

The background of the entire cover is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a park at night. It is raining, with numerous vertical streaks of light representing raindrops. Bare tree branches are silhouetted against a dark sky. In the lower right, a person is standing near a street lamp, which casts a soft, yellowish glow. The overall mood is mysterious and chilling.

“Chilling and atmospheric!” —JENEVA ROSE

NIGHT WATCHER

A NOVEL

**DAPHNE
WOOLSONCROFT**

HOST OF *GOING WEST*: A TRUE CRIME PODCAST

NIGHT WATCHER

DAPHNE
WOOLSONCROFT



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CENTRAL

New York Boston

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For those who have looked evil in the face.

*And anyone who has lost a loved one to a
monster.*

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“I have a perfect cure for a sore throat: cut it.”

—Alfred Hitchcock



Drawn by

NOLA

Age 8

1

HIM

The creak, the squeak, from in the night,
Is quite enough to cause a fright.
But when you see his wielding knife,
It's far too late, he'll take your life.
He lurks from deep beyond the gray,
He thrives as loose among the prey.
Like a fox, to his hen,
This "He" is called the Hiding Man.

His first victim's stifled scream echoes in his ears as he composes each line, acting as background noise to his typing. Mere hours ago, while he drew his blade across her throat, her lips pressed against his gloved hand, the woman wrestled for mercy. Mercy, compassion, pity that would never come. It now forms as an unforgettable memory in his mind, one he has been replaying repeatedly since its recent genesis.

In clean gloves, he tugs the poem from his aged typewriter and settles it delicately into a manila document mailer.

His breath is heavy against the mask, with only thin slivers of air available through the mouth slit he cut out himself. But wearing it completes his transition like new skin, letting him embody the man of his choosing—his making. He's finding it loathsome to remove the newly created mask from his head, nearly wishing it would melt into his flesh and become his

authentic face.

With his nondominant hand, he scribbles the Portland Police Department's address on the front of the mailer and thinks still of the screams, and the sirens approaching the dead woman's house, and the pigs finding his slaughtered hen. A tight smile forms beneath the fabric.

He knows this is only the beginning.

He's just getting started.

2

NOLA

Twenty Years Later

I play with the silver rings on my right hand while a raspy-voiced woman from Massachusetts spews a horror story she claims occurred just yesterday. Sliding them on and off my index and middle fingers, I let my mind wander to a different place. I don't know where it takes me, but I follow for half a minute or so. When I realize I've faded, I adjust in my seat and undertake my usual role of Attentive Radio Show Host.

During certain stories, I slip away into my own head, often wondering how many of the tales I'm told are elaborately crafted in hopes of fooling me on live radio. To my knowledge, this has happened several times, leaving me to scramble for a clever response. Most stories we're told feel authentic, the person's tone showcasing fear and realism. But I guess it depends on your beliefs.

Having heard stories like these my whole life, I automatically believe in it all. Spirits, aliens, even the boogeyman. It's hard enough to accept that we're all alive with skeletons and feelings and problems, spinning faster than we can comprehend on a giant sphere. Seeing doesn't have to be believing.

So far, the woman on the line—Maggie—has told me that she visited a lake outside of Boston with her granddaughter and decided to cut their rowing trip short after the previously sunny skies turned silver and

considerably wet.

As they were rowing back to shore, her eleven-year-old granddaughter turned around and saw what appeared to be a woman on the other side of the lake, standing at the shore, very still. And for some ungodly reason, the caller then decided to paddle closer to the unknown figure. She noticed that the woman hadn't moved an inch as she approached, but worse, that her mouth was gaped open and black, just like her eyes.

Some phrases of warning she should consider moving forward: "curiosity killed the cat" and the ever-simple "mind your business." I don't tell her this.

As the caller hurriedly plunged her paddle into the frigid water below, the creature woman, clad in a long white dress, dropped to the ground and scratched at the dirt like a wild animal.

The caller's fear is visceral, almost tangible; her story is somehow leaning away from hokey, especially when she explains that she wants to send us the photos her granddaughter took.

"We've heard stories about women in white, but this one is definitely unique," I tell the microphone.

"Neither of us can stop thinking about her eyes. They were the blackest I've ever seen," the caller says. "I'm telling you. She wasn't human."

I share a look with Harvey through the big window that divides the studio from the control room. He takes over, saying, "Well, let us know if anything else happens, Maggie. And for anyone out there listening, we'd love to know if you've seen something similar in the Boston area. Thanks for dialing in with this one."

He ends the call, and we go back and forth on air, discussing her story along with the terrifyingly real creature-woman we can see in the photos Maggie just sent us via email—which are better than most images we receive. After a night of supposed UFO sightings in the Midwest and a short ghost story from an unknown woman, I welcome this lady-on-the-lake tale.

"All right, Night Watchers. I'm Nola Strate, and this has been *Night Watch*. Until tomorrow night, from Telegraph One and KXOR, stay safe out there."

I pull my headphones off and massage the tips of my ears.

I'd think my ears would be used to these things after four nights a week, three hours per show, and five years of hosting. Instead, my body lightly rejects the technological advancement that is padded headphones.

"That was a great show," Harvey calls from the control room, his voice muffled by the glass barrier between us. I can see the iridescent sheen of his teeth from here as a smile crosses his mouth, his lightly stubbled jawline tightening.

I stare into his blue, sunken eyes a little too long before responding.

"I still can't get over the photos Maggie sent. I'm just going to be imagining her following me down to the bar. All by myself," I say with a hint of sarcasm, pulling the door open and snatching my bag from a cubby.

"If you wait a few minutes, I'll walk down with you. That, or face the wrath of Lake Lady." He pulls off his headphones and runs his hand through ear-length, chocolate hair, sweeping a tousled lock off his forehead.

"She can face the wrath of my need for some fresh air. If she dares," I say, desperate to get out of the studio.

Our routine includes walking to our favorite bar and drinking something that will warm our bodies after hours of chilling stories. Though, sometimes, I walk alone while Harvey wraps up and posts tonight's show to all the podcasting platforms. Usually that's my editor Josiah's job, but he took the night off for his daughter's dance recital.

Kids. Dancing. Important life stuff.

"I'll keep your seat warm," I shout on my way out the door.

I trudge down the dimly lit staircase that snakes to the KXOR building's main entrance. It's a quiet spot with many nighttime studio vacancies, as most of the company's shows spotlight in the daytime hours. That only adds to the unsettling feeling I get whenever I leave this place by myself after recording.

Old, battered brick walls.

A big, creaky door that slams loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood.