?"

The janitor looks up from his mop bucket, says, "You're not supposed to be in here."

"The door was unlocked."

As Ron arrives at the base of the stage, the janitor's eyes fall on what remains of Ron's left hand—everything lost to frostbite but the thumb.

Ron places the janitor around seventy, the man small and wiry. He asks, "How long have you lived here, sir?"

"Forty-five years next month."

"No kidding."

"Look, I gotta finish up here."

"Could I just ask you one little favor?"

"What's that?"

Ron's heart pounds under his Hawaiian shirt, his mouth gone dry.

"I want to see the golden bear."

"What the hell are you talking—"

"The brazen bear you bring out every winter solstice."

The janitor smiles and shakes his head, leans against the mop handle. "You're one of those people, huh?"

"What people?"

"Once or twice a year, some conspiracy freak comes along asking about the winter solstice celebration, and didn't this town used to—"

"I'm not asking, and I'm not a kook. I was here, sir, twenty-nine years ago, December twenty-second, Twenty-Aught-Four."

"You must be con—"

"I watched from the balcony while you roasted my wife inside the golden bear."

For a moment, the theatre stands so quiet, Ron can hear the murmur of traffic out on Main, the janitor staring him down with an oblique combination of anger and fear.

Ron says, "I didn't come here to hurt any—"

"I told you. I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you—"

"And I got work to do."

The janitor turns away and pushes his mop bucket toward the far right aisle that in Ron's dreams are always lined with white-masked executioners.

He walks slowly down the sidewalk among the throng of tourists, sweating again after half a block.

The waterfall has dried up, and the sky, so blue and pure all those years ago when he and Jessica first came to town, has faded into a pale and dirty white.

Main Street looks the same, although the two lanes have been divided into four to accommodate the tiny vehicles, and there are traffic lights and automated pedestrian crosswalks now at every intersection. Some of the older buildings have been demolished, but most remain to be dwarfed beneath the five- and six-story apartment buildings.

The "Welcome to Lone Cone" sign boasts a population of just under nine thousand.

Ron glances at the hillsides above town, overridden with condos and trophy homes.

Above them all, a Wal-Mart sits perched on a manmade plateau, and behind it the immense gray peaks stand snowless under the brutal summer sun.

-40-

Ron waits twenty minutes in line for a cup of dark roast, then joins his wife at a table near the window.

"How's your latte?" he asks.

"Delicious."

Starbucks world music trickles through speakers in the ceiling like a slow-drip IV.

"Could we spend the night here, Ron? It's so beautiful—"

"I'd rather not."

She reaches across the table, holds his hand.

"When we leave here, do you want to show me where you stumbled out of the mountains? Maybe we could stop on the side of the road, say a few words for Jessica?"

"Sure, we could do that."

"You regret coming here."

"No, it's not that. I always knew I would."

"Must feel strange after all this—"

The knock on the window startles them, and Ron glances up to see the janitor peering through from the sidewalk.

-41-

Ron and the janitor sit on a bench at the termination of 7th Street, on the bank of a filthy pond inhabited by a single mangy-looking duck.

“We thought you’d come back,” the janitor says. “Right after, I mean. Wise you didn’t.”

“Town’s changed,” Ron says.

“Beyond recognition.”

“Does Lone Cone still practice—”

“God, no. People went soft, couldn’t stomach it. Quit believing in the usefulness of such a thing.”

“Usefulness?”

“You hear about the avalanche?”

Ron shakes his head, swats away a swarm of flies that have discovered the sweat glistening on his bald scalp.

“Second winter after we quit the blot, we caught a blizzard. Hardest we’d ever seen. The slide came down that chute right there.” The janitor points to a treeless corridor on a nearby peak that runs right into the town. “Destroyed fifty homes, killed a hundred and thirty-one of us. I still hear them, broken and screaming under the snow.”

“Some might call that divine retribution.”

“I lost my wife and two sons that night. Almost everyone left after that. Sold their land to developers. Then the second homes started cropping up. Chain stores. Texans and Californians.” He sweeps his hand in disgust at the bustling little city, heat shimmering off the buildings and streets. “Until it became this. I keep saying I’ll leave one of these days. Nothing really left for me, you know? Not my town anymore.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“‘Cause you at least saw this place when it was a piece of heaven. When it was perfect. I almost feel a kinship with you.”

“I had to quit practicing medicine,” Ron says. “Lost everything I’d worked for. Fucked me up for a lot of years.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“But then I met a beautiful woman. We had three beautiful children.”

“Glad to hear that.”

Ron pushes against his legs, groaning slightly as he struggles to his feet.

“My wife’s waiting for me in the Starbucks.”

“We weren’t monsters.”

“I better get back.”

Ron starts walking toward the commotion of Main.

“They’re gone,” the janitor says, Ron stopping, looking back at the small, sad man on the bench.

“What’s gone?”

“The old ways.”

“The old ways had a dark side.”

Ron turns away from him and walks across the heat-browned grass, trying to remember what the mountains looked like without all the glass and steel.

The janitor calls after him, “So do we, Mr. Stahl, and now there’s nothing to remind us.”

-42-

We are spread across the country now, old and dying or dead already, and we have mostly acclimatized to the absurdity of daily life in the fourth decade of the twenty-first century, although occasionally we regress and rant.

To journals.

Our fellow dinosaurs.

To our children who bring their children to visit us in nursing homes.

We go on about how it used to be—the extinct and glorious slowness of life and other artifacts:

The pleasure of eating real food, seeded and grown out of ground proximate to your own doorstep.

Decency.

Community.

Respect for the old traditions.

We tell all who will listen, but mostly ourselves, that we once lived in a perfect little town in a perfect little valley, where life was vivid, rich, and slow.

And once in a while, someone will ask why it can’t be that way again, and we tell them sacrifice. There’s no sacrifice anymore. And they nod with enlightened agreement, that special condescension reserved solely for the old, without the faintest idea of what we really mean.

Read on for an interview with Blake Crouch, excerpts from all four of his books, Desert Places, Locked Doors, Abandon, and Snowbound, and a bonus excerpt of Serial Uncut by Crouch, Kilborn, and Konrath…

Interview with Blake Crouch by Hank Wagner

Originally Published in Crimespree, July 2009

According to his website, Blake Crouch grew up in Statesville, a small town in the piedmont of North Carolina. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2000, where he studied literature and creative writing. He currently resides in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado. Crouch's first book, *Desert Places*, was published in 2003. Pat Conroy called it "Harrowing, terrific, a whacked-out combination of Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy." Val McDermid described it as "An ingenious, diabolical debut that calls into question all our easy moral assumptions. *Desert Places* is a genuine thriller that pulses with adrenaline from start to finish." His second novel, *Locked Doors*, was published in July 2005. A sequel to *Desert Places*, it created a similar buzz. His third novel, *Abandon*, was published on July 7, 2009.

HANK WAGNER: Your writing career began in college?

BLAKE CROUCH: I started writing seriously in college. I had tinkered before, but the summer after my freshman year, I decided that I wanted to try to make a living at being a writer. Spring semester of 1999, I was in an intro creative writing class and I wrote the short story (called "Ginsu Tony") that would grow into *Desert Places*. Once I started my first novel, it became an obsession.

HW: Where did the original premise for *Desert Places* come from?

BC: The idea for *Desert Places* arose when two ideas crossed. I had the opening chapter already in my head... suspense writer receives an anonymous letter telling him there's a body buried on his property, covered in his blood. I didn't know where my protagonist was going to be taken though. Around the same time, I happened to be glancing through a scrapbook that had photographs of this backpacking trip I took in Wyoming in the mid 90's. One of those photographs was of a road running off into the horizon in the midst of a vast desert. My brain starting working. What if my protagonist is taken to a cabin out in the middle of nowhere, by a psychopath? What if this cabin is in this vast desert, and he has no hope of escape? That photograph broke the whole story open for me.

HW: Why a sequel for your second book? Affection for the characters?

BC: It was actually my editor's idea. I was perfectly happy walking away from the first book. But once she mentioned it during the editing of *Desert Places*, I really started to think about where the story could go, wondered how Andy might have changed after seven years in hiding, and I got excited about doing it. And I'm very glad I did, because I would've missed those characters. Even my psychopaths are family in some strange, twisted way.

HW: Of all the reviews and comments about your books, what was the strangest? The meanest? The nicest? The most perceptive?

BC: The strangest: This was a comment about me and the reviewer wrote something to the effect that I was either a super-talented writer with an immense imagination or one sick puppy. I think that's open to debate. The meanest: From those [expletive deleted] at Kirkus. Now, keep in mind, this is my first taste of reviews and the reviewer absolutely savaged my book. It was so mean it was funny... although I didn't see the humor for some time. The review ended, "Sadly, a sequel is in the works." The nicest: That's hard to choose from. I particularly loved the review for *Locked Doors* that appeared in the *Winston-Salem Journal*. The reviewer wrote, and this is my favorite quote thus far, "If you don't think you'll enjoy seeing how Crouch makes the torture and disembowelment of innocent women, children and even lax store employees into a thing of poetic beauty, maybe you should go watch Sponge Bob." The most perceptive: The reviews that recognize that I'm trying to make a serious exploration of the human psyche, the nature of evil, and man's depravity are the ones that please me the most.

HW: Do you strive for realism in your writing, or do you try more to entertain?

