

LIKE IT
NEVER
HAPPENED

Also available by Jeff Hoffmann

Other People's Children

LIKE IT
NEVER
HAPPENED

A NOVEL

JEFF HOFFMANN

CROOKED
LANE

NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real or actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright© 2023 by Jeffrey Robert Hoffmann

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Crooked Lane Books, an imprint of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

Crooked Lane Books and its logo are trademarks of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication data available upon request.

ISBN (hardcover): 978-1-63910-699-8

ISBN (ebook): 978-1-63910-700-1

Cover design by Heather VenHuizen

Printed in the United States.

www.crookedlanebooks.com

Crooked Lane Books
34 West 27th St., 10th Floor
New York, NY 10001

First Edition: March 2024

10987654321

For Dad

CHAPTER

1

Milwaukee

WHEN TOMMY SEES Kevin's obituary, that dark puddle of blood from thirty years ago springs to his mind even before he can remember what Kevin looked like. He remembers it black, darker than the asphalt of the Burger King parking lot, but it must have been red that night. It happened so long ago it's hard to be sure. He had gone back to look at that puddle several days later, to convince himself that it had all really happened, that it wasn't some terrible fever dream. By then it was black for sure, just another stain-like motor oil or transmission fluid. Tommy doesn't really care that he can't remember the color of the blood, but it troubles him deeply that it takes so long and so much effort to summon the memory of Kevin's face.

"Hey, Dad? Can I borrow your truck?"

Tommy drops the newspaper to his lap and looks up at the door of the den. His daughter Sophie is wearing her coat, too much mascara, and a blank expression.

"Where you going?"

"To the library? Got a test tomorrow. Physics."

Tommy glances at his watch. "Mom will be home in ten minutes. We'll eat in twenty."

Sophie's eyes flicker toward the front door. "I'm not hungry. I had soup."

Tommy knows that she isn't going to the library, that the library is just the excuse most likely to spring her on a Wednesday night without an argument. She's probably headed to her boyfriend's basement to vape and make out. He knows what Maggie will say about that when she gets home, but he decides to argue with Maggie tonight rather than Sophie.

"Be home by nine thirty."

"Fine."

Sophie disappears, and a moment later the front door slams.

Tommy pushes up from the couch to get dinner ready. When Maggie's gearing up for a case, he's in charge of food, and Tommy can't stomach another pizza, so that morning he made stew in the Crock-Pot. He lifts the lid and inhales the scent as he stirs.

He knows that if his mom were still alive, she'd remember exactly what Kevin looked like. Her mind was sharp right up until the end, even as her eyesight failed. She lived with them her last six months, and every night when Tommy came home from work, she'd ask him to read her the obits so she could track the passing of her friends, her acquaintances, and her enemies. She'd sit in the recliner over by the fireplace, and Tommy would settle onto their old green couch. He read names until she recognized one.

Eight months ago, Tommy's mom's name appeared on that page with her own too-small paragraph that failed to

describe a life well lived. After she was gone, Tommy kept reading the roll call. He occasionally recognizes a name- one of his mom's friends, somebody from church. He spotted the name of a friend's daughter on that page, and for more than a week he was paralyzed by the idea that Emma could die in some other place, that he'd miss the notice, and that nobody would tell him she was gone.

If his mom heard him read Kevin McNamara's name, she'd remind Tommy of that first day Kevin came over, the summer after kindergarten, and she would say that he never really left until that summer after high school. She'd talk about the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches she made for them after their mornings building the tree fort in the woods, or the hot cocoa after an afternoon of sledding down by the creek. She'd complain about all those sleepovers when Kevin's mom was out on a date or just out. And then she'd ask Tommy yet again why he and Kevin McNamara weren't friends anymore.

* * *

Maggie squeezes the steering wheel so hard her knuckles hurt. The anger knots her shoulders like it always does after a day like today. Sometimes the drive is enough. The jazz that trickles from the radio relaxes her breathing and allows her to unclench by the time she arrives home. Tonight, the drive won't suffice. Tonight, she'll need Tommy to wrap her in his strong arms. Maybe later, after dinner, he'll dig his thumbs into her shoulders, knead the day away. When she pulls into the empty driveway, she wonders for a moment where Tommy is. But then she realizes that Sophie probably took the truck, and she thinks of Sophie's boyfriend, and she squeezes her temples cranks just a bit tighter.

Maggie trudges up the front steps of their modest brick two-story and wonders whether to order pizza or Chinese. When she opens the front door, the thick, swampy smell of beef stew hits her, and she thanks the universe for Crock-Pots and for Tommy. She sets her purse on the kitchen table and lets her eyes linger on Tommy's broad back as he leans over dinner, stirring. He's a mountain of a man. He's solid, and not just his tall, thick body. Tommy, if nobody else, she can count on. The knot in her shoulder eases just a little.

"How was the day?" he asks without turning, in that gentle way of his. It was his voice more than anything that first piqued Maggie's interest. It doesn't fit this strong bear of a man, and that disconnect caught and held her attention. It still does.

