



WATCH OVER ME



NINA LACOUR

Dutton Books



DUTTON BOOKS
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Dutton Books,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2020

Copyright © 2020 by Nina LaCour

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity,
encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture.
Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with
copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any
form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to
continue to publish books for every reader.

Dutton is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593108970

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Edited by Julie Strauss-Gabel

Design by Anna Booth

Text set in Carre Noir Std

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people,
or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are
products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or
places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume
any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

For Kristyn



WATCH
OVER
ME

had we been telling the truth

ON THE MORNING OF MY INTERVIEW I slept until eight, went downstairs to the kitchen, and poured myself the last of the coffee. I stood at the counter, watching out the window as I sipped, and then pushed up my sleeves and turned on the water to wash the breakfast dishes that Amy and Jonathan had left stacked in the sink.

In just a few days, I would leave them.

Amy had bought a crib and tucked it into the garage. A few days after that, she came home with a bag from a toy store. A stuffed bunny peeked over the side. She asked me how my English final went and I told her that I wrote about the collapse of social mores in a couple of short stories and she said it sounded great. And then she took the bag into their bedroom as though it were nothing.

She was only being kind. I knew that. They hadn't asked me to stay.

The sink was empty. I scrubbed it until it was perfectly

white and then I turned off the water. I tried to breathe. I tried not to want this so badly.

My phone buzzed.

"Are you ready?" Karen asked. She'd been my social worker for four years and even though I could tell she was in traffic, probably dribbling coffee on her skirt and checking her email as she talked to me, she calmed my racing heart.

"I think so," I said.

"Remember—they read your letter. I've told them so much about you. They've talked to all your references. This is just a final step. And you get to make sure you really want it."

"I want it."

"I know you do, honey. I want it for you too. Call me as soon as it's over."

He knocked at ten thirty, exactly when he said he'd arrive.

"Mila?" he asked when I opened the door. He stuck out his hand. "Nick Bancroft. So nice to finally meet you."

I led him into the kitchen, where a round table sat beneath a window in the sun and the chairs were close enough for friendly conversation but far enough apart for strangers.

"How are you doing?" he asked after we sat.

"Well, finals are over, so that's good," I said.

"Yes, congratulations. Your transcripts are solid. Have you considered college?"

I shrugged. "Maybe I'll go at some point."

He nodded, but I saw that he felt sorry for me. My eyes darted to the window. I didn't know how to talk about my life with someone who understood. I clenched a fist in my lap and forced myself not to cry. I was ready to prove my work ethic, talk about the hours I spent volunteering at the library, and assure him that I was not afraid of dirt or messes or children throwing tantrums—but I was not ready for this.

"So, let me tell you about Terry and Julia and the farm," he said, taking mercy on me. "They adopted me when I was three, so it's been home basically all my life. I haven't lived at the farm in a long time, but I help them run the finances and I do all the interviews." I felt my fist unclench and I settled into the chair and listened to him tell me about the things I had already learned from talking to Karen and reading a *San Francisco Chronicle* article from fifteen years ago with the headline MENDOCINO COUPLE ADOPTS FORTIETH FOSTER CHILD. He talked about the farm and how everyone contributes to running it, from the children to the interns, and how as an intern I would spend my weekdays teaching in the schoolhouse and my Sundays waking up at five a.m. to run the booth at the farmers' market. He told me about the holidays when all the grown-up children come back to visit. "It becomes home if you let it," he said. "Even for the interns. I know that might sound hard to believe, but it's true."

"When do I find out?"

"Oh!" he said. "I thought you knew. You've been chosen already. It's yours if you want it."

My hands flew to my face. "Thank you," I said. And then I couldn't say anything else. He nodded, that look of sympathy again, and kept talking.

"Most of your hours will be spent in the school. They've designed a curriculum and your job will be to learn it and teach the six- to nine-year-olds. There is only one of them right now, I think, but more will come soon. And Terry and Julia will be there to help."

"Would you like some tea?" I blurted. I had meant to ask him when he got there but had been too nervous. Now that I knew I was chosen, I wanted him to stay and tell me everything. Maybe that way I could hold it inside me—a real, live thing—in the days between that one and the one of my arrival.

"Sure," he said. I filled the kettle and set some boxes in front of him. He chose peppermint, and as I poured the steaming water over the leaves I breathed in the scent and it was like starting over already.

"I want to make sure you understand what this is," Nick said. "Quite a few people have turned it down. And some people haven't known what they were getting into and it hasn't worked out. You need to *want* it. It's a farm. It's in the middle of nowhere—to one side is the ocean and in every other direction is nothing but rocky hills and

open land. It's almost always foggy and cold and there's no cell service and no town to shop in or meet people—Mendocino is forty-five minutes away. Farmers'-market days are the only times you'll interact with the outside world, and you'll be weighing squashes and wrapping flowers most of the time."

"That's fine," I said. "I don't mind."

He warned me that the cabins where the interns live were tiny, only one room with wood-burning stoves for heat. He said that there was a landline but no cell service, and that everyone ate meals together three times a day and took turns with prep and cleanup.

"The main house is comfortable and you're always welcome in it. They have tons of books and a bunch of instruments. There's even a grand piano in the living room."

"I've always wanted to play the piano," I said. I don't know why I didn't tell him about all my years of lessons and the songs I knew by heart. "Someone to Watch Over Me" began to play in my brain, and the kitchen filled with music. My grandmother was sitting next to me, her fingers showing me where my fingers should go. Nick kept talking, and I listened over the sound of piano notes, full and rising. I had been so young. I didn't tell him about the terrible thing I'd done. He didn't ask those kinds of questions. Funny, when interviewing for a job to work with children, that a person would ask about college and remoteness and not say, *Tell me*

the worst thing you ever did. Tell me about your wounds. Can I trust you?