BC: First and foremost, I want to entertain. I want the reader to close the book thinking, "that was a helluva story." Beyond that, I do strive for realism. I want the reader to identify with my characters' emotions, whether it's fear, sadness, or happiness. The places I write about, from the Yukon to the Outer Banks to the Colorado mountains are rendered accurately, and that's very important to me, because I want the reader to have the benefit of visiting these beautiful places in my books.

HW: The villain in *Locked Doors* seems almost a force of nature, cunning, instinctively brilliant when it comes to creating mayhem. Do you worry that readers might write him off as unrealistic?

BC: I decided to approach Luther Kite a little differently than my bad guy, Orson Thomas, in *Desert Places*. In the first book, I tried to humanize Orson, to gin up sympathy by explaining what happened in his childhood to turn him into this monster. With Luther et al., I made a conscious decision not to delve into any of that, and for this reason I think he comes off as almost mythic, larger than life, maybe with even a tinge of the supernatural. I don't worry that readers will find him unrealistic, because I didn't try to make him like your typical realistic humdrum villain. What I want is for readers to fear him.

HW: What's the most important thing a book has to do to keep YOUR attention?

BC: It's actually very simple... a great story told through great writing. I don't care if it's western, horror, thriller, historical, romance, or literary. I just want to know that I'm in the hands of someone who knows what they're doing.

HW: Who are your literary heroes?

BC: I grew up on southern writers -- Walker Percy, Pat Conroy -- the fantasy of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. In college I discovered Thomas Harris, Dennis Lehane, James Lee Burke, Caleb Carr, and my favorite writer, Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy just blows me away. His prose is so rich. He is unlike anyone else out there today. His 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*, in my opinion, is the greatest horror novel ever written.

HW: What makes *Blood Meridian* "the greatest horror novel ever written?"

BC: The writing is mind blowing. The violence (which occurs frequently and in vivid detail) rises to the level of poetry in McCarthy's hands. And the story is fascinating. It's based on historical fact and follows a bloodthirsty gang through the Mexico-Texas Borderlands in the mid-1800's, who have been hired by the Mexican government to collect as many Indian scalps as they can. I read *Blood Meridian* every year.

HW: Reading *Desert Places* and *Locked Doors*, it seems that you're drawn to the horrific. The books are filled with horrific acts, and with terrifying set pieces, as in the descent into the Kites' basement in *Locked Doors*. Did the horror genre hold any attraction to you growing up?

BC: I honestly didn't read a lot of horror growing up, but I always loved the sensation of fear produced by a scary movie or a great book. Some of my first short fiction (written in middle school) could be classified as horror. In fact, there's a short story on my website called "In Shock" that I wrote in the 8th grade.

HW: Might there be a sequel to *Locked Doors* someday?

BC: Midway through the writing of *Locked Doors*, it occurred to me the story might be a trilogy. I may finish out the trilogy at some point. I'm starting to miss my characters (the ones that survived), and I have a feeling that I will return to the world of *Locked Doors* at some point in the future to check in on them. We'll have to see.

HW: Your latest novel, *Abandon*, is set in Colorado, where you've lived for the past six years. Did you intend to write a novel set in that state when you moved there, or did your surroundings inspire you to?

BC: This was definitely a case of my surroundings inspiring me. Two months after we moved from North Carolina to Durango, we had some friends come out to visit. My wife and I took them on a backpacking trip into the San Juans, and it was on this trip that I first saw the ruins of a mining town—Sneffels, Colorado and the Camp Bird Mine. It made a huge impression, the idea of living in these extreme conditions, particularly in winter. The claustrophobia, the desperation, the kind of people who would subject themselves to such a life fascinated me.

HW: Did you have any particular goals in mind when you embarked on this project? Did they change as you worked? Do you think you met your goals?

BC: The idea of writing a "mining town thriller" was with me for a long time, as early as the summer of 2003, before *Desert Places* was published. Initially, I thought it would all be set in the past, a straight historical. Then in '05, while on tour for *Locked Doors*, I had a sudden realization that this was the

story I needed to write, and that it wasn't just historical. There would be present scenes, too, and the mystery at the heart of the book would be the mass disappearance of the town. My goal was to write a book that I would want to read, and in that regard, I think I succeeded.

HW: How long did it take to prepare to write the book? How much research was involved? Do you research first, then write, or answer the questions that arise as you dive into the writing?

BC: I started outlining in the fall of '05, and finalized the book with my editor in the summer '07. There were 7 drafts, and tons of research, which occurred at all stages of the writing.

HW: Was it tough striking a balance between writing a thriller and the urge to display all your newfound knowledge? Any fascinating tidbits that didn't go into the book that you want to share with readers?

BC: Lots of stuff got cut, and some of it was wonderful (and it still pains me to have let it go) but in the end, it was all about what advanced the story. For instance, there was an Irishman who lived in one of the Colorado mining towns, and the love of his life had died on their wedding night some years prior. Every night, from his cabin above town, the sound of a violin would sweep down the mountain. Mournful, beautiful music. The town got used to hearing it. One night, after the violin went silent, a single gunshot echoed from the cabin. The townsfolk went up and found him dead, with a note asking to be buried with his wife. I loved that bit, wanted to put this guy into the story, but it didn't belong, so I had to let it go.

HW: Your first two books followed the adventures of basically the same cast of characters. Was it a relief or was it scary to move on to a whole new set of players?

BC: Both a total relief and completely terrifying. But what's worse than the fear of doing something new and challenging is realizing one day that you're in a rut, that you've essentially written the same book again and again.

HW: Your first two books could be described as pure, relentless adrenaline. In fact, those are your words. Was it difficult to work on a novel taking place in two different times, switching back and forth between the two? How about

working with a larger cast? Did that present you with any particular challenges, issues, problems?

BC: It was hard at first, but once I got into the flow of both narratives, it wasn't such a big deal to go back and forth, which is the way I wrote it. It sounds silly, but I wrote the present in one font, the past in another, and for some reason, changing fonts helped me to get back into whatever section I was working on. This cast of characters, which I knew was going to be big going in, was intimidating starting out. I spent a month on character studies, really getting to know each main character and their back-story before I dove into the book, and I think (I hope) that made all the difference.

HW: Has having children changed the way you look at your writing? Your subject matter? Do you ever pause and think, I guess my kids won't be able to read that until they're older?

BC: *Abandon* was the first thing I wrote after my son was born, and being a father for the first time and that new relationship and life-altering love couldn't help but find its way into this work. Parent-child relationships definitely constitute a significant aspect of *Abandon*. And yeah, there's no way my kids will be able to read my first two books until they're at least seven or eight (kidding).

HW: Who is your first reader?

BC: My wife.

HW: What's your favorite procrastination technique to avoid writing?

BC: Playing my acoustic guitar.

HW: Now that you're in the business, do you find as much time to read as before? Do you avoid fiction for fear of unconsciously copying someone's stories?

BC: I read more now than ever. You have to. I've never avoided fiction for fear of unconsciously copying someone else's stories. You can't help but be influenced by the work of others. No one is unique. As Cormac McCarthy said, "The sad truth is that books are made of other books."

HW: I happen to know you've written an essay about Jack Ketchum's Off Season for the upcoming International Thrillers Writers project *Thrillers: 100 Must Reads*. Was that format difficult for you? Did the experience provide you with any special insights into your own writings, or into thrillers in general?

BC: It was the hardest thing I'd written all year. I felt like I was in college again working on a term paper. That being said, it was a great joy to delve into the life and work of Jack Ketchum. I had great editors on that project. (HW: Full disclosure time: the editors for that worthy project are the esteemed David Morrell and yours truly. End of plug.)

HW: Tell us a little about future projects. You have a short story slated to appear in the ITW anthology, *Thrillers 2*?

BC: Yep, it's called "Remaking" and also happens to be set in a beautiful Colorado town called Ouray. It's premised on a question: What would you do if you were in a coffee shop, saw a man sitting with a young boy, and suspected the boy wasn't supposed to be with him, that maybe he'd been kidnapped. I'm over the moon and humbled to be included in such a stellar collection of writers. Joe Konrath and I have just released a free short story as an eBook with the help of our publishers. It's kind of groundbreaking, both in how Joe and I collaborated, and how our publishers came together to make it available everywhere. It's called "Serial", and is probably the most twisted thing either of us have ever written. The *Abandon* audiobook will have a short story that I read called "On the Good, Red Road," and finally Jen Jordan's new anthology, *Uncage Me*, publishes in July, and I have a story in that one called "*69."

HW: Are you working on a new novel at the moment?

BC: I am.

HW: Where are you in that process?

BC: About a hundred pages in.

HW: Can you talk a little about the new book, or would that jinx things?

BC: I'm pretty sure I would deeply regret talking about it at this point. I

find if I talk too much about works-in-progress, it takes the wind out of my sails.

HW: Any book recommendations?

BC: Joe Konrath just published a novel under the name Jack Kilborn. It's called *Afraid*, and I think it's one of the best pieces of horror fiction to come out in recent memory.

HW: Work uniform?

BC: A white tee-shirt and pajama bottoms with snowflakes on them. I know, it's awful.

HW: Misconceptions about people who graduated from UNC?

