

# Home Invasion

By Jen Conley

It was a cold winter night in 2001 when Keon Dell did his very first and only burglary. He had robbed before—grabbed purses, took money from friends, stole car stereos, even held up a store by gunpoint (no bullets in that gun), but he'd never broken into a house, much less a house owned by people who could afford a maid. Keon, who was just eighteen, was tense and uneasy as he sat in the backseat of the dark sedan while Ramone—one of those roughened-up white guys who had done hard time—was in the passenger seat, giving directions to Booker, the one doing the driving. Booker, who was black like Keon, steered the car with his left hand, his grip loose and relaxed, like they were heading out for pizza instead of a break-in.

Ramone wasn't referring to their plan as a break-in or a burglary. He referred to it as a Home Invasion, mocking the term used in newspapers these days. Booker had done a handful of them, he said, a couple of years back, and there was nothing to it. But this one wasn't Booker's idea—it was Ramone's baby. Ramone had a girl who lived out these ways, on the border of Burlington and Ocean counties. She knew about the house because she had been the maid; around here it was mostly woods and lonely back roads where the Jersey Devil was rumored to roam.

Booker smoked while he steered the car along the twisting and turning roads. In between giving directions, Ramone told the story about the Jersey Devil: how after Mrs. Leeds found out she was pregnant, she cursed the child because it was her thirteenth; how after it was born, it grew into a devil with horns, hooves and bat wings, and then it beat everyone in the room bloody with its forked tail; how after the gory thrashing, it screeched a horrific cry and flew up the chimney.

Booker was originally from South Carolina, so he had never heard the story before, but Keon knew it well. He had been brought up in New Jersey and it was something all kids learned in school. "It's just culture. New Jersey culture," Keon remembered his fourth grade teacher saying. But the story had scared him enough to press her about it. "Will the Jersey Devil come to my house?"

His teacher shook her head. She had thick brown freckles on her nose and cheeks. "No. He only bothers the people in south Jersey, in the Pine Barrens. We live in central Jersey."

Still, the story frightened little Keon and gave him nightmares.

Keon wasn't so little anymore—standing almost five-eleven. He was lean but muscular, not bad looking in a wiry sort of way. He was also the only one in the car who hadn't done time, although that was just stupid-ass luck. Recently, he and TJ Jones had robbed an Arab at gunpoint. Keon just walked right into the convenience store, put the gun to his head, and demanded the old man open the cash register. TJ grabbed the cash. "Thanks for following directions," Keon said to the man before they fled. And they were never caught.

"Right here, right here," Ramone said. "Yeah. This is it." Booker turned the car onto the gravel road, a long driveway winding through thick woods until it ended at a large house. Booker flipped the lights off and Keon sucked in his breath, fingering the gun in his pocket. This time, it was loaded. Earlier, Ramone had explained that the

owners of the house were in Ft. Lauderdale for the winter. Ramone's girl, who had been the maid for a short while, had told him this. She was from the Ukraine and very beautiful—naturally blonde and slim. She had an exotic face with Siamese eyes and wide-set cheekbones. "It's called the Slavic look," Ramone explained to Keon. "If I had it in me, I'd send her down to AC so she could make some serious cash in a club. But the thought of Olya sitting on some fat old shit for a lap dance makes me very ill."

Keon and Ramone worked together in the kitchen of a restaurant owned by a large man. Every few days, the man strutted into the kitchen, his huge chest and stomach protruding like the breast of a pigeon. "Make me a cheesesteak, Ramone. And don't put too many onions on it." His name was Dennis Cork. Ramone called him Dennis Pork.

Yet what surprised Ramone was that Dennis had allowed Keon to work at all. "Dennis Pork don't hire brothers. He says they all steal. How'd you get yourself hired? He must have been hard up."

"Don't know," Keon said with a shrug. He had quit school in October after a fight with his Phys. Ed. Teacher. "Go fuck yourself!" he had yelled. An hour later, the school secretary explained he had earned himself three days' suspension. "Fuck off," he told her and the next day quit. It didn't matter much anyway. He was supposed to be a senior but he only had enough credits for a sophomore. Not long afterwards, Keon got a job at Dennis Cork's restaurant.