Maggie takes off her glasses, rubs the bridge of her nose. "Leonard fucked me."

Tommy puts down the spoon, turns, and wraps her in a hug. Maggie lets herself disappear into his embrace. "What'd he do this time?"

"Remember that drug dealer? The one they caught with nine kilos of heroin?"

"Yeah?"

"Rock-solid case, and Leonard forced a plea deal on me. Six months in county rather than the decade in Stanley that he deserved."

"Why?"

"Leonard went to law school with the defense attorney."

Tommy rests his chin on the top of her head, and she presses her face into his chest. His shirt smells of engine grease and tacos and Old Spice and Tommy. He squeezes her tightly, and her jaw slackens. Her fists become a bit more like hands.

"Did she call today?" Maggie murmurs into his shirt.

"No," he says, and he doesn't ask who *she* is. Since that day in January when the dorm supervisor down at Marquette called to say that she was missing, Emma became that pronoun. When the police told them that her boyfriend was gone too, their worst fears eased, but Emma lingers in their thoughts all day, every day. In February, when Emma finally called Tommy to let him know that she was all right, the police traced the number to a prepaid cell phone.

Maggie slips from the hug, puts her glasses back on, and walks to the sink to wash her hands. "How was your day?"

Tommy goes back to stirring the stew. He shrugs. "HVAC in the science building went out."

"Any snowflakes melt?"

At this Tommy grunts a laugh. "No. We got it back up in two hours. Everyone survived."

"At least it wasn't a dorm." Tommy is the senior building engineer, and Maggie knows that when something breaks down in a dorm, parents start calling, and if those parents are alumni or donors, things can get complicated. "Where's Sophie?"

Tommy puts the lid back on the pot and opens the cabinet for the plates. "Library."

Maggie leans back against the counter. She wants to accept the testimony. She tries not to cross-examine. "How do you know she's at the library?"

Tommy sets the plates on the table before he answers. "I don't."

He leaves it at that, and Maggie doesn't have the energy to press the point. "Jeremy?"

"Locked in his bedroom. Doing his math homework or jacking off into a gym sock."

"Stop."

"Just sayin'. He's thirteen."

Maggie smiles, maybe for the first time today. "He's still my little boy."

Tommy unplugs the Crock-Pot and carries it to the table. "Dinner!" he shouts up the stairs.

They sit down to wait for Jeremy. "I've got a wake on Friday," Tommy says.

"Who died?"

"A guy from high school."

"I've got nothing on Friday night," Maggie says. "Want me to go with?"

"Nah." Tommy looks down at his hands, scrapes grease from under a thumbnail. "He was just a guy I used to know."

* * *

After he finishes the dishes, Tommy climbs down the wooden steps to the rec room. He built out the basement shortly after Jeremy was born, when the girls were still little. The shelves he built for the kids' toys now sit mostly empty, their contents given away or sold at long-ago garage sales. It used to smell like popcorn, Play-Doh, and finger paint. Now, it mostly sits quiet and dark unless Tommy's paying bills or Maggie's throwing clay.

He sits down at the particleboard table in the corner and shakes the mouse. The monitor Rickers to life, and he clicks open the web browser. He starts by reading Kevin's obituary again. It's brief, but it's him. Forty-nine years old. Killed in a motorcycle accident. Survived by his loving sister, Susan, and his wife, Naomi. Preceded to God's kingdom by his mother. Like every obituary, it leaves out so much. It doesn't mention where he worked or where in Milwaukee he lived. It doesn't speak of his empathy or his quirky sense of humor.

And it doesn't describe what a self-righteous ass he could be when he thought he was right.

Tommy types Kevin's name into Google and finds a metric ton of Kevin McNamaras that aren't Kevin. He's done this every few years since the internet became a thing. He scoured AOL and MySpace and Facebook and LinkedIn and Instagram, but he never found Kevin. Tommy heard that he lived down in Chicago and was trying to make it as a sculptor, and then that he had drifted north to Fond du Lac to build furniture. The latest rumors placed Kevin back in Milwaukee, making ends meet as a handyman. He'd never heard about a wedding. Kevin didn't scatter breadcrumbs. His obituary is the only morsel that the internet coughs up.

Malcolm proves a lot easier to find. He can't, **in** fact, be avoided. Fifty lawyers under fifty. Quotes during mergers. Comments after acquisitions. Pictures at charity balls. Profiles in *Forbes*, *Chicago Magazine*, and the *Northwestern Law Review*. Tommy clicks on a random link and finds Malcolm staring at him from the lobby of the Chicago Hilton. He stands next to his wife, her long, dark hair hanging over bare tan shoulders. Her prominent Roman nose makes her face distinctive rather than just beautiful. She's a bit taller than Malcolm, who seems to be straining to his full height. His smile is gone, along with the long hair from high school—now trimmed to the corporate spec. He's still got those eyelashes that the girls loved and that so embarrassed him. Malcolm's suit probably cost more than Tommy's truck. He wonders if he and Malcolm would still be friends if they never pulled into that parking lot, if the shit never hit the fan, but it's hard to imagine having anything in common with the tight-lipped lawyer in the photo. He searches for a home address or a phone number but finds nothing. No Facebook,

and Malcolm's LinkedIn account doesn't allow messages. He clicks through to his firm's website and writes down the main number. Malcolm will have to wait until tomorrow.

