

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THAT SUMMER

Jennifer Weiner



An
eShort
Story

Off Season

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**Jennifer
Weiner**

Off-Season

AN eSHORT STORY

ATRIA BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

“A writer?”

The agent smirked at the familiar tone—excitement, fascination, a slightly morbid curiosity. The way kids sometimes sounded when they glimpsed some odd-looking animal at the zoo. “She is. One of mine, as it happens.”

“An actual writer. Staying at our house.” Donna Jenkins’s voice had turned dreamy. “How exciting!”

“Very exciting,” the agent agreed, and wondered how much of Donna’s enthusiasm had to do with the idea of an actual, published writer inhabiting their house, and how much could be ascribed to the extra \$60,000 she and her husband would be making by renting their place for the off-season, when all the summer people returned to the cities they’d left in June, leaving their big, empty houses behind. “But she’s got some requirements.”

“Oh?”

“She needs absolute privacy to work. She can’t be disturbed or distracted. She can’t have anyone in the house, or around it. No workmen, no lawn service, no cleaning ladies. Nobody shoveling out the drive, or coming to repoint the brickwork. Just her.”

“Hmm.” The agent could hear Donna thinking, weighing the inconvenience of a troublesome houseguest against the paycheck the guest would bring. “We were planning on having some things done in the winter. The living room needs to be repainted, and we were going to replace the carpet in the—”

“I understand,” the agent interrupted. “If it’s too much of a disruption, I can keep looking.”

“No! No. I’m sure we can reschedule everything.” Now the agent could hear a hint of desperation in Donna’s tone. Her husband, Mark, had taken an early pandemic-related retirement package from the bank that had employed him. The money faucet that had gushed reliably all through the 1990s and the aughts and

the boom-boom Trump years had slowed its flow to a trickle. If Donna and Mark were going to keep their summer palace, they'd need a new income stream.

"It's just—a six-bedroom house for one woman." Donna gave a nervous giggle. "Her books must sell very well."

"Not yet," the agent said. *But they will*, he thought. He'd taken steps to make sure of it.

• • •

Sarah Vernon stepped into the foyer of a mansion that overlooked the sea. Weak winter sunshine came slanting through the skylight two stories overhead and through the floor-to-ceiling windows she could see down the hall, illuminating what she was certain had to be called a great room.

The house was very grand. Sarah herself was not. She was big, tall and broad-shouldered, with hands like shovels and feet so large that she had to order her shoes from a website she was pretty sure catered to drag queens. Her hair was mousy and had started turning gray right around the time Sarah turned thirty-five. She had thin lips, and her eyes, pale greenish-gray, protruded slightly, giving her a rabbit aspect. If she were describing herself in a novel, she'd use *forgettable* if she was feeling generous; *unlovely* if she wasn't.

Sarah's single piece of luggage rested by her feet, her laptop bag hung from her shoulder. A gorgeous fringed rug, in shades of crimson and tangerine and brilliant gold, spread out in front of her. Sarah found herself afraid to set foot on it, afraid to move, or even breathe too deeply. *A writer's retreat*, her agent had said. Her new agent. Sarah could barely believe she had an agent at all. She found it even less plausible that the new agent was Will Presser. Will Presser, who represented the award-winning and the bestselling and was a celebrity in his own right. Everything Will

Presser touched was a success, and now, Will Presser had touched her.

Unconsciously, Sarah's lips pressed together, covering her protruding incisors. She shifted her laptop bag, hitching it higher up onto her shoulder, and made herself take her first steps into her temporary home.

Sarah had published three novels by her fortieth birthday, three well-written, tightly plotted thrillers. *Elevated* thrillers, her previous agent used to say, although Sarah knew that not everyone agreed; that one of the publishers who had passed on her debut said that the book was beautifully written, but a little quiet, a little small. Her publisher said, and Sarah herself knew, that there was an endless appetite for the kind of books she wrote. That might have been true, but, if it was, readers were getting their fill elsewhere, not even bothering to taste what Sarah set out for them. In spite of the glowing reviews in the trade publications—and, once, in the *New York Times Book Review's* "On Crime" column—none of Sarah's books had sold more than five thousand copies, or had earned enough money, either in advances or royalties, for Sarah to make fiction her full-time job. She adjunct-professor'd and freelance edited, she took temporary work proofreading legal documents and wrote speeches and blog posts for executives and newsletters for hospitals and community colleges. With her sales trending steadily in the wrong direction and that first publisher's assessment forever seared in her brain, Sarah had not been surprised when the publishing house she'd worked with for her first three books had declined to make an offer on her fourth, and when, subsequently, her agent had dropped her. "We all love you," her former agent, a distressingly young woman, had said, three weeks after Sarah had sent in her pages, weeks that Sarah had spent with her nerves cranked tight, jumping every time her phone buzzed with an incoming email or call and glaring at it when it didn't. "We think you're a real talent. We just think someone else might have better luck breaking you out."

Sarah had listened, the phone tight against her face, feeling like she'd fallen down a dark, dark well; a well with no bottom; like there would be no end to her disappointment and her shame and her sorrow. She thanked the young woman politely, even as she noted the beeps of call-waiting and incoming emails and texts in the background, the sound of other, less-disappointing clients. "I appreciate everything you've done for me," she said. "I know you tried." She ended the call, set down the phone, then bent forward, slamming her desk with her fists, and screamed, a horrible, guttural sound; the sound of a dying animal, finally admitting defeat.