Ramone agreed with his decision. "Just get your GED. You ain't heading for college, are ya, Colin Powell?" Ramone had his GED, something he got while he was doing time. Ramone had a ten-inch scar that started on the left side of his neck and traveled down his chest in a jagged angle. His arms were covered in black tattoos. He had spent his teen years in Jamesburg—a rough juvie for boys—and a couple more years up in Rahway State Prison. He was missing his right pinkie finger. After working beside each other for some time, Ramone explained to Keon how he had come to lose it. "When I was a kid, my mother ran with this motherfucker for a while. One afternoon, he was drinking hard and he got mad at me when I dropped the milk all over the kitchen floor. So he grabbed me, took something like this," Ramone held up the cleaver he was using to cut a piece of raw beef into strips, "and held my hand on the counter and chopped it off like that." Ramone placed the cleaver over the meat, rocked it forward and backwards, slicing through the pinkish beef. Then he lifted the piece up and let it dangle from his hand. "My finger came off just like that. Quick and clean, brother."

Keon stared at the pink strip of meat. "How old were you?"

Ramone shrugged. "Eight."

Keon nodded like it was nothing, but he shuddered inside. He himself had been in and out of foster homes and now lived with his grandmother in a dilapidated neighborhood. He had seen his share of shit, but for some reason, like the story of the Jersey Devil, the missing pinkie story gnawed at him like a mad ringing in the ear.

"Olya says there's a key in a flower pot," Ramone said after Booker killed the engine. "Next to the back door."

A lit lamp glowed in the front window of the house. Booker chuckled and said it was probably one of those keep-robbers-away lights. "Make people like us think they're home." He lit a cigarette. "And then we'd stay away."

Olya had worked for these people for five months until the woman had let her go. There was nothing she did wrong, the woman told Olya; her husband simply wanted to

cut back on expenses. Olya said fine, finished up her work, and left pleasantly. There was no bad blood. Yet there were some things Olya observed or learned that she eventually spilled to Ramone: the woman had a lot of jewelry; the husband kept a box of cash in his desk drawer; apparently, they went to Florida every year after Christmas and stayed until Mother's Day.

"They're stupid people, leaving keys around," Ramone said. "Dumb-asses."

"Let's go," Booker said.

They got out of the car and headed towards the back. The night was cold and Keon shivered as he walked along the gravel driveway. His stomach was in knots—he was real nervous—talking about the Jersey Devil had given him a bad premonition.

The moon, full and bright, revealed a clear view of the large house, which had two floors, a porch that wrapped around the side, and low long windows. In the backyard, a shiny black iron fence enclosing a covered in-ground pool, glimmered softly in the white moonlight. Thick woods surrounded the property, keeping it nestled and cozy, like something in a fairy tale.

The three of them put on gloves.

The key was indeed in an empty pot near the door. Keon shook his head—he was bothered by this stupidity. Ramone grinned. "Olya says they have a daughter who comes and checks on the house once a week."

"Then why don't they just give her a key?"

He opened the door. "I know, brother. Stupid people. Dumb-asses."

Booker stood outside and smoked. Keon, shivering from the cold (and from nerves,) stared at him. "What're you doing? Smoke inside. It's freezing out here."

Booker took one more drag and then dropped it on the ground. "Habit, man. My mom makes me smoke outside." Keon nodded and held the door for Booker to pass through.

They entered into the kitchen, which was the largest indoor kitchen Keon had ever seen. The counters were bare and they gleamed, even in the slight darkness. A dishtowel hung along the counter in front of the sink. The kitchen connected to the living room, where a lamp shone near the front window. Ramone and Booker walked around, poking their heads behind the plaid couches, picking up wooden knickknacks, flipping through old magazines that sat on the tables. Keon sighed impatiently. He peered out one of the kitchen windows and walked into the living room. He was nauseous now. "Can we get this done?"

Ramone turned to him. "You okay, brother?"