He also finds Henry easily. Rocky Mountain Tissue Solutions in Denver. An altruistic Henry proves even more difficult to square than a driven Malcolm. Henry grew up with little-his dad worked maintenance at the parish- and Henry always talked about owning his own business or becoming a management consultant or an investment banker. He finds no home listing for Henry either, but when he clicks through to his company website, he's surprised to find Henry's email and cell phone number under his profile picture. The years have been good to Henry. His forehead hasn't expanded, and his hair remains so blond that Tommy wonders if he dyes it. His crow's-feet make him seem happy rather than old. Tommy punches the number into his phone, and it rings only twice.

"This is Henry."

Hearing Henry's voice, all grown up and confident but with that same rumble it always held, sends Tommy reeling back decades, like hearing an old song that he forgot he knew.

"Hey. This is Tommy."

Henry says nothing for a long moment, and Tommy tries to imagine what his own voice must be doing to the other man.

"Hey, Tommy." His words come even, calm, as if they had talked last week. "What's up?"

"Kevin died."

Another silence. Longer this time. Tommy imagines Henry soaking in *that* news, measuring the implications. "How?"

"Motorcycle accident. All I know is what I read in the obituaries."

"We're forty-nine. Aren't you a bit young for the obituaries?"

Tommy almost tells him about his mom and the obits, but knows how that will sound. "Wake's on Friday. Thought you might want to know."

"Yeah," Henry says. "Yeah. I'm glad you called." Tommy doesn't know what else to say. He didn't consider anything past telling Henry about Kevin. He thinks to ask about kids, whether he's still married to Alice, how he likes Denver, but Kevin's death and that long-ago night hang between them.

"Did you call Malcolm?" Henry asks.

"Not yet. All I could find was a work number. I'll call him tomorrow."

"TU have to see about Friday," Henry says after another awkward silence. "I'll have to check with Alice."

"Yeah. Okay."

"Did you ever tell anybody?" Henry blurts. "About ... you know."

"No," Tommy says, and he thinks about Maggie.

Tommy hears Henry breathing into the phone. When he speaks again, his voice is softer, less confident, younger. "I bet Kevin did."

CHAPTER

2

Denver

THE AIR AT altitude is cold after dark, but Alice is layered for it. Henry used to argue against her running at night, especially after they moved up into the foothills with their narrow, serpentine roads. She'd tell him not to worry, that the dark was actually safer. The headlights warn her of cars approaching from behind or about to speed around a curve in front of her. The concern that caused Henry to complain about her nighttime runs used to warm Alice even as she ignored him, but it's been years since he's brought it up.

As she settles into her pace, she drinks in the lights of the city below her. The grid glows with geometric predictability in the center, but the lines of light snake toward twists and turns in the suburbs. The jagged skyline lurches up from the southeast. The darkness and the glow below help her savor the burn in her thighs and calves. Her lungs push air in and out like a bellows, and all of it allows her to think.

She needs the run tonight. She needs the night and the sweat and the lights to clear her mind. She had three closings in the last two days, and one was a disaster. She put the Jacobsens' house on the market more than eight months ago, and they insisted on listing it for two and a half million dollars, which Alice knew was too much. They refused four reasonable offers before Alice finally found fools from the East Coast willing to offer the ask. Problem is that those fools from the East Coast are also a pain in the ass. After the inspection, they started asking about radon and complaining about holes in screen doors and the depth of the footings for the deck. At first, the Jacobsens refused to consider any of it, so Alice had to call back and forth, negotiating common ground. The buyer finally shut up about the screens. She convinced the Jacobsens to drop five grand from the price for the footings that didn't meet code and to place another ten in escrow for radon remediation in the unlikely event it was necessary. Mostly, though, she played marriage counselor. She helped both sides realize that they really didn't want the whole thing to fall apart.

Alice takes a left at the fork in the road, toward the mountains, because she needs a long run today and she wants the climb. The wind is in her face now, but her legs feel strong. Her breath comes easy given her pace and the steep slope. Her mind is starting to clear of the messy, meaningless details, allowing her to focus on what she plans to say to Henry.

Marriage counseling. She saw the parallels with her job when she and Henry went through couple's therapy two years ago. After he screwed his personal trainer. Henry's transgression flayed Alice. The fact that he betrayed her in such a trite, cliched way ground salt into the wound. The

way she found out, though, was by far the worst part. Trish, someone Alice didn't even know that well, told her after hot yoga while they toweled themselves off on the bench outside the studio. Trish's face was drenched with sweat and pity, and her words came in a halting whisper. *'I know it's none of my business,'* and *'I've heard it from multiple people,'* and *'I just thought that you should know.'* Trish didn't even know Henry or his personal trainer. *Multiple people.* Alice has no idea how many women had fingered Henry's dirty laundry before passing it along to the next, until Trish, of all people, finally felt compelled to show it to her.

