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## The Intruder

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## THE INTRUDER

by Chuck Foley

The Craig family had lived in Jonesville, Kentucky for nearly ten years, a town known for its strip mining, and not much else. Like most of the townspeople, they lived in a tenement row house, located on the east side of town along the bank of the Wesley River. It was the roughest side of town, and it was even rougher this year, ever since Mr. Craig was buried alive in a rock slide while working on a project in the next town.

Mrs. Craig, a short, frail woman whose black hair, now streaked with gray, made her appear older than thirty-five, had only her job at the restaurant and the meager government aid checks to support her and the three children.

Christina, a skinny, but pretty ten-year-old with big, dark eyes, was the youngest, and Karen, pudgy, with curly, black hair and freckles, was two years older than she. And then there was Damon, or "Demon," as Karen usually called him.

At fourteen, he was the oldest child, an agile youth with piercing eyes, set back deep in their sockets, dark, hollow caverns. His brown hair was cut short, leaving fully exposed his ears, which protruded from his head as if to retrieve any sound within miles. The second-hand clothes he always wore hung loosely on him, making Damon seem weaker than he really was. His mother always bought them larger than necessary so that he would grow into them, rather than out of them.

He would watch over the girls while his mother worked at night. Actually, he would watch television more than his sisters, especially the cop shows and westerns. He enjoyed the sensational shoot-outs at the end. Damon used to tell his mother that somebody he, too, would be a policeman or cowboy.

The summer days passed quickly that year, and the school season was closing in. It was late August, and Damon was just returning from the ballpark, where he played short-stop for the neighborhood softball team of boys 14 and under, one of the few activities he liked other than TV. He set his bat in the well of the coat-rack tree that stood in the small vestibule leading into the living room, which had the appearance of a combination den and sitting area.

His father's desk sat against one wall, with old documents and books strewn about the top. A dilapidated couch, flanked by antiqued green and tables on either side, and a sitting chair that did not match, were across from the portable TV set. He stepped into the room, throwing his cap on the scratched coffee table in front of the couch.

"Is anybody home?"

"Yes, dear, in the kitchen," his mother answered in her Kentucky drawl, where she was re-planting some ferns that were outgrowing their original pots.

Damon walked into the kitchen and poured himself a large glass of lemonade to quench the thirst brought on by the afternoon's game.

"Who won the game today?" she asked without looking up from her work.

"They did," he said.

"Oh? Howcum?" she said.

"'Cause of a forfeit. Billy Jenkins started a fight with the pitcher on the other team. Thought he was being throwed at." He paused to gulp down his lemonade.

"Well, was he?"

"Yeah," Damon said, wiping from his face the liquid that did not quite reach his mouth.

"Then why did your team have to forfeit?"

"'Cause then, both benches emptied out on the field, and I was trying to pull them apart, and

everything, and I feel this guy tugging at the back of my jersey. So I turns around and gives him my best punch." He swings his fist through the air to duplicate the situation in the kitchen for his mother.

"Damon! I've told you, time and time again you shouldn't be picking on boys half your size."

"It wasn't no boy, Mama. It was the umpire."

"Goodness sakes alive, child!"

"Oh, he's alright," Damon said, "They've suspended me for the rest of the year, but it don't matter much. We only got one game left, anyhow."

"That ain't the point. If your daddy were here, today, he'd give you a lickin' sure," she said. "You go set yourself down in the other room and turn on the TV while I fix supper. See if you can't keep out of trouble for awhile."

He joined his sisters in the living room. They had come downstairs to listen in on the discussion taking place in the kitchen.

"Damon the Demon's in trouble again," said Karen, taunting her brother from the sitting chair next to the couch.

"You got big ears for such a small head," Damon replied.

"Not as big as yours." She put her hand over her mouth and shook with laughter. Christine, meanwhile, sat quietly on the couch near Damon, looking straight ahead at the television.

"I oughta give you a fat lip to match your fat face," he said to Karen, clenching his fist.

He turned his attention to the television, ignoring the fact that Karen was holding her tongue out in his direction. A game show was on, which he disliked, so he got up and changed the channel over to one of the syndicated cop shows, much to the displeasure of Karen.