Except Sarah wasn't dead or defeated. Not quite yet. She googled until she found Will Presser's website. For a long moment, she stared at the picture of the agent who'd been nicknamed the Viper. Then, her fingers slamming into the keyboard, she'd bashed out an email. AUTHOR SEEKS AGENT, she'd written in the subject line, followed by a paragraph of introduction, a link to her website, and, in conclusion, a bald, unvarnished request: *I know I need a new team to take my sales to the next level—or, really, if I'm going to have any kind of career at all. I'm hoping you'll be willing to take me on.*

As shocked as she'd been to find the guts to write to Will, Sarah was even more surprised when the man called her. "Please hold for Will Presser," a smooth, female voice had said, and there he was, the man himself. "I've read your books," he said, in a voice that was low and intriguing. *Sexy*, she thought, *but with a rasp*. A bite. "And I agree with what you said in your letter. The right people ought to be able to break you out. And I think that I can help."

He'd invited her to dinner at a fancy sushi place, a restaurant whose ten tables were all booked three months out. Sarah had fretted over her clothes—nothing looked right, and she couldn't afford anything new. She'd finally settled on black pants and an ivory-colored blouse with pearl buttons, with a deep V of a collar that exposed the skin of her chest, and the dip at the hollow of her

throat. Once, a boyfriend had called her collarbones sexy. Sarah suspected that her long-ago beau had been desperate to find something about her that he could praise. She imagined him cataloguing her various parts—hair? eyes? breasts?—and finding each of them wanting until he'd finally arrived at her blameless clavicles. So Sarah had put them on display, and worn her hair in a twist that left her neck exposed. She'd spritzed perfume on her pulse points, fastened her mother's pearls around her throat, and gone out into the darkness to meet the Viper.

Will Presser had been waiting for her at the bar, wearing a black shirt beneath a blazer made of silky black suede. She could remember his teeth, flashing startling white in the darkness of his neatly trimmed mustache and goatee, when he rose to greet her. He'd kept his hand hovering above the small of her back as they walked to the table, where he'd pulled out her chair with a flourish. The sushi had been decadent, delicious, especially to someone who'd been living on ramen and beans and rice. Sarah remembered the unctuous bits of fish, rich and fatty, slipping down her throat, the bright crunch of seaweed salad, slicked in sesame oil, the burn of warm sake, tracing a fiery path through her chest each time she'd swallowed. They'd talked about publishing first, played *Do you know* and *Have you read*. They'd discussed different editors at different publishing houses, the new Reese pick, the most recent scandals. An author who'd cheated on her wife at Yaddo, another, formerly sober, who'd gone on a bender at Bread Loaf that had concluded with him naked on a snowmobile; the pair of young women who wrote a series of mysteries together, only, Will said, lowering his voice, they didn't actually do any of the writing at all.

"So who writes them?" Sarah could feel the alcohol humming pleasantly in her blood; the taste of raw fish lingered on her tongue. She felt good, relaxed, and happy, at ease in her own skin, for once.

Will lowered his voice, leaning in so close that his knee bumped hers beneath the table. “You know Victoria? Their agent?” Sarah did know Victoria, who was a plump, grandmotherly woman in her seventies. “She does the writing. The girls—” Will made a dismissive, brushing-off gesture with one long-fingered hand. “They’re just there for the author photos.”

Sarah could feel her cheeks flushing as she giggled the laugh of a younger, smaller woman. She wondered how many secrets like that there were in the writing world, and if there was anyone or anything in publishing that Will didn’t know. She was also wondering if this was entirely a professional meeting, or whether it was something more like a date. *Oh, sure*, said a voice in her head, the one that sounded a lot like her father. *Because what Will Presser’s been waiting for his whole life is a forty-one-year-old with buck teeth who’s still practically a virgin.* Sarah had, in fact, had sex in her life. Just not much of it, and what she’d had had not been good. She’d been with only two men, and neither one had been an actual boyfriend (one of them, humiliatingly, would only see her between the hours of midnight and 6:00 a.m., sneaking into her dorm, probably after he’d been out with someone else, and sneaking back out before the sun came up). Sarah had never been married, never even lived with a man. As sure of herself as she felt behind the keyboard, moving her invented people through their invented lives, that was how insecure she felt with a real, live man in the actual world.

At some point—a point that coincided with the pair of them finishing a second bottle of sake and Will, without consulting her, ordering a third—the evening started to get soft around the edges. Sarah could remember Will saying *Every single one of your books should have hit the list*, and cringed as she remembered telling him *I’ll do anything. Anything you tell me.* Her voice had sounded high and girlish, incongruous, coming from her broad-shouldered frame, as she’d made those vows, as she’d promised to put herself, and her career, entirely in his hands.

She wasn't surprised when he'd suggested going back to his place for a nightcap. She'd let him steer her out of the restaurant and into the car waiting at the curb. She could feel the heat coming off him, with his shoulder brushing against hers in the backseat; could smell his cologne, a little musky, a little smoky, like something charred. The thought of sophisticated Will Presser smelling like a Weber grill the day after the Fourth of July made her giggle. Will laughed with her, as if he knew what she was thinking and was in on the joke.

Sarah had wiped her eyes "I'll do anything," she'd blurted again, and then had felt her face get hot as she realized how that sounded.

Will's hand was a warm weight on her forearm; his raspy-sexy voice comforting and certain. "I know," he'd said, very softly. "I know you will."

Then everything had gone blank until the morning, when Sarah had found herself sitting upright and fully dressed in Will's living room. Will, too, was dressed, except for his shoes, and he was talking on the phone. His feet looked like small pink animals as he walked over the dark-lacquered floorboards. Sarah filed the phrase away—*small pink animals*—thinking that she'd use it in her work. Thinking about Will's feet meant that she wasn't thinking about what had happened during the hours she couldn't remember.

Her ivory blouse was spattered with soy sauce, her pants were stiff with something she didn't want to think about, her head ached terribly, with a pain so sharp that her eyes watered. Had they gone to bed? Should she ask? Or would he be insulted if they had, and she couldn't remember? She looked at him, trying to decide. In the unforgiving morning light, she could see the lines around Will's eyes, the discoloration of his skin, which made him look his age, whatever that was (fifty? sixty? sixty-five?).

