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Dark Matter

Written by Blake Crouch

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Dark Matter

Blake Crouch

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For anyone who has wondered what their life might look like at the end of the road not taken.

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

Footfalls echo in the memory

Down the passage which we did not take

Towards the door we never opened.

—T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

Dark Matter

ONE

I love Thursday nights.

They have a feel to them that's outside of time.

It's our tradition, just the three of us—family night.

My son, Charlie, is sitting at the table, drawing on a sketch pad. He's almost fifteen. The kid grew two inches over the summer, and he's as tall as I am now.

I turn away from the onion I'm julienning, ask, "Can I see?"

He holds up the pad, shows me a mountain range that looks like something on another planet.

I say, "Love that. Just for fun?"

"Class project. Due tomorrow."

"Then get back to it, Mr. Last Minute."

Standing happy and slightly drunk in my kitchen, I'm unaware that tonight is the end of all of this. The end of everything I know, everything I love.

No one tells you it's all about to change, to be taken away. There's no proximity alert, no indication that you're standing on the precipice. And maybe that's what makes tragedy so tragic. Not just what happens, but *how* it happens: a sucker punch that comes at you out of nowhere, when you're least expecting it. No time to flinch or brace.

The track lights shine on the surface of my wine, and the onion is beginning to sting my eyes. Thelonious Monk spins on the old

turntable in the den. There's a richness to the analog recording I can never get enough of, especially the crackle of static between tracks. The den is filled with stacks and stacks of rare vinyl that I keep telling myself I'll get around to organizing one of these days.

My wife, Daniela, sits on the kitchen island, swirling her almost-empty wineglass in one hand and holding her phone in the other. She feels my stare and grins without looking up from the screen.

"I know," she says. "I'm violating the cardinal rule of family night."

"What's so important?" I ask.

She levels her dark, Spanish eyes on mine. "Nothing."

I walk over to her, take the phone gently out of her hand, and set it on the countertop.

"You could start the pasta," I say.

"I prefer to watch *you* cook."

"Yeah?" Quieter: "Turns you on, huh?"

"No, it's just more fun to drink and do nothing."

Her breath is wine-sweet, and she has one of those smiles that seem architecturally impossible. It still slays me.

I polish off my glass. "We should open more wine, right?"

"It would be stupid not to."

As I liberate the cork from a new bottle, she picks her phone back up and shows me the screen. "I was reading *Chicago Magazine*'s review of Marsha Altman's show."

"Were they kind?"

"Yeah, it's basically a love letter."

"Good for her."

"I always thought . . ." She lets the sentence die, but I know where it was headed. Fifteen years ago, before we met, Daniela was a comer to Chicago's art scene. She had a studio in Bucktown, showed her work in a half-dozen galleries, and had just lined up her first solo exhibition in New York. Then came life. Me. Charlie. A bout of crippling postpartum depression.

Derailment.

Now she teaches private art lessons to middle-grade students.

"It's not that I'm not happy for her. I mean, she's brilliant, she deserves it all."

I say, "If it makes you feel any better, Ryan Holder just won the Pavia Prize."

"What's that?"

"A multidisciplinary award given for achievements in the life and physical sciences. Ryan won for his work in neuroscience."

"Is it a big deal?"

"Million dollars. Accolades. Opens the floodgates to grant money."

"Hotter TAs?"

"Obviously that's the real prize. He invited me to a little informal celebration tonight, but I passed."

"Why?"

"Because it's our night."

"You should go."

"I'd really rather not."

Daniela lifts her empty glass. "So what you're saying is, we both have good reason to drink a lot of wine tonight."

I kiss her, and then pour generously from the newly opened bottle.

"You could've won that prize," Daniela says.

"You could've owned this city's art scene."

"But we did this." She gestures at the high-ceilinged expanse of our brownstone. I bought it pre-Daniela with an inheritance. "And we did that," she says, pointing to Charlie as he sketches with a beautiful intensity that reminds me of Daniela when she's absorbed in a painting.

It's a strange thing, being the parent of a teenager. One thing to raise a little boy, another entirely when a person on the brink of adulthood looks to you for wisdom. I feel like I have little to give. I know there are fathers who see the world a certain way, with clarity and confidence, who know just what to say to their sons and daughters. But I'm not one of them. The older I get, the less I understand. I love

my son. He means everything to me. And yet, I can't escape the feeling that I'm failing him. Sending him off to the wolves with nothing but the crumbs of my uncertain perspective.

I move to the cabinet beside the sink, open it, and start hunting for a box of fettuccine.

Daniela turns to Charlie, says, "Your father could have won the Nobel."

I laugh. "That's possibly an exaggeration."

"Charlie, don't be fooled. He's a genius."

"You're sweet," I say. "And a little drunk."

"It's true, and you know it. Science is less advanced because you love your family."

I can only smile. When Daniela drinks, three things happen: her native accent begins to bleed through, she becomes belligerently kind, and she tends toward hyperbole.