Alice's watch taps her wrist at three miles, and she turns back toward home. Six miles will be just about right tonight. She's facing the lights again now, and the wind is at her back. It took half a year and a couple dozen therapy sessions to unpack all of her anger, disappointment, and disgust, examine it all, and then pack it away again. It helped that she believed Henry when he told her that the affair was his first and promised that it would be his last. He said he was sorry with words and flowers and random acts of kindness like doing the laundry and the dishes and even scooping the cat box. It helped that they had a good therapist, who encouraged both of them to examine what had happened but also what they'd had before and what remained. She helped them catalog what they still valued about their relationship—their shared love of good books, bad jokes, long vacations, and great sex. The therapist tried to help Henry explain why he did what he did, but she never managed to pry a meaningful answer from him. After a month of sessions, Alice finally concluded that Henry really didn't know why he cheated on her. He'd spent his entire adult life creating and maintaining emotional distance from ugly

things, so he was well practiced. It took her six months to decide that she didn't want to blow it all up, and now, sweat trickling down her back and her pulse pounding in her ears, she feels like an idiot for that too.

Alice comes around a corner, and she sees the back of their house above her, third one from the main road, clinging to the side of the mountain. Most of the lights are on. The pine ceilings gleam gold, and the light through the windows glows warm. She slows to a walk for the last stretch. The view from those windows sold her on the house. She wonders whether she or Henry will keep it. She doubts that Henry will fight her on much of anything, but Alice can't decide if she wants to live with all those memories. There are other houses. Other views.

Six miles always leaves her feeling alive, but tonight, it's more than just the run. She's felt tall and strong and free since she made her decision. She's been mentally packing her things for the last week, stripping the list down to the essential. As she separated the wants from the needs, and ignored everything that she never wanted anyway, her list became short. As her belongings fall away, Alice feels almost weightless. She imagines a new home in Albuquerque or Santa Monica. Barcelona, even-although she'd have to brush up on her Spanish.

For the longest time, their childlessness left Alice empty in a way that was difficult to talk about. It wasn't one decision, but many. She had to decide in her twenties when Henry started talking about kids. It seems like her thirties were filled with constant deciding. That was the decade when everyone she met-friends, clients, coworkers- asked her how many children she had, and then studied her with naked curiosity when she said that she had none.

Many assumed fertility issues and talked about the latest technology for making babies. When she told people that she didn't want children, that her life was full without them, they must have read something on her face, because as her thirties dwindled, a startling number of people gave themselves the permission to tell her, with pity in their voice, how much time she still had left. Everyone seemed to think she was eyeing her biological dock, weighing the future. Only Henry knew that the past kept its heavy thumb on the scale.

But that was all put to bed years ago. Once she turned forty, people stopped asking, even Henry. And now she knows the void that always makes her chest ache a little will make everything simpler, cleaner. She only has to worry about herself, and this time she'll make the decision with a dear head and on her own terms. Her cat won't mind the changes.

Alice steps from the shoulder of the road onto the sidewalk of their little development. Ridgeline Drive. Just six houses carved out of the hillside and the forest. She has them pegged between two and four million dollars each, based on proximity to the city, square footage, aesthetics, and the view. She'll miss their friends, especially the Wesolowskis and the Kopecs, but she knows she'll miss them whether she moves to Barcelona or stays on Ridgeline Drive. Everything will change. Those late summer nights on the Kopecs' deck drinking expensive cabernet, the long weekends at Vail, their dinners in the city—all require an even number, pairs, couples. Everything will change. Of course, everything's already changed, hasn't it?

It changed a month ago. That's when the sex stopped, like a spigot turned. Henry stopped visiting her side of the bed, stopped nibbling her ear, just like the last time. Henry

seldom went more than a few days without rolling across, never a week, and a month was out of the question. Last time, it puzzled her, but this time she doesn't have to wait for Trish or somebody else to tell her why she isn't getting laid anymore. She spent that first week in denial, but then she raced through the remaining stages of grief like running a 5K at sea level.

Alice opens the door and steps from the brisk cold into the cozy warmth. She hears the fireplace crackle and smells burning juniper. Her face goes flush, and pins and needles stab her neck and back. She tugs off her gloves and stops her watch. She removes the hair tie, slips it onto her wrist, and lets her long blond hair fall loose. She wriggles out of her shoes, and she peels layers as she walks down the front hall. The slate floor feels cool, even through her socks. By the time she makes the great room, she's down to just her tights and a sports bra. The walk settled her breathing and her heart rate, but she's still slick with sweat.

Henry perches on a stool at the kitchen island, peering at his laptop. Alice takes the opportunity to study him one last time before she tells him what she's decided, and everything changes. He looks an awful lot like he did when they started dating their freshman year of high school. Not a hint of gray in his blond hair, and his blue eyes still move quickly, taking everything in. But creases claw at the corners of his eyes, his chin doubles up when he's looking down, and a slight paunch bulges when he's sitting. He only works out occasionally now. No more personal trainer- just a treadmill in the basement.