BC: That if by some rip in the space-time continuum, Al-Qaeda managed to get a Division I college basketball team together, and if that team somehow made it to the NCAA tournament, and then survived March Madness, and, now here's a real stretch, were facing Duke in the championship game on Monday night, that UNC fans would put aside their petty rivalry and root for Duke over the terrorists.

DESERT PLACES
Published in January 2004 by Thomas Dunne Books

DESCRIPTION: Andrew Z. Thomas is a successful writer of suspense thrillers, living the dream at his lake house in the piedmont of North Carolina. One afternoon in late spring, he receives a bizarre letter that eventually threatens his career, his sanity, and the lives of everyone he loves. A murderer is designing his future, and for the life of him, Andrew can't get away.

Harrowing...terrific...a whacked out combination of Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy.
PAT CONROY

[C]arried by rich, image-filled prose. Crouch will handcuff you, blindfold you, throw you in the trunk of a car, and drag you kicking and screaming through a story so intense, so emotionally packed, that you will walk away stunned.
WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

Excerpt from Desert Places…

On a lovely May evening, I sat on my deck, watching the sun descend upon Lake Norman. So far, it had been a perfect day. I'd risen at 5:00 a.m. as I always do, put on a pot of French roast, and prepared my usual breakfast of scrambled eggs and a bowl of fresh pineapple. By six o'clock, I was writing, and I didn't stop until noon. I fried two white crappies I'd caught the night before, and the moment I sat down for lunch, my agent called. Cynthia fields my messages when I'm close to finishing a book, and she had several for me, the only one of real importance being that the movie deal for my latest novel, Blue Murder, had closed. It was good news of course, but two other movies had been made from my books, so I was used to it by now.

I worked in my study for the remainder of the afternoon and quit at 6:30. My final edits of the new as yet untitled manuscript would be finished tomorrow. I was tired, but my new thriller, The Scorcher, would be on bookshelves within the week. I savored the exhaustion that followed a full day of work. My hands sore from typing, eyes dry and strained, I shut down the computer and rolled back from the desk in my swivel chair.

I went outside and walked up the long gravel drive toward the mailbox. It was the first time I'd been out all day, and the sharp sunlight burned my eyes as

it squeezed through the tall rows of loblollies that bordered both sides of the drive. It was so quiet here. Fifteen miles south, Charlotte was still gridlocked in rush-hour traffic, and I was grateful not to be a part of that madness. As the tiny rocks crunched beneath my feet, I pictured my best friend, Walter Lancing, fuming in his Cadillac. He'd be cursing the drone of horns and the profusion of taillights as he inched away from his suite in uptown Charlotte, leaving the quarterly nature magazine Hiker to return home to his wife and children. Not me, I thought, the solitary one.

For once, my mailbox wasn't overflowing. Two envelopes lay inside, one a bill, the other blank except for my address typed on the outside. Fan mail.

Back inside, I mixed myself a Jack Daniel's and Sun-Drop and took my mail and a book on criminal pathology out onto the deck. Settling into a rocking chair, I set everything but my drink on a small glass table and gazed down to the water. My backyard is narrow, and the woods flourish a quarter mile on either side, keeping my home of ten years in isolation from my closest neighbors. Spring had not come this year until mid-April, so the last of the pink and white dogwood blossoms still specked the variably green interior of the surrounding forest. Bright grass ran down to a weathered gray pier at the water's edge, where an ancient weeping willow sagged over the bank, the tips of its branches dabbling in the surface of the water.

The lake is more than a mile wide where it touches my property, making houses on the opposite shore visible only in winter, when the blanket of leaves has been stripped from the trees. So now, in the thick of spring, branches thriving with baby greens and yellows, the lake was mine alone, and I felt like the only living soul for miles around.

I put my glass down half-empty and opened the first envelope. As expected, I found a bill from the phone company, and I scrutinized the lengthy list of calls. When I'd finished, I set it down and lifted the lighter envelope. There was no stamp, which I thought strange, and upon slicing it open, I extracted a single piece of white paper and unfolded it. In the center of the page, one paragraph had been typed in black ink:

Greetings. There is a body buried on your property, covered in your blood. The unfortunate young lady's name is Rita Jones. You've seen this missing schoolteacher's face on the news, I'm sure. In her jeans pocket you'll find a slip of paper with a phone number on it. You have one day to call that number. If I have not heard from you by 8:00 p.m. tomorrow (5/17), the Charlotte Police Department will receive an anonymous phone call. I'll tell them where Rita Jones is buried on Andrew Thomas's lakefront property,

how he killed her, and where the murder weapon can be found in his house. (I do believe a paring knife is missing from your kitchen.) I hope for your sake I don't have to make that call. I've placed a property marker on the grave site. Just walk along the shoreline toward the southern boundary of your property and you'll find it. I strongly advise against going to the police, as I am always watching you.

A smile edged across my lips. I even chuckled to myself. Because my novels treat crime and violence, my fans often have a demented sense of humor. I've received death threats, graphic artwork, even notes from people claiming to have murdered in the same fashion as the serial killers in my books. But I'll save this, I thought. I couldn't remember one so original.

I read it again, but a premonitory twinge struck me the second time, particularly because the author had some knowledge regarding the layout of my property. And a paring knife was, in fact, missing from my cutlery block. Carefully refolding the letter, I

slipped it into the pocket of my khakis and walked down the steps toward the lake.

As the sun cascaded through the hazy sky, beams of light drained like spilled paint across the western horizon. Looking at the lacquered lake suffused with deep orange, garnet, and magenta, I stood by the shore for several moments, watching two sunsets collide.

Against my better judgment, I followed the shoreline south and was soon tramping through a noisy bed of leaves. I'd gone an eighth of a mile when I stopped. At my feet, amid a coppice of pink flowering mountain laurel, I saw a miniature red flag attached to a strip of rusted metal thrust into the ground. The flag fluttered in a breeze that curled off the water. This has to be a joke, I thought, and if so, it's a damn good one.

As I brushed away the dead leaves that surrounded the marker, my heart began to pound. The dirt beneath the flag was packed, not crumbly like undisturbed soil. I even saw half a footprint when I'd swept all the leaves away.

I ran back to the house and returned with a shovel. Because the soil had previously been unearthed, I dug easily through the first foot and a half, directly below where the marker had been placed. At two feet, the head of the shovel stabbed into something soft. My heart stopped. Throwing the shovel aside, I dropped to my hands and knees and clawed through the dirt. A rotten stench enveloped me, and as the hole deepened, the smell grew more pungent.

My fingers touched flesh. I drew my hand back in horror and scrambled

away from the hole. Rising to my feet, I stared down at a coffee brown ankle, barely showing through the dirt. The odor of rot overwhelmed me, so I breathed only through my mouth as I took up the shovel again.

When the corpse was completely exposed, and I saw what a month of putrefaction could do to a human face, I vomited into the leaves. I kept thinking that I should have the stomach for this because I write about it. Researching the grisly handiwork of serial killers, I'd studied countless mutilated cadavers. But I had never smelled a human being decomposing in the ground, or seen how insects teem in the moist cavities.

I composed myself, held my hand over my mouth and nose, and peered again into the hole. The face was unrecognizable, but the body was undoubtedly that of a short black female, thick in the legs, plump through the torso. She wore a formerly white shirt, now marred with blood and dirt, the fabric rent over much of the chest, primarily in the vicinity of her heart. Jean shorts covered her legs down to the knees. I got back down on all fours, held my breath, and reached for one of her pockets. Her legs were mushy and turgid, and I had great difficulty forcing my hand into the tight jeans. Finding nothing in the first pocket, I stepped across the hole and tried the other. Sticking my hand inside it, I withdrew a slip of paper from a fortune cookie and fell back into the leaves, gasping for clean lungfuls of air. On one side, I saw the phone number; on the other: "you are the only flower of meditation in the wilderness."

In five minutes, I'd reburied the body and the marker. I took a small chunk of granite from the shore and placed it on the thicketed grave site. Then I returned to the house. It was quarter to eight, and there was hardly any light left in the sky.

Two hours later, sitting on the sofa in my living room, I dialed the number on the slip of paper. Every door to the house was locked, most of the lights turned on, and in my lap, a cold satin stainless .357 revolver.

I had not called the police for a very good reason. The claim that it was my blood on the woman was probably a lie, but the paring knife had been missing from my kitchen for weeks. Also, with the Charlotte Police Department's search for Rita Jones dominating local news headlines, her body on my property, murdered with my knife, possibly with my fingerprints on it, would be more than sufficient evidence to indict me. I'd researched enough murder trials to know that.

As the phone rang, I stared up at the vaulted ceiling of my living room, glanced at the black baby grand piano I'd never learned to play, the marble fireplace, the odd artwork that adorned the walls. A woman named Karen, whom

I'd dated for nearly two years, had convinced me to buy half a dozen pieces of art from a recently deceased minimalist from New York, a man who signed his work "Loman." I hadn't initially taken to Loman, but Karen had promised me I'd eventually "get" him. Now, $27,000 and one fiancee lighter, I stared at the ten-by-twelve-foot abomination that hung above the mantel: shit brown on canvas, with a basketball-size yellow sphere in the upper right-hand corner. Aside from Brown No. 2, four similar marvels of artistic genius pockmarked other walls of my home, but these I could suffer. Mounted on the wall at the foot of the staircase, it was Playtime, the twelve-thousand-dollar glass-encased heap of stuffed animals, sewn together in an orgiastic conglomeration, which reddened my face even now. But I smiled, and the knot that had been absent since late winter shot a needle of pain through my gut. My Karen ulcer. You're still there. Still hurting me. At least it's you.