"Your father said to me one night—never forget it—that pure research is life-consuming. He said . . ." For a moment, and to my surprise, emotion overtakes her. Her eyes mist, and she shakes her head like she always does when she's about to cry. At the last second, she rallies, pushes through. "He said, 'Daniela, on my deathbed I would rather have memories of you than of a cold, sterile lab.' "

I look at Charlie, catch him rolling his eyes as he sketches.

Probably embarrassed by our display of parental melodrama.

I stare into the cabinet and wait for the ache in my throat to go away.

When it does, I grab the pasta and close the door.

Daniela drinks her wine.

Charlie draws.

The moment passes.

"Where's Ryan's party?" Daniela asks.

"Village Tap."

"That's your bar, Jason."

"So?"

She comes over, takes the box of pasta out of my hand.

"Go have a drink with your old college buddy. Tell him you're proud of him. Head held high. Tell him I said congrats."

"I will not tell him you said congrats."

"Why?"

"He has a thing for you."

"Stop it."

"It's true. From way back. From our roommate days. Remember the last Christmas party? He kept trying to trick you into standing under the mistletoe with him?"

She just laughs, says, "Dinner will be on the table by the time you get home."

"Which means I should be back here in . . ."

"Forty-five minutes."

"What would I be without you?"

She kisses me.

"Let's not even think about it."

I grab my keys and wallet from the ceramic dish beside the microwave and move into the dining room, my gaze alighting on the tesseract chandelier above the dinner table. Daniela gave it to me for our tenth wedding anniversary. Best gift ever.

As I reach the front door, Daniela shouts, "Return bearing ice cream!"

"Mint chocolate chip!" Charlie says.

I lift my arm, raise my thumb.

I don't look back.

I don't say goodbye.

And this moment slips past unnoticed.

The end of everything I know, everything I love.

I've lived in Logan Square for twenty years, and it doesn't get any better than the first week of October. It always puts me in mind of that F. Scott Fitzgerald line: *Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall.*

The evening is cool, and the skies are clear enough to see a handful of stars. The bars are more rambunctious than usual, jammed with disappointed Cubs fans.

I stop on the sidewalk in the glow of a gaudy sign that blinks VILLAGE TAP and stare through the open doorway of the ubiquitous corner bar you'll find in any self-respecting Chicago neighborhood. This one happens to be my local watering hole. It's the closest to home—a few blocks from my brownstone.

I pass through the glow of the blue neon sign in the front window and step through the doorway.

Matt, the bartender and owner, nods to me as I move down the bar, threading my way through the crowd that surrounds Ryan Holder.

I say to Ryan, "I was just telling Daniela about you."

He smiles, looking exquisitely groomed for the lecture circuit—fit and tan in a black turtleneck, his facial hair elaborately landscaped.

"Goddamn is it good to see you. I'm moved that you came. Darling?" He touches the bare shoulder of the young woman occupying the stool beside his. "Would you mind letting my dear old friend steal your chair for a minute?"

The woman dutifully abandons her seat, and I climb onto the stool beside Ryan.

He calls the bartender over. "We want you to set us up with a pair of the most expensive pours in the house."

"Ryan, not necessary."

He grabs my arm. "We're drinking the best tonight."

Matt says, "I have Macallan Twenty-Five."

"Doubles. My tab."

When the bartender goes, Ryan punches me in the arm. Hard. You wouldn't peg him as a scientist at first glance. He played lacrosse during his undergrad years, and he still carries the broad-shouldered physique and ease of movement of a natural athlete.

"How's Charlie and the lovely Daniela?"

"They're great."

"You should've brought her down. I haven't seen her since last Christmas."

"She sends along her congrats."

"You got a good woman there, but that's not exactly news."

"What are the chances of you settling down in the near future?"

"Slim. The single life, and its considerable perks, appears to suit me. You're still at Lakemont College?"

"Yeah."

"Decent school. Undergrad physics, right?"

"Exactly."

"So you're teaching . . ."

"Quantum mechanics. Intro stuff mainly. Nothing too terribly sexy."

Matt returns with our drinks, and Ryan takes them out of his hands and sets mine before me.

"So this celebration . . . ," I say.

"Just an impromptu thing a few of my postgrads threw together. They love nothing more than to get me drunk and holding court."

"Big year for you, Ryan. I still remember you almost flunking differential equations."

"And you saved my ass. More than once."

For a second, behind the confidence and the polish, I glimpse the goofy, fun-loving grad student with whom I shared a disgusting apartment for a year and a half.

I ask, "Was the Pavia Prize for your work in—"

"Identifying the prefrontal cortex as a consciousness generator."

"Right. Of course. I read your paper on it."

"What'd you think?"

"Dazzling."

He looks genuinely pleased at the compliment.

"If I'm honest, Jason, and there's no false modesty here, I always thought it would be you publishing the seminal papers."

"Really?"

He studies me over the top of his black plastic glass frames.

"Of course. You're smarter than I am. Everyone knew it."

I drink my whisky. I try not to acknowledge how delicious it is.

He says, "Just a question, but do you see yourself more as a research scientist or a teacher these days?"