Keon shrugged, trying to play it cool. "I just want to get this done."

Ramone told him to go upstairs and find the jewelry. He and Booker would look for the cash. Keon nodded and climbed the carpeted staircase. He held a small flashlight and flipped it on when he reached the upstairs hallway, guessing the master bedroom was the last door on the left. When he arrived, he pushed the door open and, to his horror, immediately saw the bed was rumpled and unmade. Keon stood for a second and listened, swinging the flashlight about the room, over the bed and dressers. An overturned open book lay on the night table. Worn jeans, a thick red sweater, and a large white bra were draped on the far chair. His heart knocked hard in his chest. He pulled his left glove off and placed his hand on the white sheet—a trick he had seen in a movie. The mattress was warm.

When Keon had stuck the gun against the Arab's head, there was a sense that he was playing, like when he was a little kid and imagined he was a bank robber. He knew the Arab would be scared and do what he said. He knew nothing was going to go wrong. Hell, there were no bullets. And because it happened so fast—like that freefall amusement ride at the Boardwalk—he had no time for a nervous stomach.

But now, this was different. This whole thing was taking too long—the drive out to the house, that Ramone and Booker were taking a leisurely approach—everything seemed bizarre and doomed. Keon inhaled deeply and then exhaled. He swung the flashlight back to the night table and looked at the telephone. She'd called the police, hadn't she? He tugged the glove back on and picked up the old white phone.

There was no dial tone. It didn't work.

He put it down and listened again. He could hear Booker and Ramone downstairs, moving around, banging things around, their voices muffled.

A small movement came from the closet. Keon froze. He decided not to check it yet. He did nothing but feel the gun in his pocket.

And then Ramone appeared. He swung his flashlight across the room until he found Keon. Instantly, Ramone noticed something was off. Keon swallowed and nodded, pretending he had everything under control. Ramone pointed to the closet door and, after hesitating for a moment, Keon nodded once more.

Ramone smirked and pointed. Check it out.

Keon took a deep breath and waited, but Ramone's eyes were on him. Keon's hands shook.

"Boy!" Ramone hissed.

Keon pulled out his gun, walked to the closet, and opened the door. He shone the flashlight and there she was, huddled in the corner, under the hanging clothes. She let out a timid yet frenzied cry.

"Get up," Keon ordered. It took a long minute, but she wrenched herself out from the corner and stood, whimpering. She was a woman in her sixties, bland in the face with coarse dark hair. She wore a flannel red nightgown and white puffy socks. She looked familiar to him.

Ramone stuck his head into the closet and pointed his gun towards the woman. "Looky-here!"

The woman wept.

"The phone's dead—I checked it," Keon said quickly. "So no police were called."

Ramone lowered the gun and turned to Keon. "Young man, you make me proud!" His voice sizzled like burning eggs on a skillet.

Keon said nothing.

Ramone ordered the woman to step out of the closet, and he and Keon moved aside as she stumbled forward, trembling and muttering, the flashlight making shadows bounce from ceiling to floor to the woman. Keon caught quick glimpses of her face. Yes, she resembled someone he knew.

"This ain't good," Ramone remarked, clucking his tongue. "No good at all." Then, suddenly and oddly, Ramone announced he had to check on Booker—he didn't trust the dickhead, you see. "We've had issues."

"Can you handle this?" Ramone asked.

“Yeah,” Keon said.

Ramone, seeming satisfied, walked away. But before he left, he flipped on the overhead lamp. “No point using flashlights if the lady of the house is home, is there?”

Instantly, in the new harsh light, Keon recognized her: Mrs. Mullins, his seventh grade math teacher. He’d only had her for a few months because he wasn’t at that school for long. Eventually he was removed from the foster home he was living in and sent back to his grandmother’s.

She didn’t let on that she recognized him, which was good. Keon pointed his gun, directing her to walk to the bed and sit on it. She did so obediently.

Keon asked where she kept the jewelry.

She pointed to the top drawer of her dresser. “There’s a lot in there,” she said, her voice quivering, reminding Keon of the way his grandmother’s tea cups slightly rattled in the cheap china cabinet. “You can get plenty for them.”