The second ring.

I peered up the staircase that ascended to the exposed second-floor hallway, and closing my eyes, I recalled the party I'd thrown just a week ago-guests laughing, talking politics and books, filling up my silence. I saw a man and a woman upstairs, elbows resting against the oak banister, overlooking the living room, the wet bar, and the kitchen. Holding their wineglasses, they waved down to me, smiling at their host.

The third ring.

My eyes fell on a photograph of my mother-a five-by-seven in a stained-glass frame, sitting atop the obsidian piano. She was the only family member with whom I maintained regular contact. Though I had relatives in the Pacific Northwest, Florida, and a handful in the Carolinas, I saw them rarely-at reunions, weddings, or funerals that my mother shamed me into attending with her. But with my father having passed away and a brother I hadn't seen in thirteen years, family meant little to me. My friends sustained me, and contrary to popular belief, I didn't have the true reclusive spirit imputed to me. I did need them.

In the photograph, my mother is squatting down at my father's grave, pruning a tuft of carmine canna lilies in the shadow of the headstone. But you can only see her strong, kind face among the blossoms, intent on tidying up her husband's plot of earth under that magnolia he'd taught me to climb, the blur of its waxy green leaves behind her.

The fourth ring.

"Did you see the body?"

It sounded as if the man were speaking through a towel. There was no emotion or hesitation in his staccato voice.

“Yes.”

“I gutted her with your paring knife and hid the knife in your house. It has your fingerprints all over it.” He cleared his throat. “Four months ago, you had blood work done by Dr. Xu. They misplaced a vial. You remember having to go back and give more?”

“Yes.”

“I stole that vial. Some is on Rita Jones’s white T-shirt. The rest is on the others.”

“What others?”

“I make a phone call, and you spend the rest of your life in prison, possibly death row....”

“I just want you-”

“Shut your mouth. You’ll receive a plane ticket in the mail. Take the flight. Pack clothes, toiletries, nothing else. You spent last summer in Aruba. Tell your friends you’re going again.”

“How did you know that?”

“I know many things, Andrew.”

“I have a book coming out,” I pleaded. “I’ve got readings scheduled. My agent-”

“Lie to her.”

“She won’t understand me just leaving like this.”

“Fuck Cynthia Mathis. You lie to her for your safety, because if I even suspect you’ve brought someone along or that someone knows, you’ll go to jail or you’ll die. One or the other, guaranteed. And I hope you aren’t stupid enough to trace this number. I promise you it’s stolen.”

“How do I know I won’t be hurt?”

“You don’t. But if I get off the phone with you and I’m not convinced you’ll be on that flight, I’ll call the police tonight. Or I may visit you while you’re sleeping. You’ve got to put that Smith and Wesson away sometime.”

I stood up and spun around, the gun clenched in my sweaty hands. The house was silent, though chimes on the deck were clanging in a zephyr. I looked through the large living room windows at the black lake, its wind-rippled surface reflecting the pier lights. The blue light at the end of Walter’s pier shone out across the water from a distant inlet. His “Gatsby light,” we called it. My eyes scanned the grass and the edge of the trees, but it was far too dark to see anything in the woods.

“I’m not in the house,” he said. “Sit down.”

I felt something well up inside of me-anger at the fear, rage at this injustice.

“Change of plan,” I said. “I’m going to hang up, dial nine one one, and take

my chances. You can go-”

“If you aren’t motivated by self-preservation, there’s an old woman named Jeanette I could-”

“I’ll kill you.”

“Sixty-five, lives alone, I think she’d love the company. What do you think? Do I have to visit your mother to show you I’m serious? What is there to consider? Tell me you’ll be on that plane, Andrew. Tell me so I don’t have to visit your mother tonight.”

“I’ll be on that plane.”

The phone clicked, and he was gone.

LOCKED DOORS
Published July 2005 by Thomas Dunne Books

DESCRIPTION: Seven years ago, suspense novelist Andrew Thomas's life was shattered when he was framed for a series of murders. The killer's victims were unearthed on Andrew's lakefront property, and since he was wanted by the FBI, Andrew had no choice but to flee and to create a new identity. Andrew does just that in a cabin tucked away in the remote wilderness near Haines Junction, Yukon. His only link to society is by e-mail, through which he learns that all the people he ever loved are being stalked and murdered. Culminating in the spooky and secluded Outer Banks of North Carolina, the paths of Andrew Thomas, a psychotic named Luther Kite, and a young female detective collide. *Locked Doors* is a novel of blistering suspense that will scare you to death.

Crouch quite simply is a marvel. *Locked Doors* is as good as anything I've read all year, a stay-up-all-night thriller that will have you chewing your fingers down to the nub even as you're reading its last paragraph. Highest possible recommendation.
BOOKREPORTER

Palpable suspense. Non-stop action. Relentless and riveting. Blake Crouch is the most exciting new thriller writer I've read in years.
DAVID MORRELL

Excerpt from Locked Doors…

The headline on the Arts and Leisure page read: Publisher to Reissue Five Thrillers by Alleged Murderer Andrew Z. Thomas.

All it took was seeing his name.

Karen Prescott dropped The New York Times and walked over to the window.

Morning light streamed across the clutter of her cramped office--query letters and sample chapters stacked in two piles on the floor beside the desk, a box of galleys shoved under the credenza. She peered out the window and saw the fog dissolving, the microscopic crawl of traffic now materializing on Broadway through the cloud below.

Leaning against a bookcase that housed many of the hardcovers she'd guided to publication, Karen shivered. The mention of Andrew's name always unglued her.

For two years she'd been romantically involved with the suspense novelist and had even lived with him during the writing of Blue Murder at the same lake house in North Carolina where many of his victims were found.

She considered it a latent character defect that she'd failed to notice anything sinister in Andy beyond a slight reclusive tendency.

My God, I almost married him.

She pictured Andy reading to the crowd in that Boston bookshop the first time they met. In a bathrobe writing in his office as she brought him fresh coffee (French roast, of course). Andy making love to her in a flimsy rowboat in the middle of Lake Norman.

She thought of his dead mother.

The exhumed bodies from his lakefront property.

His face on the FBI website.

They'd used his most recent jacket photo, a black-and-white of Andy in a sports jacket sitting broodingly at the end of his pier.

During the last few years she'd stopped thinking of him as Andy. He was Andrew Thomas now and embodied all the horrible images the cadence of those four syllables invoked.

There was a knock.

Scott Boylin, publisher of Ice Blink Press's literary imprint, stood in the doorway dressed in his best bib and tucker. Karen suspected he was gussied up for the Doubleday party.

He smiled, waved with his fingers.

She crossed her arms, leveled her gaze.

God, he looked streamlined today--very tall, fit, crowned by thick black hair with dignified intimations of silver.

He made her feel little. In a good way. Because Karen stood nearly six feet tall, few men towered over her. She loved having to look up at Scott.

They'd been dating clandestinely for the last four months. She'd even given him a key to her apartment, where they spent countless Sundays in bed reading manuscripts, the coffee-stained pages scattered across the sheets.

But last night she'd seen him at a bar in SoHo with one of the cute interns. Their rendezvous did not look work-related.

"Come to the party with me," he said. "Then we'll go to Il Piazza. Talk this out. It's not what you--"

"I've got tons of reading to catch up--"

"Don't be like that, Karen. Come on."

"I don't think it's appropriate to have this conversation here, so . . ."

He exhaled sharply through his nose and the door closed hard behind him.

Joe Mack was stuffing his pink round face with a gyro when his cell phone started ringing to the tune of “Staying Alive.”

He answered, cheeks exploding with food, “This Joe.”

“Hi, yes, um, I’ve got a bit of an interesting problem.”

“Whath?”

“Well, I’m in my apartment, but I can’t get the deadbolt to turn from the inside.”

Joe Mack choked down a huge mouthful, said, “So you’re locked in.”

“Exactly.”

“Which apartment?” He didn’t even try to mask the annoyance in his voice.

“Twenty-two eleven.”

“Name?”

“Um . . . I’m not the tenant. I’m Karen Prescott’s friend. She’s the--”

“Yeah, I get it. You need to leave anytime soon?”

“Well, yeah, I don’t want to--”

Joe Mack sighed, closed the cell phone, and devoured the last of the gyro.

Wiping his hands on his shirt, he heaved himself from a debilitated swivel chair and lumbered out of the office, locking the door behind him.

The lobby was quiet for midday and the elevator doors spread as soon as he pressed the button. He rode up wishing he’d bought three gyros for lunch instead of two.

The doors opened again and he walked onto the twenty-second floor, fishing the key ring containing the master from the pocket of his enormous overalls.

He belched.

It echoed down the empty corridor.

Man, was he hungry.

He stopped at 2211, knocked, yelled through the door, “It’s the super!”

No one answered.

Joe Mack inserted the master into the deadbolt. It turned easily enough.

He pushed the door open.

“Hello?” he said, standing in the threshold, admiring the apartment--roomy, flat-screen television, lush deep blue carpet, an antique desk, great view of SoHo, probably loads of food in the fridge.

“Anybody home?”

He turned the deadbolt four times. It worked perfectly.

