

WATCH OUT FOR HER

WATCH OUT FOR HER

Samantha M. Bailey

CHAPTER ONE

**Sarah**

*Now*

I watch people.

With a voyeur's keen eyes, I peer out the window of our rental car as Daniel pulls up to our new house at 227 Lilac Lane. This is the house we'll be living in for the next six months. I've only seen grainy pictures of the inside. My husband's new consulting firm found it for us as an incentive to bring him on board, making this sudden move across the country easier.

At twilight, the detached two-story blends into the others on this quiet, serene street, like I hope we do. At the end of the block, there's a cul de sac, and a set of boxy townhouses across from a ravine. I shiver, not from the bitter autumn chill, but because the woods feel too close, remind me too much of everything we left behind in Vancouver.

My son, Jacob, and I exit the car, our boots crunching on the fallen leaves. The sound centers me in the present, far from Holly Monroe, our babysitter over the summer, and the reason I agreed to this move. Daniel is ahead of us, dragging a suitcase behind him. Every few seconds, he looks over his shoulder, smiling. I smile back, but inside I'm crying over everything I've hidden from him.

Jacob stops in front of the three-bedroom, red-brick home looming before us. "It has eyes." His voice is flat, his body trembling through his thin coat. The wind is sharper in Toronto than North Vancouver. Something else my son is forced to get used to. "The windows are the eyes, and the door is the mouth. It has no nose, though."

I shudder and pull him close. A six-year-old's imagination, but still, his words haunt me.

## WATCH OUT FOR HER

My son isn't aware of the real reason I wanted to leave Vancouver. Neither is my husband.

All Jacob knows is Daddy got headhunted as a business consultant in the city where he grew up, and Mommy supports Daddy. They don't know anything about the nights I hid in the thick cluster of trees outside our pool enclosure because it offered the perfect view of our babysitter's house. They don't know what I saw.

I wanted to be her. Until I stopped trusting her. Then I only wanted to protect what is mine.

They aren't aware I'm now escaping her.

I turn to my son as he slips his thumb into his mouth, which I thought he'd finally stopped doing over the summer. My heart constricts at how vividly the freckles dotting Jacob's nose stand out against his chalk-white skin. He looks terrible. We took the red-eye so he would sleep, but he was so upset that he cried for almost the entire five-hour-flight. It's been said that you're only as happy as your unhappiest child. I have just one child, and he's shattered. He's lost his home and left behind everyone he loves, except me and Daniel.

"Ready to see the house?" I ask, trying to sound upbeat. I'm both relieved for this fresh start and aching at my son's sorrow.

Jacob pulls his wet thumb out. The skin around the nail is ripped and chapped. "I want to go home."

*Well, that's impossible,* I think to myself, but I don't say it out loud, of course. Our beautiful cliffside home in Forest View, where we'd lived since Jacob was born, burned to the ground three weeks ago. A leaking propane tank set our pool cabana on fire, and it spread to the house, already sold in a private agreement Daniel had arranged.

## WATCH OUT FOR HER

Even though the sale fell through, he's dealing with the insurance and selling our gorgeous land overlooking the Capilano River. Daniel has taken care of everything, a far cry from the man who doesn't make his own lunches for work. All I have to do is be Jacob's mother. Like I should have been content with all along.

A porch light flicks on when Daniel gets to the front door. Jacob and I follow up the three steep steps, and I peer through the decorative glass, our ghostly reflections staring back at me. Daniel rummages for the key in the lock box, inserts, and turns it. There's no click. The black oak door wasn't locked.

My mouth goes dry. "Daniel?" I try to keep the tremor from my voice.

"Wow. The property manager forgot to lock it," he says.

I feel eyes on me and spin around. Under the dim yellow glow of a streetlamp, a curtain twitches in the house across the street. A face appears, then disappears. I will not overreact. I refuse to give into the foreboding dread that's been pressing on my chest since the last time I saw Holly.

I trail behind Daniel, pushing Jacob inside and locking the front door behind us. I don't have time to even look around the main floor before Jacob lets out a howl—a low, agonized wail that twists my insides.

"What's wrong?" I ask, quickly going over to him and falling to my knees on the hardwood so I'm at his eye-level.

"Mr. Blinkers! I can't live here without him!" He punches his fist over and over on his skinny thigh. I take his tiny hand and hold it between mine.

## WATCH OUT FOR HER

There's no pain greater than your child's pain. I've made so many mistakes that I can never undo. My sole focus now is making my son happy again.

