



THE HOUSE IN THE PINES

A Novel

ANA REYES

**"Powerfully eerie and atmospheric."—RILEY SAGER,
New York Times bestselling author of *The House Across the Lake***



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A NOVEL

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DUTTON



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For Bonk, Mom, Dad, Bubba, Brian, and Hilda

PROLOGUE

Deep in these woods, there is a house that's easy to miss.

Most people, in fact, would take one look and insist it's not there. And they wouldn't be wrong, not completely. What they would see are a house's remains, a crumbling foundation crawling with weeds. A house long since abandoned. But look closely at the ground here, at this concrete scarred by sun and ice. This is where the fireplace goes. If you look deeply enough, a spark will ignite. And if you blow on it, that spark will bloom into a blaze, a warm light in this cold dark forest.

If you come closer, out of the cold, the fire gets stronger, blows smoke in your eyes, tumbling smoke with a burning-pine smell that sweetens to the smell of perfume, then softens to the smell of your mother's coat. She's murmuring in the next room. Turn around and here come the walls, shyly, like deer emerging from the trees. Frozen concrete becomes an area rug. Take off your shoes, stay a while. Outside the wind is rising, and there comes a clacking, a close, rapid chatter. It must be the windows in their sashes. A light snow sifts from the sky, blanketing this cozy home. Tucking it in for the night. "Goodnight little house, and goodnight mouse." Remember? For once, there is no reason to get up, no one to chase or run away from. From the kitchen comes the smell of home, the sounds of a sauté. This is how the world was once, before the first colic, the first scald, the first getting lost. And this is why you do it.

“Goodnight nobody, goodnight mush. And goodnight to the old lady whispering ‘hush.’”

Get a good night’s sleep, because when you wake, this house will be gone.

ONE

Maya didn't know it yet, but the video had already begun to circulate on social media. A grainy six-minute stretch of security footage that was strange and unsettling enough to garner several thousand views the day it went up, but not quite lurid enough to go viral, not ghastly enough to inspire repeat viewings. Not for most people, anyway. But for Maya, its existence would upend all that she'd been building for herself these past few years, this sometimes sloppy but mostly solid life that she shared with Dan, who snored quietly beside her in bed.

She hadn't yet seen the video because she was avoiding all screens, not wanting their blue light to keep her awake. She had tried everything to sleep: Benadryl, melatonin, counting backward from a hundred down to one. She had turned the clock around, taken a bath and some cough syrup, but none of it helped. This was her third sleepless night in a row. She had moved in with Dan earlier this month and could easily draw from memory the shape of every water stain on the ceiling. The branching lines of every crack.

Turning onto her side, Maya reminded herself to get curtains. The space heater at the foot of the bed clicked on, a white noise she usually liked, but now the rattle of its metal grille grated on her. Kicking off the covers, she got out of bed and pulled on a flannel shirt over her underwear. The apartment was cold, the central heat only partially effective, but her skin was damp with sweat.

The chilled wooden floor felt good on her feet as she made her way down the dark hall, passing the second bedroom, empty now except for the exercise bike that she and Dan had bought off Craigslist. She'd never done much to decorate any of the apartments she'd shared with the various roommates she'd had since college—no posters, no pictures in frames, not so much as a throw pillow—but lately she'd begun popping over to T.J. Maxx after leaving work at Kelly's Garden Center just across the parking lot and heading straight for the home décor section. Buying end tables, area rugs, and other things she couldn't really afford.

Maya had plans for this place. She was determined for it to feel like home.

It was just before dawn, a gray, wintery light settling over other recent purchases in the living room: The coffee table to replace the one Dan's roommate had taken when he left. New shelves for the many books she had brought, added to all of Dan's. A new-to-them couch, dark green velvet. And hanging on the wall above it, the one decorative item she'd brought with her, the only art she'd held on to for the past seven years.