Had they known the truth about me they might not have given me the job, I thought, even though I was determined to be good. Even though I held on fiercely to my own goodness.

By the time he finished his tea, we had it all planned out. He asked if I wanted to wait until after the graduation ceremony and I said no, that I didn't care about wearing a hat and robe and walking with the other students. Okay, he said, then he would pick me up on Sunday and we would drive up together. He gave me a thin volume called *Teaching School: A Handbook to Education on The Farm* and asked me to read it. He said, "Mila, I have a good feeling about this. I think you'll be a perfect fit with all of us." And I told him I had a good feeling about it, too. And I told him that I felt lucky, and he said, "You *are* lucky. We all are."

And then he left.

Had we been telling the truth, he would have said, *The place where I'm sending you—it looks beautiful, but it's haunted.*

Okay, I would have said.

It will bring everything back. All that you tried to bury.

I understand.

It's going make you want to do bad things.

I have experience with that.

And how did it turn out?

Terribly. But I promise to do better this time.

We could have had that conversation—it would not have been impossible. I would not have told him everything about me, but I would have told him enough. I still would have taken that four-hour drive up the jagged coastline to be with Terry and Julia and Billy and Liz and Lee and the rest of the children. All I'm saying is it would have been easier had I known.

welcome

FROM MY UPSTAIRS BEDROOM WINDOW, I watched for Nick's shiny black car. Once it appeared, I stood and set my cell phone on the windowsill. I didn't expect Amy and Jonathan to keep paying the bill, and there was no service where I was headed anyway. I took one final look at the room from the doorway—drawers empty now, bed stripped—and then I went downstairs.

I said goodbye to Amy and Jonathan and promised to send letters as we loaded the little I owned into the trunk.

"I hope the baby is sweet," I said to Amy. Her eyes darted away, but there was nothing for her to feel guilty over. They had let me live in their house for three of the four years I had been in the foster system. They'd given me a nice room and cooked me food and talked with me and bought me everything I needed. It was nobody's fault that we didn't fall in love. They were young and they wanted a baby.

"I mean it," I said.

I climbed into Nick's car and waved goodbye. The finality

of it all rose over me. I was *leaving*. My vision went dark, the world stopped. But then it passed, and I was all right.

Five hours later, Nick turned off Highway One and onto an unmarked gravel drive. He avoided potholes for a quarter mile, and slowed as we approached a wide wooden gate.

“For the goats,” he said.

He stopped the car, opened the door to climb out, and left the engine running.

It was just before eight o’clock and the sky was pale pink, and I watched through the windshield glass as he unlatched the gate and pulled one side open, then crossed in front of the car to open the other. Behind him was a field and a big wooden barn. Some moss-covered boulders. Two goats munching grass.

Here I was.

I had made it.

And then he was back in the car, and we rolled forward. When he stopped again, I said, “I’ll get it,” and I stepped onto the farm for the first time. It was salty and muddy and cold—even in June—and I breathed in its newness as I swung the gates closed and latched them shut. When I turned back to the car, I could see a row of small cabins, and past them, a sprawling farmhouse with its lights on, all white and three stories, something from a picture book or an old movie, nothing like any house I’d ever set foot in.

“See that over there?” Nick asked, pointing to a curved, white tent. “That’s the flower tunnel. Julia’s famous around here for her flowers.”

“I can’t wait to see everything.”

He parked midway down the gravel drive, at the closest point to the cabins, and we walked across the field, Nick with my suitcase, me with my backpack and duffel. The cabins were identical from the outside—each of them tiny, more sheds than houses—with small front windows and old brass doorknobs. Some muffled words followed by laughter came from inside the first cabin as we passed it. About twenty paces later we reached the second, which was silent and still. And then after another twenty steps, he stopped in front of the last one.

“Welcome home,” Nick said.

He made no move to open the door, so I turned the knob myself. I expected the inside to be dark, but it wasn’t. A skylight cut through the middle of the ceiling, casting the room in the same pink glow as outside.

Nick tucked my suitcase just inside the doorway. My shoes were muddy from the field, so I set my backpack and duffel inside without crossing the threshold. I saw a rug, a twin bed with a wrought-iron frame, a writing desk with a chair, a wood-burning stove, and a stack of cut wood.

“I’ve always liked these little cabins,” he said. “But I never got to live in one. They’re only for the interns.”

"You lived in the house?"

He nodded. "In a room with two other boys. We whined about it all the time—we were total shitheads—but it was great. Now we meet up for vacations every summer and we always share a hotel room. I never sleep as well as I do when I'm in a room with my brothers."

I smiled. "That's sweet," I said.

"I'm going to head over to the house, but take your time. Terry or Julia will show you how everything works a little later."

"Okay. I'll see you soon."

I waited for a moment longer, there in the doorway.

Then I took off my shoes, lined them neatly by the threshold, stepped into the cabin, and closed myself in. The rug was soft underfoot and full of color—greens and pinks and blues. And even without a fire in the stove, I was warm.

I could have stayed there for the rest of the night, but they were waiting for me. After I'd sat on the bed to test its softness and hung my clothes on the tiny rack between the woodstove and the table, I slipped my shoes back on and headed across the field.

I approached the main entrance, but the windows on each side of the heavy oak door were dark. So I walked the perimeter of the house, running my hand along the white wood planks until I heard voices and saw light, and found

a small patio with a door to a mudroom that opened onto a kitchen. It swung open before I finished knocking.

There was Julia, for the first time.

She had a soft body and laugh lines, white-blond hair and pink lips. "This is home," she said. "No knocking on doors here. Just come right in."

She wound her arm through mine and led me in. I had expected more people but apart from us it was only Nick and Terry, leaning toward each other from opposite sides of a butcher-block island, immersed in conversation.

"Ah," Terry said when he saw me. He had silver close-cropped hair and brown skin, a wide white smile, and eyes that surprised me with their blueness. "Mila, welcome. I'm sure you're hungry. We saved some dinner for you and Nick."

