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**NO  
ONE  
CAN  
KNOW**

*A  
NOVEL*



**KATE ALICE MARSHALL**

*author of What Lies in the Woods*

# No One Can Know



KATE ALICE MARSHALL



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*This one is for my parents.  
Which is kind of awkward, now that I think about it.  
They're really lovely people, I promise.*

## EMMA

### *Then*

She looks at the body of her mother, sprawled in the hallway. If she turns her head, she will see her father, slumped in his chair by the fireplace in the next room, one fingertip still touching the side of a glass in which his whiskey, the ice long melted, still sits. She looks down at her hands to see if there is any spot or smear of blood, but they are clean.

She turns to her sisters. They stand apart from each other. She picks out details: the blood drying on the cuffs of the soft blue pajama bottoms, the wet hair hanging in stringy clumps, the hands rubbing together as if trying to get clean. She starts to speak, falters. She wets her lips and tries again.

“This is what we’re going to do,” she says, and when she tells them, they don’t argue. They don’t say anything. They simply obey.

Twenty-three minutes later, she picks up the phone from the kitchen counter and dials. When the emergency operator answers, she speaks in a level voice.

“My name is Emma Palmer. Our parents are dead. We need the police.”

She looks at the clock on the stove. It is 5:13 A.M.

She hangs up. They walk together to the porch and wait. When the cruiser pulls up in front, they are still standing there. The lights flash over them. Red, blue, red, blue. Hair dry. Faces each a study of numb shock. Dressed in clean clothes—there will be no blood found on them, no bloodied clothes found anywhere on the property. None of them look at the others. None of them reach out for comfort, for reassurance, or offer it in turn. They are each a world of their own.

Emma holds a hundred questions between her teeth, biting down until her jaw aches. She doesn’t ask. Will never ask.

It isn’t that she’s afraid of the answers.

She's afraid she already knows them.

"Our parents are dead," she says again, to no one in particular.

It's the last true thing she says for a long time.



1

EMMA

*Now*

The edge of the picture nipped Emma's finger as she reached into her purse for her keys. It was a flimsy thing, printed on glossy paper that felt plasticky under her fingertips. The image looked more like an off-brand gummy bear than a baby. She hadn't asked for it, hadn't really wanted it, but she hadn't seen a way to refuse when the doctor pressed it into her hands.

She realized she was standing in front of the door, not moving, her hand still in her purse. With a muttered curse she hooked her finger through her key ring. She turned the key in the lock, but it was already open—which it shouldn't have been, not in the middle of the day. The door swung open, and Emma stood frozen in the doorway. She breathed in. Testing, she knew and tried not to know, for the scent of blood, of sweet decay. Of everything happening again.

Then—"Emma?"

Nathan stepped out from the kitchen. He had a beer can in one hand. She stared at Nathan, at the beer, mind still on—*about nine weeks along*—the cheerfully sterile walls of the exam room. The slide of the ultrasound wand over her flat stomach.

"What are you doing home?" she managed at last.

An expression she couldn't read flashed over his face—guilt, defeat, something in between. "Why don't you come inside," he said.

She closed the door behind her. She set her purse on the little table in the hall, and now she saw Nathan's shoes discarded next to the shoe rack and his briefcase leaning against the couch in the living room. He was supposed to let her know if he was going to be home unexpectedly. She always had to know

what she would find when she walked in the front door of her own home. She'd never told him why; he assumed it was just one of the quirks of her anxiety.

He was leaning against the kitchen doorway now, the beer can sweating in his hand. "We need to talk," he said.

*That's my line,* she thought.

Not a normal day off, then. She wiped her palms on her jeans. "Okay. What's up?" she asked, her voice too bright. He didn't seem to notice. He wasn't very good at reading people. That was one of the things she liked about him. She was keenly aware at all times how other people perceived her—too aware that it was impossible, really, to get things just right. You were too emotional, not emotional enough. Putting on an act, not acting the way they expected, or so on point with expectations that it had to have been rehearsed.

Nathan took things at face value. She didn't have to spend every conversation trying to ferret out what he really thought of her.

"Maybe you should have one of these first," Nathan said with a crooked smile, holding out the beer. Emma's stomach turned.

*I shouldn't drink.*

*I need a drink.*

She'd waited too long again. Frozen up. He lowered his arm and sighed. "I got laid off," he said, tossing a little shrug in at the end of the words.