"I—"

"Because I see myself, first and foremost, as a man pursuing answers to fundamental questions. Now, if the people around me"—he gestures at his students who have begun to crowd in—"are sharp enough to absorb knowledge by sheer proximity to me . . . great. But the passing on of knowledge, as it were, doesn't interest me. All that matters is the science. The research."

I note a flicker of annoyance, or anger, in his voice, and it's building, like he's getting himself worked up toward something.

I try to laugh it off. "Are you upset with me, Ryan? It almost sounds like you think I let you down."

"Look, I've taught at MIT, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, the best schools on the planet. I've met the smartest motherfuckers in the room, and Jason, you would've changed the world if you'd decided to go that path. If you'd stuck with it. Instead, you're teaching undergrad physics to future doctors and patent lawyers."

"We can't all be superstars like you, Ryan."

"Not if you give up."

I finish my whisky.

"Well, I'm so glad I popped in for this." I step down off the barstool.

"Don't be that way, Jason. I was paying you a compliment."

"I'm proud of you, man. I mean that."

"Jason."

"Thanks for the drink."

Back outside, I stalk down the sidewalk. The more distance I put between myself and Ryan, the angrier I become.

And I'm not even sure at whom.

My face is hot.

Lines of sweat trail down my sides.

Without thinking, I step into the street against a crosswalk signal and instantly register the sound of tires locking up, of rubber squealing across pavement.

I turn and stare in disbelief as a yellow cab barrels toward me.

Through the approaching windshield, I see the cabbie so clearly—a mustached man, wide-eyed with naked panic, bracing for impact.

And then my hands are flat against the warm, yellow metal of the hood and the cabbie is leaning out his window, screaming at me, "You dipshit, you almost died! Pull your head out of your ass!"

Horns begin to blare behind the cab.

I retreat to the sidewalk and watch the flow of traffic resume.

The occupants of three separate cars are kind enough to slow down so they can flip me off.

Whole Foods smells like the hippie I dated before Daniela—a tincture of fresh produce, ground coffee, and essential oils.

The scare with the cab has flattened my buzz, and I browse the freezer cases in something of a fog, lethargic and sleepy.

It feels colder when I'm back outside, a brisk wind blowing in off the lake, portending the shitty winter that looms right around the corner.

With my canvas bag filled with ice cream, I take a different route toward home. It adds six blocks, but what I lose in brevity, I gain in solitude, and between the cab and Ryan, I need some extra time to reset.

I pass a construction site, abandoned for the night, and a few blocks later, the playground of the elementary school my son attended, the metal sliding board gleaming under a streetlamp and the swings stirring in the breeze.

There's an energy to these autumn nights that touches something primal inside of me. Something from long ago. From my childhood in western Iowa. I think of high school football games and the stadium lights blazing down on the players. I smell ripening apples, and the sour reek of beer from keg parties in the cornfields. I feel the wind in my face as I ride in the bed of an old pickup truck down a country road at night, dust swirling red in the taillights and the entire span of my life yawning out ahead of me.

It's the beautiful thing about youth.

There's a weightlessness that permeates everything because no damning choices have been made, no paths committed to, and the road forking out ahead is pure, unlimited potential.

I love my life, but I haven't felt that lightness of being in ages. Autumn nights like this are as close as I get.

The cold is beginning to clear my head.

It will be good to be home again. I'm thinking of starting up the gas logs. We've never had a fire before Halloween, but tonight is so unseasonably cold that after walking a mile in this wind, all I want is to sit by the hearth with Daniela and Charlie and a glass of wine.

The street undercuts the El.

I pass beneath the rusting ironwork of the railway.

For me, even more than the skyline, the El personifies the city.

This is my favorite section of the walk home, because it's the darkest and quietest.

At the moment . . .

No trains inbound.

No headlights in either direction.

No audible pub noise.

Nothing but the distant roar of a jet overhead, on final approach into O'Hare.

Wait . . .

There's something coming—footfalls on the sidewalk.

I glance back.

A shadow rushes toward me, the distance between us closing faster than I can process what's happening.

The first thing I see is a face.

Ghost white.

High, arching eyebrows that look drawn.

Red, pursed lips—too thin, too perfect.

And horrifying eyes—big and pitch-black, without pupils or irises.

The second thing I see is the barrel of a gun, four inches from the end of my nose.

The low, raspy voice behind the geisha mask says, "Turn around."

I hesitate, too stunned to move.

He pushes the gun into my face.

I turn around.

Before I can tell him that my wallet is in my front left pocket, he says, "I'm not here for your money. Start walking."

I start walking.

"Faster."

I walk faster.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Keep your mouth shut."

A train roars past overhead, and we emerge from the darkness under the El, my heart rocketing inside my chest. I absorb my surroundings with a sudden and profound curiosity. Across the street is a gated townhome complex, and this side of the block comprises a collection of businesses that shutter at five.

A nail salon.

A law office.

An appliance repair shop.

A tire store.

This neighborhood is a ghost town, nobody out.

"See that SUV?" he asks. There's a black Lincoln Navigator parked on the curb just ahead. The alarm chirps. "Get in the driver's seat."

"Whatever you're thinking about doing—"

"Or you can bleed to death right here on the sidewalk."

I open the driver's-side door and slide in behind the wheel.