He put a mitt on his hand, opened an old-fashioned oven, and pulled out two plates heaped with mashed potatoes and sausages and beans. He lit the burner to warm some gravy in a small cast-iron pot.

"Special occasion food, I see," Nick said. Then, to me, "Prepare yourself for a *lot* of soup."

Terry laughed, reached an arm toward Nick, and ruffled his hair.

"I'm not *twelve*," Nick said, laughing, too.

Terry turned to me and smiled, warm but careful. "Here, sit."

I sat at the never-ending kitchen table, all oil-spotted

and cup-stained, and let the dinner fill me up while Terry and Julia chatted with Nick about his new job in a San Francisco skyscraper. I half listened, taking in the details of the kitchen. The blue-and-white-flowered curtains, the butcher-block counters, the giant mason jars lined up on shelves, full of flour and cornmeal and sugar and rice. I had never been anywhere like it.

"Well . . .," Nick said when he had finished eating.

"You're sure we can't persuade you to stay?" Terry asked.

"Gotta work in the morning. But I'll come up again soon. Good luck," he said, giving me a quick hug goodbye. "Don't let these two work you too hard."

They walked him out, and by the time they returned I was also finished eating.

"Mila," Terry said, picking up my empty plate and water glass. "Why don't you stay and visit with us for a little bit before I show you around."

"I'd love to," I said. "Can I can help clean up?"

"Oh, don't worry about these. You'll be cleaning up plenty soon enough." He set my dishes in the sink and smiled as he nodded toward the living room, where I could see that Julia was already arranging pillows on one of the sofas. I followed him up the two steps that separated the rooms. A fire burned under a grand hearth, glowing across overstuffed chairs and floor pillows, two sofas and a grand piano. The whole room was covered in floor-to-ceiling

shelves laden with books and framed photographs. Rugs piled upon rugs. Everything was beautiful and nothing was perfect, and I didn't know how I could have been chosen to be there.

Julia sat on the sofa, one leg tucked under. "Nick said you had an easy drive up. Have you been this far north before?"

I chose one of the chairs and sank into it. "No," I told her. "Never this far." I traced the outline of a bird printed on the armrest. I was trying not to look at the grand piano, which filled up the corner behind her. The sight of it made my chest ache.

The fire crackled and light danced across the ceiling and I wanted to give them something of myself. "I have to tell you . . ." They both leaned forward. "Nick told me about the piano. And for some reason I said I wanted to learn how to play it, but I actually *know* how to play. It's just been a very long time."

Julia laughed. "It's funny, isn't it? The things that come out of our mouths."

"I'm glad you told us," Terry said. "What a treat to have someone here who plays well. There's enough terrible playing, believe me."

"I don't know if I play *well*. It's been years."

"Do you want to play now?" Julia asked.

I did want to. I wanted to very badly. So I got up and

walked across the room and sat down and set my fingers on the keys.

I remembered what to do next. It came back to me. I played “Someone to Watch Over Me” from beginning to end without faltering. I knew just which keys to press, when to pause, and when to speed up. I played softly because, upstairs, children were sleeping. I finished and crossed back to the chair. I wondered if they could see me blushing, but I didn’t really mind if they did.

“We knew we picked well,” Julia said.

“Yes,” Terry said. “Now tell us who taught you to play like that.”

So I told them that I had lived with my mother and my grandparents for most of my childhood, until I turned thirteen and my mom and I moved in with Blake. “My grandmother loved to play the piano and she was a really good teacher. I don’t even remember trying to play, or messing up, or worrying about whether I was doing it right. I just remember her fingers on the keys and her telling me to follow.”

“And what happened to your grandparents?” Terry asked.

“They died sometime after we moved out. In a car accident.”

“And we heard that your mother . . .” Julia trailed off, waiting for me to finish the sentence.

“She left,” I said. “After the fire.” I traced the bird again,

and then the branch it perched on, and the leaves that sprouted from the branch. By the time I looked up I was able to meet their faces. "I don't want to talk about the fire if that's okay."

"That's just fine," Julia said.

"Your past is your own," Terry said.

I nodded. We sat quietly for a minute or two. Julia said, "Thank you for playing for us. Thank you for your openness." She stood up and stretched her arms over her head. "It's past nine already. I'm going to check on the children. They're so looking forward to meeting you in the morning."

"I'm looking forward to meeting them, too."

"Let's get you some provisions," Terry said. "It's always nice to have something in case you want a midnight snack without crossing the field. And then we'll go to your cabin and I'll show you how to heat it."

In the kitchen, he handed me a basket and offered me oranges and a loaf of bread and cookies. "And now," he said, once the basket was full, "we cross the field to the third cabin." He gestured to the window, then stopped. I followed his gaze but at first all I saw was our reflection, standing beneath a light in the kitchen: a tall Black man with an expression of wonder, a lonely white girl trying to make sense of the dark.

Then in the moonlight I saw something outside, glowing and crossing the field, moving closer. And the closer it came,

the more it looked like a figure, like how a person would look if a person emanated light.

"I hope you aren't afraid of ghosts," Terry said.

I felt gripped around the throat at first. Felt a familiarity. A darkness. My spine went stiff and straight and I made my face blank. I would be impenetrable. I would not give myself away.

The ghost hovered in place on the moonlit field. It lifted its arms to the sky and spun in a slow circle. A girl, I thought, by the way she moved. And, in spite of myself, I was mesmerized.

"No," I whispered. "No, I'm not afraid."

I didn't know if I was telling the truth.

All I knew was I wanted to watch her spin forever. I wanted to *be* her. The soft, dark grass on my bare feet. Free of the fears I carried with me. We watched her, Terry and I did, until she had spun herself invisible. What a wonder it was, to stand side by side with someone and watch the same thing. And then all that was left was an open field and a moon and some cabins in the distance.

