



## THE WATCHERS

(Mikela)

*We are everywhere, in every community. The watchers. The keepers of souls. I don't know how we recognize each other, but we do. And when we do, we feel known, at home.*

*I wonder sometimes if there was a time before I learned I had this gift. It seems as natural as breathing. But I know some weight in me lifts every time I find another one like me. I'm not complaining. Most of the time, the weight of my gift makes me feel safe. It makes the soles of my feet come alive and I feel all of one piece, grateful for the ground and the way it pushes back and gives me strength.*

*Many people believe that this gift is inherited. But not in a straight way, from father to son or mother to daughter. I like the idea that someone, a grandmother or uncle or great aunt, if they were still living, could look in my eyes and we would know each other for what we are.*

*My people also believe there need to be eight of us watchers of souls for the community to be safe. My community has been unsafe for as long as our memories, mine and my sister's and brothers' and my mother's and my father's. It's not that we watchers don't exist, but there aren't enough of us. That is why so many of my people have died at the hands of others.*

*My mother, when she threw my afterbirth in the river, gave a gift to others, but made her own world worse. We believe that where we bury the placenta and umbilical cord is our destiny. The umbilical cords of girls we bury inside the walls of our houses, so they*

*will stay at home to help their families. But my mother threw my cord in the river, something done only with sons. So they will travel far and bring back riches. That is why so many of our young men set out for the States carrying their families with them in their hearts.*

*That is not why my mother threw my cord in the river. She did it so I might escape. She did it to make up for what she did to my sister Natividad when she dug her cord out of the wall and threw it away in the same river. She threw my sister's cord away in disgust, just the way she wanted to throw away all the memories of the past, of where my sister came from. My mother wanted to throw away her own gift for life. And she wanted to take it back. That is why, two years later, she threw my afterbirth in the river as well. She wanted to give me what she couldn't give herself. She didn't know about my gift. She didn't know that this meant I would wander wherever my sister went, keeping her soul, even when it left her body, safely in sight.*

*My mother dug Natividad's umbilical cord out of the wall with a sharp stick one morning when my father was out in the fields. My sister had only been alive six days. My mother could feel it all happening again, the soldiers, so many of them. She wanted to dig the memory out of her body, out of her house, the way they dug the babies out of the living mothers and threw them in the trees. She wanted release, but with every thrust of the stick into the crumbling clay, it was as if she were killing herself with her own hand. She felt it was the will of God that was driving her hand against the wall of her house. It felt like she was fighting for her life. And it felt like she was dying.*

*Every time the stick went in, her stomach tightened, the bleeding stopped. I believe at that moment my mother still loved my father but hated his hope, the way he thought if he just acted in the old ways, the old faith would come back. He knew where my sister came from. He knew that half of Natividad came from our mother. He thought sealing her cord away in the house would make my mother whole again. But my mother wouldn't have it.*

*So much depends on how we do a thing. I see my mother, my sister feeding at her breast, throwing that muddy knot into the river. Throwing it with all her strength, weeping and screaming without sound. Hating my sister's busy mouth. Hating the nipple she couldn't take out of it. And I can see my mother two years later, my sister on her back, me at her breast, doing the same thing—but with a completely different purpose. She was asking for forgiveness. She was giving me what she most wanted—freedom.*

*I am grateful that my mother made my choices for me. So when the time came to leave, I did it without worrying. I know I will never go back again. But I know, as well, that I take my gift with me. And I am free to use it here, now.*

*But I am not very old or wise. That is why I look for the others. I've found several so far. Mario, the shoe shine boy in the park, he is one of them. And there is a foreigner with gold hair who sits in the park some days, he is one of them. And the man*

*who pulls the cart from the park every evening filled with everything my people have made and cannot sell, he's one of them too. There are more here, I know because this town has many communities, and we watchers are in all of them. I wonder if the wanderers among us watchers wander between communities as well.*

*Right now, my community is one person, my sister, Natividad, although I know soon there will be three of us. That is why I am looking for the other watchers. Natividad takes so much seeking, I know I will need help when the baby comes.*



### Chapter 3 STEALING

Mikela liked waking in the dark to the shuffling and murmuring of the older girls in the next room. She could recognize who they were by the tones of their voices. Antonia always woke first and would whisper her friend Analisa awake gently, like a mother. Together they would go off to the showers, Analisa swearing at the smell several steps before she reached the bathrooms. But it was better than home, Mikela thought. Better than the capital.

Her sister Natividad hadn't agreed with her, and only three months after the policeman had brought them here, Natividad had climbed up on Mikela's shoulders and slipped through the narrow opening in the window in the kitchen while the other girls were sleeping. Mikela had heard Natividad cry out as she landed on the ground, but Mikela didn't dare say anything. When Mikela met Natividad the next day on the way home from school as they had planned, she noticed her sister was limping badly. It was nothing, Natividad told her, compared to the yelling.