A Mayan weaving about the size of a bath towel. A tapestry of red, yellow, green, and blue, threaded into interlocking rows of symbols resembling flowers and snakes. This was more than a decoration to Maya. She didn't know what the symbols stood for exactly, but she knew that somewhere in the mountains of Guatemala lived people who could read them. She passed by the tapestry in the dark on her way to the kitchen.

The sink held the night's dirty dishes, plates splattered with Bolognese. She loved cooking with Dan in their new kitchen, and the food had been fragrant with garlic and fresh tomatoes, but it hadn't tasted right. Or maybe she just wasn't hungry.

Or maybe her stomach had been clenched like a fist. Dan had asked if anything was wrong, she had told him she was fine, but she wasn't. Opening a cabinet, she pushed aside a few coffee mugs,

tumblers, and wineglasses until she found what she was looking for. A shot glass, a single ounce. That's all she would have, she told herself, and the photo strip magneted to the freezer reminded her why.

The photos were from last Halloween, taken in a photo booth at the bar where they'd spent the night dancing with friends. Maya had gone as "Fairy Witch," a character she'd invented while scouring Goodwill for a costume at the last minute. She wore a glittery pair of wings, a pointy black hat, a blue dress with sequins on the collar, and somehow this had landed her second place in the costume contest.

Dan was Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*. It had been difficult to find a gray onesie large enough to fit his hearty frame, let alone one that was ethically produced, but Dan had started looking well in advance. Then he'd sewn a furry tail onto its seat and made himself a crown of recycled gold card stock.

The two of them looked like opposites in a lot of ways; she was petite and surprisingly athletic-looking for someone who'd never played sports, while he was tall and looked like he loved to eat, which he did. He was blue-eyed and fair with a short chestnut beard and glasses, while she was olive-skinned and ethnically ambiguous. People had always guessed that she was Indian, Turkish, Mexican, or Armenian. She was, in fact, half Guatemalan, a quarter Irish, and a quarter Italian. Thick black hair and high Mayan cheekbones met the round chin and upturned nose of the Irish on her face. She and Dan might have looked like opposites, but if you looked closely, you'd see that there was something in each of their postures—a slight leaning down on his part toward her, and an upward tilt to her stance as if to meet him halfway. They looked happy. And she looked drunk—not quite sloppy, but close.

She took out a bottle of gin from the freezer. White vapor swirled from its neck as she twisted off the cap and filled the tiny glass up to the brim, raised it—*Cheers!*—to their mugging faces, and made

herself a promise: Tomorrow morning, she would tell Dan the reason that she hadn't been herself these past few days, the reason she couldn't sleep or eat. She would tell him she was going through Klonopin withdrawal.

The problem was that Dan didn't know Maya had been taking Klonopin in the first place. When they met, she had already been taking it every night for sleep. No huge deal—once upon a time, she'd even had a prescription—why mention any of this to someone she was dating?

Prior to Dan, she hadn't dated anyone for longer than a month. But then one month with Dan stretched into three, and before she knew it, two and a half years had passed.

How to explain why she'd waited so long? Or why she was on it in the first place?

And what would Dan think if he knew that the pills came not from a pharmacy but from her friend Wendy?

Maya had rationalized her dependence in so many ways, telling herself it wasn't a lie, just an omission; that she kept the pills in an aspirin bottle in her purse for convenience, not to hide them. All along, she had planned to quit, and then, she assured herself, once her habit was safely in the past, she would tell him.

But now she had run out of the little yellow pills, and Wendy, a friend from college, wasn't returning her calls. Maya had tried a dozen times, texting, emailing, and finally calling. The two had remained close for a few years after graduation, largely because they'd both stayed near BU and both liked to party. They rarely saw each other during the day but drank together several nights a week. But now that Maya had cut down on drinking, they saw each other less and less; looking back, she realized their monthly brunches had become literally transactional: fifty dollars for ninety milligrams of Klonopin.

Could this be why Wendy wasn't returning her calls?

As Maya's withdrawal got worse—insomnia, the fiery feeling in her brain, the sense of crawling ants on her skin—she wondered if Wendy had known just how hellish it would be.

Maya hadn't known. The psychiatrist who'd prescribed it to her seven years ago, Dr. Barry, hadn't said anything about addiction. He'd told her the pills would help her sleep, which they had—but only for a time. As the months passed, she'd needed more and more to achieve the same results, and Dr. Barry was always happy to oblige, upping her dosage with a flick of his pen—right up until Maya graduated college and lost her insurance. Once she could no longer pay for her sessions, she found herself cut off, and only then did she realize that she couldn't sleep anymore without pills.

Luckily for her, Wendy also had a prescription and didn't much trust the mental health establishment. She didn't take any of the meds her doctor prescribed, preferring to sell them or trade them for other drugs. Maya had been buying her Klonopin from Wendy for the past three years, ever since she graduated college. Telling herself all along that she would quit. She hadn't expected going off to be easy, but the severity caught her off guard, and Googling her symptoms hadn't helped. Insomnia, anxiety, tremors, muscle spasms, paranoia, agitation—she could handle those. What scared her was the possibility of hallucinations.

It took all her will to recap the gin and return it to the freezer. She went to the bathroom and took a swig of NyQuil, wincing as the syrup went down. Her reflection winced back at her, ghostly in the light spilling through the high frosted window. Her skin was pale and clammy, her eye sockets like craters. Withdrawal had taken her hunger, and Maya saw that she was losing weight, the bones of her cheeks and collarbones more pronounced. She forced herself to unclench her jaw.

In the living room, she sank into the couch and peeled off her sweaty flannel shirt. She turned on the reading lamp and tried to lose herself in a book, a mystery she'd been enjoying up until now, but

found herself reading the same paragraph over and over. The quiet felt loud. Soon the street outside would ring with the voices of commuters to the Green Line, people getting into cars parked along the curb and doors slamming.

She heard footsteps and turned to see Dan emerging from the darkness of the hall. He looked half asleep, hair sticking up from his pillow. He'd been up late, studying for his third-year law school exams.

They were both twenty-five, but Dan was doing more with his life, or at least that's how it felt to Maya. Soon he would graduate, take the bar, and start looking for a job, tasks she didn't envy. What she envied was his faith in himself. He wanted to be an environmental lawyer, a goal he'd been working toward for as long as she'd known him, while she'd worked at Kelly's Garden Center, tending to customers and potted plants, ever since graduating from BU.

It wasn't that she thought the job was beneath her, but sometimes she worried that Dan did, or that he looked down on her apparent lack of drive. Early on in dating, she had told him that she wanted to be a writer, and he'd been supportive; he'd brought it up occasionally, asking when he'd get to read her work. But the truth was that Maya hadn't written anything since senior year of college.

And lately he'd stopped asking, as if he'd stopped believing she would ever follow through.

He squinted at her through the gloom. Maya sat on the couch in her underwear, while he wore sweatpants, wool socks, and a long-sleeved shirt. "Hey . . ." he said groggily. "You all right?"

Maya nodded. "I couldn't sleep."

But Dan wasn't stupid. He was, in fact, extremely smart—this was part of why she loved him. He knew something was wrong, and she wanted to tell him—she had promised herself she would—but now was obviously not the time. (Again.) Rising from the couch, she draped the itchy flannel around her shoulders and crossed the living

room to lay a hand on his arm. “I was just about to go back to bed.” She looked up into his tired eyes, then past him to the bedroom.

It was hard to say when the bedroom had gotten so messy. Neither of them was naturally tidy, but they managed to keep the living room and kitchen neat. As guests never had any reason to go into the bedroom, though, Maya and Dan left clothes on the floor and dirty mugs, wineglasses, and books strewn around, and lately it had gotten worse. The mess had never bothered her, but now the room felt disturbingly like the inside of her head.

She lay down and closed her eyes, and Dan made a sound like he might say something. She waited. She waited until his breaths were slow with sleep.