Keon shoved the gun in the back pocket of his jeans. “You got no safe?”

“It’s in the basement,” she whispered.

Again, Ramone appeared in the doorway and he grinned widely. “In the basement? So there’s more money than what’s in the desk drawer?”

Mrs. Mullins peered up at Ramone and then dropped her head. He glared at her for a long moment before he spoke once more, “Lady, your age and ugliness is gonna save you from you-know-what.”

She looked up, terrified.

Keon felt a nasty chill ride through him.

Ramone chuckled. “I’m going downstairs again. I’ll be back in a second.”

Keon turned to the dresser drawer, picking up rings and necklaces. “Is this real?” he asked, holding up a piece. “Don’t give me any shit. If I find out any of this is fake, I’ll come back.”

“I know you,” she finally said, her voice rattling now. “You’re Keon. Keon Dell.”

Keon paused for a second, his breath halting short, his heart thrashing against his ribs like a thick, mean hammer. He forced himself to carry on and shuffled through the drawer. “That ain’t my name.”

“Yes. I was a teacher and I had you a few years ago, right before I retired. I remember all my troubled students.”

Keon picked up a thick, gold bangle. His hand shook. “This real?”

She nodded. “You lived with that nice family, the Lauber’s.” Her voice acquired a hopeful tone. “They still take in kids, you know.”

Once again, Keon told her she was mistaken. She wasn’t a teacher he particularly liked. She was nasty, screaming at kids who daydreamed or had no explanation why they were missing homework. She had yelled at him, too, for slouching at his desk, his newly grown long limbs stretched out into the aisle and his thick hands stuffed in his pants pockets. “Pay attention, Mr. Dell! Or you’ll be paying attention tomorrow afternoon in detention.”

Keon liked that school, though. Mostly it was white kids, but there were a good handful of black and Hispanic students. He was popular, being all street and tough. He had been living with the Lauber’s since the beginning of sixth grade, and by the time the summer began, he had grown to love his clean bed and the steadiness of the family.

Every Thursday, Mrs. Lauber let him choose the dinner menu. Most times, he picked tacos or her homemade mac and cheese with hotdogs. In seventh grade, he made the basketball team, but he only played four games because after Christmas, the state sent him back to his grandmother's. "You gonna behave this time," she told him. But he had never behaved for her, no matter what she said. "When your mother gets back, she's gonna be horrified at how you conduct yourself." He hadn't seen his mother since he was ten, hadn't lived with her since he was six. She was up in Brooklyn somewhere, with some man.

He didn't stay with his grandmother for long after the Lauber's. He was sent to a group home for a while, and then another foster home, and another, and then back with his grandmother. All told, by the time he had turned eighteen, he had been in five different homes. Yet the Lauber's had been the best. Still to this day, Keon pulled out the recipe for that mac and cheese with the hotdogs and made it for himself and his grandmother. "Not bad," she'd always say. "Not bad at all."

"You must remember me," Mrs. Mullins said. "I yelled at you all the time."

Keon shook his head. "Nope." He had a sack for the jewelry, and when he was satisfied he had taken all the valuable stuff, he closed the drawer. "What about your husband? Does he have something? A watch maybe?"

She said no.

"Where is he, anyway?"

"Florida."

Keon became angry. This was a stupid lady. The phone was off. The key was in a flower pot. She didn't even try to lie and say her husband would be home any minute. "Now why tell me your husband ain't nowhere near this place? Why not tell me he's on his way home?"

She shrugged. "You do remember me, Keon? I gave you detention a few times and you always came."

Ramone stood in the doorway. "She knows you?"

You stupid woman, Keon thought, his heart sinking.

Ramone walk forward, pulled out his gun, and put it to her head. "You know him?"

She shook violently, but controlled her voice, even taking on a slight authoritative tone—surely an old defensive strategy from her teaching days. "Yes. Keon was a student of mine."