"Julia and I were warned before we bought this place that there were ghosts here. We didn't believe it, or maybe we didn't care. But the first time I saw them, I dropped to my knees."

I turned toward him, waited for more. But he shook his head as though to break the memory. "Shall we?" he asked.

The mudroom was stocked with raincoats and boots and a full shelf of battery-powered lanterns. He handed a lantern to me and took one for himself. "Whenever you head into the dark, bring one of these with you. The paths are uneven and the field can get muddy. Keep one in your cabin and then bring back the others when you return to the house."

We stepped out and crossed right through the space where the ghost had been. I thought there would be something—a scent, a breeze—but she was gone completely and the night was only the night.

"We'll start with the bathroom," he said, striding past the row of three cabins to a smaller structure behind them. "The door sticks sometimes. Push down a little bit. Lean into it."

I tried and it worked. It was a simple, clean space with a toilet and a counter with a sink and a new bar of soap.

"It gets very cold. Not quite ideal for the middle of the night, but I hung this hook on the back of the door in case you wear a jacket over. The shower is around back." We held out our lanterns and walked the perimeter of the building to a high gate that enclosed a patio of sorts. First there was a bench and several hooks. A few steps over was a shower-head, and next to that was a round, metal trough, the kind that animals might drink water from. I realized it functioned as a bathtub. "It is not the most comfortable, but it does the trick if you want a soak," Terry said. "And you're welcome to bathe in the house anytime."

Back at my cabin, he stood at the doorway. "I'd like to show you a couple of things. How to light the fire, where to stack the wood. Do you mind if I come in?"

"Not at all."

He checked the supply of wood. "Oh, good," he said. "Billy made sure you had plenty. You'll meet him and Liz tomorrow, along with all the children. Breakfast is at seven thirty in the kitchen. Have you used a wood-burning stove before?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"The best way to learn is by doing," he told me. "So go ahead and take two logs from the pile and a few sheets of that newsprint."

I did as I was told, placed them in the stove. He took a matchbook from a blue dish, began to hand it to me, and then froze—his arm in mid-reach, the matchbook between his fingers. I didn't look at his face but I could see him breathing. My heart lunged into my throat—*he is afraid of me, afraid of me*—but then I remembered that he didn't know the whole story, so he had no reason to be afraid. He was sorry for me, then. He thought it might be difficult.

"I don't mind," I told him. "I'm not afraid of fire."

"Good, good," he said. I took the matchbook from his fingers, tore off a match, and struck it. After the newsprint was lit, I closed the doors of the stove and latched them.

"Just one more thing and then I'll go."

I waited.

"You're free to leave anytime. You are not a prisoner here. But if you *do* want to leave, all I ask is that you let us know so that we can drive you into town. Some people have set out walking. It isn't safe."

I nodded.

"Of course, I hope you'll stay," he said, and smiled.

"I plan to," I told him, and we said good night.

I unzipped my duffel, pulled out my toiletry bag, and walked the path to the bathroom to prepare for bed. When I was heading back, the ghost had reappeared on the green. She leapt, she spun. I averted my eyes. Heard Terry saying, *I hope you aren't afraid of ghosts*. My pace quickened as I approached my cabin. I shut the door fast and hard behind me.

I undressed and stepped into my pajamas, pulled the covers back and climbed in. My face touched the pillow.

Musty sleeping bag on a concrete foundation. My mother tucking me in.

Framed rooms, but no roof. Stars overhead. Dying eucalyptus trees, towering above.

A hint of smoke wafted from the firepit below as my mother leaned over me. She pressed her soft lips against my forehead.

"It's like camping," she whispered, zipping the bag to my chin. "Sweet dreams."

She stood. She turned. She left me alone in that strange, cold place.

But no, no—I was in my cabin. Its walls and roof. Desk and duvet. Fire burning to keep me warm.

I covered my pounding heart with my hand.

“This is my home,” I said to myself.

I found my way back—to the soft pillow under my cheek, to the glow of the moon through the skylight, to the steadiness of my breath.

“This is my home,” I whispered as I shut my eyes. “All the rest is over.”

the schoolhouse

IN THE MORNING I OPENED THE CURTAINS to fog so thick and low on the grass that I couldn't see the house beyond it. With the fire out, my cabin was cold, no trace left of last night's warmth.

I put on my sweater to head to the bathroom. I hadn't considered the possibility of running into anyone, but here were the other interns, headed right toward me.

Liz and Billy. Her, with short dreads and dark skin and a nose ring, smiling at me. Him, lanky and fair in a jean jacket and carefully slicked hair, as though he had sprung to life from a James Dean poster.

"You must be Mila," Liz said as they drew near. She wore only a towel beneath her jacket.

"Yes," I said, thinking of my tangled hair and sour breath. I thought they would stay to talk but they blew past me. Billy turned and walked backward a few steps. "See you at breakfast," he said, and we went on in our separate directions. *Had they showered together?* I wondered. *Or had they met*

on the path, coincidentally, as we just had? I would check the mirror in my room before leaving next time. I wished for my own bathroom. Scolded myself for my ingratitude.

There I was, on the beautiful rocky coastline, with a cabin of my own and a job and hot meals every day. There I was, with the prospect of a family. And I was worried about my hair and my breath. We are all humans; we all wake up messy and confused. It was nothing, I told myself. Get ready. Go on with your day.

I felt so self-conscious, appearing in the doorway for breakfast, all those faces turning to take me in. *Jackson, Emma, and Hunter. Darius, Blanca, Mackenzie, and James.*

I would have to hear each of their names again and again to learn them. The three high schoolers sat in the far corner. Emma flashed me a bright smile. Hunter smirked and Jackson barely glanced at me at all. We were so close in age. I was grateful that I wasn't assigned to teach them. Liz, though—now dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, eating an avocado half with a spoon—said, "Let's make Mila feel welcome, everyone," and, miraculously, Hunter nodded. Jackson lifted a hand to wave.