He ended his call, pocketed the slim, silvery phone that she was sure was the very, very latest, and smiled at her. "I think what you need is a writer's retreat. I've made the arrangements," he'd said.

“There’s a car waiting downstairs. You’ll be on the one o’clock ferry to Elder Island. Have you ever been?” He must have guessed, from her shocked face, that no, Sarah had never been to the ultraexclusive enclave, between Martha’s Vineyard and the Cape. “I’ve got a home there, and I’ve rented you a place.” He turned away, giving her his profile as he looked out his window, down at the city. “It’s a wild place.”

“Wild, like parties?” Sarah’s mouth felt very dry, and her thoughts, and her body, felt sluggish, like her heart was taking an extra-long time with each beat.

“Well, in the summertime, sure. But that’s not what I meant. Wild, like unspoiled. You’ll like it there.”

“But—my job—” She’d gotten a part-time position teaching English at a prep school where tuition for a semester cost more than she’d made in the last eighteen months.

“Art demands sacrifice,” said Will, with a wink. “And I can give Perry a call.” Perry was Perry King, the headmaster of the school and, it turned out, a friend of Will’s. While Sarah was trying to remember if she’d told Will where she’d been teaching, he was talking about the arrangements. “It’s a fully winterized house. You’ll be comfortable. It’ll be quiet. I’ll make sure you aren’t disturbed, and I’ll advance you money for food and incidentals.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Do you have Venmo?”

Sarah’s mind was whirling madly from one thing—her job! her apartment! Elder Island!—to another, pinballing among all of the reasons why she couldn’t leave right now. Not the least of which was: she had fewer than three thousand dollars in her checking account.

“Don’t think this is charity.” Will smiled. “I’ll be taking the cost of the rental out of the advance I’m going to get you.”

“But...”

“Yes,” he’d said, and put his hands on her shoulders, his gaze boring into hers. “I’m sure.”

And that, it seemed, had been that. Will had escorted her downstairs and she’d climbed into the car—the same one from the previous night. At her apartment, she’d thrown clothes and books and chargers into a bag. She’d left a note for her roommates, along with a check for her portion of the next month’s rent, and the car had waited for her, and had driven her to the ferry, which had taken her to Elder Island, which, Google informed her, was a thirty-five-square-mile island with a year-round population of just under three thousand (99 percent of them were white), a population that increased by a factor of ten in the summer. The average price of a single-family home was \$3.3 million. There’d been Native Americans there, once. Most of whom had died of smallpox in the 1740s and 1750s, after white settlers deliberately infected them. *Some residents believe that the island is cursed*, Sarah read. *They say that Chief Wanahinpah’s dying proclamation was that the spirits of wild animals would inhabit the settlers’ souls, that they would tear at one another with tooth and claw until the tides ran red with blood.*

Nice.

Sarah gathered herself and went to the kitchen. The pantry was stocked with everything she liked, right down to her preferred brand of almond milk and the flavors of oatmeal. She wondered how Will had done it, how he’d chosen what she would have picked for herself and gotten it all here. *Money*, she thought. If you’ve got enough money you can do anything. The refrigerator, too, was full; the options a little heavy on the red meat, but that was men for you. Steaks and chops and burgers. After her mother died, that had been all her father would eat, with a baked potato as the only vegetable. How would you like that cooked? a waitress would ask. *Bloody*, her dad would say, or *Still mooin’*, making what passed, in the Vernon household, for a joke as he bared his teeth in what passed, in the Vernon household, for a smile.

Sarah walked upstairs and chose a bedroom, large and airy and beautifully, if impersonally, decorated in soothing beiges and creams. The bed had a padded headboard, the mirror that hung over the expansive dresser looked like a genuine antique. She unpacked her bag: two pairs of sweatpants, a long cardigan that looked more like a blanket than an actual garment. Wool socks and turtlenecks, and her favorite flannel nightgown, high necked, with a ruffled yoke and sleeves. A ridiculous, girlish thing, and she probably looked like an elephant when she wore it, but who'd see her, out here?

She put the nightgown into the top drawer, along with her underwear and bras, and walked through the house, inspecting the kids' rooms and the guest rooms, the lavishly appointed bathroom, the living room, with its bookshelves stocked with bestsellers. In the kitchen, she made herself scrambled eggs and toast for dinner, and then a cup of tea (*and thus, she thought, is my transformation to little old lady official and complete*). She set her laptop on the kitchen table and stared at it, the way a wrestler stares at his opponent across the ring.

Where do stories come from? she remembered asking her father when she was a girl, right around the time she'd learned to read. Her mom had died of leukemia when Sarah was three. It had just been the two of them until she'd left for college, her poor father, who'd read his last novel in high school, and his strange, plain, book-besotted daughter who'd read her first copy of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* so many times that the book had fallen apart.

I dunno, her dad had said, shrugging. *People just make them up.*

But how? Sarah had persisted. She couldn't imagine, back then, just being able to make something up, to invent a whole world, and people, and things that happened to them. *How do people just make up stories?*

I dunno, her dad had said again. He'd cracked open a beer, adjusted his bulk in the recliner... and then, instead of telling Sarah to go play, or not to pester him, that there was a game on, and he worked all week and was trying to relax, he said, *Maybe the west wind whispers it in their ears*. It stuck in her mind, because it was one of the only fanciful, metaphoric things that her father, who'd worked his whole life as a school custodian, had ever said.

If only it were that easy, she thought, touching the button that would bring her laptop to life. Her plan was to write for an hour, maybe two, but when she looked up, it was two in the morning. Somehow, six hours had flown by. Her mouth was dry, and her bladder ached, and her hands felt cramped and stiff.

She shook her head, settling her hands at the small of her back for a stretch, did a few shoulder rolls, and took herself off to bed, where she plunged into dreamless sleep, with the clouds covering and uncovering the full moon, sending shadows drifting over her face.