Tonight is the night. She's promised herself. As soon as she showers, she'll tell him. Last time she confronted him as soon as she got home from yoga, and she was a sweaty,

blubbering, hysterical mess. It will be different this time—
other terms.

"How was the run?" he asks.

"It was good," she says, because it was. "Dark. Cold."

Henry looks up, and his mouth is pinched in that way it gets when he's deciding how to say something. "I'm booking a flight to Milwaukee."

Alice walks to the stove and grabs a dish towel from where it hangs on the handle. She wipes the sweat from her face and her neck. She knows Henry hates when she does this, and that's half the reason she's doing it. "For when?"

"Friday morning."

A trip to Milwaukee works well. She can pack her things while he's gone. "Why?"

"Kevin died."

The sweat on her back goes instantly cold. Goose bumps dimple her arms. "McNamara?" she asks, as if there's another Kevin in Milwaukee.

"Yeah," Henry says. "Motorcycle accident."

"Oh," Alice manages. "Oh, fuck." And she realizes that, in a way, she's been waiting to hear Kevin's name for the last thirty years. The way Henry blinks tells Alice that he, too, is thinking about that parking lot and the aftermath. "How'd you find out?"

"Tommy called."

"Of course. Tommy."

Alice wants to tell Henry what she's decided. She wants to tell him right then, half-dressed, standing in the kitchen. It isn't the sag on his face that stops her. She's past worrying about that, but her mind snags on what Kevin said that last time Henry saw him. "*We're all gonna regret this,*" he said. "*In the end the truth's gonna come out.*" Even all those years

ago, the way Henry described it made it seem more like a threat than a prediction. She stands in the kitchen, with her decision on her tongue, even as she tries to sort out if she's still part of that *we*. Finally, she hangs the towel around her neck and wanders toward the bedroom. All she wanted from the day was to end her marriage. Kevin ruined even that.

"Book me a ticket too," she says over her shoulder. "I'm going with you."

CHAPTER

3

Chicago

ELENA PUSHES HER sleeves up to her elbows and reaches into the bowl. Her hands churn the eggs and flour, slowly squeezing. The eggs are cold and runny, the flour warm and dry, and as they mix, they change each other. Together they become something different. As the dough forms, she kneads it gently, like her mom taught her. Up and down and over, slowly. There's nothing special about the ingredients of ravioli dough, but her mom taught her that you can't rush it. Time and care are the special ingredients.

While she kneads, her mind churns the call that she got from her lawyer a few hours ago. Malcolm wants Kinsey to stay with him every other weekend and two weeks a year. Elena laughed when he told her, but her lawyer didn't. There's no way in hell that's going to happen. On the face of it, it doesn't seem like a lot to ask. If she were divorcing a different man, she'd use every other weekend to restart her life. She would take improv classes or fly to cities like Seattle and Asheville, simply because she'd never been there

before. She would meet a strange man in a strange bar and drive all night to see the sun rise over Niagara Falls because it seems like everyone should do that at least once. But she's divorcing Malcolm. Malcolm, who, when he's not traveling, seldom leaves work before nine at night. Malcolm, who works most weekends. Malcolm, who probably couldn't name one of Kinsey's friends, much less surface a number to call one of their parents to set up a hangout. Does he plan to leave her alone in that downtown condo? Would he hire a babysitter for a thirteen-year-old? Elena doesn't even have to ask Kinsey what she thinks. She would set fires or file for emancipation or parachute from the roof of his building if she had to stay with Malcolm every other weekend.

When the dough forms enough, she takes it out of the bowl and presses it to the board, turning it slowly, putting her weight into it. When it feels right, she slips it back into the bowl, covers it with Saran Wrap, and sets it in the fridge. She washes her hands and then walks around the enormous kitchen, gathering what she needs: another egg, two bowls, forks, spoons, the fluted pastry cutter, and her mom's favorite rolling pin.

When Malcolm first showed her the blueprints for the house, back when they talked through their plans, she just laughed at what she saw. She could tell, even on paper, that it was way too big, that it would feel more like a barn than a kitchen. At the time, she had given Malcolm credit for good intentions—he knew that she loves cooking, and he wanted the best for her. But she couldn't make him understand what *she* had in mind: a cozy kitchen like her mom's in that bungalow on Cass. Everything in that kitchen was one step away, two at the most. When Elena cooked with her mom, they couldn't help but bump elbows. Add a drunk

aunt or three, turn on the oven, and that kitchen became as warm as the laughter that filled it. She tried to hint at it-then she scribbled all over the blueprints, cutting the size of everything in half, and finally they argued. But Malcolm doesn't like to lose arguments, so the granite island that she's working on seems just a little bit larger than her parents' entire house.