Darius, Blanca, Mackenzie, and James—the little ones—perched together in a row on a tall bench at one side of the table. They paid special attention to the cloth napkins on

their laps. At each of their places, Terry was setting down small bowls of plain yogurt and a boy followed behind him with a larger bowl, spooning berries into the white.

"Lee's famous fruit salad," Terry said.

So this was Lee. He turned, and when he saw me, he set down the bowl.

"Hey!" Blanca shouted. "I want my berries!"

Lee's eyes widened, but Billy said, "It's okay, buddy. I got this. You go meet your teacher." In a low voice, Billy spoke to Blanca, and then I heard her say, "May I have my berries *please*?" and Billy say, "Certainly."

Lee stepped toward me and held out his hand. He was nine years old and small for his age. His hand was thin, but his shake was firm, as though he had been practicing. "My name is Lee," he told me. "I'm your only student for now."

Terry placed his broad hand on Lee's skinny shoulder.

"Lee's been eager to meet you."

"I'm not very good at math," Lee said. "But I like to read."

I sat on a chair so that I would not have to look down at him as we spoke.

"*What* do you like to read?"

"Everything."

"I have a feeling we're going to get along," I told him. I smiled, and his serious face turned into a grin, and it was so

sudden and surprising—that smile—that I felt tears spring to my eyes. I blinked them away fast and turned to the table where Julia had set an empty mug and was offering me coffee.

The schoolhouse was the old barn I'd seen on the drive in, one expansive room with a few salvaged wood tables and chairs arranged throughout. One corner was set up for the preschoolers with mats and pillows and toys to play with. All the dolls were handmade, stitched eyes and mouths, tiny dresses and pants dyed turmeric yellow and beet red. A little city of wood-carved houses sat on a low shelf with matching cars lined up as if at a stoplight.

With windows lining both long walls, the room was filled with morning light. It was relaxed and spacious, a perfect place for learning.

I told Terry as much, and he said, "I'm glad. But you may wish to suspend your praise for another moment . . . Now we let you in on the secret of the supply closet."

He opened the closet doors to reveal shelves crammed full of typical school stuff—ruled paper and graph paper, protractors and calculators. And unexpected things, too. Sheets of beeswax. More wood toys. A papier-mâché mobile of the solar system with its strings tangled, bins with costumes spilling over their sides.

"One day I will sort through all of this. I told myself I'd

do it before you arrived. I told myself I'd do it before Billy and Liz arrived. So much for my good intentions! But anything you need should be in here. If it isn't, let Julia or me know and we will get it for you or find a good substitute."

"I'm sure this will be more than enough," I said.

"We try to always have at least two kids of around the same age so they have someone to do lessons with. For a time, we had Esther along with Lee, but then Esther's aunt came forward to adopt her. It doesn't usually happen that way for us—our children usually stay. But there are two girls who may be joining us soon. Eight-year-old twins whose mother's parental rights were just terminated. We're waiting to see."

I nodded.

"All right, enough with the orientation. You read the handbook, yes?"

"Cover to cover," I said.

"Wonderful. You can help Lee with his equations now. He's been doing a lot of self-guided work lately and he'll appreciate having someone dedicated to helping him."

Lee sat at a table at the far end of the schoolroom with his shoulders hunched.

"May I?" I asked, placing my hand on the empty chair next to him, and he nodded, moving his notebook closer to make more space for me. The notebook was covered with carefully formed numbers and equations and black boxes

that confused me until I realized that instead of crossing or scribbling out his mistakes, he had blackened them so no hints of their specific wrongness remained.

“Long division,” I said. “How is it for you?”

His brow furrowed. “Fine,” he said. “Hard, I guess. I’m stuck on this one. I keep thinking I’m getting it right, but when I check in the book, it’s wrong.”

“Can I help you?”

“Sure,” he said.

When he slid his notebook toward me, I saw his hands—olive skin with graceful fingers, each of them straight except for the ring finger of his right hand. That finger turned out above the knuckle where it had clearly been broken and left to heal on its own. I became aware, then, of the way I moved through the world. No unusual scars or crooked bones. Nothing about the way I looked at first glance that gave me away. I wondered who had done that to him. Who had left it untreated.

He must have noticed me looking because he moved his hands under the table. And it struck me how bad it felt to him, to have me look for too long. My face burned. I wanted so much to be good at this.

I gathered my hair as I would if I were putting it into a ponytail.

“Look,” I said, showing him one of my earlobes and then the other. He leaned in, looked closely. I felt the intensity

of his gaze, and felt, too, the weight of what I was showing him.

"Do you see how the holes aren't centered? Do you see how this one . . . is higher than this one?"

Lee nodded.

"I didn't get my ears pierced because I thought it would look pretty. I didn't get it done at a mall or in a shop. The person who did it, he did it to hurt me."

I had never spoken the words before, hadn't told anybody. Now Lee would know it forever, and it would bond us together, and I hoped he would never again feel like a spectacle of pain around me.

We held each other's gaze for so long that I knew it must have meant something. Finally, he nodded, brought his hands back to the table. I looked at the ruled paper, his painstaking numbers, the little blacked-in squares of wrongness.

"Okay," I said. "Let me see. It's been a long time since I've done this."

I asked him to walk me through the problem, at first because I needed to remember the steps of long division but then because I realized it was a good method, to have him explain it to me. I caught his mistake a step before he got there, and then when he reached that point in the problem, he hesitated and I smiled.

"Oh," he said. "It should be seven."

"Yes. Now keep going. Let's see what you get."

"Seventeen-point-five," he said. "I'm pretty sure . . ." He turned to the back of the book and showed me.

"You got it!"

"Yay!"

"Should we start the next one?"