"Hey, we were watching the other program."

"You don't mind, do you, Christina?" he said politely, ignoring his other sister.

She shook her head no.

"Two to one. Majority rules," he said.

Karen stormed out of the living room, and up the stairs to her bedroom.

"I'm glad she's gone, aren't you?"

Christina nodded that she was glad, too.

Together, they watched the drama unfold on the TV screen. The good guys chased the bad guys into a dead end alley. There were at least five cops against the two criminals, who were desperately trying to shoot it out. It was their only chance for escape. After a brief exchange of gunfire, both criminals were lying on the ground, presumably dead. However, as the officers approached, one of the criminals raised his gun and shot one of the policeman square in the chest. Another final barrage of bullets from the remaining officers, ended the criminals career for good.

"Boy, was that stupid," Damon said, referring to the wounded policeman.

Mrs. Craig entered the room and announced that supper was ready. "Get it while it's hot. Christina, go call Karen, will you honey?"

After dinner, as the children did the dishes their mother got ready for work.

"You take care of the girls, now, Damon," she said, slipping into her long, tattered overcoat. "I'll be home around midnight, and I'll expect you all to be in bed by then."

After she left, Damon snuggled up on the couch in front of the television, while Karen and Christina went out to play with some of the other neighborhood kids.

"Make sure you're home before it gets dark," Damon said as they went out the door, "'cause I don't want to have to go out searching for you."

"Hmph." Karen bunched up her nose at him and slammed the door behind them in defiance of his orders.

"You little brat!" he called out after her.

The evening news was on most channels, so Damon searched the kitchen for something more to eat. After finding some dried out, stale, soda crackers in the cupboard, he poured himself a glass of lemonade and resumed his seat on the couch to wait for the start of the detective movie, which would begin in a few minutes.

As the movie wound on, the sun sat and the sky took on the shades of night. It was not until the show had ended, the bad guys shot to pieces, that Damon realized his sisters had not yet returned.

Cursing his luck, and in particular, Karen, he left the house and amble on down the street to the end of the block where the Harris' lived. It was almost a second home, they spent so much time there.

As he got to the house, he saw them both just leaving the Harris' doorstep. He ran up to meet them, scolding them for staying out so late.

They scurried on home, Damon following behind the girls, passing by one row house after another, all similar to theirs.

Damon was able to spot their house from several lots away, and noticed the front door ajar. He knew he had forgotten to lock it, but he also knew he did not leave it open.

"You girls stay put, right here, a minute," he said, "I think somebody's in the house."

They sensed that he was serious, and Christina clutched Karen's hand in hers, as they shivered nervously in the warm, summer night air. The sky was almost black, save for a few stars and a crescent moon. A singular street lamp cast its dim luminance on the small, front lawn of the Craig's.

Damon snuck around to the back entrance of the house, figuring the intruder, if indeed there was one, would most likely leave by that way.

With his key, he unlocked the back door, which opened into the kitchen, and entered quietly.

The room was totally dark, and he could feel his heart beating faster and faster, threatening to burst through his shirt. As his eyes became adjusted to the night, he crept over to the kitchen table. From there he could see directly into the living room.

The drawers to his father's desk were pulled out from the frame, papers and books were everywhere. A figure, with the TV set in his hand, was headed for the back door when he noticed Damon.

He turned and ran towards the front entrance as Damon came charging after him. Just as he was about to pounce on the intruder, Damon tripped on one of the many books on the floor, but managed to grab hold of the thief's leg as he reached the vestibule.

The thief, a young man not much older than Damon, sat down the TV, and the two of them wrestled each other into the coat rack, knocking the coats and the baseball bat to the floor. The young man jumped to his feet, now wielding a knife. Damon grabbed the bat and swung it at him, catching him on the chin. With a cry of anguish, the intruder fell to his knees, subdued. But Damon was not convinced so he reached back and swung heavily, the sound of the bat striking the thief's skull filling the room. The intruder fell to the floor, face down in a pool of his own blood.