The dream began right away. One moment Maya was listening to Dan’s breath, the next she was on her way to Frank’s cabin. Awake, she had forgotten this place, but asleep, she knew the way by heart: down a narrow path through the woods, then over a bridge to the clearing on the other side. The cabin was in the clearing, ringed by a wall of trees. Two rocking chairs sat empty on the porch. The door was locked, but asleep, Maya always had the key.

She went inside, not because she wanted to but because she had no choice. Some part of her—the part of her that dreamed—insisted on returning here night after night, as if there were something she was supposed to do here. Something she was supposed to understand. A fire crackled warmly in the tall stone fireplace. The table was set for two. Two bowls, two spoons, two glasses yet to be filled. Dinner simmered in a pot on the stove, some kind of stew. Cooked meat and rosemary, garlic and thyme—it smelled delicious—and she felt her body begin to relax, to slow down, even as terror sprouted in her gut and wrapped its tendrils around her heart.

It didn't feel like a dream.

She knew Frank was here. He was always here. The stream gushed softly in the window, a peaceful sound, but Maya knew better. There was danger here, lurking just beneath the surface of things, woven into the fabric of this place. Danger in its coziness, its warmth. Danger even in the sound of the stream, its gentle gurgle—it was getting louder. The sound of water rushing over stones. Rhythmic and insistent, it grew louder and more pronounced until it seemed to be talking to her, words surfacing from the white babble but disappearing before she could catch them.

Maya listened, trying to understand, until she realized that it wasn't the river that was talking to her. It was Frank.

He was standing behind her, whispering in her ear. Every hair on her body rose. Her heart thrashed and terror shrieked in her ears as she slowly turned around.

Then she opened her eyes, drenched in sweat.

It was rare that she remembered her dreams upon waking, and when she did, the impression was usually vague, but in the days since she had taken her last Klonopin, her sleep had grown exponentially more fractured, and her dreams more vivid. They left behind a fog of dread. She reached for the clock and turned it to face her. 5:49. Careful not to wake Dan, she rose once more from the bed, grabbed her laptop from the desk, and tiptoed to the living room.

She pulled up a playlist of soothing nature sounds and her mom's German chocolate cake recipe. Tonight, she and Dan were driving the two hours to Amherst for his mom's birthday. Normally Maya would have looked forward to this—she liked his parents and had offered (before she ran out of pills) to bake his mom a cake—but now she wondered how she would make it through dinner, just the four of them, without his parents realizing that something was wrong.

She wanted their approval. The first time she met them, Dan's father had thought it would be fun to speak to her in Spanish, which

was awkward because Maya's Spanish was embarrassing. She sounded like any other English speaker who'd studied the language in high school, her vowels too long, her verbs the wrong tense, while Dan's father could roll his *r*'s. *Sorry*, she'd said to him in English; she'd been trying to redeem herself in Dan's parents' eyes ever since.

Like their son, Greta and Carl were smart. Intellectuals. She was a photojournalist, and he was a fifth grade teacher and multilingual poet. Maya wanted them to like her, but beyond that, she wanted to be like them. She didn't plan to work at Kelly's Garden Center forever. She wanted to tell them that her father had been a writer too, even if her mom worked in the kitchen of a luxury rehab center, baking bread.

But then Dan's parents might have wanted to know more about her father, who died before she was born. Telling people this always led to a moment of awkwardness as everyone searched for the right thing to say, and the last thing she wanted for tonight was more awkwardness.

She would simply tell them that she was feeling under the weather. This was true. She would cover up the dark circles beneath her eyes and try not to fidget. She would smile, not too widely or too small, and no one would know how little she'd slept.

Rubbing her temples, she tried to focus on the waterfall sounds coming from her speakers. She wrote down the ingredients they needed. Shredded coconut, buttermilk, pecans. Then, lacking the attention span for a book, she went to YouTube and scrolled through the many channels she subscribed to. She needed something to distract herself from the craving gnawing on her brain, something designed to grab her attention and hold it.

