

*"Nightmarish—you
won't be able
to look away."
— Shari Lapena, author of
The Couple Next Door*

NIGHT

WATCHING

TRACY

A Novel

SIERRA

NIGHTWATCHING

Tracy Sierra

PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS / VIKING

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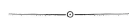
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For Catherine

My mother



I have a very general acquaintance here in New England.

THE MAN, "YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN," NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

There was someone in the house.

She stood in her son's dark bedroom. Through its open door and down the long hallway, the landing at the top of the steep kitchen stairs was lit by the dim glow of a plug-in night-light.

The light was there so the children would be able to see the stairs in their nighttime wanderings. To prevent them silently, helplessly falling as they padded from their rooms to their parents' bedroom overnight seeking water, or comfort, or after a wet bed.

The old house let the wind hiss through and crack its ribs. The sounds of it bracing against the storm, its staggered breathing, were familiar. But through it all came noises that rooted her to the spot. Also familiar, but not at this time of night. Not when she had been sure she was the only one awake.

In the brief hush between the frozen gusts came the wheeze of weight on the stairs.

You're imagining things.

Her daughter lay asleep in the next room. Her son was already sleeping again a few steps away from her.

For a moment the hope that it might be her husband lifted her.

Stop it. That's impossible.

But it could be her daughter sleepwalking again. They'd bolted the door of the girl's room that led to the old front stairs—a place too dangerous to let her sightlessly wander. But it was possible her daughter had gone out the other door to her bedroom. The one they left unlocked despite the girl's sleepwalking and the danger of the kitchen stairs. The door they left open so

she could use the bathroom at night, so that she understood she was still a big girl, they trusted her and she should trust herself.

Yes, that could explain it! And you wouldn't have heard the baby monitor go on.

Her husband had mounted a motion-activated baby monitor outside their daughter's unlocked bedroom door after three nights of finding the little girl standing at their bedside, still and unwakeable in the darkness.

"What can I say?" Her husband had shrugged. "Cameras are what I know."

Click, fizz, beep! The monitor would spring to life in their bedroom, and their daughter would pass on the screen, looking blurry and bleached on the night vision, retinas giving an animallike mirror flash. One of them (her, always her) would get up and intercept their daughter before the girl had a chance to accidentally hurt herself. She would guide her little girl back to bed, stroke the dark hair away from the empty open eyes, away from the slack mouth, sit with her daughter until she lay back on her pillow.

That must be it. Sleepwalking.

And yet, she couldn't make herself move. Couldn't unfasten her eyes from the distant night-light. A part of her remembered that the sound of her daughter on those stairs was simply different. A part of her acknowledged that in all her daughter's nighttime drifting, the little girl had never actually gone down the stairs. And the sounds were coming from the stairs.

A twisted bit of nursery rhyme echoed through her head, one of the endlessly reread child things that now permeated her consciousness.

If wishes were fishes we'd have some to fry. If wishes were fishes we'd eat and not die.

A low thump, a pause. A complete and instant switch in her thinking.

He's hit his head.

It sometimes happened to people who were unfamiliar with the eccentricities of the old house. Anyone taller than six feet had to tilt their head or duck to avoid the low cut of the ceiling at the turn of the kitchen stairs.

There were thin, scraping sounds as this person readjusted. Recalculated. Moved again.

She saw fingers wrap the banister like white spider legs.

The intruder pulled himself up slowly until he stood at the top of the stairs, features washed to invisibility by the darkness and the way the night-light shone low behind him. For the briefest of moments looking at that silhouette, she saw her husband. Opened her mouth to call to him, ask how he'd gotten home.

But your husband wouldn't hit his head. Not tall enough.

With this thought came clarity. The figure went wrong around the edges and unfurled into a stranger.

It's a man.

He was tall. His arms hung loose and long. His presence had the distantly familiar rancidness of something wrong and rotten she'd tasted before but couldn't quite place.

Do you recognize him? Who is he?

He tipped his head and stared directly at the pool of darkness down the long hallway where she stood shrouded.

She knew objectively, logically, that it should be impossible for him to see her. How many times had she stood in his precise spot, in his exact pose? How many times had she looked down the dark, off-kilter hall toward the oldest part of the house, where she now stood in her son's room? Trying to tell in the middle of the night if the door was open, if her little boy was standing there, never once able to see anything but shadow. Because that night-light on the landing, close to the floor and faint as it was, blinded her to anything beyond its dim reach. Always, every time, she had to be almost at the boy's bedroom door before she could be sure that yes, there was her son, back out of bed, silently watching her. Instead of safe asleep.

The light has to—it must—blind him.

The man's face was made a skull by the shadows. Solid black where eyes should be. The light snagged on his lips to cut an over-grinning smile. His whole self seemed to her so huge it was beyond the bounds of

reasonable. So substantial it was as though even his mouth, his nostrils, his ears, must be filled with flesh.

She struggled for air. It was the reality of him, the human details, that choked her. His short, sandy hair stuck out sideways the way a child's does after pressing flat against a pillow overnight. His dark shirt was only half tucked in. He shifted his weight. Scratched at the side of his nose, then rubbed at the spot where he must have hit his head.