Every time they moved-from their first apartment in Wicker Park, to the house in Lakeview, and finally to Winnetka-everything got bigger. More rooms, more square feet in every room. This house could shelter a small South American village. It took most of the first six months for Elena to buy enough furniture to keep the echoes at bay. A few of the couches she has yet to sit upon.

As the homes grew larger, Malcolm's time in them contracted, until seeing him at home felt like spotting a snow leopard or a snipe. He had always been driven, but when they first started dating, while he was in law school, there had been room for Elena alongside his ambition. He took her to concerts. She showed him the Art Institute. He laughed at her jokes. He listened to her back then. He talked to her. They even cooked together when she asked him to.

When he started working at the firm, when he started slicing his time into fifteen-minute morsels, the firm ate most of them. Elena tried to satisfy herself with the scraps. She reminded herself that she'd known about Malcolm's work ethic up front. She was there for all those long nights studying for exams and the bar. Truth in labeling and all that, but it got lonely fast. Malcolm made partner in record time, and for a while that success helped him settle. He eased back just a bit, and Elena pried her way back into his life. She gorged herself on the time Malcolm spent with

her, and she deluded herself that it would last, that making partner could allow him to relax back into their marriage.

After Kinsey was born, he dialed it back even further. Those first few years, he was almost like a regular dad. He woke with Kinsey on weekend mornings. He put her to bed whenever he was home on time. He read *Go, Dog. Go!* as if he were memorizing a case from a law school textbook. But when Kinsey was almost two, when she started walking and talking, when she was finally edging out of the *pet* phase of child development into the *person* phase, the Cellutec deal hit. That was the biggest of his career up to that point, and he let himself be drawn back into the thick of it. After that, he never really came back.

Elena beats another egg with which to seal the pasta, and then takes the dough out of the fridge. She's rolling the first strip when she hears the front door open and close. She glances at the clock. Kinsey-home from school. She Rips the strip over and pats some Bour onto the other side. As she rolls, she deftly shifts the pressure on the rolling pin to keep the thickness of the dough consistent. Back when she was learning, if the dough wasn't perfectly even, her mom would scoop it up and wad it into a ball, Elena would cry, and they'd start again. Elena taught her daughter the same way, but of course Kinsey never cried. If the dough isn't even, the pasta ruptures at the thin spots when the water boils. The filling spills out and makes a mess of everything. In the end, making pasta from scratch depends on smoothing things just right. It takes patience and consistency and steadiness to keep everything from exploding into a terrible mess.

Elena hears Kinsey's sneakers squeak across the hardwood into the kitchen.

"Hey, girl. How was school?"

Kinsey drops her backpack on the island and washes her hands. "Fine."

"Fine like almost crappy or fine like sublime?"

Kinsey says nothing.

"Fine like so thin that it's hard to see with the naked eye?"

Still nothing.

"Did you have to pay a fine?"

Not even a whisper of a smile. Kinsey was never one to spend unnecessary words. Puberty made her even more frugal, but since Malcolm moved out, she's become downright stingy. Elena still works to goad them from her, though. She steals a look at her daughter. She's wearing her Sacred Heart plaid skirt, knee socks rolled down to her ankles. Her legs are scrawny like Elena's used to be, and she's got Elena's long dark hair. Her enormous eyes, that nose, and her high cheekbones sometimes make Elena feel like she's looking in a mirror, but Kinsey carries herself more like Malcolm, with a quiet self-assurance that Elena was never able to manage at that age.

Kinsey glances at the board. "Ravioli?"

"I'll make an Italian out of you yet." Elena starts on the second strip of dough, dusts it with flour. She moves the pin. She keeps it even. "Can you make the filling before you practice?"

Elena hears the fridge open behind her and takes that as Kinsey's answer. Kinsey likes to spend an hour with her mandolin after school, and she's been practicing more with the concert coming up, but Elena can still sometimes coax her into helping. It takes two trips to the fridge for the ricotta, the parmesan, the spinach, and the mushrooms.

Kinsey piles it all right next to Elena, and that makes Elena smile. A quarter acre of countertop, but Kinsey still chooses to work elbow to elbow with Elena.

"I've got parent-teacher conferences tomorrow," Elena says. She's been teaching half-day kindergarten for the last four years. It helps her feel useful and allows her to escape the big empty house for the morning, but she's home most days when Kinsey arrives. "I won't be home until about seven."

Kinsey just nods. She minces the spinach. Her knife makes quick, clean work of it, and she starts in on the mushrooms.

"And we're going to Milwaukee this Saturday," Elena says.

"What for?"

"Mia's birthday." Kinsey's cousin is just a year and a half older, and she and Kinsey have always been two peas in a pod.

Kinsey mixes the mushrooms, spinach, and cheese. She puts the bowl on the board. "What time?"

Elena hands a spoon to Kinsey. "Probably leave around nine. Why?"

Kinsey takes a long time to answer. They both spoon the filling into clumps on separate strips of dough. "Reza has a sleepover."

"We should be back by then."

"The sleepover's on Friday."