She blinked at him, unsure what the proper facial expression to greet this news should be. How did one convey sympathy while also conveying *we are truly, deeply screwed?*

"Obviously it's terrible timing," he said.

"Nathan, we *just* had our offer accepted on the house," Emma said, voice shaking. "We paid the earnest money." More than ten thousand dollars. With multiple offers, their agent had told them it would help them compete.

"I'm aware of that," he said, voice a bit clipped now.

Emma pressed her palms to her face. Her cheeks were hot, her hands cold. She could still feel the remnants of the ultrasound gel, dried to tackiness under the waistband of her jeans.

She walked past him, shoulder bumping against his. She crossed the

kitchen to the countertop and planted her hands on the Formica surface, staring at the grease stain that had been there when they moved in three years ago.

She straightened up. “Have you called Justin yet?” Justin was the man handling their mortgage, who had suggested that given Emma’s spotty employment history and anemic income, Nathan should be the only one on the mortgage application. Emma had nodded along when he’d said to put the remaining medical bills, credit card bills, and car loan under her name to maximize Nathan’s borrowing power, so now here she was in the negative—on paper, only on paper, they were a team—while Nathan smiled his way into half a million dollars’ worth of house on credit. “The offer. There are—what are they—contingencies. We get our money back if the inspection doesn’t go through, that kind of thing. Is there—”

“I got laid off before we made the offer,” he said. She startled, her mouth dropping open. He made a dismissive gesture with one hand. “I had another job lined up. The house was perfect, and I was going to be able to start this week and it wouldn’t even matter, they were paying *more*, it was golden, and then....”

“No job,” Emma said, voice strangled nearly to silence. “Nathan, why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because it was handled!” he said. “If I’d said anything, the loan could have fallen through. Better to have the new job sorted first. Then the project funding got canceled at the last minute. The position was eliminated.”

A hot fist of nausea lodged behind her breastbone. She’d been feeling a bit queasy lately. Nothing extreme. Not enough to notice, to wonder, not when there was the house hunt and then the mad scramble of putting together offers and getting the preapproval. Not when she’d had her period like clockwork (breakthrough bleeding, they’d called it, not uncommon) and had only gone in for an answer to her sudden, overwhelming fatigue.

The house had felt like a mistake from the start. The letter had arrived informing them that the duplex was going up for sale and they had sixty days to vacate, and she’d wanted to start looking for a new apartment. But Nathan had pointed out that with the rental market what it was, and with him finally having steady employment after a decade of patchwork contracts and

canceled projects, it might be the perfect time to buy.

She'd blanched at the idea. Her work, which had once kept them afloat, had cratered after the accident, during the long weeks of her recovery. The rest had dried up after her biggest client went under and others tightened their belts. New websites weren't the priority when they were trying to keep the lights on. But Nathan had finally landed a permanent position. One that paid well—well enough to (mostly, nearly, almost) pay off their small mountain of credit card debt, Nathan's student loans, the medical bills from the accident.

"Because I technically lied about my employment, we can't get the earnest money back," Nathan was saying. "And we were already on the bubble with the loan approval. Justin doesn't think there's any way he can push it through, even if I miraculously get a new job offer tomorrow." He collapsed into a chair at the kitchen table.

Her mind churned quickly over the possibilities. The closing date would have been a tight turnaround as it was. Finding another rental wasn't an option until Nathan got a job, not without the cash that had now vanished into the hole of the offer that was too high but worth it, *completely worth it, when you think about our life there, our future.*

He was looking at her like he was waiting for her to tell him what to do. Because she always knew what to do. She was always the one with the plan.

"I'm pregnant," Emma said. Fingers curled over the edge of the counter. Gaze on the cheap vinyl tile. Were those meant to be roses in the corners? They looked like splotches of mildew.

"What?"

Her eyes flicked up. He stared at her, mouth slack, hair falling boyishly over one eye. Dark hair, blue eyes, a small scar on his chin she liked to set her thumb against right before she kissed him. They'd met at a coffee shop, back when she couldn't even afford internet, so she'd hidden herself in the corner away from the baristas' annoyed glances and ordered plain black coffee and nothing else for hours at a time as she worked. He'd been sitting at the table next to hers. When he bought her a chocolate croissant, she tried to wave him off, but he said it was for his sake, since her growling stomach was distracting him.

She took the croissant. And the latte that followed. It was a week before

he actually asked her out, to a mediocre movie and good Italian food, and kissed her a gentlemanly kiss good night at her doorstep before she slid her hand into his hair and pulled him to her hungrily, drew him inside the tiny studio, undressed him in the dark.