Ramone laughed. "Now how fucked up is that?" He moved the gun away and shoved it in his back pocket. He picked up a pillow and tossed it to Keon. "They have a basement. The mister has it all decked out like an English pub, but there ain't no beer on tap. Imagine that?" He flicked his head towards the woman. "Let her give you a tour. Let her open the safe for you." He eyeballed her. "You know the combination, right?"

She said she did.

Ramone glared at Keon. "It's right behind the bar."

Keon shook his head. "Get Booker to do it."

"He's busy. Get going." Ramone pulled the woman up and pushed her to the door. He grabbed the sack from Keon. "Go on, boy."

They walked downstairs and passed Booker, who leaned against a wall in the kitchen. He nodded, opened the basement door, leaned in, and held out his hand like a game show host. “Check it out, man. It’s cool.”

The steps were wooden and they creaked as Keon and Mrs. Mullins made their way down. With his right hand he held his gun and pointed it at her back, and with his left hand, he gripped the pillow, his stomach sick with anxiety. The basement was large, carpeted, and paneled in dark brown. A mahogany bar sat in the far corner with a dozen or so bottles hanging upside down. There were three taps and bar towels and thick ashtrays—all with names of beers Keon didn’t recognize. He looked around, searching for a way out. To the far left, he noticed a glass door. “Where does that go?” he asked her.

“To stairs that lead outside to the pool. I had Pete put it in for the grandkids. This way they can take their wet clothes off without getting water all over my house.” Her voice was rickety and frightened, yet she pressed on, annoying Keon. “I have five grandchildren. I love them to death. You should see my Visa bill at Christmastime.” Her tormented chatter knock-knock-knocked in his head. He needed to think and her talking distracted him.

“Keon, do you have any sisters or brothers?” she asked. “I adored my brother. Oh, how I worshiped him. Do you have any siblings?”

Keon didn’t answer. He walked backwards, holding the gun so it faced her, and tried the door. It was bolted. He walked towards her again. He was shaking now. “Why’s the phone off?”

She swallowed. “Because I’m usually in Florida. We turn that and the cable off to save money. I’m just here for a few days. My friend died. You might remember her. Mrs. Lattori? She taught math too.”

He vaguely recalled a tall, skinny woman with short, black hair.

“She walked with a cane. I’m sure she had the cane when you were there.” He now clearly saw the woman limping in the hall, a three-pronged gray metal cane at her side. “MS,” Mrs. Mullins said. “Multiple Sclerosis.”

“What’s in the safe? More jewelry?”

“Cash. Money. Our passports. Birth certificates.”

Keon let out a disgusted deep breath. He never understood why regular people kept cash in the house. “Why does your husband leave money in the house? Why not leave it in the bank?”

She trembled. “Emergency.” Her voice quivered. “We leave it when we go to Florida for our daughter in case she needs it. He’s old fashioned. He thinks people should always have cash on them.” She continued talking and shaking. “A lot of us older people keep cash in the house. They don’t trust the banks. I guess Pete has some of that in him. The safe is fire-proof, too.”

He still didn’t understand. “Then why does he got money in the desk upstairs?”

Mrs. Mullins blinked her eyes and shrugged sadly.

Keon decided to move on. “You sure you know the combination to the safe?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. Open it now.”

They walked over to the bar and behind it, on the second shelf, sat a small beige safe. Mrs. Mullins bent down and, with trembling hands, twirled the dial three times,

until it opened. She pulled everything out—papers, passports, cash—and placed them on the counter. Keon could hear Booker and Ramone walking around upstairs, the front and back doors opening and closing. What were they doing? Keeping watch?

“That’s all there is, I swear,” she said.

He told her to come out from the bar and walk towards the glass door.

“Keon,” Mrs. Mullins began.

“Shut up,” he whispered. He looked at the glass door. He wanted her to hit him—no, to kick him, right in the groin, so he could double over and she could make a run for it. He still held the pillow in his hand.

He stared at the door once more. She didn’t seem to catch on, so he decided he would have to tell her what to do.

But there was no time. Suddenly, Ramone came bounding down the stairs, laughing. “What’re you doing, boy?”