They both dip their fingers into the bowl and wipe the egg along the edge of the dough. They fold it over the filling and press the seam with a fork to seal it. Elena knows that Kinsey remembers, but she reminds her anyway. "You have dinner with your dad on Friday night."

Kinsey's fork stops for a moment, and then it starts moving again. "You're finally making the right amount," she says.

Elena smiles up at Kinsey, but Kinsey's hair is hanging over her face. "I always make enough."

Kinsey finishes sealing her strip of dough and then drops the fork into the sink. "That's not what I mean. When Dad still lived here, you always made too much. He never came home for dinner, but you always made enough for him too."

Elena bites her cheek and picks up the pastry cutter. She locks her eyes on the board. She carves the ravioli from the strip of dough. Kinsey pinches the seal on each and gently places them in the bowl. Kinsey's right, of course. Elena always knew that he wouldn't show, but the Italian grandma at her core always hoped that Malcolm would surprise them, and she didn't want to be caught with too little. But he usually ate takeout at the office when he didn't have a business dinner. Mostly, she put the leftovers down the garbage disposal when they finished eating, but sometimes she packed them into Tupperware and stored them in the enormous Sub-Zero for a few days before she washed it all down the sink. Tonight, she's making just eight ravioli- four each-the right amount.

"I don't want to go to dinner with him," Kinsey says quietly.

Elena looks up at her, and Kinsey meets her gaze. She's waiting to see how Elena will react. She has that gift of stillness, of waiting, that comes from Malcolm. The older she gets, the longer she can wait, and the more it unsettles Elena. Elena wants to tell Kinsey to go to the sleepover, that she'll handle Malcolm, but that call from her lawyer nags. She knows that Malcolm's dreading that dinner more than

Kinsey. She suspects that dinner is probably related to that call from her lawyer, Malcolm trying to pretend that he still knows how to act like a dad, that he hasn't evaporated from Kinsey's life entirely. Not yet. But the last thing she needs right now is a pissing contest with Malcolm about a freak- ing dinner. "I know, honey, but-"

"No. You don't know." Kinsey's eyes harden. Her voice is matter-of-fact, but with an edge to it, like Malcolm's when their paths crossed long enough to argue. "He won't know what to talk about, and I have nothing to say to him. We'll just stare at our food until it's gone, and then we'll stare at the other people in the restaurant until the bill comes."

Elena wants to wrap Kinsey in a hug. She wants to tell her that she doesn't have to go. But even as she wants to capitulate, she wants to scream at that cold, stubborn part of her daughter that reminds her of Malcolm, because although she works hard not to admit it to herself, she hates that part of Kinsey.

"It's like having dinner with a stranger, Mom."

During the day, Elena's been able to hold everything at a distance-the divorce, the disintegration of their family, the overwhelming loneliness. She's been able to deal with the lawyer as if it was all just a transaction, like selling a car or a house. She's been able to laugh about it with her neighbor, Holly, because prying a serious conversation from Holly is like trying to warm your hands with ice. She's only allowed herself to cry at night, lying alone on her side of the too-big bed in the too-big bedroom. But now a big fat tear rolls from the corner of her eye down to the tip of her nose. Her hands are covered in dough and flour, so she lets it settle there, quivering. Finally, two more tears roll down her nose and they fall as one onto one of their eight perfect

ravioli. She has no idea what to say to Kinsey. She has no idea what will happen next or what she should do or how she'll manage to keep all of this from bursting open into a terrible mess that they'll all regret. Kinsey pushes away from the counter and grabs her backpack from the island.

"It doesn't matter," she says as she walks across the enormous kitchen toward the cavernous living room. "He'll probably cancel anyway."

* * *

Malcolm stares straight ahead as he plunges toward the lobby. The two associates in the elevator car are working for him on the McGregor deal, but he doesn't know their names. And they have the common sense not to attempt small talk. That would only draw attention to the fact that they're either leaving too early or squandering billable minutes to sneak out for a double latte.

When the doors open, he glances at his watch. 6:52. **H**e left his office one minute early. It takes just seven minutes to walk to his condo building and ride the elevator to the thirty-ninth floor. He pushes through the revolving doors, turns left, and walks briskly toward the lake. He doesn't notice the warm spring breeze that ruffles his hair, or the men and women walking head-down and fast in the other direction, toward the late train. He certainly doesn't notice the panhandler sitting on his haunches, leaning against the building at the corner of Madison and Wabash, shaking the coins in his McDonald's cup, trying to compete with the rumble of the L train passing overhead. Instead, he sorts through the loan covenants for the mezzanine financing for the McGregor deal. He has a meeting with the banks for that layer of debt tomorrow morning. They threw in the kitchen sink, like they

always do, and he evaluates which two or three covenants their loan committees really need. He crafts the arguments that will shred the rest.

Malcolm strides past the black leather chairs and across the marble lobby of his building to Security. He glances at his phone, sees nothing urgent, and then looks up at the kid behind the desk.

"Name's O'Donnell," he says. "I'm on thirty-nine. I've got a visitor arriving shortly. A Ms. Bradford. Send her up."