• • •

Bucky Knight was the caretaker for many of the better houses on the Island, and Vaughn Madison maintained hot tubs and pools. The two men, both Island natives, usually saw each other at least once or twice a week in the summer months, at one house or another. Bucky would have been called out to fix a broken window blind, or to unclog a toilet, and he'd find Vaughn's truck blocking the driveway, and Vaughn himself by the pool, shirtless as he slowly worked his skimmer through the water.

"I don't know why he won't wear a shirt," Bucky had told his wife, Laura, on numerous occasions. "He's got a beer gut, and man boobs."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," Laura would say, and Bucky would shake his head and wonder if Vaughn saw himself as

some still fit, muscular pool boy, and not a gone-to-seed, mostly bald fellow of fifty who lived alone with his dog.

Bucky locked his truck and stepped into Elder Island's only year-round bar. He let his eyes adjust to the dimness and got himself settled on the stool next to Vaughn's. They clapped each other on the back. Bucky got himself a club soda and bought his buddy a fresh beer.

"How's life treatin' ya?" Vaughn asked, in his broad New England accent.

"Can't complain," Bucky said.

"Heard the Jenkinses have a tenant for the winter," Vaughn said.

Bucky nodded. He'd been briefed by Mrs. Jenkins, had heard all about the tenant, and her requests. "Guess I won't be going up there much. Mrs. Jenkins told me the tenant doesn't want to be disturbed. And she doesn't want anyone in the house but her. She wants to be left completely, absolutely alone."

"Weird, huh?" Bucky asked.

"Weird," Vaughn agreed with a nod. Of course, the men were used to odd behavior from the Island's wealthy summer people. The Moores were nudists—Bucky had learned, the hard way, to call in advance and confirm his appointments if he didn't want to encounter Mrs. Moore swimming or sunning or playing badminton in the altogether. The Singhs made him wear paper booties over his shoes when he came into their house, and old Mr. Hopper signed his notes, in wavering cursive, with his name, and then Honey, who was his standard poodle.

Vaughn's beer arrived. He drank off half in a single swallow and belched resoundingly. "Wonder what her story is."

"Well, we poor working stiff's aren't meant to find out." Bucky had no intention of telling Vaughn that curiosity had gotten the best of him, and that he'd looked up the Jenkinses' tenant online,

but he'd only been able to find a single, black-and-white headshot, with a one-sentence biography. *Sarah Vernon lives in New York*. Every article used the same headshot, a black-and-white picture of a remote-looking woman with dark hair and light eyes who could have been anywhere from thirty to fifty.

“Laura says she’s probably getting over a broken heart.”

“Oh, well. If Laura says it...”

Bucky thumped Vaughn’s shoulder. Not gently.

“Maybe she’s a sex addict,” said Vaughn. “Maybe she’s worried that if she sets her eyes on a gorgeous specimen like me, she won’t be able to control herself.”

“Oh,” said Bucky. “I’m sure that’s it. Mystery solved.” Personally, he thought it more likely that Sarah was the regular kind of addict, whose stay on the Island amounted to what they referred to in the rooms as Doing a Geographical. New state, new town, new house were all supposed to equal a fresh start. Except wherever you go, there you are. And it wasn’t as if an enterprising or needy soul couldn’t find his or her preferred poison on the Island, which had four package stores and a brand-new marijuana dispensary called the Piping Plover.

“You still gettin’ paid?” Vaughn asked. “Even if you can’t do any caretaking?”

Bucky nodded. “You, too?” Vaughn’s contract usually included a visit each month of the off-season, where he’d make sure that the pipes hadn’t frozen, the pool covers were still in place, and that wild animals hadn’t chewed through the hoses.

“You betcha,” said Vaughn. “It’s part of my contract. They pay me, whether they use me or not.”

Bucky lifted his glass, and Vaughn raised his. They clinked a toast.

“To no-show jobs.”

“To rich writers.”

“*Salud.*”

“*Prosit.*”

They drank.

• • •

Sarah Vernon woke from a nightmare with a scream dying behind her lips. Her limbs felt heavy, laden with dread and guilt, and a question was pounding in her brain. *What have I done, what have I done?*

Bad dream, she told herself. It was just a bad dream. Whatever dread or guilt she felt wasn't related to anything she'd done, it was the by-product of this new place, and her terrible dream, the details of which were already fading. There'd been a dark forest, the moon obscured by clouds, and she'd been running, chasing something, her feet bare and her heart pounding and her belly achingly empty, desperately hungry. She remembered Will Presser, her agent, had been part of the dream. He'd shown up in the forest, naked. Sarah cringed, thinking that this had to be some kind of violation to imagine your literary representative without clothes on, even if you did it accidentally. Will's body had been very pale, almost gleaming in the moonlight as he'd crouched over something dream-Sarah hadn't wanted to see, and he'd said what he'd said that night at dinner. *Art demands sacrifice.* Then he'd raised his dripping hands....

What have I done?

It made no sense, thought Sarah, and swung her legs out of the bed. Her days on Elder Island had been blameless: Up at six for eggs and bacon. A brisk walk along the water, then back to the kitchen table for her first stint at the laptop. Write until one o'clock. Break for lunch, which, lately, was hot dogs, cut into chunks and cooked in a pot with a can of baked beans, or tuna, straight from the can. Another walk, almost a forced march

around the property, and sometimes a phone call with Will, who called every few days to check in. Back to the computer for another four hours. Something easy—a burger or a steak, cooked in the cast-iron skillet, with a salad on the side—for dinner. Then, sometimes, more writing, before she fell into bed, exhausted, and woke up the next morning, ravenous. She'd planned on doing some exploring, going into town to see if any of the shops were open, checking out the library, even trying to find Will's house, but the story had her so tightly in its grip that even bathroom breaks felt like wasted time. *But art demands sacrifice*, she thought, and reminded herself that her writing had never, ever flowed so easily.