Her eyes went wide. Her blood surged thick and pounded her ears to deafness. She realized she was shaking, had a flash of shame at her total inability to control her own body. She remembered this shame. Saw in memory a linoleum floor. No fight, no flight, just complete and utter shuddering immobility.

And time. *Tick, tick, tick*, a clock must be saying somewhere. *Tock, tock, tock*, uncountable seconds passing.

One minute, two? Ten? Breathe. Think. He sees you. Can he see you?

The man's size was a suffocating reminder of how small she was. His shadow stuck to the ceiling, cast high by the low glow of the night-light.

He's in your house. Your house!

This was why her ears were deafened by blood. Why terror hollowed her out weightless.

Someone who would take that step, someone who would snap aside that curtain?

Oh yes. Someone like that is serious.

But—maybe he isn't real? Maybe you're seeing things.

This idea melted through her. The man could be a vivid nightmare. Or one of the fears she rubbed between thumb and forefinger, one of the worries she would rumble and burnish to smooth morbid fantasy staring sleepless at the bedroom ceiling.

Where do you come up with these awful things? That's it, that's all. Overactive imagination. A dream. One-two-three, air in, air out, open your eyes. Then, poof! He'll disappear. You'll see.

But when she forced her eyes closed, forced them open again, the man hadn't vanished. For the first time she noticed he was wearing sneakers.

She understood the implications somewhere deep and visceral. He couldn't have walked through the blizzard in those sneakers. She imagined him sitting on the bench in the entryway downstairs. Taking off his snow boots. Placing them neatly on the floor, side by side. Pulling the sneakers out of a bag and putting them on. A conscientious houseguest. Planning to stay a while.

He is very, very serious.

Her eyes skittered to the side to see the snowflakes still falling. Their whiteness was the only thing visible outside, touching then spinning away from the sliver of window glass visible between the curtains, resting in and softening the corners of the panes. Before the nor'easter began, there'd been at least a foot of accumulation. By bedtime there'd been almost two feet on the ground. Now—well, she couldn't tell from where she stood. But she knew that her house, the whole property, the whole world, was wrapped tight.

Next to the window was her son's bed. The little boy was curled into a tiny, soft, sleeping lump, his chest moving ever so slightly up and down under his green blanket. A bit of hair and a curve of his ear were the only things discernible in the darkness.

As she looked at her son's shape, her heart was squeezed by such love and panic she nearly groaned with the pain of it. She thought of his soft, full cheeks, how they intersected with the tiny bone of his chin. The sweet, cartoonish proportions of his little self. The tender, potbellied gourd of his torso. His thin limbs and straight hips. Her own small, perfect boy who was fully and completely a person, however tiny. However new here.

And now?

What's going to happen to that little person now?

She dragged her eyes back to the man.

Ten seconds? Ten minutes?

He'd been there for just a moment. He'd been there forever.

But it can't happen. This can't happen. Not to you.

These things happen. These things happen every day.

It must be your fault. What did you do?

A pull of despair tugged the back of her tongue.

You did everything right, didn't you? You locked the doors. The windows.

What did you do to deserve this?

But she knew better than most that deserving had little to do with getting. She was sure almost no one got to give permission for the worst things that happened to them.

The man stood patiently in the splash of weak light. So awfully, jaw-achingly patient. She watched as he listened for even the lightest sounds of life. She watched him choosing his next steps.

In her son's dark room, she keenly felt the presence of the door behind her to the top landing of the front stairs. Once upon a time, they'd been the home's only stairs. On the other side of that landing was the door to her little girl's bedroom that they kept bolted from the landing side for her safety.

Her mind's eye saw each of them as a component in a schematic. Her son here, her daughter asleep in her room. The man waiting at the top of the stairs that led down to the kitchen. He stood between her and the modern addition attached to the back of the old house. Between her and her bedroom, her office, the garage. Which meant he stood between her and her phone on her bedside table. The car in the garage. The gun locked snug in its wall safe. The bullets for that gun hidden high in her husband's closet. Between her and her computer, set up in the guest room that doubled as her office. There he stood between her and all possibility of help and aid and rescue and communication and strength.

She felt a need to claw at something.

Hold still, hold still! He'll see you.

In wonderment she realized she was soaked completely in sweat. A viscous amphibian flop sweat that let the cold cling to every bit of her skin with aching pressure. Already the dampness of it soaked into the T-shirt and underwear she'd worn to bed. It made the robe she'd thrown over herself as a barrier against the house's perpetual winter chill stick to her, clammy.

The man fished something out of a pocket on his immense chest. He let it dangle from a hand. An oblong object, heavy yet loose, a slight swing to it.

SLAP! He swung it and it hit his other palm. The unexpected noise, the weight, the reality, the implications of the unidentifiable weapon he held, swept the tension from her knees so that she had to fight to stand.

That the man wasn't wearing a mask turned things all the more surreal in this new world where everyone did. And him here, doing this, with his face exposed?

But he was wearing gloves. White plastic gloves that glowed from the dim shine of the night-light.