"My grocery bag," I say.

"Bring it." He climbs in behind me. "Start the car."

I pull the door closed and stow the canvas Whole Foods bag in the front passenger floorboard. It's so quiet in the car I can actually hear my pulse—a fast thrumming against my eardrum.

"What are you waiting for?" he asks.

I press the engine-start button.

"Turn on the navigation."

I turn it on.

"Click on 'previous destinations.' "

I've never owned a car with built-in GPS, and it takes me a moment to find the right tab on the touchscreen.

Three locations appear.

One is my home address. One is the university where I work.

"You've been following me?" I ask.

"Choose Pulaski Drive."

I select 1400 Pulaski Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60616, with no idea where that even is. The female voice on the GPS instructs me: *Make a legal U-turn when possible and proceed for point-eight miles.*

Shifting into gear, I turn out into the dark street.

The man behind me says, "Buckle your seat belt."

I strap myself in as he does the same.

"Jason, just so we're clear, if you do anything other than follow these directions to the letter, I'm going to shoot you through the seat. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes."

I drive us through my neighborhood, wondering if I'm seeing it all for the last time.

At a red light, I pull to a stop in front of my corner bar. Through the deeply tinted front passenger window, I see the door is still propped open. I glimpse Matt, and through the crowd, Ryan, turned around

in his stool now, his back to the bar, his elbows on the scuffed wood, holding court for his postgrads. Probably enthralling them with a horrifying cautionary tale of failure starring his old roommate.

I want to call out to him. To make him understand that I'm in trouble. That I need—

"Green light, Jason."

I accelerate through the intersection.

The GPS navigation guides us east through Logan Square to the Kennedy Expressway, where the indifferent female voice instructs me, *Turn right in one hundred feet and proceed for nineteen-point-eight miles.*

Southbound traffic is light enough for me to peg the speedometer at seventy and keep it there. My hands sweat on the leather steering wheel, and I can't stop wondering, Am I going to die tonight?

It occurs to me that if I do survive, I'll carry a new revelation with me for the rest of my days: we leave this life the same way we enter it—totally alone, bereft. I'm afraid, and there is nothing Daniela or Charlie or anyone can do to help me in this moment when I need them more than ever. They don't even know what I'm experiencing.

The interstate skirts the western edge of downtown. The Willis Tower and its brood of lesser skyscrapers glow with a serene warmth against the night.

Through the writhing panic and fear, my mind races, fighting to puzzle out what's happening.

My address is in the GPS. So this wasn't a random encounter. This man has been following me. Knows me. Ergo, some action of mine has resulted in this outcome.

But which?

I'm not rich.

My life isn't worth anything beyond its value to me and to my loved ones.

I've never been arrested, never committed a crime.

Never slept with another man's wife.

Sure, I flip people off in traffic on occasion, but that's just Chicago.

My last and only physical altercation was in the sixth grade when I punched a classmate in the nose for pouring milk down the back of my shirt.

I haven't wronged anyone in the meaningful sense of the word. In a manner that might have culminated with me driving a Lincoln Navigator with a gun pointed at the back of my head.

I'm an atomic physicist and professor at a small college.

I don't treat my students, even the worst of the bunch, with anything but respect. Those who have failed out of my classes failed because they didn't care in the first place, and certainly none of them could accuse me of ruining their lives. I go *out of my way* to help my students pass.

The skyline dwindles in the side mirror, falling farther and farther away like a familiar and comforting piece of coastline.

I venture, "Did I do something to you in the past? Or someone you work for? I just don't understand what you could possibly want from—"

"The more you talk, the worse it will be for you."

For the first time, I realize there's something familiar in his voice. I can't for the life of me pinpoint when or where, but we've met. I'm sure of it.

I feel the vibration of my phone receiving a text message.

Then another.

And another.

He forgot to take my phone.

I look at the time: 9:05 p.m.

I left my house a little over an hour ago. It's Daniela no doubt, wondering where I am. I'm fifteen minutes late, and I'm never late.

I glance in the rearview mirror, but it's too dark to see anything except a sliver of the ghost-white mask. I risk an experiment. Taking my left hand off the steering wheel, I place it in my lap and count to ten.

He says nothing.

I put my hand back on the wheel.

That computerized voice breaks the silence: *Merge right onto the Eighty-Seventh Street exit in four-point-three miles.*

Again, I take my left hand slowly off the wheel.

This time, I slide it into the pocket of my khaki slacks. My phone is buried deep, and I just barely touch it with my index and pointer fingers, somehow managing to pinch it between them.

Millimeter by millimeter, I tug it out, the rubber case catching on every fold of fabric, and now a sustained vibration rattling between my fingertips—a call coming in.

When I finally work it free, I place my phone faceup in my lap and return my hand to the steering wheel.

As the navigation voice updates the distance from our upcoming turn, I shoot a glance down at the phone.

There's a missed call from "Dani" and three texts:

> DANI 2m ago
> Dinner's on the table
>
> DANI 2m ago
> Hurry home we are STARVING!
>
> DANI 1m ago
> You get lost? :)

I refocus my attention on the road, wondering if the glow from my phone is visible from the backseat.