In New York City, the words had come at a maddening, constipated trickle, and during the two actual writers' retreats she'd attended, they hadn't come at all. But here, on Elder Island, the story was gushing out of her, sometimes so fast that her fingers couldn't keep up with her thoughts. And it was good work, too, the story of a marriage, where the reader would start off sympathizing with the poor, cheated-on wife and her sickly, asthmatic daughter, only to discover that the wife was not really a victim, that the daughter wasn't actually sick, and that nothing was as it had seemed. This book's details and description were as rich and vivid as anything she'd ever written, and the story was not, by any stretch, quiet or small. Sarah felt, even more than she normally did, that she was both writer and reader, the person telling the story and the one who couldn't wait to find out what happened next. It felt like the story was something that existed independently from her; like it had its own voice, which would mutter or whisper in her ear, telling her what came next. *Like a baby*, she thought, *growing in the womb, drawing sustenance from its mother while being its own thing entirely*. Like the west wind, whispering its tales, and she'd finally figured out how to listen.

Sarah padded down the hallway, hurrying along on her big, bare feet, feeling the guilt dissipate like smoke. She couldn't wait to get down to the kitchen, couldn't wait to open up her laptop and

fall back into the world of her story and find out what happened next.

• • •

Elise Crooks could not believe what she was hearing. “I’m sorry,” Mrs. Jenkins repeated, “but we’ve got a tenant, and she’s very particular. She can’t be disturbed. There can’t be anyone on the property.” She lowered her voice. “She’s a writer.”

Elise rolled her eyes. Like the Island wasn’t crawling with writers, of fiction and nonfiction, published and aspiring (she’d learned, after receiving a stinging rebuke from one of her clients, that you never, ever said unpublished, which implied failure, you said *aspiring*, which implied hope, even if the aspirer in question was on the wrong side of forty).

“I don’t want to disturb your tenant, but I won’t be in the house,” Elise said, in case Mrs. Jenkins had forgotten where her roses were located. “I’ll be out by the pool, and I’ll be in and out in under an hour. I promise, she won’t even know I’m there.”

Mrs. Jenkins had sounded truly regretful. “I wish I could say yes,” she’d said. “But this woman—well, her agent—was very explicit. Nobody goes in the house, nobody goes near the house. He made me promise.”

“I understand,” said Elise, who didn’t. Casually, she asked, “Is this writer anyone I would have heard of?”

“I’d never heard of her,” said Mrs. Jenkins. “Her name is Sarah Vernon, and her agent seems to feel she’s got a breakout book inside of her, and that’s what she’s writing at our place!” Brightening, she said, “I wonder if she’ll thank us in the acknowledgments.”

Elise forced herself to press her lips together, not to scream at the silly woman on the other end of the phone. Elise was seventy-four years old, and she’d tended gardens on Elder Island since she’d opened her business more than fifty years ago. She was the best of

the three gardeners on the island. In the annual Elder Island Garden Competition, her gardens had taken the top prizes for almost each of the last twenty years. Her espaliered roses were especially coveted. Elise had a special technique, honed over the years, a way of coaxing and training that got the flowers to bloom against a brick wall in sweet-scented, stunning profusion, all summer long. Off-season maintenance was the secret to her success... and if she couldn't prune the Jenkinses' roses, years of her hard work would be undone.

"Mrs. Jenkins, I hear what you're saying. But I want to be clear: If I don't cut those roses back, you're not going to be happy at all when you come in the spring."

Mrs. Jenkins sighed. "I know it's a sacrifice. But we agreed to this woman's terms."

Elise ended the call and shook her head. People had no idea what it took to train roses, to have them climb up a wall and spread out along a trellis. They thought it just happened, like magic, that it wasn't the result of careful, thoughtful, deliberate attention, and hard work. *Years* of work. And now, to be told that she couldn't give her plants what they needed!

Outrageous, she thought, the wrinkles around her lips deepening as she frowned. But that was summer people for you; clueless and rich, toddling around like giant babies in the fog their money generated, not caring who they hurt. They just had no idea.

• • •

Sarah woke up the next morning from another terrible dream, the now familiar guilt pressing down on her chest like a millstone, the same question repeating itself more and more loudly.

What have I done?

"Nothing," Sarah said out loud. Her voice was startling in the silence. Her whole body ached. Even the tiniest turn of her neck

sent sickening waves of pain rolling through her. She breathed in, slowly, through her nose, willing herself not to be sick, wondering what had happened. She was thinking about pregnancy again. About Rapunzel, and how Rapunzel's mother had been so desperately craving the taste of a certain green during her pregnancy that she'd sent her husband into the witch's garden to steal it. Maybe Sarah's story was hungry, and maybe, instead of greens, it wanted meat.

Sarah felt a shudder roll through her body. Her stomach lurched. *You're being silly*, she told herself, and pushed back the sheets, swinging her legs out of bed. When she looked down at her bare feet, her heart froze in her chest, and she forgot to breathe.

Her feet were dirty. Not the kind of dirty that could be explained by walking barefoot indoors, either. They were caked with mud, and her shins were scraped and scabbed. One of her toenails had been torn off completely, another was ripped at the quick. When she reached down to brush some of the mud away, she saw something under her fingernails. She clenched her hands into fists and whipped them behind her back, squeezing her eyes shut for good measure.

What the fuck?

What the actual, living fuck?

She voiced a terrible, quavering moan and pressed her shaking hand against her forehead. *He did something to me*, she thought. *Will. He did something.*

With her eyes closed, Sarah made herself think, forced herself to remember their night together. She recalled, first, the food, the slippery, salty bits of fish. Raw oysters that he'd ordered ("Do you like them?" he'd asked, and she'd said, "Oh, of course!"), and she'd told him they were delicious, even though the feel of that almost-living flesh sliding down her throat had revolted her. *I think what you need is a writer's retreat*, he'd said. But she hadn't even told him about the proposal she'd sent to her previous agent. They'd

never discussed what she wanted to write next. So how had he known she'd had a story ready?