He found the problem and wrote it in his notebook, taking time to make every number perfect. If it was a one, instead of drawing a straight line he included the angle at the top and the line at the bottom. Sevens, he crossed. He added tiny tails to the ends of his twos.

At the far end of the schoolhouse, a child began to cry. I turned and there was Billy crouched between two of the little ones, reminding them to take turns with the blocks. I glanced at Liz, who was leading a workshop with her high school students; each of them was reading an essay, scrawling comments in their margins. I felt the twoness of Lee and me. The only pair. I was all he had, so I'd need to do my best. I looked at the notebook again to see his progress but found none had been made. He was turned to the window, fear plain on his face.

I followed his gaze but all I saw was a foggy sky with a bright spot where the sun broke through. A tangle of colorful flowers. Two red birds darting and falling and rising again.

But when I turned back I saw that his eyes were unfocused. His face had lost its color; he was gritting his teeth.

"Lee," I said. "What is it?"

He didn't answer me. I couldn't tell if he'd even heard what I'd said.

"Lee," I said louder. I looked behind me, but all the others were focused on themselves. It was just Lee and me, and I had to get him through whatever this was. Gently, I placed my hand on his shoulder and he startled, turned to me.

"What did you see out there?" I asked him, making sure my voice was soft, making sure I seemed purely good and calm and concerned, that I was the kind of person he would want to be there with him as he went through whatever it was he was enduring.

"Was it a ghost?" I asked.

"No," he said. "The ghosts only come out when it's dark."

Julia entered the schoolhouse at three o'clock to ring a brass bell.

"Lessons are finished for the day," she said when the chime faded, and across the schoolroom chairs were pushed out, books were shut and stacked, paper and pencils were put away. The little ones lined up. Lee was up and out of his chair, placing his supplies in the cabinet. Everyone but me knew what to do.

"Mila, come walk with me," Julia said, and I was relieved to be called away. She led me down the gravel road toward the highway. The two goats chewed grass.

"They're stubborn little creatures," Julia said. "And strong, too. The white one's Annabelle; she'll tolerate petting. Percy is the brown fellow and he's got a mean streak. Now I've warned you."

"They're very cute."

"They are," she said. "And they serve their purpose well."

"Which is?"

"Eating the dry grasses. Keeping away the brush." She opened the gate. "We keep this closed so that they don't run off."

"Nick told me."

"Good old Nick. Of course he did. I thought I'd take you to the ocean so you know the best route."

"I didn't realize we could walk."

"We're very close. The trail isn't marked, though, so you need to know where you're headed."

We followed the rest of the path out to the highway, and Julia pointed out the trees and shrubs and taught me their names. "The little ones can remind you if you forget. Quiz them. It's part of the curriculum we developed for the pre-school. People need to know where they fit in in the world. The first part of that relies on understanding what's around them. So we give them the language and let them explore. The intern we had before Billy didn't care much for nature, so we were glad when we found Billy last year. He spent a lot of time camping before his parents died. They were

real adventurers—rock-climbing expeditions, backpacking trips—they taught him so much about nature that we barely had to fill him in on anything.”

We reached the highway. “Cars come by very fast,” she said. “So, when you’re walking with the children be sure to take their hands and go quickly. One moment there can be no sign of a car and then, before you know it, one is coming right at you.” We crossed and walked for no more than a couple minutes before the path ended and the rocks dropped straight off.

We were standing at the edge of a bluff, looking down at the ocean. I felt my knees go weak and it surprised me. I hadn’t known there were new fears to discover.

She must have noticed how I felt, because she linked her arm through mine. Her thick wool sleeve made my cheap cotton sweater seem inadequate. I told her so, and she said, “We have lots of extra clothes in the house. Try the upstairs closets when you need anything. We have shoes in all sizes and jackets and sweaters and scarves and hats and other accessories. Also board games, supplies for bird-watching and foraging. Even some old posters and framed artwork if you want to decorate your cabin. Really, anything you can think of. Now, let’s head down.”

We walked along the bluff until it met a trail that was partially obscured by an ancient madrone tree, and there we began the descent. It was steep and rocky, but before

long we were on the sand. Seagulls flew overhead. In the distance, a few people surfed.

"Do you swim?"

"Yes," I said. "I mean, I know *how* to swim if that's what you're asking."

"Do you do it well?"

"Not really. Just in pools, mostly. When I was a kid. My friend Hayley's family had one."

"This is what you need to know about the Pacific. One, it's freezing so you'll need a wet suit. We have them along with everything else in the upstairs closets. If you're going to do it, come with Terry or me. Or with Billy and Liz—they're both strong swimmers. There's a serious current here, so don't ever swim when the tide's coming in or going out. If you *do* happen to get caught in a rip tide, though, what you'll do is this: Relax into it. Let it take you out. As long as you don't struggle, it will send you right back to shore. Understand?"

I nodded. We watched the surfers, watched the waves. The sky was clear and blue now, no traces of the morning's fog.

"Do you like it?" Julia asked. But I didn't know what she meant. All I saw was the deep blue-green water, the white foam against dark rock. The wildflower-studded cliffs, and the tall grasses in the wind. "Because it's magnificent," she said. "But I don't like it. It scares me."

"I guess I didn't know I was *allowed* to not like it." I felt foolish saying that, but it was true.

"I love the sound," Julia said. "The sight from a safe distance. A *far* distance. I like a view of the ocean, but not the actual thing of it. But Terry and many of the others—Billy and Liz, too—they love being up close. I think it helps drown out certain things for them."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say. I looked at all of it and asked myself how I felt, and I didn't have an answer.

poppies

JULIA AND I ENTERED THE HOUSE through the front door, the one I'd turned away from the night before. It opened into a foyer that led to the living room, where the high schoolers were helping the little ones, gathered around the coffee table with scissors and glue and sheets of colorful paper.