But Maya wasn't on social media of any kind. Her friends saw this as an eccentricity, Dan claimed to find it refreshing, and she'd managed to convince even herself it was some kind of stance, some statement she was making. Maybe it was, to some extent, but the

truth was more complicated and not the kind of thing Maya should be thinking about right now, her anxiety already at a ten.

She watched a short video about a cat who'd raised an orphaned beagle as its own, then one of a Boston terrier with a talent for skateboarding. She had no profile picture, no identifying information of any kind online, but of course that didn't stop her from receiving targeted advertising and recommendations.

Later she'd wonder if this was why the video popped up in her feed. "Girl Dies on Camera." Of course she clicked. According to its caption, the grainy, six-minute video was security footage taken from a diner in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Maya's hometown. Despite looking like it was from the 1950s, the diner must have been relatively new, as she didn't recognize it. A row of shiny booths, mostly empty, lined a wall of windows. It looked to be the middle of the day. The video was in color, but the quality was low, everything washed out. The black-and-white checkerboard floors. Pictures of classic cars on the walls. The only customers were a family of four and two elderly men drinking coffee.

The camera was aimed at the front door in order to catch a criminal bursting in with a gun or running out with the cash register, but this wasn't what the camera caught. Instead, when the door opened, it showed what looked like an ordinary couple, a man in his thirties and a slightly younger woman. The woman looked a little like Maya, with a round, open face, high forehead, and wide, dark eyes.

The man was Frank Bellamy.

Of this, Maya had no doubt. She hadn't seen him for the past seven years, but there was no mistaking the small chin and slightly crooked nose. The easy walk and disheveled hair. The video erased any signs of aging on his face, making him look exactly as she remembered. As if no time at all had passed. She watched the couple seat themselves in a booth and pick up their laminated menus. A waitress came over with water and took their orders without writing them down.

What happened next looked like a normal conversation between Frank and the woman, except that Frank was the only one talking. The woman listened. She was tilted toward the camera, her face visible, while he was tilted slightly away, so that the camera saw only his right ear, cheek, and eye, and the edge of his mouth as he spoke.

Cold tentacles circled Maya's lungs.

A lot of viewers probably stopped watching at this point, as the video was five minutes in and almost nothing had happened. Not even its clickbait title was enough to hold most peoples' attention beyond a certain point. Whoever had posted the video might have chosen to edit out this long, one-sided conversation that Frank had with the woman, but then maybe it was needed to show how what happened next truly came out of nowhere.

Maya leaned in closer to the screen, trying to read the woman's face. The woman appeared only vaguely interested in whatever Frank was saying, her face slack, providing no clue to her thoughts. Frank could have been telling her a story, one without humor, apparently, or any element of surprise. Or maybe he was giving her instructions of some sort. Or directions to somewhere far away.

She could have been a student at the back of a lecture hall on a drowsy summer day. Still in her puffy yellow coat, she focused her dark eyes gently on his face, resting her elbows on the table. Maya saw in the time bar that the video had only twenty seconds left. That was when it happened.

The woman rocked back and forth in her seat. She hinged forward at the waist, eyes wide open. She made no attempt to break her fall, forearms resting on the table as her face crashed down. The suddenness would have been comical in other circumstances, like a clown face-planting in a banana cream pie, only here there was no pie and no laughter. Just a slight, stunned pause before Frank rushed over to the woman's side of the booth, slid in beside her, and

began to say something, probably her name. Now that he was facing the camera, it was easy to see his fear and surprise.

When he pulled her to him, the woman sagged with dead weight over his arm. The video ended just as the waitress hurried over. But in the moment just before it ended, Frank's eyes rose up to the camera, directly into it, and it felt to Maya like he was looking right at her.

She closed her laptop with shaking hands.

The video had been posted less than three days ago and already had 72,000 views. Frank had every reason to think she would see it, which meant she had every reason to be afraid. After all, this wasn't the first time Maya had witnessed someone drop dead in his presence.