The touchscreen goes dark.

Reaching down, I click the ON/OFF button and swipe the screen. I punch in my four-digit passcode, click the green "Messages" icon. Daniela's thread is at the top, and as I open our conversation, my abductor shifts behind me.

I clutch the wheel with both hands again.

Merge right onto the Eighty-Seventh Street exit in one-point-nine miles.

The screensaver times out, auto-lock kicks in, my phone goes black.

Shit.

Sliding my hand back down, I retype the passcode and begin tapping out the most important text of my life, my index finger clumsy on the touchscreen, each word taking two or three attempts to complete as auto-correct wreaks havoc.

The barrel of the gun digs into the back of my head.

I react, swerving into the fast lane.

"What are you doing, Jason?"

I straighten the wheel with one hand, swinging us back into the slow lane as my other hand lowers toward the phone, closing in on Send.

He lunges between the front seats, his gloved hand reaching around my waist, snatching the phone away.

Merge right onto the Eighty-Seventh Street exit in five hundred feet.

"What's your passcode, Jason?" When I don't respond, he says, "Wait. I bet I know this. Month and year of your birthday backwards? Let's see . . . three-seven-two-one. There we go."

In the rearview mirror, I see the phone illuminate his mask.

He reads the text he stopped me from sending: " '1400 Pulaski call 91 . . .' Bad boy."

I veer onto the interstate off-ramp.

The GPS says, *Turn left onto Eighty-Seventh Street and proceed east for three-point-eight miles.*

We drive into South Chicago, through a neighborhood we have no business setting foot in.

Past rows of factory housing.

Apartment projects.

Empty parks with rusted swing sets and netless basketball hoops.

Storefronts locked up for the night behind security gates.

Gang tagging everywhere.

He asks, "So do you call her Dani or Daniela?"

My throat constricts.

Rage and fear and helplessness burgeoning inside of me.

"Jason, I asked you a question."

"Go to hell."

He leans close, his words hot in my ear. "You do not want to go down this path with me. I will hurt you worse than you've ever been hurt in your life. Pain you didn't even know was possible. What do you call her?"

I grit my teeth. "Daniela."

"Never Dani? Even though that's what's on your phone?"

I'm tempted to flip the car at high speed and just kill us both.

I say, "Rarely. She doesn't like it."

"What's in the grocery bag?"

"Why do you want to know what I call her?"

"What's in the bag?"

"Ice cream."

"It's family night, right?"

"Yeah."

In the rearview mirror, I see him typing on my phone.

"What are you writing?" I ask.

He doesn't respond.

We're out of the ghetto now, riding through a no-man's-land that doesn't even feel like Chicago anymore, with the skyline nothing but a smear of light on the far horizon. The houses are crumbling, lightless, and lifeless. Everything long abandoned.

We cross a river and straight ahead lies Lake Michigan, its black expanse a fitting denouement of this urban wilderness.

As if the world ends right here.

And perhaps mine does.

Turn right and proceed south on Pulaski Drive for point-five miles to destination.

He chuckles to himself. "Wow, are you in trouble with the missus." I strangle the steering wheel. "Who was that man you had whisky with tonight, Jason? I couldn't tell from outside."

It's so dark out here in this borderland between Chicago and Indiana.

We're passing the ruins of railroad yards and factories.

"Jason."

"His name is Ryan Holder. He used to be—"

"Your old roommate."

"How'd you know that?"

"Are you two close? I don't see him in your contacts."

"Not really. How do you—?"

"I know almost everything about you, Jason. You could say I've made your life my specialty."

"Who are you?"

You will arrive at your destination in five hundred feet.

"Who *are* you?"

He doesn't answer, but my attention is beginning to pull away from him as I focus on our increasingly remote surroundings.

The pavement flows under the SUV's headlights.

Empty behind us.

Empty ahead.

There's the lake off to my left, deserted warehouses on my right.

You have arrived at your destination.

I stop the Navigator in the middle of the road.

He says, "The entrance is up ahead on the left."

The headlights graze a teetering stretch of twelve-foot fencing, topped with a tiara of rusted barbed wire. The gate is ajar, and a chain that once locked it shut has been snipped and coiled in the weeds by the roadside.

"Just nudge the gate with the front bumper."

Even from inside the near-soundproof interior of the SUV, the shriek of the gate grinding open is loud. The cones of light illuminate

the remnants of a road, the pavement cracked and buckled from years of harsh Chicago winters.

I engage the high beams.

Light washes over a parking lot, where streetlamps have toppled everywhere like spilled matchsticks.

Beyond, a sprawling structure looms.

The brick façade of the time-ravaged building is flanked by huge cylindrical tanks and a pair of hundred-foot smokestacks spearing the sky.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"Put it in PARK and turn it off."

I bring the car to a stop, shift out of gear, and punch off the engine.

It becomes deathly silent.

"What is this place?" I ask again.

"What are your Friday plans?"

"Excuse me?"

A sharp blow to the side of my head sends me slumping into the steering wheel, stunned and wondering for a half second if this is what it feels like to be shot in the head.