"Time to clean up!" said Emma, the girl who'd smiled at me that morning. I watched as each of the tiny children stacked the paper and put the caps back on the glue. Emma patted little Blanca on the head before she led the other two teenagers upstairs.

"Thank you!" Julia called after them. Then she turned to the children and marveled over their collages and cleanup. She promised them extra bubbles for their baths and they happily followed her out. "The others should be in the kitchen," she called back. I could hear voices from around the corner—Terry and Lee and Billy—deep in conversation. I took the steps down through the doorway.

Four loaves of sourdough sat cooling on the counter. Billy was shaking a jar of cream, turning it to butter.

"Oh, there you are," he said when he saw me. "Julia stole you away."

Lee glanced up from his comic. "Where did she take you?"

"To the ocean."

The sloshing sound ended. "Finally!" Billy said. He unscrewed the lid, set down the jar, and rubbed his bicep. I noticed a gold bracelet on his wrist, a simple chain. Terry uncovered a giant pot and the scent of tomato soup filled the kitchen. Lee licked his lips and said, "Yum-yum!"

Terry ladled the soup into bowls on the counter and placed the lid back on the pot. "Billy, how is that butter coming along?"

"Stirring in the salt," Billy said. "Patience, old man."

A little later, Liz appeared from the living room. She crossed to the sink and washed her hands before grabbing a bread knife. "How was your first day?" she asked without turning around.

"I enjoyed it," I said.

"You don't have to say that just because we're all here," Billy said.

"Agreed," said Terry. "First days are often difficult."

But I thought of it—the early morning and the breakfast and the pencil sharpening and the lessons, even the mistake

of looking too long at Lee's broken finger, even his moment of fear—and I was sure I was telling the truth.

"I really did," I said.

Lee shut his comic. "Let's play high-low."

Liz finished slicing and I noticed that each piece of bread was perfect, as though she'd sliced hundreds of loaves. She set down the knife and said, "Sure, Lee. Let's. Want to go first?"

"My high was meeting Mila. It's been hard to not have a teacher for two whole months."

Warmth rushed to my chest. Here was this little boy, who wanted me.

"My high was meeting Mila," Liz said. She glanced at me and smiled. I felt myself blush. "Terry?"

"Hmmm . . ." He brushed his hands on the front of his apron. "Well, I met Mila yesterday so I have to break this lovely pattern. But my high was watching Mila teach school. She's a natural. With teaching, you have it or you don't. You can still get by by learning the nuts and bolts of it, but that teacher instinct—it can't be taught."

It was almost too much to take, all this praise.

"Are you going to keep going?" Billy asked. "I thought we were playing high-low but this sounds like a lecture."

Terry threw up his hands. "Go ahead."

Billy set a bowl of fresh butter next to the bread. "Well, obviously my high was meeting Mila. Welcome to the farm. We're super happy to have you."

"Thank you," I said. "My high is right now."

"It's almost time to call the rest in," Terry said. "Lightning-bolt lows! Mine's the supply closet in the schoolhouse. Utter chaos."

"A blister on my toe," Liz said.

"Missed my parents like hell this morning," Billy said.

Lee leaned forward. "That thing happened to me again. I got scared in my throat and stomach."

I wondered why he would say it now, so clearly, when he hadn't said it then. I wanted to be someone he trusted.

"That was mine, too," I said. "Seeing you feel that way."

He gave me a smile. When I was his age, I had my grandparents. I had my mother. It wasn't until later that all of it changed. *Lee*, I thought, as the freshly bathed children filed in, as Emma and Hunter and Jackson took the far end of the table, as he chewed small bites of bread, swallowed his careful spoonfuls of soup. *I'll do whatever I need to earn your trust.*

And once the four loaves were eaten along with all the butter, once everyone's bowls were empty, and the pre-schoolers had practiced the songs they'd been learning, and we'd moved into the living room for a round of charades, Julia stood and said, "It's warm tonight. Anyone up for a moon romp?"

"Yes!" the children all yelled, and out they went with their lanterns into the night while the high schoolers settled

on the back porch, two of them with guitars, and Billy and Liz and I cleaned up in the kitchen.

“Lee’s gone through a lot,” Billy said to me, later. “He gets panic attacks. He knows how to work through them. Just give him some time and he’ll be okay.”

We were walking back to our cabins, the three of us, each of us holding a lantern.

“Do you know what happened to Lee’s parents?” I asked.

Liz said, “His dad’s in jail. Probably forever. His mom OD’d a little over a year ago and died. He doesn’t like talking about it, but he ended up telling Samantha the whole story.”

“Samantha?”

“The intern who was here before you.”

“Oh,” I said. “Right.”

Billy shook his head. “Poor Lee.” I nodded and thought of his broken finger, his moment of fear. “Night, Mila,” Billy said.

“Good night,” I said.

And then he opened his door and Liz followed him in. I remembered the laughter from the night before. I wondered if they were together or if they were only friends. It didn’t matter. Either way I was not one of them, despite the kind things they had said.

I continued a few paces toward my cabin but soon

stopped again. A glow appeared in the distance, beyond the house. *The dancing ghost*, I thought. But as it came closer I saw it wasn't one ghost, but several.

They assembled in the center of the field. They clasped hands, formed a circle. One of them darted into its center and then back out again. They broke into a line.

They were playing a game. Clasp and unclasp hands, following rules I couldn't make sense of. They were wondrous and I was unafraid. Under the steady moon, the fog moving across the sky like a living thing, I watched for a long time, astonished by how lucky I was to have been chosen. How incredible it was to be there in that strange, incomprehensible place. I saw the glow of a new ghost approaching, and something shadowy, too. Something there and then gone.

I half slept in Blake's skeleton house under the eucalyptus trees.

Wind through the dry leaves.

An owl's hoot, a cat's yowl. A scampering. My mother's moan.