Fingerprints matter but not if we see his face, because he's going to kill us.

She shook her head so quick and tight she heard the ocean.

Stop that! Don't be ridiculous, calm down, think clearly.

No. You are thinking clearly. This is serious. There are stakes. Everything is at stake. Don't pretend otherwise. Look at him. No mask. Gloves. Dry sneakers. Weapon. He's prepared. He will hurt them. Hurt you. Anything else is a fantasy. You know it. You know the lines he's crossed already. Being nice, thinking positive—no.

With a wave of despair she saw it was already over. What could she do but offer up a soft neck and pretend she was elsewhere? There was no way to fight him. No weapon, no help. Two small children and her short, weakened, waifish self. There was no way to win, defend, protect. She folded inward with the hopeless acknowledgment that she'd done the calculations, sketched out all the options, and was simply not equal to the task.

The fear of pain, the terror of what he could do, was an unbearable anticipation. The surging panic in her frozen body turned her into a live wire stripped bare but unable to release a charge.

This is the part of the movie you aren't allowed see. What's about to happen is what forces them to cut to black.

The man leaned back and cracked his spine like a runner preparing to start a race. The peculiar weapon seemed to pull at his hand with a limp heaviness.

The wide face slowly turned as the man looked away from her toward the hall of the modern addition. His shifting weight made the floor groan beneath him.

Still wishful, still deeply hoping that she was slipping into madness, that it was all imagination, she told herself, *That's a nice touch, brain, remembering how the floor creaks right there.*

He took one step, then another. She blinked in disbelief as he moved away from her. He went down the hall of the addition before walking through the door of her bedroom and disappearing.

Because he turned away from instead of toward her, a razor-thin hope zapped and fizzed to life at the base of her neck.

Do something.

She was awake in the middle of the night because of her son. He'd woken her as always in a most disturbing way. Scratching a fingernail along an eyelid. Poking his thumb into her ear. Deftly pulling out a single hair. Tonight, he'd pinched her nose shut until she woke with an inward gasp, batting hands pathetically at empty air. She'd followed her little boy down the hall, his tiny, capable body barely visible in the deep darkness. She knew better than to ask about the nightmare that had caused him to wake her. Her son had almost always already forgotten it. All that was left was the feeling of horror, a residual strangeness, a need to have someone else awake. Tonight, as usual, she'd lightly scratched his scalp to soothe him to sleep.

The little boy's nightmares had started a few weeks after lockdown began.

You think you hide your fears from your children, but they absorb them like they absorbed your blood.

"Does anyone get any sleep in this house?" her husband complained. On his fingers he counted out the issues. "Sleepwalking, night terrors, insomnia, nightmares, too warm, too cold, too wet, too thirsty. Too tired!"

"Well"—she yawned—"at least *you* don't have any trouble sleeping."

"That's true," he said. "I've got the mama wall protecting me. Why wake lame old Dad when you can wake the mama bear? Bring out the big

guns?”

“Who are you calling a ‘bear’? And that’s the first time anyone’s ever called me ‘big.’ ”

Her husband shot her his charming, hooked smile. “The little mama, then. Better to wake up the little, tiny, *attractive* mama.”

So her son would wake her, never her husband, and she’d follow him silently through the darkness, bundle him into bed, *Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are*. She’d brush the black hair away from where it stuck to his long lashes, away from the corners of his already-sleeping eyes. And she’d be left wide awake sitting at the end of his bed, waiting to see if the absence of her touch woke her little boy, as it so often did, requiring she repeat the process. Then she’d pad back down the hall, lie down, and stare at the ceiling, wondering at the strange new fearfulness of the world. Thinking of the things she’d done wrong. Of the things she might have been able to control if she’d thought far enough, carefully enough, ahead. She would imagine other worlds where things had gone differently. Better. Worse.

It’s not your fault.

It’s all your fault.

The man disappearing through her bedroom door was like waking from her little boy’s dream. A nightmare shuffling off, leaving behind an uncannily empty quiver of air.

Yesterday, upon the stair, I met a man who wasn’t there.

Her skin cracked. Her teeth unclamped.

What are you going to do?

She had a vision of waking the children, pulling them into the snow out the old front doors down the stairs behind her, a five- and eight-year-old, both barefoot, in pajamas, her in a robe and slippers, because shoes, coats, the car, everything—*everything!*—was on the other side of the house.

He’d catch us. Easily. Immediately. Crossing the house or, if we tried to run, through the snow. And it’s so far to the nearest neighbor. Half a mile? At least. At least! And in this storm. And through those drifts. Record cold, they said. Record snowfall.

No time, no time. Do something.

She was briefly awed by the realization that for the first time in a long time she felt alive, and even more astonishing, she desperately wanted to stay alive. But her surprise was paired horribly with deep fear. Fear of the man's kinetic violence. What he might do with that strange weapon. Fear of that potential energy released on her children. Fear of pain. She had never dealt well with pain.

Does anyone?

Then, a possibility. In the gripping swirl of her animal frenzy, adrenaline and helplessness, she remembered the hidden place.