

“Dunbar delivers a tumble through the shifting light of grief, and a forgiving forest floor on which to land.” LEIF ENGER, *New York Times* bestselling author

The
NET
Beneath
US

a novel

CAROL DUNBAR

The
NET
Beneath
US

CAROL DUNBAR



A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York

*For
Pickle E. Pie*

The land knows you, even when you are lost.

—Robin Wall Kimmerer

FALL

Ethan Arnasson bent to fasten the chain to the skid cart as the saws buzzed in the distance and the horses behind him stirred in the leaves and forest funk. A root popped beneath his feet, a shift deep below ground that sent a tremor through his backbone and knees.

He straightened and looked out.

There across the woods, beneath a great white pine, stood what could only be the ghost of his younger brother.

Robby stood solid and strong in the way that he always stood, wearing an orange helmet, rumbling his saw; he hopped around that pine skinny and quick; smart-mouthed and smiley Robby who everybody liked, who died one summer even though he was younger, dead now twenty years, and yet there he stood not fifty feet away.

Ethan watched transfixed. Robby's saw churned out a bright cloud of blue exhaust, and the air shimmered between them, cross-hatched with dusty bars of light. The blade sank into the tree, dust spraying out in a thick white plume. The smell of wood chips and gasoline ripened; the noise crested to a shrill pitch, then cut out. Robby flipped his visor up, tipped his head back, and the ghost disappeared.

Ethan fell slack against the skid. His heart hammered under his work jacket and he took out a handkerchief from his back pocket. Of course, it was just Silas working over there, his nephew Silas wearing his helmet, holding his saw. Ethan wiped the sweat

and dust from his worn-down eyes. It was uncanny how the boy moved so much like his father had, how he squinted up at that pine. Ethan still thought of Silas as the boy he was when his father died, but he'd grown now, hadn't he? Stepped up into the full sun of his life with the business he was running and the house he was building, married with a wife and kids; not a boy at all. This must be what parents meant when they said, *My, how time flies*.

Some things sneak up on you when you aren't even looking and spread themselves out across several years' time; other things change right away, inside the space of a single heartbeat.

Silas figured it out the moment before it happened. He stood back, peering up into the boughs of that pine. The saw idled, the horses chuffed. Ethan was only watching because he thought he saw a ghost, but then he knew it, too, the moment still and brightly lit as winter air.

Something was wrong with that pine.

Elsa Arnasson was making dirt. Wearing their son in a backpack carrier, with her long Nordic hair caught up loose and haphazard at her neck, she carried the empty compost container and walked up the hill away from the garden, crossing the field that was their front lawn and swinging her arms, because life in the country didn't mean you had to be content with the dirt you got. Nope. You could follow a recipe to make better dirt. New and improved dirt, because, she had discovered, everything about living in the country was about following a recipe.

Already she had made Christmas tree ornaments, vegetarian casseroles, and dyes made from onion skins and beets to color her own Easter eggs. That morning she'd made pancakes served with the wild blueberries she'd picked that summer by hand—berries so small they resembled capers, the mosquitoes so bad she thought she'd go mad. But she was starting to get the hang of it, life in the country, her body always in motion. And the recipe for dirt was simple: one shady patch of earth, a bushel of leaves, and scraps from your kitchen. Layer, water, repeat. She'd read that nearly a quarter of all household garbage could be used for compost, and now it was working, their first batch of topsoil, what gardeners called black gold, and she could turn it and touch it and crumble the dirt between her own two hands.

"We'll grow carrots and potatoes and mushrooms," she said to Finn as she went inside, everything a "we" with babies because experts agreed—explaining things helped them develop language

skills. Their daughter in first grade could already read. Hester had asked for pancakes that morning and Elsa had made them—with whole wheat flour and yoghurt she'd cultured from raw milk. She'd made yoghurt! Her eyes adjusted to the dimness of the house they were building into the side of a hill—what she thought of with some affection as their cave.

“Squash and corn and pun’kins.” She imitated a country twang, jerked her chin with a funky rocking motion, the baby riding along as she washed her hands at the kitchen sink. The water came not from the antique spigot but from the blue water jugs lining her countertop. And she'd never imagined it would take this long to build a house—they'd been living this way four years! But a person could get used to anything, she'd told Silas that morning, washing her hands in the pan of warm water she kept in the kitchen sink. She'd turned to him with a burst of affection.

He'd been sitting there with their two children, Silas, his back to her in a wooden chair, the sleeves of his plaid flannel rolled up. The muscles of his forearms tanned and strong as he tossed their daughter into the air. Hester's hair flew out like spokes around the sun and Finn banged away on his high chair tray. It was the picture of everything she'd always wanted—noise, color, mess. And love. Elsa could feel the love beaming out from every face.

It was never her dream to live this way—independent, not connected to the grid. She didn't grow up in the country, didn't grow up anywhere, and would never think of herself as a country woman even now. Before moving out here with Silas she hardly knew how to make her own toast let alone yoghurt, and gardening was something migrant workers did in a field. “We have a guy for that,” her father always said. But Elsa met Silas during a time in her life when she needed something more to believe in, and Silas had ideals big enough for them both.

Drying her hands, she hefted up the laundry basket with its wet clothes and headed back outside.

In her tall brown boots she crossed the porch into the sun and squinted, stopping to adjust to the bright outdoors. A breeze blew down leaves in a dry gold rain. Finn in his backpack tugged at her hair, just the two of them in a clearing on a warm fall day. Leaves cartwheeled past her feet, past the fire pit Silas dug for them and the folding chairs he put out within hearing distance of the baby monitor, and past the spot where they'd spent two summers camping in a trailer. Silas, so respectful of the money she'd given to invest in their land—the last of her mother's inheritance, what she thought of as Winnie's legacy—he did everything the right way and he did it himself, the permits and digging, the gravel and concrete, septic tanks and inverters with wiring and insulation and the trees he felled and peeled by hand. Why buy new fixtures made in China from plastic when you can go to an auction fifty miles away and buy solid brass for three bucks? Why spend six gallons of water per flush when you can incinerate and compost the ashes? Why eat meat when there are so many different kinds of legumes? Why indeed. She never imagined it would take this long, thought they'd have the house finished before Finn was born. It was such a relief to finally move in, but the house was only a basement with cold cinder-block walls and windowless rooms. She'd opened boxes of cookware and dishes, the silver chest and wedding china from her grandmother, and she didn't know what to do with these things, her old life so different from how she lived now—surrounded by mortar and nail guns, chain saws and mauls, the spiders and snakes winding through the grass.

But for the first time in her life, she was starting to feel it: that she belonged. Not just because she'd made a family here, but because she felt it—a connection to something bigger than just herself, the rolling land, the rousing air.

It came out from the dark pines behind the garden: a puffball that floated in the breeze.

It came like the white fluff of a dandelion only larger, an airy

jewel suspended in sunlight that seemed to glow although it was a hundred feet away. It moved on an invisible current and drifted through the trees, played peekaboo behind the boughs, bobbed in and out of shadow. It captured her full attention then because of how it crossed their field toward them, and then hovered, right in front of her, right at eye level—how friendly it seemed, interested, even! She wasn't imagining it—Finn in the backpack gurgled and kicked his legs.

She opened to the moment, forgot about the laundry basket in her hands, the baby on her back, and the house they were building. She forgot about everything and watched this puffball as a buzzing sensation moved through her, small at first, and then rising to fill her entire being, her whole body filled with a sense of rightness, a sense of peace so strong, she couldn't imagine feeling anything but good ever again. This beautiful day, this home they were building and the children they were raising, all of it exactly right, exactly as it should be. After getting so many things wrong, after losing her mom and leaving school and disappointing her dad, she was finally in the right place doing the right thing, and they would be okay.

She thought this, and the puffball whirled away, spinning off into the trees.

From out on the road came the honking of a car horn. It blasted through the trees as tires crunched along gravel, the horn blaring on and on, their driveway long and winding because Silas had wanted their house set way back from the road. Through the bare branches the sun flashed along the vehicle, and Elsa recognized the Jeep that belonged to Luvera Arnasson, Silas's aunt who lived eight miles up the road. She and Ethan had practically raised her husband on their small dairy farm, they'd lived here all their lives—and Luvera with her country know-how and thirty years' more life experience with *everything* would no doubt point out that she, Elsa, was doing something wrong.

But not even Luvera could get to her—everywhere under her skin still tingled and buzzed. Luvera turned the car around in the dirt lot with her window rolled down and her continuous honking, as if Elsa weren't standing right there.

"There's been an accident," Luvera shouted, almost barking. "Ethan and Silas. We have to get to the logging site. Now."

Her words had jagged edges, chaotic lines. Her hair tied back with bangs over her small, peering eyes.

"Elsa?" Luvera leaned forward. "Did you hear what I said? We have to go now. Get in the car."

"Yes." She looked around. This beautiful day, the house they were building. "I hear." She pulled out the plastic legs on the backpack—what she thought of as landing gear—and set her son down. Worked her shoulders free from the straps and turned to Finnegan Arnasson, nine months old. *An accident?* she thought, kissing his feet. *Did we have an oopsie-daisy accident?* She couldn't feel bad. Spilling a glass of milk at dinnertime was an accident, but nothing to get worked up over.

"I should get his diaper bag," she said, lifting out Finn. "I should run up to the house."

"Okay, fine. Leave him here." Luvera unbuckled her seat belt and hustled out of the car. "Do what you need to do but hurry. I'll get him buckled in."

Luvera took her little boy. Even though she had no children of her own, Luvera had purchased a used car seat and installed it in her Jeep. She kept an antique high chair in her kitchen and a children's Bible in the living room. She also canned her own jam and raised chickens and made her own soap from the goats she milked by hand.

"What are you still standing there for? Go go go!" she said. "And get enough diapers. We might be gone awhile."

We might be gone awhile. Elsa folded up the phrase like she folded up the diapers and clothes. She packed a bag in the cool,

quiet house, while her thoughts floated like the puffball in the breeze. There were no problems, nothing had weight. *The logging site. An accident.*

She thought about the last time Silas had an accident, the summer they were living in the trailer. He was working at the sawmill on their back forty. It was hot, the night air filled with heat lightning and fireflies. She'd made dinner over an open campfire but he never came, and after getting Hester to sleep, she went back there into the woods by herself.

It was hard to see, the air hazy, cobwebbed with dusk. She found him working late, taking apart the whole sawmill, humming to himself.

"What happened?" She tried to sound amused but was actually horrified by the sight of things, the splintered logs, the jagged teeth of a crooked blade. She expected there to be blood on his hands but he only took the thermos she brought him and grinned.

"I know it's a mess," he laughed. "Broke the welds and everything but it's my fault, I was rushing." The saw had kicked back and torqued the carriage out of alignment, causing a massive jam, wrecking the blade.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

And he told her, as if it were obvious, "Keep on keeping on."

She came out of the house with the diaper bag on her shoulder, Luvera bent over in the back door of the car, the window rolled down, the engine still running.

"Luvera?"

"Oh, thank goodness." She backed out, shut the car door.

"Are they okay?"

Luvera straightened. "It's bad," she said to Elsa, sending the words down like a hammer to the pearl of her day.