Because you wrote to him, the reasonable part of her brain said. Of course he knew you had an idea. Why else would you be trying to find an agent?

But he'd never asked about what she wanted to write next, never referenced her proposal or asked to see pages during their meal... and another voice was suggesting something different. *Maybe you didn't really have a story,* it said. *Maybe he put one inside you.*

Sarah moaned again and pressed one dirty fist against her mouth. Now that she'd thought of it, she couldn't stop thinking. What if this wasn't her story but was, instead, something that had been... shoved into her brain, somehow? Whispered into her ear while she slept; planted, like a dark seed inside of her, during the night, that she couldn't remember? And what would happen when this monstrous plant was setting its polluted roots, when it unfurled its terrible blooms? Would it push and claw its way through her and leave her in bloody pieces on the floor?

Sarah went to the bathroom. She wet a cake of soap and worked it against her fingernails, harder and harder, scrubbing and rinsing and scrubbing again until every trace of red was gone. Maybe she'd sleepwalked. Maybe she'd scratched her legs as she'd done it. There had to be a plausible, rational explanation for what had happened, one that didn't involve magic, or some kind of psychic rape. And then, not knowing what else to do, not knowing who to ask, or which parts of what she'd dreamed and what she'd imagined and what might have happened in the real world were true, Sarah sat down at the kitchen table. She flipped open her laptop and fell into the story again.

• • •

The next time Vaughn and Bucky saw each other was after Thanksgiving, when Vaughn was closing up the Kaplans' hot tub and Bucky was doing a final walk-through of the house after the Thanksgiving holiday.

"How've you been?" asked Bucky as Vaughn bent, grunted, and pulled a bright-red scrap of fabric from the hot tub's filter. When he tossed the scrap of cloth on the deck, Bucky could see lace. Panties, he figured. Maybe even a thong.

Remarkably, Vaughn didn't make a juvenile comment. Instead, he just shook his head.

"Something wrong?" asked Bucky. Mr. Perceptive, his wife called him, at moments like that. In deference to the weather, Vaughn was actually wearing a shirt. Bucky had just enough time to feel grateful for the coverage when Vaughn bent down to dump a cupful of chemicals into the hot tub's churning water, a move that put his ass crack on glorious display. Bucky tried not to sigh.

Vaughn stood up, holding the empty cup in his hand. With his eyes on the ground, he said, "You know Anheuser went missing, right?"

"No." Anheuser was Vaughn's dog, a big, good-natured long-legged, black-coated creature of indeterminate breed and permanent halitosis, as amiable and dopy as his owner. In spite of his terrible breath, Anheuser was beloved by the Island's year-rounders. "Since when?"

"Three nights ago. I let him out to do his business. When I called for him, he didn't come. And he always comes." The other man's voice had gotten thick. As Bucky watched, Vaughn drew a bandanna from his back pocket and gave his nose a noisy honk.

"Jesus," said Bucky. "I'm sorry."

Vaughn managed a nod. "Will you keep your eyes open?"

Bucky promised that he would, even though keeping his eyes open, just lately, meant he'd been seeing what struck him as a

higher-than-normal number of roadkill. Dead squirrels and skunks and deer, reduced to red smears on the road; sad heaps of fur and dessicated guts in the ditches. Anheuser wasn't the only pet who'd gone wandering, either. Little Maura Farley had lost her kitten—he'd seen a MISSING KITTY sign at the Superette, lovingly hand-crayoned—and the Kaplans' Thanksgiving had ended badly when Mrs. Kaplan had come across the corpse of her little bichon, Ellie, on Saturday night. Mrs. Kaplan had found Ellie in the backyard, her belly ripped open and dripping, all her pretty white fur drenched in blood. She'd called Bucky, still crying, and guess whose job it had been to scoop the mess into a garbage bag and carry it away?

Bucky swallowed hard, hoping Vaughn hadn't heard about Ellie, or seen the dead coyote in the ditch on his way up the drive. Bucky thought of himself as the strong, silent type (*Ha ha ha*, he heard Laura laughing in his head), and he'd never been too fussed about blood and guts. What had happened to that poor little dog, though...

“So what do you think?”

Bucky blinked. Vaughn was leaning against his skimmer, looking at him expectantly.

“Say again?”

“I said,” said Vaughn patiently, “that we should go on a little recon mission. Check out the Jenkinses' tenant.”

“Why do you think she's got anything to do with your dog?”

“She's the only new person on the Island,” said Vaughn. “And I've got a bad feeling about her.”

“You've never even seen her!”

“Doesn't matter.”

Bucky opened his mouth to say that Anheuser had probably just wandered off into the woods, or had gone chasing some

female dog in heat. What he said, instead, was, “If you’re wrong, the Jenkinses will fire you.”

“So what?” Vaughn asked, his voice truculent, but Bucky saw the way his brow had furrowed, like he was attempting to subtract what the family paid him each year from the sum he declared to the IRS. “What if she’s got Anheuser?” Vaughn asked.

“What would she want with your dog?” asked Bucky. Vaughn just shook his head, and Bucky finally got a good look at his friend, and could see the dark circles that ringed his eyes.

“If you think something happened,” Bucky said slowly, “you should call Andy.” Andy Umpleby was Elder Island’s chief of police. In the summertime, there were four meter maids to help him, plus two deputies, who shut down loud parties and pulled over drunk drivers and made the occasional drug bust. But in the off-season, Andy Umpleby was the only law enforcement on the Island.

“And say what?” Vaughn demanded. “I don’t have any evidence!” He lowered his voice. “Just a bad feeling.” In a dazed, almost wondering voice, Vaughn said, “I dreamed about him.”