He turns before the boy can respond. He steps into the elevator and slips his keycard into the slot. The door closes, and thirty seconds later it opens again in his living room—the room that will become his living room, anyway. Malcolm walks across the empty space and stops at the floor-to-ceiling windows. He finished with the loan covenants during the elevator ride, but he doesn't really notice the first sailboats of the season, bobbing at their moorings, or the way the evening sun filters between the buildings to the west, or the gulls' effortless rise on the updraft between his building and the next. His eyes linger for a moment on the young couple in the building across from him. They're sitting close to each other on the couch, folding their laundry. He forces himself to look away—back out at the lake.

He's got dinner tonight with the managing partner of the firm, and they'll discuss how to position themselves for the ElekTek IPO. He thinks again about the dossiers that his assistant prepared on the CEO and CFO. ElekTek, if he lands it, will be his biggest deal by far. He reviews from memory the alma maters and personality profiles and the web of connections through colleagues, boards, and clubs, probing for the shared soft spot that will serve as the

beachhead upon which he'll mount his assault. ElekTek would be huge. ElekTek would get his name on the door.

The elevator chimes softly and slides open. Malcolm turns to find a slight older woman with an enormous canvas bag over her shoulder. Her straight gray hair and tan face remind Malcolm of his mother when she returned from spending the winter in Alabama, but his mother would never dress so fashionably.

The woman pulls a notebook and pen from her bag, sets the bag on the ground next to the elevator, and joins Malcolm at the window. Her eyes flick from him to the view of the lake and back. "I'm Evelyn," she says, extending her hand.

"Malcolm." He takes her hand, and it feels fragile, like a baby bird.

"What a beautiful space," she says. "You have the whole floor."

It's not a question, so Malcolm doesn't answer. Evelyn walks toward the kitchen, glances in at the empty counter-tops, turns back to him. "Bout seven thousand square feet?"

"Something like that."

"My initial consultation usually takes about two hours," she says, looking around the wide expanse of the living room. "But we might need a bit more than that."

Malcolm looks at his watch. "I've got seventeen minutes."

Evelyn coughs a laugh. "Right. I need to unpack your expectations. I need to understand your style and the mood you're hoping to create. We'll develop a preliminary color palette. We'll discuss how you anticipate moving through the space, your entertainment needs, how you live. And the budget, of course."

This all makes Malcolm smile. "Listen. Now I've got sixteen minutes. My expectations are easy to unpack-I expect you to fill this place up with furniture and make it look nice."

"But-"

"Fifteen and a half. I don't really care about the budget, but if I'm not out the door by 7:22, then I'll find another designer."

Evelyn blinks and her mouth works, but Malcolm can see the words *'I don't really care about the budget'* work their magic and settle her lips toward stillness. She looks at her own watch and then back up at Malcolm. "I'll need to stay for a couple of hours to measure and imagine."

"That's fine."

"And we'll need to walk through so that I know what room's what."

Malcolm knew that she'd see it his way. "We've got fourteen minutes," he says without looking at his watch.

Malcolm blurts decisions as they circle the condo: *living room, dining room, office, guest bedroom, exercise room, guest bedroom*. Evelyn scribbles notes and sketches as they walk. She lingers at the doorway of the master bedroom. Malcolm watches as she takes in the mattress on the floor, neatly made, and the open closet full of suits and shirts and shoes.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Three weeks."

He sees her digest that and weave a narrative in her mind that's probably pretty accurate in its broad strokes, even if it's impossible for her to imagine the details. She finally looks back down at her notebook and scribbles a short paragraph before following him to the last bedroom, the one that faces Navy Pier.

"This will be my daughter's room," he says, his mouth suddenly dry. "When she's here."

"How often will she be with you?" Evelyn asks quietly.

Malcolm looks at the Ferris wheel, its lights on now, turning so slowly but never stopping. "We're still working that out."

Evelyn steps into the room, moves to the window. "How old is she?" she asks.

"Thirteen."

"What does she like?"

Malcolm finds the question slippery, hard to hold much less answer. He tries to think about Kinsey's room in Winnetka, but he was only ever in there after she was asleep, so all he can summon is the smell of it, like persimmons and plastic. Worse, when he tries to picture Kinsey, even though it's only been three weeks since he's seen her, the image is already starting to blur. A thickness that Malcolm fails to recognize as terror fills his throat. He wants to say that she likes whatever it is that thirteen-year-old girls like, but he knows how that will sound.

"Hobbies?" Evelyn asks the window. "Interests?"

He wants to say *Austin & Ally* and American Girl dolls and Harry Potter, but he knows those were all years ago. He wants to ask for more time to answer the question, because that's all he needs, really, is more time. He looks past Evelyn, past the Ferris wheel, past the lighthouse, but the vast, darkening expanse of Lake Michigan holds no answers.

"I don't really know," he finally admits with a whisper.

Evelyn turns and their eyes lock. Hers leak pity, and Malcolm hates her for it.