But I can't because we lost Mr. Blinkers—the soft, gray stuffed bunny he slept with every night all summer. It also burned up in the flames that ravaged our house, while we fled for our lives. While I alone frantically attached the emergency ladder to my son's bedroom window and climbed to safety with him wrapped around my waist. Daniel was away at a conference in Victoria. It wasn't his fault that he wasn't home. None of what happened this summer is his fault.

“Maybe we can find his brother at a store here for you, sweetheart.”

Daniel drops our bags and the house keys hit the small ebony table at the door. The clang makes me jump. He crouches with me in front of Jacob. “Buddy, we'll get you a new bunny, and we'll take him to see the Jays and Raptors. And to Canada's Wonderland, which is only fifteen minutes from here!”

Daniel's trying too hard, and of course Jacob sees right through it.

“I want the bunny Holly gave me!” He leans into my shoulder and the tears come so fast and furious my coat is damp. I hug him fiercely and let him cry, my rainbow baby, my miracle after my miscarriage. Jacob is the only child I'll ever have.

Daniel locks eyes with me, his full of regret. Regret about what? How strained and distant our marriage became? How invisible I've been to him? No, I won't go there. He's trying so hard to be more attentive, to make me feel like I matter, like he had when we got married fifteen years ago.

This is the man who massaged my feet every single night when I was pregnant with Jacob. Daniel cried with me when we lost our first baby, our daughter, at fifteen weeks because her heart had stopped beating inside me.

## WATCH OUT FOR HER

I can't lose anyone else.

Daniel is the first to answer our son. "Jacob, it's better we don't talk about Holly, okay? It makes Mommy upset."

I run my hand over my husband's thick brown hair, just starting to gray at the temples. Of course it suits him while my hair, dyed platinum at the beginning of August, is now pulled back in a greasy ponytail so the already darkening roots aren't as prominent.

"I want everything the way it used to b-b-be," Jacob stutters.

I want to see the two dimples that sweeten his cheeks when he smiles. "Honey, change is hard, but everything's going to be okay."

My voice cracks. It was so hard to say goodbye to my mom, my brother, Nathan, sister-in-law Pam, and nieces Sienna and Lily. Before this, I'd never left Vancouver for more than a couple of weeks. Now the mere idea of ever returning fills me with fear and shame. I lost all control this summer, and Daniel has no idea what I've done.

I stroke Jacob's cheek before stepping out of the foyer toward the first doorway. There are two more doorways ahead, a creepy fairy tale house of endless doors. The darkness immediately overwhelms me. Our old house boasted a large open-concept design with long windows through which the morning light shone bright and happy. From our pool deck, we were mere steps from the forest of stately Douglas Firs overlooking the Capilano River that swirled just beyond our backyard. Here the main floor is all dark molding and narrow windows. Eerie shadows spill onto the dusty, sable-colored hardwood.

I blow out a heavy breath and snuggle Jacob, whose teeth are chattering. "We should turn on the heat."

## WATCH OUT FOR HER

“Sure. Jacob, come with me. We’ll find the thermostat.” My husband’s skin is gray. He looks as exhausted as I am. I feel another sharp pang of guilt, but I turn away, trying to focus on how excited Daniel seems to be back in Toronto, beginning a new consulting career after two decades as a COO, handcuffed to his desk.

I hold the black banister all the way up the curved staircase, leading to a spacious landing covered in dark brown hickory flooring. The master bedroom is large, with expensive, somber oak dressers and headboard. I itch to snoop in the nooks and crannies to discover who lived here before us and what skeletons they might have hidden in this house. I guess old habits really do die hard.

I close the door and glance quickly in the full-length mirror hung on the back. My cheeks are hollow, and the circles under my eyes are a deep purple. I don’t care. Here I can go back to being Sarah Goldman: just a mother and wife, not a woman obsessed with watching her twenty-two-year-old babysitter.

My fatigue is debilitating. I’ve never slept well, but the frenzied rush to leave Vancouver has drained me.

I lie back on the king-sized bed, bare of sheets or a duvet. This maudlin house isn’t to my taste, but at least it’s furnished. I’m glad to see a smoke detector on the ceiling, but the tiny light in the middle isn’t on. I should check the batteries. At only five foot one, I need to grab the black chaise next to the window that overlooks the street.

I drag it under the smoke detector, releasing dust motes into the air. I stand on it, sighing, because my fingers can’t possibly reach high enough to take it down. But I can at least see it clearly now.

## WATCH OUT FOR HER

It's not a light in the middle, not a light at all. But there's something round in the center of the smoke detector.

It looks like a camera.

*The house has eyes.*

Someone is watching me.