“About Anheuser?”

Vaughn nodded, swallowing hard. “He was in the woods, and he was all...” Another gulp. “Torn. People were doing things to him.”

“It was just a dream.” Bucky patted the other man between his shoulder blades, then gripped his shoulder. “Just put out some of that Dinty Moore stew that Anheuser likes. He’ll come right home, I bet.”

“Sure,” said Vaughn, sighing as he pulled a black push-up bra out of the filter basket. “Sure.”

• • •

Elise Crooks had suffered from insomnia since she was a girl. For the last month, it was the Jenkinses' Queen Victoria roses that were keeping her awake. She'd close her eyes and see the branches peeling off the wall, going rogue, even dying. She saw blossoms failing to unfurl; a litter of dead leaves and embryonic petals clogging the pool's drains. She saw Janet Brandywine, that smug bitch, taking top honors in the Labor Day Garden Tour.

One night, after hours of tossing and turning, Elise made up her mind. *There's more than one way to skin a cat.* She pictured the Jenkinses' pool—the low fence, the hinges that Bucky Knight kept well oiled, so they wouldn't make even the tiniest creak when they were opened. In two nights, the moon would be full, casting enough of a glow to see by, certainly to cut back a rosebush by. Elise lay in her narrow, maiden-aunt bed. A smile crept across her face. She'd wait for the full moon. She'd listen for the sounds of typing, and make sure the house was dark. She'd wear all-black; she'd bring her sharpest shears. She'd be done with her work before anyone ever saw her, leaving nothing but perfectly trimmed roses behind.

• • •

The next time Bucky saw him, Vaughn had just finished puking into the ditch by the side of the road, and looked ready to do it again. Vaughn had managed to pull his van mostly off the blacktop, and he'd put his flashers on, but the driver's-side door was wide open, and Bucky could hear the radio blaring "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me" over the sound of his friend dry-heaving in the bushes.

Bucky pulled his own truck onto the shoulder and climbed out of it, hurrying to help his friend.

"Did you see that?" Vaughn asked Bucky, his voice hoarse and raspy. He dragged his hand across his mouth, grimacing. "You saw it, didn't you?"

Bucky nodded. He'd come around the curve, same as Vaughn must have done, and had almost driven through that... that horror... in the middle of the road. Bucky had managed just a peek at it, and at what stood in its center before he'd turned away, feeling his own guts revolting.

"What was that?" asked Vaughn and wiped his mouth. "Who made it?"

"Foxes?" offered Bucky. Thinking, *No*. Foxes killed, they even maimed, and cats, of course, would toy with their prey, and they would drag dead moles and mice and birds to your doorstep or even drop the gory trophies on your bed, but animals would not arrange corpses in the center of the road and paint a spiral of guts and blood around them. "Or kids. Teenagers messing around."

"Kids," Vaughn repeated, in a small, toneless voice. He hazarded a glance over his shoulder, at the mess in the road, then jerked his head back, as if he'd been slapped. "That's Anheuser there. I saw... I saw..."

His head, Bucky thought as Vaughn bent over, put his hands on his knees, and heaved again. No half-digested food this time—none left, Bucky imagined—just strings of bile. Bucky had seen Anheuser's head on top of that desecration. The jaw had been wrenched open, the bottom half tossed somewhere, the teeth of the top half planted in the pile of viscera.

"What's it for?" Vaughn whispered. "What's it *mean*?"

Bucky shook his head. "I don't know. We should call Andy." He put his hand on Vaughn's upper arm and steered him toward his van. He didn't want to risk Vaughn looking backward and seeing what else Bucky had seen, or what he thought he'd seen.

Maybe I was wrong, he told himself as he climbed into his truck and pulled his cell phone out of his holster. But he was 90 percent sure he'd seen a hand—a human one—somewhere near the top of the pile, stuck in next to the dog's head, palm open and raised to the sky, beseeching. He wasn't sure. And he knew there was

nothing on God's green earth that could make him turn around and look long enough to confirm it.

• • •

The phone rang once, then again, but it wasn't until the third ring that Sarah raised her head from her laptop's screen with a displeased grunt. WILL PRESSER was flashing across the screen. She scabbled for the right button.

“Will?”

“Sarah!” He sounded perfectly calm, utterly relaxed. “You called?”

She must have, Sarah thought, even though she couldn't remember doing it. She'd had another dream. She could remember waking up, feeling that same, too-familiar guilt, and maybe her feet had been dirty again? And had she been hurt, somehow, some cut or bruise? She couldn't remember. The dream, and the awakening, the horror and confusion, it all felt hazy and distant, and now the work was sharp and urgent, more real than the world around her. At five in the morning, she might have been, must have been, desperate to talk, desperate for someone to tell her that there was a reasonable explanation for what she was feeling, for the nightmares, and the bruises and the cuts, the torn fingernails and the awful iron taste in her mouth, but now, she wanted to type, and let the story keep pouring out of her. The daughter had died. The wife had gone missing. The husband had gone after her, and, Sarah suspected, there was something very bad waiting for him. She wasn't sure, though, and she couldn't wait to find out.

“Is everything all right?” asked Will

“Fine,” she said.

“I'm glad I caught you. I loved the pages you sent, and I slipped them to a few of my favorite editors.”

Sarah felt a faint stirring of interest. “What’d they say?” she made herself asked.

“They loved it. Loved it. They want to make offers on the partial, but, of course, I told them to wait until you’re done. I think we’re going to do very well. Very well indeed. Meanwhile, have you checked your Amazon rankings?”

Sarah tried to remember. At home, she monitored those numbers religiously, as depressing as they were. Out here, she didn’t think she’d looked even once. “No. Why?”

“Because *Double Hitch* is number ninety-three in the Domestic Thrillers and Suspense category. And *LitHub* just named *The Monday Wife* one of the ten best thrillers you haven’t read yet.”

