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CROUCH A NOVEL

Dark Matter

A NOVEL



Blake Crouch



CROWN
NEW YORK

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Acknowledgments

*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"

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 juliennening, 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.