Mikela wished Natividad had had more patience. The new Mamí, once she had been there for several weeks, stopped screaming so loudly or so often. She never yelled at the younger girls like Mikela. It was the older girls, who were twelve or thirteen and eager to be women she was so angry at. But when she yelled at Natividad, she hadn't known what she was doing or what

would happen. Natividad was very quiet but very stubborn. Mikela could tell, as soon as Mamí Dolores started shouting, that Natividad went away somewhere inside herself, that the voice sounded too much like their mother for Natividad to stay in her body. But she hadn't expected Natividad to leave the girls' home, and Natividad hadn't expected Mikela to stay. Still, Natividad hadn't gone that far away and the mamás didn't know that she and Mikela met every day, or that Mikela knew she could go and join Natividad whenever she wanted to. Instead of the kitchen window Natividad had used to slip away, Mikela had found one in the bathroom that she could reach by standing on the faucets in the shower stall and pulling herself up over the edge of the window. She could get out without anyone else's help. Mikela was lucky that she was very strong—and also very quiet. She was much stronger than the other girls because she and Natividad came from the country. The girls from the city always complained about their work, but it was very little compared to the way things were for Mikela before she and Natividad ran away.

Natividad didn't like the way Mamí Dolores yelled at her and, even though Natividad was very smart, she didn't like the girls in her school, who made fun of the clothes she wore and the way she talked. Her voice still had the accent of their original language. Girls from the home stole, they said. That is why they were sent away from their families. And some of them sold themselves on the streets. It didn't matter that Mamí Concepción would tell them they were just jealous. "Many of you don't have people who welcome you home every day. Many of you don't know for sure there will be food on the table every evening. The girls in this home have a real home where they are never hungry and where they are always welcome." Mikela and her friend Juana had liked Mamí Concepción's fierce defense, but what the girls at the school said was true. The girls in the home stole—from each other and from their classmates. And if they liked the home it was because it *wasn't* home.

Some of the girls here, especially the ones who came from the capital, thought they were slaves here. They minded cleaning the bathrooms, doing the laundry, or making the meals in the large kitchen at the back of the home. But Mikela liked learning all these things—how to change the smell in the bathroom so it smelled like hope instead of fear, how to make the *atole* for breakfast or cake for dessert on their special days. Here they never cut firewood and carried it home on their heads or planted and picked corn or beans or walked miles before daylight to the mill to grind their corn for flour. Here the floors were stone and shone when she poured water over them.

Here the air wasn't filled with smoke, even in the kitchen, and she could see into the corners of every room. Here there were no ropes in the rafters and, except for Mamí Dolores, all the other mothers rarely raised their voices and, even more rarely, their hands. For it wasn't only her voice Mamí Dolores had raised against Natividad.

Mikela rolled on her side and nudged her friend Carmen who slept in the next bed. It was their week to help in the kitchen and the girls who went to school in the morning would be ready for their breakfast. They were impatient and yelled at Mikela and Carmen if they didn't bring the food quickly enough. Mikela thought they were funny and always laughed when they said things to her. But Carmen would start crying before long, so then Mikela would have to do all the carrying herself. She didn't like that. So, if she could have some of the food on the table before they came in, then they were less impatient, and Carmen wouldn't sit, weeping like a little baby, on Mamí Concepción's lap in the kitchen, while Mikela rushed back and forth by herself.

While Mikela waited for Carmen to dress, she pulled her knapsack from under her bed to make sure all her homework was ready. Natividad had helped her with it yesterday, but then Mikela had to copy it all over in her own writing or the teachers might know. Mikela could do her homework herself, but it made Natividad feel good to help her, and Mikela was worried about Natividad.

Natividad's body was very fat now, but her face and arms were very thin. Mikela stole food from the kitchens to take to her, but she knew Natividad shared it with her boyfriend, Pablo. Mikela thought Pablo probably asked nicely, but one time she saw a mark on her sister's arm. Since then, Mikela had been very careful to bring enough for two so there wouldn't be any more marks. Mikela didn't know, when the baby came, how she was going to be able to steal enough for all three of them.

Natividad didn't worry about food, though. What she wanted from Mikela was paper and pens—and these were getting even more difficult for Mikela to steal from the other girls' knapsacks at school. The stores kept their notebooks on shelves in the back of the store. Or inside a glass case where they could be seen but not touched. Either way, Mikela couldn't think of how she might take them without being seen. At school, she tried to steal from the older girls, especially the ones with the wooden cases because that meant they were in art or mechanical drawing classes and their paper was bigger and