He told people he'd fallen in love with her over pastries and coffee, but when they were alone he confessed it had been that night with her teeth against his neck, the certainty of her, the hard edges that she had hidden so well.

She told him she'd fallen in love with him with the taste of butter on her lips that first morning, but it was just a story. She had no idea when she'd fallen in love with him. But people needed stories to make sense of things, and she had learned to give them what they needed.

Now his face was pale. His lips shut. That face that couldn't hide anything failing to hide his unhappiness. "You're on the pill," he said.

"It happens," Emma replied helplessly. She'd missed a pill here or there when she was sick, distracted, traveling. Far from perfect use. "You want children." That was the point of the house, with its extra bedrooms.

"I do. Of course I do. It's just—now—" His throat convulsed. "If I can't find a job ... We won't even have a place to *live* in a few weeks. We can't."

"What are you saying?" she asked.

Nathan wanted children, and she had said *yes, okay, someday*, because she wanted to be the person who could want that. Now, though, it was his face that had taken on a gray pallor. His eyes that dropped to the table. "It's not the right time. Maybe things work out. But what if they don't? And I wouldn't want to wait, and then—when it's further along—"

Emma put her hand against her abdomen. Still flat, no outward sign at all, and she realized she had already made a decision.

"I'm keeping it," she said.

His brow creased slightly, as if puzzled. Sometimes, she thought, she underestimated how well he knew her. He said *we want kids*, but maybe he knew that he wanted kids, and she said okay. "We're out ten thousand dollars, and that was *all* we had. The down payment was supposed to be another loan. I'm unemployed. We're getting kicked out at the end of the month. How are we supposed to raise a kid right now?" he asked.

“I don’t know.” Her hand became a fist against her belly.

He sat back in his chair, a look of consideration on his face. “What about your parents’ house?” he asked, and there was something odd in his tone—like he’d been waiting to bring it up all along.

“What about it?” Emma asked, instantly wary. Her stomach tightened with a feeling like dread.

“Well, we own it, don’t we?” he asked, eyebrow raised.

“Technically, we don’t own anything. The trust does. You know I can’t do anything with the house unless Daphne and Juliette both agree.” They were the names of strangers in her mouth. “We can’t take out a mortgage on it or sell it or anything like that by ourselves.”

The way the trust had been set up, they hadn’t been able to do anything with the house until Daphne turned twenty-one. By then, none of them had spoken to one another in years. It was easier to go on ignoring one another’s existences. Ignoring the house, and the horrors it held.

“I’m not saying sell it—not yet, anyway. But there’s nothing to stop us from living there,” Nathan said. He looked excited. Here it was: the perfect solution to all of their problems. Emma’s heart was rabbit-quick. He stood. He crossed the floor, put his hands on her arms.

“We can’t,” she said. It felt like she was forcing the words out against something solid. She never thought of it as the house where she’d grown up. Only the house where her parents died.

“This is the perfect solution. We move into your folks’ old house. We fix it up, talk to your sisters about selling it, and then we can buy our own house. It’s ridiculous that you’ve all just left it sitting there empty,” he said.

“I can’t go back there,” Emma said, shaking her head. Not to the house. Not to Arden Hills.

He made a frustrated noise. “Why not? Come on, Emma. You’re not being rational. We need a place to live. You own a house. It’s not complicated.” He gathered her to him, her face pressed against his chest. She closed her eyes and breathed in the familiar scent of him. “If you want to have this baby, we have to do this. We’ll move into the house. We’ll figure things out.”

The button of his shirt dug into her cheek. She let him hold her, and said

nothing.

Secrets shifted beneath her skin, ready to bloom.

★ ★ ★

Emma had never lied to Nathan about her past.

Not exactly.

She'd told him she had two sisters, one older and one younger, that they hadn't spoken in years, that they had drifted apart after their parents died when she was sixteen. That they had inherited the house—four bedrooms, three bathrooms, two acres of land.

That Juliette, already eighteen when their parents died, had left for college and never came back. That Emma and Daphne had been shuffled off into foster care—split up and then spit out.

He'd asked how her parents died. Of course he had. Delicately, pressing a kiss against her shoulder, his hand against her hip, because that was the only time she ever talked to him about her past—stripped bare in the dark, looking anywhere but into his eyes.

She hadn't lied.