But no, he only hit me with his gun.

I touch my hand to the point of impact.

My fingers come away sticky with blood.

"Tomorrow," he says. "What do you have scheduled for tomorrow?"

Tomorrow. It feels like a foreign concept.

"I'm . . . giving a test to my PHYS 3316 class."

"What else?"

"That's it."

"Take off all your clothes."

I look in the rearview mirror.

Why the hell does he want me naked?

He says, "If you wanted to try something, you should've done it while you had control of the car. From this moment forward, you're

mine. Now, take off your clothes, and if I have to tell you again, I'm going to make you bleed. A lot."

I unbuckle my seat belt.

As I unzip my gray hoodie and shrug my arms out of the sleeves, I cling to a single shred of hope—he's still wearing a mask, which means he doesn't want me to see his face. If he were planning to kill me, he wouldn't care if I could identify him.

Right?

I unbutton my shirt.

"Shoes too?" I ask.

"*Everything*."

I slip off my running shoes, my socks.

I slide my slacks and boxer shorts down my legs.

Then my clothes—every last thread—sit in a pile in the front passenger seat.

I feel vulnerable.

Exposed.

Weirdly ashamed.

What if he tries to rape me? Is that what this is all about?

He sets a flashlight on the console between the seats.

"Out of the car, Jason."

I realize that I see the interior of the Navigator as a kind of lifeboat. As long as I stay inside, he can't really hurt me.

He won't make a mess in here.

"Jason."

My chest is heaving, I'm starting to hyperventilate, black spots detonating across my field of vision.

"I know what you're thinking," he says, "and I can hurt you just as easily inside this car."

I'm not getting enough oxygen. I'm starting to freak out.

But I manage to say, breathlessly, "Bullshit. You don't want my blood in here."

When I come to, he's dragging me out of the front seat by my arms. He drops me in the gravel, where I sit dazed, waiting for my head to clear.

It's always colder near the lake, and tonight is no exception. The wind inflicts a raw, serrated bite on my exposed skin, which is covered in gooseflesh.

It's so dark out here I can see five times the number of stars as in the city.

My head is throbbing, and a fresh line of blood runs down the side of my face. But with a full load of adrenaline shotgunning through my system, the pain is muted.

He drops a flashlight in the dirt beside me and shines his at the disintegrating edifice I saw as we drove in. "After you."

I clutch the light in my hand and struggle to my feet. Stumbling toward the building, my bare feet trample sodden newspaper. I dodge crumpled beer cans and chevrons of glass that glitter under the beam.

Approaching the main entrance, I imagine this abandoned parking lot on another night. A night to come. It's early winter, and through a curtain of falling snow, the darkness is ribboned with flashing blues and reds. Detectives and cadaver dogs swarm the ruins, and as they examine my body somewhere inside, naked and decomposed and butchered, a patrol car parks in front of my brownstone in Logan Square. It's two in the morning, and Daniela comes to the door in a nightgown. I've been missing for weeks and she knows in her heart I'm not coming back, thinks she's already made her peace with that brutal fact, but seeing these young police officers with their hard, sober eyes and a dusting of snow on their shoulders and visored caps, which they shelve respectfully under their arms . . . it all finally breaks something inside of her she didn't know was still intact. She feels her knees liquefy, her strength giving way, and as she sinks onto the doormat, Charlie comes down the creaky staircase behind her, bleary-eyed and wild-haired, asking, "Is it about Dad?"

As we close in on the structure, two words reveal themselves on the faded brick above the entrance. The only letters I can make out spell CAGO POWER.

He forces me through an opening in the brick.

Our light beams sweep across a front office.

Furniture rotted down to the metal frames.

An old water cooler.

The remnants of someone's campfire.

A shredded sleeping bag.

Used condoms on moldy carpet.

We enter a long corridor.

Without the flashlights, this would be can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face dark.

I stop to shine my light ahead, but it's swallowed by the blackness. There's less debris on the warped linoleum floor beneath my feet, and no sound whatsoever, save for the low, distant moan of wind outside these walls.

I'm growing colder by the second.

He jams the barrel of the gun into my kidney, forcing me on.

At some point, did I fall onto the radar of a psychopath who decided to learn everything about me before he murdered me? I often engage with strangers. Maybe we spoke briefly in that coffee shop near campus. Or on the El. Or over beers at my corner bar.

Does he have plans for Charlie and Daniela?

"Do you want to hear me beg?" I ask, my voice beginning to break. "Because I will. I'll do anything you want."

And the horrible thing is that it's true. I would defile myself. Hurt someone else, do almost anything if he would only take me back to my neighborhood and let this night continue like it was supposed to—with me walking home to my family, bringing them the ice cream I'd promised.

"If what?" he asks. "If I let you go?"

"Yes."

The sound of his laughter ricochets down the corridor. "I'd be afraid to see what-all you'd be willing to do to get yourself out of this."

"Out of what, exactly?"

But he doesn't answer.

I fall to my knees.

My light goes sliding across the floor.

"Please," I beg. "You don't have to do this." I barely recognize my own voice. "You can just walk away. I don't know why you want to hurt me, but just think about it for a minute. I—"

"Jason."