Another door opened somewhere in the hallway and approaching footsteps reverberated off the hardwood floor. Joe Mack glanced down the corridor at the

tall man with black hair in a black overcoat strolling toward him from the stairwell.

"Hey, pal, were you the one who just called me?" Joe Mack asked.

The man with black hair stopped at the open doorway of 2211.

He smelled strange, of Windex and lemons.

"Yes, I was the one."

"Oh. You get the lock to work?"

"I've never been in this apartment."

"What the fuck did you call me for--"

Glint of a blade. The man held an ivory-hilted bowie. He swept its shimmering point across Joe Mack's swollen belly, cleaving denim, cotton, several layers of skin.

"No, wait just a second--"

The man raised his right leg and booted Joe Mack through the threshold.

The super toppled backward as the man followed him into the apartment, slammed the door, and shot the deadbolt home.

Karen left Ice Blink Press at 6:30 p.m. and emerged into a manic Manhattan evening, the sliver of sky between the buildings smoldering with dying sunlight, gilding glass and steel. It was the fourth Friday of October, the terminal brilliance of autumn full blown upon the city, and as she walked the fifteen blocks to her apartment in SoHo, Karen decided that she wouldn't start the manuscript in her leather satchel tonight.

Instead she'd slip into satin pajamas, have a glass of that organic chardonnay she'd purchased at Whole Foods Market, and watch wonderful mindless television.

It had been a bad week.

Pampering was in order.

At 7:55 she walked out of her bedroom in black satin pajamas that rubbed coolly against her skin. Her chaotic blond hair was twisted into a bun and held up by chopsticks from the Chinese food she'd ordered. Two unopened food cartons and a bottle of wine sat on the glass coffee table between the couch and the flat-screen television. Her apartment smelled of spicy-sweet sesame beef.

She plopped down and uncorked the wine.

Ashley Chambliss's CD Nakedsongs had ended and in the perfect stillness of her apartment Karen conceded how alone she was.

Thirty-seven.

Single again.

Childless.

But I’m not lonely, she thought, turning on the television and pouring a healthy glass of chardonnay.

I’m just alone.

There is a difference.

After watching Dirty Dancing, Karen treated herself to a soak. She’d closed the bathroom door and a Yankee candle that smelled of cookie dough sat burning in a glass jar on the sink, the projection of its restless flame flickering on the sweaty plaster walls.

Karen rubbed her long muscular legs together, slippery with bath oil. Imagining another pair of legs sliding between her own, she shut her eyes, moved her hands over her breasts, nipples swelling, then up and down her thighs.

The phone was ringing in the living room.

She wondered if Scott Boylin was calling to apologize. Wine encouraged irrational forgiveness in Karen. She even wished Scott were in the bathtub with her. She could feel the memory of his water-softened feet gliding up her smooth shinbones. Maybe she’d call and invite him over. Give him that chance to explain. He’d be back from the Doubleday party.

Now someone was knocking at the front door.

Karen sat up, blew back the bubbles that had amassed around her head.

Lifting her wineglass by the stem, she finished it off. Then she rose out of the water, took her white terrycloth bathrobe that lay draped across the toilet seat, and stepped unsteadily from the tub onto the mosaic tile. She’d nearly polished off the entire bottle of chardonnay and a warm and pleasant gale was raging in her head.

Karen crossed the living room, heading toward the front door.

She failed to notice that the cartons of steamed rice and sesame beef were gone, or that a large gray trashcan now stood between the television and the antique desk she’d inherited from her grandmother.

She peeked through the peephole.

A young man stood in the hallway holding an enormous bouquet of ruby red roses.

She smiled, turned the deadbolt, opened the door.

“I have a delivery for Karen Prescott.”

“That’s me.”

The delivery man handed over the gigantic vase.

“Wait here. I’ll get you your tip.” She slurred her words a little.

“No ma’am, it’s been taken care of.” He gave her a small salute and left.

She relocked the door and carried the roses over to the kitchen counter. They were magnificent and they burgeoned from the cut-glass vase. She plucked the small card taped to the glass and opened it. The note read simply:

Look in the coat closet

Karen giggled. Scott was one hundred percent forgiven. Maybe she’d even do that thing he always asked for tonight.

She buried her nose in a rose, inhaled the damp sweet perfume. Then she cinched the belt of her bathrobe and walked over to the closet behind the couch, pulling open the door with a big smile that instantly died.

A naked man with black hair and a pale face peered down at her. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and swallowed.

The cartons of leftover Chinese food stood between his feet.

She stared into his black eyes, a coldness spreading through her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she said.

The man grinned, his member rising.

Karen bolted for the front door, but as she reached to unhook the chain he snatched a handful of her wet hair and swung her back into a mirror that shattered on the adjacent wall.

“Please,” she whimpered.

He punched her in the face.

Karen sank down onto the floor in bits of glass, anesthetized by wine and fear. Watching his bare feet, she wondered where her body would be found and by whom and in what condition.

He grabbed her hair into a ball with one hand and lifted her face out of the glass, the tiniest shards having already embedded themselves in her cheek.

He swung down.

She felt the dull thud of his knuckles crack her jaw, decided to feign unconsciousness.

He hit her again.

She didn’t have to.

ABANDON
Published July 2009 by Minotaur Books

DESCRIPTION: On Christmas Day in 1893, every man, woman and child in a remote mining town will disappear, belongings forsaken, meals left to freeze in vacant cabins, and not a single bone will be found--not even the gold that was rumored to have been the pride of this town will be found either. One hundred and thirteen years later, two backcountry guides are hired by a leading history professor and his journalist daughter to lead them into the abandoned mining town to learn what happened. This has been done once before but the people that went in did not come out. With them is a psychic and a paranormal photographer--the town is rumored to be haunted. They've come to see a ghost town, but what they're about to discover is that twenty miles from civilization, with a blizzard bearing down, they are not alone, and the past is very much alive....

Crouch does a great job of pacing, going back and forth between the two stories and the two time periods. The characters are authentic and interesting. He keeps up the suspense until the very end. It's a great book. Crouch is a great writer. Go and get it.
TORONTO SUN

In *Abandon*, Crouch blends elements of modern-day Colorado with its violent and storied past to create a tapestry of love, greed and revenge… unforgettable.
JOHN HART

Excerpt from Abandon…

Thursday, December 28, 1893

Wind rips through the crags a thousand feet above, nothing moving in this godforsaken town, and the muleskinner knows that something is wrong. Two miles south stands Bartholomew Packer's mine, the Godsend, a twenty-stamp mill that should be filling this box canyon with the thudding racket of the rock-crushers pulverizing ore. The sound of the stamps in operation is the sound of money being made, and only two things will stop them—Christmas and tragedy.

He dismounts his albino steed, the horse's pinked nostrils flaring, dirty mane matted with ice. The single-rig saddle is snow-crusted as well, its leather

and cloth components—the mochila and shabrack—frozen stiff. He rubs George the horse's neck, speaking in soft, low tones he knows will calm the animal, telling him he did a good day's work and that a warm stable awaits with feed and fresh water.

The muleskinner opens his wallet, collects the pint of busthead he bought at a bodega in Silverton, and swallows the remaining mouthful, whiskey crashing into his empty stomach like iced fire.

He wades through waist-deep snow to the mercantile, bangs his shop-mades on the doorframe. Inside, the lamps have been extinguished and the big stove squats dormant in the corner, unattended by the usual constellation of miners jawboning over coffee and tobacco. He calls for the owner as he crosses the board floor, moving between shelves, past stacked crates and burlap sacks bulging with sugar and flour.

"Jessup? It's Brady! You in back?"

The twelve burros crane their scrawny necks in his direction when Brady emerges from the merc. He reaches into his greatcoat, pulls out a tin of Star Navy tobacco, and shoves a chaw between lips and gums gone blackish purple in the last year.

"What the hell?" he whispers.

When he delivered supplies two weeks ago, this little mining town was bustling. Now Abandon looms listless before him in the gloom of late afternoon, streets empty, snow banked high against the unshoveled plank sidewalks, no tracks as far as he can see.

The cabins scattered across the lower slopes lie buried to their chimneys, and with not a one of them smoking, the air smells too clean.

Brady is a man at home in solitude, often days on the trail, alone in wild, quiet places, but this silence is all wrong—a lie. He feels menaced by it, and with each passing moment, more certain that something has happened here.

A wall of dark clouds scrapes over the peaks and snowflakes begin to speck the sleeves of his slicker. Here comes the wind. Chimes clang together over the doorway of the merc. It will be night soon.

He makes his way up the street into the saloon, still half-expecting Joss Maddox, the beautiful barkeep, to assault him with some gloriously profane greeting. No one's there. Not the mute piano player, not a single customer, and again, no light from the kerosene lamps, no warmth from the potbellied stove, just a half-filled glass on the pine bar, the beer frozen through.

The path to the nearest cabin lies beneath untrodden snow, and without webs, it takes five minutes to cover a hundred yards.

He pounds his gloved fist against the door, counts to sixty. The latch string

hasn’t been pulled in, and despite the circumstance, he still feels like a trespasser as he steps inside uninvited.

In the dark, his eyes strain to adjust.

Around the base of a potted spruce tree, crumpled pages of newspaper clutters the dirt floor—remnants of Christmas.

Food sits untouched on a rustic table, far too lavish to be any ordinary meal for the occupants of this cramped, one-room cabin. This was Christmas dinner.