Once it was light I rose to my feet, bladder full, and found the hole in the ground Blake used as a toilet. He'd told us about the ashes he poured over to get rid of the smell, but I smelled it anyway—pungent enough to turn my stomach. I squatted, held my breath. When I had finished, I rinsed my hands at the spigot. I washed my face and my hair, too, used a bar of soap because it's all I could find. I wrung my hair out, water dripping onto the dirt, and went to find my mother.

There she was, sharing a bench with Blake by the firepit.

He looked at me with his green eyes, his smile that had never been friendly, not even the first time I'd met him. His arm was around my mother, holding her in place.

"Good morning," he said.

My best friend, Hayley, the only friend I spent time with outside of school, was away at camp with no cell service.

I left her a message later that day, telling her to call me as soon as she could. But that evening, before she'd called me back, Blake took my phone away.

"We don't need these," he said. "What we need is human connection."

He was standing in fur-lined slippers on the concrete foundation, the frame of the house towering over him, the last of the evening light filtering through the place where the roof should have been.

My mother had just left for work. She would be gone all night.

"I want to show you something," he said, slipping my phone into his pocket. "Follow me."

I followed him to the space he called his room. There, tarps hung as walls with blankets lining them for insulation. Layered carpets spread over the concrete, and on top of some of them was his mattress. He opened a box and dug through it for a velvet pouch. Inside was a pair of mother-of-pearl opera glasses.

He handed them to me. "These can be a lot of fun," he said. "The old-fashioned kind. Let's fix some dinner and you can see what you find when you take the time to really look. You don't need screens. You need real life."

While he grilled vegetables on a barbeque outside the house, I gazed through the glasses at the sky. I saw the stars and the moon. Some birds flew by and I lost sight

of them, then scanned down and there they were, on a telephone wire.

And below them was a window, lit up, with a family in the living room working a puzzle. I watched the father slip a puzzle piece over to a kid who was a little younger than me. I could have watched them for a long time, but it felt like spying. I knew I wouldn't want some strange girl peering in on me when I didn't know about it, even if she was only curious and didn't mean any harm.

I turned the glasses downward and that's when I saw her. A woman, ancient, with vacant eyes. She stood in a nightgown on the street. In one hand, she held a bouquet of oversize, plastic daisies. In the other, she held what looked like the gnarled roots of a tree. She was on the sidewalk, alone in the dark, staring at nothing.

"Blake," I said.

He was carving into wood with a pocketknife while he waited for the food to cook. "Mm-hm," he answered, eyes fixed on his project.

"Look at that lady," I said. He kept carving for a moment and then saw I was handing the opera glasses to him. He took them and I pointed down at the street. "What's she doing? Do you think we should help her?"

He lifted the glasses to his eyes and shifted the focus. He remained turned toward where I had been looking for a long time. I could see her even without the glasses,

standing perfectly still, then swaying back and forth before growing still again.

"What lady?" Blake asked.

But he had been looking right there. He was still looking. And there she was.

"The old woman."

"I don't see an old woman."

"Right *there*," I said. "With the fake flowers and that other thing."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "You must be tired, you should go to bed." He folded the opera glasses and dropped them back in their velvet pouch.

"But I haven't had dinner yet. It's still early." I couldn't tell how early it was, though. I didn't have my phone. I didn't own a watch.

"You're so tired you're seeing things," Blake said. "You don't feel right. Go lie down."

I did as he told me.

"You know . . .," he said the next morning. We were warming water over the fire for coffee. "I had a thought about this so-called woman you saw last night."

"She was right there," I said. "It's so weird you didn't see her."

"I'm wondering—was she by any chance wearing a nightgown?"

"Yes!"

"And was her hair very short?"

"Yes, that was her."

"And were the fake flowers daisies, by any chance?"

"Yeah. Yeah I think they were."

He poured coffee beans into a hand grinder and turned the handle.

"Her name was Lorna," he said. "She lived in the house across the street for years. But she died last May."

The next time I saw her it was daytime and my mother was there. I had been reading but had grown hungry. I closed my book and stood and there she was, empty-handed this time, in the nightgown still.

My mother and Blake were sitting at the table together, looking over his architectural plans.

"Look," I said to them. They both stood and craned their necks.

"Poor—" my mother started.

"Mila. Poor Mila," Blake said. "Apparently she's being haunted. All I see is a street corner. Isn't that all you see, Miriam?"

My mother looked at Blake and then back to where my ghost was standing.

"Only a street corner," my mother said.

Blake pulled something out of his pocket. A small

box. "I found something for you," he told her. She opened the lid.

"Oh, they're beautiful! Mila, come see."

A pair of silver earrings. They looked heavy and old.

"I had to talk the lady at the shop into selling them to me." He took one from the box. "Let's see how they look on you."

My mother blushed. "It's been so long since I've worn any. I'm afraid the piercings might have closed up."

"We'll give it a try," Blake said, pressing the post to her earlobe. "Almost," he said. "Just needs a push."

I watched my mother wince and then smile, tears shining in her eyes.

"Next one," he said, and did it again. He wiped her blood from his hand. "Look at that, Miriam," he said. "You're a vision."

And then he turned to me. "Poor Mila," he said. "She feels left out." He scanned the surroundings before reaching to the ground. He closed his fist around a cluster of California poppies and pulled them from the earth. He handed them to me, dirty roots and all.

"Your consolation prize," he said.

I was in the dark again, on the farm again. Once my heart had steadied and I had caught my breath, I turned toward my cabin. For years, I'd done all I could to live a normal life, to forget the things that had happened, to leave the memories buried where they belonged—out of consciousness, obscured by neglect, unable to hurt me.

Why this now?

Here was the crunch of my shoes on the gravel, I reminded myself. Here was the lantern's light. One step and then another and soon I would be safe.

But as I turned the lock to my cabin door, I saw something below me, lying on the straw doormat.

California poppies, bound together with a blade of grass.