She'd let him lie for her.

*"Was it an accident?"* he'd asked.

*"They never found the person,"* she had said, and let him think it was the answer to his question. Let him imagine screeching tires and winding roads.

Now, after the sun had set and they'd retreated to bed, she fixed her eyes on the slanted light from the street that stole through the blinds.

*"My parents didn't die in an accident,"* she said. She felt him shift behind her, felt the weight of his attention. *"They were murdered."*

*"Your parents were murdered?"* Nathan asked, hurt and accusation and bewilderment braided together plainly in his voice. She could read every strand. She turned, finally, to face him, but the shadows stole the contours of his expression from her.

In the safety of the dark, she told him. How they had died in the house. Been shot. A bullet to the brain, a bullet to the heart. A missing gun.

*"Why didn't you tell me?"* he asked.

*"I didn't want that to be what you knew about me,"* she said. *"I didn't*

want to think about it.”

He was silent. She could feel something between them, a rebalancing. His mistake weighed against her secret.

“You need to know,” she said. She traced her fingertips down the side of his face and silently prayed as she had so many times—a prayer of a single word. *Stay, stay, stay.* “If we go back, you’re going to hear some things.”

“What kind of things?”

“You’re going to hear that I did it,” she whispered.

He was quiet for a long time. When he spoke again, his words were toneless. “Did you?”

“No. It wasn’t me,” Emma said. She wondered if he believed her. She wondered if anyone had ever believed her.

He rolled over, half on top of her, her legs trapped beneath his. “It will be okay,” he told her. “We’ll be okay.”

His tongue slid between her teeth, and she wondered if he tasted the secrets lingering there.

The secrets still hidden within the walls of the house that was drawing them, inescapably, home.



EMMA

*Now*

Arden Hills was like a dead tree in a forest. Even as it rotted, new life had sprung up, feeding off the decay. Real estate agents and New York transplants took the place of beetles and fungi, that was all, and in a few years all that would be left of the version of the town Emma had grown up in would be a heap of rich loam beneath the new growth.

Outside of town, hobby farms cluttered the landscape, their chicken roosts decorated with faux-distressed signs reading LADIES ONLY OR THE HEN HOUSE, decorated with shutters and windowsill planters.

“We could get chickens,” Nathan said, startling Emma. This whole trip, they’d ridden in silence, thin as the skin on a cup of milk left out on the counter and yet never broken.

“You want chickens?” she asked, trying to imagine Nathan scattering feed to a quartet of clucking hens.

He nodded thoughtfully, thumbs tapping the steering wheel. “You said the house is on a bit of land, right?”

“A little over two acres out back,” she said absently.

“We could do chickens, a vegetable garden. Hell, maybe we could get goats,” he said. She didn’t point out that he didn’t even own a pair of boots, or that his one nonnegotiable expense when they moved into the duplex was hiring a landscaping company to handle the postage stamp of a yard.

She didn’t point out that this was supposed to be temporary.

“Fresh eggs would be nice,” she said instead.

He grinned widely at her, and her heart thumped once behind her ribs, hard. This was going to work out. Wasn’t it? He wasn’t angry anymore. He

was talking about chickens.

*“Are you sure you know what you’re getting into, going back there?”* Christopher Best had asked her. She’d called him three days ago, in the middle of packing up. It had been years since they’d seen each other, but she still called every once in a while. Kind of pathetic, that her lawyer was the closest thing she had to family.

*“People in Arden don’t forget,”* he’d said. But maybe he was wrong.

A few miles from the house, Emma directed Nathan toward the gas station and grocery store by the roadside. They’d need food, and she didn’t know if there would be basic supplies like toilet paper at the house.

They got out of the car, stretching limbs that had started to calcify on the long drive. Nathan laced his hands over his head and arched his back. His shirt rode up, baring a lightly furred belly, lean but without definition. Emma watched him from the other side of the car, falling without meaning to into a game she often played—imagining she was seeing her husband for the first time, as a stranger. What would she make of the scruff of beard on his jaw, his unusually long and elegant fingers? If they met again, would they ever have a second conversation?

She turned the game on herself, imagining what he would see. Thirty years old, with auburn brown hair she kept in a low ponytail. Skin that tanned easily and broke out in freckles every summer, a wardrobe of jeans and T-shirts and slouchy sweaters to throw over them in the colder months. She always thought of herself as nondescript, which was why it had puzzled her so much when Nathan showed such ardent and consistent interest in the beginning. She was soft-spoken, sometimes quiet to the point of paralysis. She had always been more comfortable talking to clients through the anonymity of the internet. She wasn’t good face-to-face.