He removes a glove, touches the ham—cold and hard as ore. A pot of beans have frozen in their broth. The cake feels more like pumice than sponge, and two jagged glass stems still stand upright, the wine having frozen and shattered the crystal cups.

Outside again, back with his pack train, he shouts, turning slowly in the middle of the street so the words carry in all directions.

“Anyone here?”

His voice and the fading echo of it sound so small rising against the vast, indifferent sweep of wilderness. The sky dims. Snow falls harder. The church at the north end of town disappears in the storm.

It’s twenty miles back to Silverton, and the pack train has been on the trail since before first light. They need rest. Having skinned mules the last sixteen hours, he needs it, too, though the prospect of spending the night in Abandon, in this awful silence, unnerves him.

As he slips a boot into the stirrup, ready to drive the burros down to the stables, he notices something beyond the cribs at the south end of town. He puts George forward, trots through deep powder between the false-fronted buildings, and when he sees what caught his eye, whispers, “You old fool.”

Just a snowman scowling at him, spindly arms made of spruce branches. Pinecones for teeth and eyes. Garland for a crown.

He tugs the reins, turning George back toward town, and the jolt of seeing her provokes, “Lord God Amighty.”

He drops his head, tries to allay the thumping of his heart in the thin air. When he looks up again, the young girl is still there, perhaps six or seven, apparition-pale and just ten feet away, with locomotive-black curls and coal eyes to match—so dark and with such scant delineation between iris and pupil, they more resemble wet stones.

“You put a fright in me,” he says. “What are you doin out here all alone?”

She backpedals.

“Don’t be scart. I ain’t the bogeyman.” Brady alights, wades toward her through the snow. With the young girl in webs sunk only a foot in powder, and

the muleskinner to his waist, he thinks it odd to stand eye to eye with a child.

"You all right?" he asks. "I didn't think there was nobody here."

The snowflakes stand out like white confetti in the child's hair.

"They're all gone," she says, no emotion, no tears, just an unaffected statement of fact.

"Even your Ma and Pa?"

She nods.

"Where'd they all go to? Can you show me?"

She takes another step back, reaches into her gray woolen cloak. The single-action Army is a heavy sidearm, and it sags comically in the child's hand so she holds it like a rifle, Brady too surprised to do a thing but watch as she struggles with the hammer.

"Okay, I'll show you," she says, the hammer locked back, sighting him up, her small finger already in the trigger guard.

"Now hold on, wait just a—"

"Stay still."

"That ain't no toy to point in someone's direction. It's for—"

"Killin. I know. You'll feel better directly."

As Brady scrambles for a way to rib up this young girl to hand him the gun, he hears the report ricocheting through the canyon, finds himself lying on his back, surrounded by a wall of snow.

In the oval of gray winter sky, the child's face appears, looking down at him.

What in God's—

"It made a hole in your neck."

He attempts to tell her to stable George and the burros, see that they're fed and watered. After all the work they put in today, they deserve at least that. Only gurgles emerge, and when he tries to breathe, his throat whistles.

She points the Army at his face again, one eye closed, the barrel slightly quivering, a parody of aiming.

He stares up into the deluge of snowflakes, the sky already immersed in bluish dusk that seems to deepen before his eyes, and he wonders, *Is the day really fading that fast, or am I?*

SNOWBOUND

Forthcoming June 2010 from Minotaur Books

DESCRIPTION: For Will Innis and his daughter, Devlin, the loss was catastrophic. Every day for the past five years, they wonder where she is, if she is—Will's wife, Devlin's mother—because Rachael Innis vanished one night during an electrical storm on a lonely desert highway, and suspected of her death, Will took his daughter and fled.

Now, Will and Devlin live under different names in another town, having carved out a new life for themselves as they struggle to maintain some semblance of a family.

When one night, a beautiful, hard-edged FBI agent appears on their doorstep, they fear the worst, but she hasn't come to arrest Will. "I know you're innocent," she tells him, "because Rachael wasn't the first…or the last." Desperate for answers, Will and Devlin embark on a terrifying journey that spans four thousand miles from the desert southwest to the wilds of Alaska , heading unaware into the heart of a nightmare, because the truth is infinitely worse than they ever imagined.

Excerpt from Snowbound…

1

In the evening of the last good day either of them would know for years to come, the girl pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped through onto the back porch.

"Daddy?"

Will Innis set the legal pad aside and made room for Devlin to climb into his lap. His daughter was small for eleven, felt like the shell of a child in his arms.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked and in her scratchy voice he could hear the remnants of her last respiratory infection like gravel in her lungs.

"Working up a closing for my trial in the morning."

"Is your client the bad guy again?"

Will smiled. "You and your mother. I'm not really supposed to think of it that way, sweetheart."

"What'd he do?" His little girl's face had turned ruddy in the sunset and the fading light brought out threads of platinum in her otherwise midnight hair.

"He allegedly—"

"What's that mean?"

“Allegedly?”

“Yeah.”

“Means it’s not been proven. He’s suspected of selling drugs.”

“Like what I take?”

“No, your drugs are good. They help you. He was selling, allegedly selling, bad drugs to people.”

“Why are they bad?”

“Because they make you lose control.”

“Why do people take them?”

“They like how it makes them feel.”

“How does it make them feel?”

He kissed her forehead and looked at his watch. “It’s after eight, Devi. Let’s go bang on those lungs.”

She sighed but she didn’t argue. She never tried to get out of it.

He stood up cradling his daughter and walked over to the redwood railing.

They stared into the wilderness that bordered Oasis Hills, their subdivision. The houses on No-Water Lane had the Sonoran Desert for a backyard.

“Look,” he said. “See them?” A half mile away, specks filed out of an arroyo and trotted across the desert toward a shadeless forest of giant saguaro cacti that looked vaguely sinister profiled against the horizon.

“What are they?” she asked.

“Coyotes. What do you bet they start yapping when the sun goes down?”

After supper, he read to Devlin from A Wrinkle in Time. They’d been working their way through the penultimate chapter, “Aunt Beast,” but Devlin was exhausted and drifted off before Will had finished the second page.

He closed the book and set it on the carpet and turned out the light. Cool desert air flowed in through an open window. A sprinkler whispered in the next door neighbor’s yard. Devlin yawned, made a cooing sound that reminded him of rocking her to sleep as a newborn. Her eyes fluttered and she said very softly, “Mom?”

“She’s working late at the clinic, sweetheart.”

“When’s she coming back?”

“Few hours.”

“Tell her to come in and kiss me?”

“I will.”

He was nowhere near ready for court in the morning but he stayed, running his fingers through Devlin’s hair until she’d fallen back to sleep. Finally, he slid carefully off the bed and walked out onto the deck to gather up his books and

legal pads. He had a late night ahead of him. A pot of strong coffee would help.

Next door, the sprinklers had gone quiet.

A lone cricket chirped in the desert.

Thunderless lightning sparked somewhere over Mexico, and the coyotes began to scream.

2

The thunderstorm caught up with Rachael Innis thirty miles north of the Mexican border. It was 9:30 p.m., and it had been a long day at the free clinic in Sonoyta, where she volunteered her time and services once a week as a bilingual psychologist. The windshield wipers whipped back and forth. High beams lit the steam rising off the pavement, and in the rearview mirror, Rachael saw the pair of headlights a quarter of a mile back that had been with her for the last ten minutes.

Glowing beads suddenly appeared on the shoulder just ahead. She jammed her foot into the brake pedal, the Grand Cherokee fishtailing into the oncoming lane before skidding to a stop. A doe and her fawn ventured into the middle of the road, mesmerized by the headlights. Rachael let her forehead fall onto the steering wheel, closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath.

The deer moved on. She accelerated the Cherokee, another dark mile passing as pellets of hail hammered the hood.

The Cherokee veered sharply toward the shoulder and she nearly lost control again, trying to correct her bearing, but the steering wheel wouldn't straighten out. Rachael lifted her foot off the gas pedal and eased over onto the side of the road.

When she killed the ignition all she could hear was the rain and hail drumming on the roof. The car that had been following her shot by. She set her glasses in the passenger seat, opened the door, and stepped down into a puddle that engulfed her pumps. The downpour soaked through her black suit. She shivered. It was pitch-black between lightning strikes and she moved forward carefully, feeling her way along the warm metal of the hood.

A slash of lightning hit the desert just a few hundred yards out. It set her body tingling, her ears ringing. I'm going to be electrocuted. There came a train of earsplitting strikes, flashbulbs of electricity that lit the sky just long enough for her to see that the tires on the driver side were still intact.

Her hands trembled now. A tall saguaro stood burning like a cross in the desert. She groped her way over to the passenger side as marble-size hail collected in her hair. The desert was electrified again, spreading wide and empty all around her.

In the eerie blue light she saw that the front tire on the passenger side was flat.

Back inside the Cherokee, Rachael sat behind the steering wheel, mascara trailing down her cheeks like sable tears. She wrung out her long black hair and massaged the headache building between her temples. Her purse lay in the passenger floorboard. She dragged it into her lap and shoved her hand inside, rummaging for the cell phone. She found it, tried her husband's number, but there was no service in the storm.

Rachael looked into the back of the Cherokee at the spare. She had no way of contacting AAA and passing cars would be few and far between on this remote highway at this hour of the night. I'll just wait and try Will again when the storm has passed.