"—love my family. I love my wife. I love—"

"Jason."

"—my son."

"Jason!"

"I will do *anything*."

I'm shivering uncontrollably now—from cold, from fear.

He kicks me in the stomach, and as the breath explodes out of my lungs, I roll over onto my back. Crushing down on top of me, he shoves the barrel of the gun between my lips, into my mouth, all the way to the back of my throat until the taste of old oil and carbon residue is more than I can stomach.

Two seconds before I hurl the night's wine and Scotch across the floor, he withdraws the gun.

Screams, "Get up!"

He grabs my arm, jerks me back onto my feet.

Pointing the gun in my face, he puts my flashlight back into my hands.

I stare into the mask, my light shining on the weapon.

It's my first good look at the gun. I know next to nothing about firearms, only that it's a handgun, has a hammer, a cylinder, and a giant hole at the end of the barrel that looks fully capable of delivering my death. The illumination of my flashlight lends a touch of copper to the point of the bullet aimed at my face. For some reason, I picture this man in a single-room apartment, loading rounds into the cylinder, preparing to do what he's done.

I'm going to die here, maybe right now.

Every moment feels like it could be the end.

"Move," he growls.

I start walking.

We arrive at a junction and turn down a different corridor, this one wider, taller, arched. The air is oppressive with moisture. I hear the distant *drip . . . drip . . . drip* of falling water. The walls are made of concrete, and instead of linoleum, the floor is blanketed with damp moss that grows thicker and wetter with each step.

The taste of the gun lingers in my mouth, laced with the acidic tang of bile.

Patches of my face are growing numb from the cold.

A small voice in my head is screaming at me to do something, try something, anything. Don't just be led like a lamb to slaughter, one foot obediently following the other. Why make it so simple for him?

Easy.

Because I'm afraid.

So afraid I can barely walk upright.

And my thoughts are fractured and teeming.

I understand now why victims don't fight back. I cannot imagine trying to overcome this man. Trying to run.

And here's the most shameful truth: there's a part of me that would rather just have it all be over, because the dead don't feel fear or pain. Does this mean I'm a coward? Is that the final truth I have to face before I die?

No.

I have to do something.

We step out of the tunnel onto a metal surface that's freezing against the soles of my feet. I grasp a rusted iron railing that encircles a platform. It's colder here, and the sense of open space is unmistakable.

As if on a timer, a yellow moon creeps up on Lake Michigan, slowly rising.

Its light streams through the upper windows of an expansive

room, and it's bright enough in here for me to take in everything independently of the flashlight.

My stomach churns.

We're standing on the high point of an open staircase that drops fifty feet.

It looks like an oil painting in here, the way the antique light falls on a row of dormant generators below and the latticework of I-beams overhead.

It's as quiet as a cathedral.

"We're going down," he says. "Watch your step."

We descend.

Two steps up from the second-to-highest landing, I spin with the flashlight death-gripped in my right hand, aiming for his head . . .

. . . and hitting nothing, the momentum carrying me right back to where I started and then some.

I'm off balance, falling.

I hit the landing hard, and the flashlight jars out of my hand and disappears over the edge.

A second later, I hear it explode on the floor forty feet below.

My captor stares down at me behind that expressionless mask, head cocked, gun pointed at my face.

Thumbing back the hammer, he steps toward me.

I groan as his knee drives into my sternum, pinning me to the landing.

The gun touches my head.

He says, "I have to admit, I'm proud you tried. It was pathetic. I saw it coming a mile away, but at least you went down swinging."

I recoil against a sharp sting in the side of my neck.

"Don't fight it," he says.

"What did you give me?"

Before he can answer, something plows through my blood-brain barrier like an eighteen-wheeler. I feel impossibly heavy and weightless all at once, the world spinning and turning itself inside out.

And then, as fast as it hit me, it passes.

Another needle stabs into my leg.

As I cry out, he tosses both syringes over the edge. "Let's go."

"What did you give me?"

"Get up!"

I use the railing to pull myself up. My knee is bleeding from the fall. My head is still bleeding. I'm cold, dirty, and wet, my teeth chattering so hard it feels like they might break.

We go down, the flimsy steelwork trembling with our weight. At the bottom, we move off the last step and walk down a row of old generators.

From the floor, this room seems even more immense.

At the midpoint, he stops and shines his flashlight on a duffel bag nestled against one of the generators.

"New clothes. Hurry up."

"New clothes? I don't—"

"You don't have to understand. You just have to get dressed."

Through all the fear, I register a tremor of hope. Is he going to spare me? Why else would he be making me get dressed? Do I have a shot at surviving this?

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Hurry up. You don't have much time left."

I squat by the duffel bag.

"Clean yourself up first."

There's a towel on top, which I use to wipe the mud off my feet, the blood off my knee and face. I pull on a pair of boxer shorts and jeans that fit perfectly. Whatever he injected me with, I think I can feel it in my fingers now—a loss of dexterity as I fumble with the buttons on a plaid shirt. My feet slide effortlessly into a pair of expensive leather slip-ons. They fit as comfortably as the jeans.