Keon didn’t answer. Ramone shook his head, annoyed. “Give me this.” He grabbed the pillow from Keon, put it against Mrs. Mullins head, and with his other hand, pulled out his gun, sticking it against the pillow. She screamed and shook horrendously, but she did not try to get away. She only pleaded for her life, her voice desperate, her pitch high and frantic. “No! No, please! Don’t! I love my grandchildren!”

Ramone tilted his head and gazed at Keon. Keon opened his mouth to—do what—stop the motion? But Ramone returned his focus to the task before him, and simply fired.

Her body buckled and collapsed. White stuffing dotted with red floated in the air. Ramone threw the pillow next to the body. Blood and pieces of gray seeped out of her head and onto the floor, a greenish carpet with swirling gold designs. Keon and Ramone stared at the body. “She said she taught you math?”

Keon nodded. He was stunned and sickened and it took everything in him not to cry out. “Yeah,” he muttered.

Ramone slipped his gun in his pocket. He walked behind the bar, grabbed the cash and several bottles of Scotch. “Help me and let’s go.”

They shut the back door when they left. Booker bent down to the ground and picked up the cigarette he had smoked before. “Don’t want them getting my DNA now.”

Booker drove the car in reverse down the long gravel driveway. Keon watched the light in the front window disappear as it became blocked by trees, his heart so horribly sickened, he imagined it was gray and shriveled—contaminated.

They split the five thousand in cash and each of them took some jewelry and Scotch. Keon got a few gold necklaces and a diamond ring. Too young to have acquired a taste for Scotch, he gave his two bottles to old Mr. Jackson next door.

Keon read his grandmother’s newspaper articles every day as they followed the murder of Barbara Mullins, age 63, mother of two, grandmother of five. Nothing was ever traced back to them, not even to Olya. “She paid me off the books,” Olya said one night, a few weeks later, while they all hung out. “And she always call me Tatiana. So I just answer to that.” Whether Olya knew the details of what happened that night, Ramone never said.

By summertime, Olya and Ramone had moved to California. She wanted to live in San Diego and Ramone said he liked the idea of her wearing a bikini twelve months

out of the year. As for Booker, he got into some hot water with a local gang member and had to slip out of town.

On a humid July afternoon, Keon walked by an Army recruiting station. He stopped and stood before the glass windows, staring at the posters of young men and women in their military uniforms, gazing proudly into the sky. Keon went inside. Once he sat down, his hands stuffed in his pockets, the recruiter asked him if he liked the idea of seeing the world. "Europe, Japan, Hawaii."

Keon thought for a moment and then said, "I could be happy in Hawaii." The recruiter laughed. Keon took his hands out of his pockets and sat up straight, suddenly reviewing his life. He had nothing now. The diamond ring he got from the robbery was cracked and the gold bangles weren't worth much. There wasn't much cash left after a couple of months. He was sleeping on old Mr. Jackson's couch because his grandmother had kicked him out a week earlier, after she found fifty dollars missing. Keon had not taken it, but she didn't believe him. He didn't have a good behavioral record to back it up.

So he joined the Army. And after a few months, 9/11 happened. And after that, Iraq was invaded. He never saw Japan or Hawaii. However, it wasn't all bad. The good thing about being a soldier in a war, Keon thought, was that so many things got jumbled up. For the longest time, after Ramone shot Mrs. Mullins, Keon woke in the middle of the night, like he did when he was a kid, dreaming of the Jersey Devil. Yet, it wasn't just the Jersey Devil he was dreaming of now. He was dreaming of Ramone's finger, and Mrs. Mullins and her blood and brains. But now that he was a combat soldier, the blood and brains of his kills got all mixed with Mrs. Mullins and Ramone's finger and sometimes, on a good night, all that evil confused him. And for a brief moment, when he was sitting up, wide awake, breathing hard, getting his bearings, the last traces of the dream breaking up and dissolving, it was like he was a kid again telling himself that the Jersey Devil was just a story. For a brief moment, after waking from the dream, mercy would fall upon him, and he would tell himself Mrs. Mullins and her bloody death never actually happened.

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