Squeezing the steering wheel, she stared through the windshield into the stormy darkness, somewhere north of the border in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Middle of nowhere.

There was a brilliant streak of lightning. In the split second illumination she saw a black Escalade parked a hundred yards up the shoulder.

Thunder rattled the windows. Five seconds elapsed. When the sky exploded again, Rachael felt a strange, unnerving pull to look through the driver side window.

A man swung a crowbar through the glass.

3

Will startled back into consciousness, disoriented and thirsty. It was so quiet—just the discreet drone of a computer fan and the second hand of the clock ticking in the adjacent bedroom. He found himself slouched in the leather chair at the desk in his small home office, the CPU still purring, the monitor switched into sleep mode.

As he yawned, everything rushed back in a torrent of anxiety. He'd been hammering out notes for his closing argument and hit a wall at ten o'clock. The evidence was damning. He was going to lose. He'd only closed his eyes for a moment to clear his head.

He reached for the mug of coffee and took a sip. Winced. It was cold and bitter. He jostled the mouse. When the screen restored, he looked at the clock and realized he wouldn't be sleeping anymore tonight. It was 4:09 a.m. He was due in court in less than five hours.

First things first—he needed an immediate and potent infusion of caffeine.

His office adjoined the master bedroom at the west end of the house, and

passing through on his way to the kitchen, he noticed a peculiar thing. He'd expected to see his wife buried under the myriad quilts and blankets on their bed, but she wasn't there. The comforter was smooth and taut, undisturbed since they'd made it up yesterday morning.

He walked through the living room into the den and down the hallway toward the east end of the house. Rachael had probably come home, seen him asleep at his desk, and gone in to kiss Devlin. She'd have been exhausted from working all day at the clinic. She'd probably fallen asleep in there. He could picture the nightlight glow on their faces as he reached his daughter's door.

It was cracked, exactly as he'd left it seven hours ago when he'd put Devlin to bed.

He eased the door open. Rachael wasn't with her.

Will wide awake now, closing Devlin's door, heading back into the den.

"Rachael? You here, hon?"

He went to the front door, turned the deadbolt, stepped outside.

Dark houses. Porchlights. Streets still wet from the thunderstorms that blew through several hours ago. No wind, the sky clearing, bright with stars.

When he saw them in the driveway, his knees gave out and he sat down on the steps and tried to remember how to breathe. One Beamer, no Jeep Cherokee, and a pair of patrol cars, two uniformed officers coming toward him, their hats shelved under their arms.

The patrolmen sat in the living room on the couch, Will facing them in a chair. The smell of new paint was still strong. He and Rachael had redone the walls and the vaulted ceiling in terracotta last weekend. Most of the black and white desert photographs that adorned the room still leaned against the antique chest of drawers, waiting to be re-hung.

The lawmen were businesslike in their delivery, taking turns with the details, as if they'd rehearsed who would say what, their voices so terribly measured and calm.

There wasn't much information yet. Rachael's Cherokee had been found on the shoulder of Arizona 85 in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Right front tire flat, punctured with a nail to cause a slow and steady loss of air pressure. Driver side window busted out.

No Rachael. No blood.

They asked Will a few questions. They tried to sympathize. They said how sorry they were, Will just shaking his head and staring at the floor, a tightness in his chest, constricting his windpipe in a slow strangulation.

He happened to look up at some point, saw Devlin standing in the hall in a

plain pink tee-shirt that fell all the way to the carpet, the tattered blanket she'd slept with every night since her birth draped over her left arm. And he could see in her eyes that she'd heard every word the patrolmen had said about her mother, because they were filling up with tears.

4

Rachael Innis was strapped upright with two-inch webbing to the leather seat behind the driver. She stared at the console lights. The digital clock read 4:32 a.m. She remembered the crowbar through the window and nothing after.

Bach's Four Lute Suites blared from the Bose stereo system, John Williams playing the classical guitar. Beyond the windshield, the headlights cut a feeble swath of light through the darkness, and even though she was riding in a luxury SUV, the shocks did little to ease the violent jarring from whatever primitive road they traveled.

Her wrists and ankles were comfortably but securely bound with nylon restraints. Her mouth wasn't gagged. From her vantage point, she could only see the back of the driver's head and occasionally the side of his face by the cherry glow of his cigarette. He was smooth-shaven, his hair was dark, and he smelled of a subtle, spicy cologne.

It occurred to her that he didn't know she was awake, but the thought wasn't two seconds old when she caught his eyes in the rearview mirror. They registered her consciousness, turned back to the road.

They drove on. An endless stream of rodents darted across the road ahead and a thought kept needling her—at some point, he was going to stop the car and do whatever he was driving her out in the desert to do.

"Have you urinated on my seat?" She thought she detected the faintest accent.

"No."

"You tell me if you have to urinate. I'll stop the car."

"Okay. Where are you—"

"No talking. Unless you have to urinate."

"I just—"

"You want your mouth taped? You have a cold. That would make breathing difficult."

Devlin was the only thing she'd ever prayed for and that was years ago, but as she watched the passing sagebrush and cactus through the deeply tinted windows, she pleaded with God again.

Now the Escalade was slowing. It came to a stop. He turned off the engine and stepped outside and shut the door. Her door opened. He stood watching

her. He was very handsome, with flawless, brown skin (save for an indentation in the bridge of his nose), liquid blue eyes, and black hair greased back from his face. His pretty teeth seemed to gleam in the night. Rachael's chest heaved against the strap of webbing.

He said, "Calm down, Rachael." Her name sounded like a foreign word on his lips. He took out a syringe from his black leather jacket and uncapped the needle.

"What is that?" she asked.

"You have nice veins." He ducked into the Escalade and turned her arm over. When the needle entered, she gasped.

"Please listen. If this is some kind of ransom thing—"

"No, no. You've already been purchased. In fact, right now, there isn't a safer place in the world for you to be than in my possession."

A gang of coyotes erupted in demonic howls somewhere out in that empty dark and Rachael thought they sounded like a woman burning alive, and she began to scream until the drug took her.

This bonus excerpt is from the eBook Serial Uncut by Blake Crouch, Jack Kilborn, and J.A. Konrath, also available in the Kindle Store…

PART ONE
Tampa, 1978

"Didn't anyone ever tell you about the dangers of hitchhiking?" the driver said. "You never know who's going to pick you up."

Donaldson wiped sweat from his brow and eyed the driver through the half-open passenger side window of the Lincoln Continental. The driver was average-looking, roughly Donaldson's age, dressed in a dark suit that matched the car's paint job.

"I'm roasting out here, man," Donaldson said. And it wasn't far from the truth. He'd been walking down this desolate highway for damn near three hours in the abusive, summer sun. "My car died. If you want to rob or kill me, that's fine, as long as you have air conditioning."

Donaldson forced a bright smile, hoping he looked both pathetic and non-threatening. It must have worked, because the man hit a switch on his armrest, and the door unlocked.

Must be nice being rich, Donaldson mused at the fancy automatic locks. Then he opened the door and heaved his bulk onto the leather seat.

"Thanks," he said.

The car was cooler than outside, but not by much. Donaldson wondered if the man's air worked. He placed his hand against the vent, felt a trickle of cold leaking out.

"Happy to help a fellow traveler. I'm Mr. K."

"Donaldson."

Neither made a move to shake hands. Mr. K checked his mirror, then gunned the 8-cylinder engine, spraying gravel as the luxury car fishtailed back onto the asphalt.

Donaldson adjusted his bulk, shifting the .38 he'd crammed into the front pocket of his jeans. The pants were loose enough, and Donaldson portly enough, that he doubted Mr. K noticed.

"You're sunburned," Mr. K said.

"Sun'll do that to you."

Donaldson touched his bare forearm, lobster red, and winced. Then he flipped down the visor mirror, saw how bad his face was. It looked like his old man had slapped the shit out of him, and hurt almost as much.

"Your car a Pinto?" Mr. K asked.

“My car?”

“A Pinto. Saw one about five miles back.”

Donaldson contemplated the harm in admitting it. He supposed it didn’t matter. Before he’d abandoned the car, he’d wiped it clean of fingerprints.

“Yeah. Blew a rod, I think.”

“Why didn’t you wait for the police?”

Again, Donaldson deliberated before answering. “I don’t like pigs,” he finally said.

Mr. K nodded. Donaldson doubted the man shared his sentiment. His hair was short, he was well-dressed, and he owned a fancy car. Cops wouldn’t hassle him. They were too busy hassling people with long hair and beards and ripped jeans.

People like me.

The highway stretched onward, wiggly heat waves rising off the tarmac. There wasn’t much traffic. Only about twenty cars had passed Donaldson during his long walk, and not one had so much as slowed down. Bastards. Whatever happened to human compassion?

“Did you kill the car’s owner before you stole it?” Mr. K asked.

Alarm bells sounded in Donaldson’s head. He frantically pawed at his .38, but Mr. K slammed on the brakes.

Donaldson bounced off the dashboard, smacking his sunburned nose hard. During the momentary disorientation, he was aware of Mr. K throwing the car into park, unbuckling his seatbelt, and pressing a thin-bladed knife under Donaldson’s double chin with one hand, while digging the .38 from Donaldson’s front pocket with the other.

“You should buckle up,” Mr. K said. “Seatbelts save lives.”