*“You’re a hard one to get to know,”* Nathan had told her once, two months in. She wished that he had told her when he figured her out. So he could explain to her who she was, what she was like.

*“Penny for your thoughts?”* he said.

*“Just looking at you,”* she said, and he smiled, pleased at the attention. She tipped her face up to his to kiss him, and they walked into the store together hand in hand, the touch tender, as if each was afraid the other would

pull away.

Inside, Nathan drifted off to peruse the shelves of novelty mugs. She grabbed a basket from beside the door and headed toward the groceries. Her stomach roiling, she shopped like a picky toddler—graham crackers and peanut butter, a bag of cashews, a loaf of bread, raspberry jam, cereal. She spotted a tub of candied ginger and scooped some into a bag, remembering vaguely it was supposed to help with the nausea, which had arrived with calamitous intensity, as if making up for lost time. She hadn't been able to keep a proper meal down in days.

She added some frozen meals, disposable plates, and cutlery to the basket. At the last minute, she grabbed a bottle of white wine from a rack. It wasn't champagne, but this wasn't the housewarming they'd planned, either. Still, it felt wrong not to have something to toast with, even if she couldn't have more than a sip. Nathan was waiting at the register, a pack of toilet paper brandished like a prize.

As the woman at the counter rang up the groceries, Nathan chatted with her, his usual patter of friendliness. He liked to talk to people. Strangers in line, on the bus, sitting next to them at the movie theater. People opened up to him. Told him about sick grandparents and empty bank accounts and cancer scares before they even knew his name. It was nice, having him around. No one ever thought to talk to Emma when he was right there beside her.

"ID?" the cashier asked brightly, cheeks rounded in a smile, still looking at Nathan. Emma handed it over. The woman's eyes flicked down, up, down again, and the smile creased into a frown. "Emma Palmer?" she said, voice pitched too high.

"Can I have my ID back?" Emma asked. She tried to keep her voice level, but it hitched. Not this. Not again. Surely it had been long enough.

The cashier jerked, then shoved the ID back in Emma's hand. She finished ringing up the rest of the food without making eye contact. As soon as the groceries were bagged, Emma snatched them and strode quickly for the exit, ignoring Nathan's hand reaching to help with the load. She didn't slow down until they'd reached the car and she'd shoved the food into the back seat. She stopped then, hand on top of the sunbaked roof, a breeze making the frizz at the edges of her vision dance.

She drew in a deep breath and only then realized that Nathan was asking if she was okay.

“Fine.” Gravel crunched under her feet. The scent of gasoline from the nearby pumps made her gut churn.

“She knew who you were,” he noted neutrally.

“Seemed like it,” she said.

“Is that going to happen a lot?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she snapped.

He held up his hands in mock surrender. “Whoa, okay. I’m just asking,” he said. “I want to know what we’re in for here.”

“Let’s just get to the house,” she said.

He seemed for a moment like he was going to object. But then he nodded and got into the driver’s seat. She slid bonelessly into the passenger side.

The house lay on the eastern edge of Arden Hills proper. Here the streets were narrower, with a tendency to loop and wind around blind curves. At the turn leading up to the river, Emma made a warning sound to get Nathan to slow, and he cast her an annoyed look—then slammed on the brakes as the road twisted sharply, leading up to a narrow wooden bridge with steep slopes to either side. A broken guardrail showed where someone else had made the same mistake. Rattled, Nathan crossed the bridge at a crawl.

“Thanks for the warning,” he muttered. She pressed her lips together, let it go.

In contrast to the farmhouses and scrubby pastures they’d driven by earlier, there was a manicured uniformity to everything on this side of the river. The cars were new; the houses loomed behind gates and ruthlessly trimmed hedges. Nathan wore a small frown, and Emma realized she hadn’t prepared him for this.

The turn to the drive was easy to miss, concealed among the trees. “Here,” she said softly, and Nathan braked, pulled in. He stopped in front of the cast-iron gates with their gaudy calligraphic *P* emblazoned on each.

Beyond was a long drive leading up to a circular driveway, an empty fountain in the center, and rolling lawns to either side, with sparse woods beyond the house. Hedges lined the lawns and their walkways. On one side of the drive stood a carriage house, its white sides and open wooden shutters