I'm not cold anymore. It's like there's a core of heat in the center of my chest, radiating out through my arms and legs.

"The jacket too."

I lift a black leather jacket from the bottom of the bag, push my arms through the sleeves.

"Perfect," he says. "Now, have a seat."

I ease down against the iron base of the generator. It's a massive piece of machinery the size of a locomotive engine.

He sits across from me, the gun trained casually in my direction.

Moonlight is filling this place, refracting off the broken windows high above and sending a scatter of light that strikes—

Tangles of cable.

Gears.

Pipes.

Levers and pulleys.

Instrumentation panels covered with cracked gauges and controls.

Technology from another age.

I ask, "What happens now?"

"We wait."

"For what?"

He waves my question away.

A weird calm settles over me. A misplaced sense of peace.

"Did you bring me here to kill me?" I ask.

"I did not."

I feel so comfortable leaning against the old machine, like I'm sinking into it.

"But you let me believe it."

"There was no other way."

"No other way to what?"

"To get you here."

"And why are we here?"

But he just shakes his head as he snakes his left hand up under the geisha mask and scratches.

I feel strange.

Like I'm simultaneously watching a movie and acting in it.

An irresistible drowsiness lowers onto my shoulders.

My head dips.

"Just let it take you," he says.

But I don't. I fight it, thinking how unsettlingly fast his tenor has changed. He's like a different man, and the disconnect between who he is in this moment and the violence he showed just minutes ago should terrify me. I shouldn't be this calm, but my body is humming too peacefully.

I feel intensely serene and deep and distant.

He says to me, almost like a confession, "It's been a long road. I can't quite believe I'm sitting here actually looking at you. Talking to you. I know you don't understand, but there's so much I want to ask."

"About what?"

"What it's like to be you."

"What do you mean?"

He hesitates, then: "How do you feel about your place in the world, Jason?"

I say slowly, deliberately, "That's an interesting question considering the night you've put me through."

"Are you happy in your life?"

In the shadow of this moment, my life is achingly beautiful.

"I have an amazing family. A fulfilling job. We're comfortable. Nobody's sick."

My tongue feels thick. My words are beginning to sound slurred.

"But?"

I say, "My life is great. It's just not exceptional. And there was a time when it could have been."

"You killed your ambition, didn't you?"

"It died of natural causes. Of neglect."

"And do you know exactly how that happened? Was there a moment when—?"

"My son. I was twenty-seven years old, and Daniela and I had been together a few months. She told me she was pregnant. We were having fun, but it wasn't love. Or maybe it was. I don't know. We definitely weren't looking to start a family."

"But you did."

"When you're a scientist, your late twenties are so critical. If you don't publish something big by thirty, they put you out to pasture."

Maybe it's just the drug, but it feels so good to be talking. An oasis of normal after two of the craziest hours I've ever lived. I know it isn't true, but it feels like as long as we keep conversing, nothing bad can happen. As if the words protect me.

"Did you have something big in the works?" he asks.

Now I'm having to focus on making my eyes stay open.

"Yes."

"And what was it?"

His voice sounds distant.

"I was trying to create the quantum superposition of an object that was visible to the human eye."

"Why did you abandon your research?"

"When Charlie was born, he had major medical issues for the first year of his life. I needed a thousand hours in a cleanroom, but I couldn't get there fast enough. Daniela needed me. My son needed me. I lost my funding. Lost my momentum. I was the young, new genius for a minute, but when I faltered, someone else took my place."

"Do you regret your decision to stay with Daniela and make a life with her?"

"No."

"Never?"

I think of Daniela, and the emotion breaks back through, accompanied by the actual horror of the moment. Fear returns, and with it a homesickness that cuts to the bone. I *need* her in this moment more than I've ever needed anything in my life.

"Never."

And then I'm lying on the floor, my face against the cold concrete, and the drug is whisking me away.

He's kneeling beside me now, rolling me onto my back, and I'm looking up at all that moonlight pouring in through the high windows of this forgotten place, the darkness wrinkled with twitches of

light and color as swirling, empty voids open and close beside the generators.

"Will I see her again?" I ask.

"I don't know."

I want to ask him for the millionth time what he wants with me, but I can't find the words.

My eyes keep closing, and I try to hold them open, but it's a losing battle.

He pulls off a glove and touches my face with his bare hand.

Strangely.

Delicately.

He says, "Listen to me. You're going to be scared, but you can make it yours. You can have everything you never had. I'm sorry I had to scare you earlier, but I had to get you here. I'm so sorry, Jason. I'm doing this for both of us."

I mouth the words, *Who are you?*

Instead of responding, he reaches into his pocket and takes out a new syringe and a tiny glass ampoule filled with a clear liquid that in the moonlight shines like mercury.

He uncaps the needle and draws the contents of the vial up into the syringe.

As my eyelids slowly lower, I watch him slide the sleeve up his left arm and inject himself.

Then he drops the ampoule and the syringe on the concrete between us, and the last thing I see before my eyes lock shut is that glass ampoule rolling toward my face.

I whisper, "Now what?"

And he says, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."