Mr. K stuck the knife into his breast pocket, belted himself back in, then hit the gas. The tires screamed and the Continental shot forward.

“I’m bleeding,” Donaldson said, his hands cupped around his nose. He knew it was a stupid, obvious thing to say, but he was still dazed and trying to buy some time.

“Tissues in the glove compartment.”

Donaldson dug them out, feeling more ashamed than hurt. This guy had gotten the better of him much too easily. As he mopped the blood from his face, Mr. K pressed a button to open the passenger side window.

“Throw the used ones outside, please.”

Donaldson went through ten tissues, tossing each one onto the road whizzing by. Then he ripped one more into pieces, balled them up, and shoved them into each nostril, staunching the trickle. He kept an eye on Mr. K the entire time, alternating between watching the man’s eyes, and watching the .38 pointed at

him.

This is a real bad situation.

"I don't enjoy repeating myself, but you hit that dashboard pretty hard, so I'll ask one more time. Did you kill the driver before you stole the Pinto?"

Donaldson knew he was screwed, but he didn't want to get himself even more screwed.

"You a cop?" he asked, not sure if that would be a good thing or a bad thing.

The barest flash of mirth crossed Mr. K's face. "No. But your biggest worry right now shouldn't be getting arrested. Your biggest worry should be the hole I'm going to put in your head if you don't answer me."

The gears began to turn in Donaldson's head. *How the hell do I get through this? Talk my way out?*

"You won't shoot me," Donaldson said, surprised by how calm he sounded.

"No?"

"You'd ruin your car."

Again, a faint hint of a smile. "It's not my car. And you still haven't answered my question."

Mr. K thumbed back the hammer on the pistol.

Donaldson contemplated his own death—the first time in his life he ever had—and decided dying would be a very bad thing.

"I killed him," Donaldson said quickly.

Mr. K seemed to think about this. He nodded slowly. "Was it someone you knew?"

"No. Jumped him in a parking lot in Sarasota. Wouldn't have wasted the bullet if I knew what a piece of crap his car was."

Donaldson watched Mr. K's eyes. They betrayed nothing. The two of them might as well have been talking about the weather.

"How'd it feel?" Mr. K asked.

"How did what feel?"

"Killing that man."

What kind of freaky talk is this? Donaldson thought, but all he said was, "I dunno."

"Sure you do. Did it feel good? Bad? Numb? Did it get you excited? Did you feel guilty afterward?"

Donaldson thought back to the day before. To holding the gun to the man's ribs. Seeing the shock in his eyes when he squeezed the trigger once, twice, three times. Watching him flop to the ground in a way that had struck him as funny. The holes in his chest had made sucking sounds, blowing tiny blood bubbles.

"Excited," Donaldson said.

“Did he die right away?”

“No.”

“Did you stay and watch him die?”

“Yeah.”

“How long did it take?”

It’s so strange that we’re both so calm about this.

Donaldson shrugged. “Few minutes, I guess.”

“Did you do anything else to him?”

“Like what?”

“Did you hurt him first?” Mr. K raised an eyebrow. “Rape him?”

Donaldson scowled. “Do I look like a queer to you?”

“What does being a homosexual have to do with it? You had a human being at your mercy. That excited you. I’m asking if you capitalized on that opportunity. If you made the most of it.”

Donaldson thought about it. The guy *had* been at his mercy. He’d begged for a while when Donaldson pulled the gun, and that was kind of a turn-on.

“I didn’t rape him,” Donaldson said.

“Could you have raped him?”

Donaldson licked some dried blood off of his top lip, let the salty, copper taste linger on his tongue. “Yeah. I could’ve.”

This answer seemed to satisfy Mr. K. He was quiet for over a minute.

The road stretched out ahead of them like a giant black snake.

Empty swampland and blue skies as far as Donaldson could see.

I can’t believe I’m telling him this stuff. Is it because he’s threatening to kill me?

Or because he understands?

“How’d you know?” Donaldson asked.

“Know what?”

“That I stole that car?”

Mr. K offered a half-smile. “I saw the gun in your pocket when you stopped, along with your clumsy attempt to hide it. You should get an ankle holster, or stuff it in your belt at the small of your back. You obviously aren’t a Florida native, or you’d have a tan already. That means you flew in or drove in. If you flew, you probably would’ve had a rental car, and those are usually new. That Pinto was an old model. When you first got in, I noticed the powder burns on your shirt, and under your rather oppressive body odor, you smell like gunpowder.”

Donaldson was impressed, but he refused to show it. He knew a lot about being victimized. One way to stop being a victim was to stop acting like a

victim.

“I asked how you knew about the car, not my gun,” Donaldson said, sticking out his lower jaw.

If Mr. K noticed Donaldson’s display of bravado, he didn’t react. “Your loose jeans didn’t jingle when you sat down in the car. When people abandon their vehicles, they take their keys with them. So I assumed it wasn’t yours.”

Donaldson appraised Mr. K again. This was a smart guy.

“How about you?” Donaldson ventured. “Did you kill the owner of this car?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“He’s tied up in the trunk. I’m taking him someplace private.”

Donald worded his next question carefully. “Do you want to kill me?”

Mr. K drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

Donaldson counted his own heartbeats, trying to keep cool until Mr. K finally replied.

“Haven’t decided yet.”

“Is there anything I can do to, uh, persuade you that I’m worth keeping alive?”

“Maybe. The Pinto owner you killed. He wasn’t the first.”

Donaldson thought back to his father, to beating the old man to death with a baseball bat. “No, he wasn’t.”

“But he was the first stranger.”

This guy is uncanny. “Yeah.”

“Who was it before that? Girlfriend? Family member?”

“My dad.”

“But you didn’t use a gun on him, did you? You made it more personal.”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you use?”

“A Louisville Slugger.”

“How did it feel?”

Donaldson closed his eyes. He could still feel the sting of the bat in his palms when he cracked it against his father’s head, still see the blood that spurted out of split skin like a lawn sprinkler.

“I felt like Reggie Jackson hitting one out of Yankee Stadium. Afterward, I even went out and bought a *Reggie Bar.*”

Mr. K gave him a sideways glance. “Why buy candy? Why didn’t you eat part of your father? Just imagine the expression on his face.”

Donaldson was about to protest, but he stopped himself. When he broke Dad’s jaw with the bat, the old man had looked more surprised than hurt. How would he have reacted if Donaldson had cut off one of his fingers and eaten it in front

of him?

That would have shown the son of bitch. *Bite the hand that feeds you.*

"I should have done that," Donaldson said.

"He hurt you when you were a child." Mr. K said it as a statement, not a question.

"Yeah. He used to beat the shit out of me."

"Did he sexually abuse you?"

"Naw. Nothing like that. But every time I got into trouble, he'd take his belt to me. And he hit hard enough to draw blood. What kind of asshole does that to a five-year-old kid?"

"Think hard, Donaldson. Do you believe your father beat you, and that turned you into what you are? Or did he beat you *because* of what you are?"

Donaldson frowned. "What do you mean *what you are*? What am I?"

Mr. K turned and stared deep into his soul, his eyes like gun barrels. "You're a killer, Donaldson."

Donaldson considered the label. It didn't take him long to embrace it.

"So what was the question again?"

"Are you a killer because your father beat you, or did your father beat you because you're a killer?"

Donaldson could remember that first beating when he was five. He'd taken his pet gerbil and put it in the blender. Used the *pulse* button, grinding it up a little at a time, so it didn't die right away.

"I think my dad knew. Tried to beat the devil out of me. Used to tell me that, when he was whipping my ass."

"You don't have the devil in you, Donaldson. You're simply unique. Exceptional. Unrestrained by morality or guilt."

Exceptional? Donaldson had never felt like he was exceptional at anything. He did badly in school. Dropped out of college. Never had any friends, or a woman he didn't pay for. Bummed around the country, job to job, occasionally ripping someone off. How is that exceptional?

But somehow, he felt that the description fit him.

Maybe that's the problem. I've been trying to be normal all of these years, but I'm not. I'm better than normal.

I'm exceptional.

"How do you know this stuff?" Donaldson asked.

"The more you understand death," Mr. K said, "the more you appreciate life."

"Sounds like fortune cookie bullshit."

"It was something I learned in the war."

"Vietnam?" Donaldson had been exempt from the draft because he didn't pass

the physical.

“A villager in Ca Lu said it to me, before I removed his intestines with a bayonet.”

“Was he talking about himself?” Donaldson asked. “Or you?”

“You tell me. Did you feel alive when you killed your father, Donaldson?”

Donaldson nodded.

“And when you killed the owner of the Pinto?” Mr. K continued.

“Goddamn piece of crap car. I wish I could kill that guy again.”

“How about someone else in his place?”

Donaldson squinted at Mr. K. “What do you mean?”

Another half smile. “The man in my trunk. If I gave you the chance to kill him, would you?”

BLAKE CROUCH was born near the piedmont town of Statesville, North Carolina in 1978. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and graduated in 2000 with degrees in English and Creative Writing. Blake lives with his family in southwest Colorado, where he is at work on a new book. His website is www.blakecrouch.com.

Blake Crouch's Works Available on Kindle
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
Bad Girl (short story)
Four Live Rounds (collected stories)
Shining Rock (short story)
*69 (short story)
On the Good, Red Road (short story)
Remaking (short story)

Visit Blake at www.BlakeCrouch.com