“Oh.” Sarah tried to make herself sound enthusiastic. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” Will chuckled. “All good things. And you’re good? And the writing’s going well?”

“Oh, yes.” The writing mattered, and how she’d felt that morning, how she’d screamed when she’d seen the mess on her sheets, the tuft of something white—fur? hair?—on her pillow, and worse underneath the bed. She’d gone to shower, and then she’d cleaned up the mess, bundling the sheets into the washing machine and using a mop on the floor, hurrying through the tasks, desperate to be back at her computer.

“Then I’ll let you get to it.” Will made the sound of a cracking whip. “Back to work!”

• • •

Sharon Styles knew what Kevin Jenkins thought of her. Never mind the words of love he’d whispered, no matter that, once, he’d called her a goddess and said she was the sexiest woman in the world. At the end of the day, as her mom liked to say, Sharon was just a townie, just a summer fling.

This was a fact she should have realized on Labor Day Weekend. It had been a perfect summer afternoon, all gold sand and clear blue skies. She'd brought a picnic to the beach. He'd slipped away from his family for an hour. She'd poured him a chilled glass of rosé and then had lain back on the blanket, the sand warm against her back while he'd kissed her. That was when she'd told him that he'd slipped one past the goalie and popped a bun in her oven. As soon as she'd said the words, Kevin's handsome face had gone cold. His beautiful lips compressed into a line the size of a paper cut, and the first words to emerge through that ungenerous slit were "Are you sure it's mine?"

Sharon felt like she'd been punched, hard, right in the stomach—like the breath had left her body—and she'd started to cry. "I love you," she'd said. "I haven't been with anyone else since you and I got together. I swear."

He'd been a gentleman about the whole thing. He'd given her cash for the procedure, and instead of just telling her to get on the ferry and go to the Planned Parenthood in Boston, like two previous guys had, he'd made her an appointment with a different doctor, a fancy one who didn't even take insurance. He'd gotten her tickets for the ferry and paid for a night in a hotel. "If you want me to come with you, I will," he'd said.

"What will you tell *her*?" Sharon had asked him, and Kevin had shrugged.

"She'll be busy in her garden. She probably won't even notice if I'm gone." His voice became bitter as he repeated the complaint that Sharon had heard a hundred times that summer. "She loves those goddamn roses more than me."

So be with me, she'd wanted to say. I love you. I'll love you more than any garden, more than any big house. We could be happy; you and me and our baby.

Holding on to that hope, that dream of love, and a better life than the one she had working as an aesthetician on the Island,

painting rich ladies' toenails, waxing their upper lips and bikini lines, Sharon had skipped the appointment that Kevin had made. When he'd texted, from the burner phone he'd bought, the one he used only with her, she'd lied. *Everything's fine*, she'd written, and added, *See you next summer!* with an exclamation point, and the heart-eye emoji. Meanwhile, the baby was growing inside of her: a secret, an insurance policy. She'd have the baby; she'd present him (she knew it was a boy) to Kevin like a prize. Then he'd see how happy they could be together.

Things had not gone according to plan. The baby arrived in the middle of April, two weeks early, and with jaundice, a condition that kept her in the hospital for ten days, and cost \$2,000 in deductibles. She'd finally gone back to her apartment, where she'd learned that single motherhood was a lot harder than she'd expected. The delivery had torn her wide open. She'd gotten eleven stitches, and she'd had to borrow her mother's hemorrhoid pillow to sit on while she held the baby (a girl, after all) and tried to feed her. Ashlynne was a tiny, bald, unlovely, rashy thing. She barely slept and screamed every moment she was awake. She was allergic to Sharon's breast milk and, seemingly, allergic to Sharon's touch. Instead of soothing her, being cuddled by her mother seemed to only make her madder. Ashlynne would shriek for hours, then collapse into a brief, thin sleep, then jolt herself awake and start screaming again. She was not, Sharon finally admitted, the kind of baby who could win a man's heart. Rather, she was the kind of baby who would send a man running. Running back to his dried-up, leathery, menopausal hag of a wife, back to his soft-handed, spoiled-rotten children, still barely employed, still getting allowances at twenty-five and twenty-six.

"It'll get better," Sharon's sisters told her. Amanda had had her first baby at twenty-one. Cathy, the family's success story, had finished two years of college and gotten married before having her first at twenty-two, but then Cathy's husband had bailed when her kids were toddlers, leaving her no better off than the rest of them.

“This is the hard part,” they said, and Cathy had patted her back, and Mandy had given her a glass of wine.

It hadn't taken Sharon long to figure out that wine was the answer, a way for her to make it through the miserable days of screams and dirty diapers and an aching pussy and nipples that burned like they'd been set on fire. One glass softened the world's edges; two glasses turned down the volume on Ashlynnne's shrilling and her own pain; three or four glasses let her actually sleep, even while the baby was crying. Wine sanded down the world's sharp corners. Wine turned the open wound of her loneliness into a manageable ache.

First she bought bottles. Then, to economize, she bought boxes. When Mrs. Fogerty at one of the east island package stores started to give her the stink-eye and Billy Durant at the west island one handed her a list of AA meetings with her five-gallon box of Chardonnay, she'd ask her sisters and her mom to shop for her when they went off-island. “I think Costco's having a sale,” Sharon said, proud of her cunning as she handed Amanda a wad of cash. “I can stock up for the summer.”

Ashlynnne developed a hideous diaper rash after Sharon left her in a wet diaper while she'd been asleep (*passed out*, her mind whispered, *you weren't asleep, you were passed out*). Sharon slathered cream on her daughter's scrawny legs and bottom and tried not to think about how sometimes she saw herself grabbing the baby underneath her armpits, grabbing her and shaking her and screaming into her face *shut up, shut up, shut UP*. In spite of her ministrations, the rash kept spreading, crawling up Ashlynnne's sunken belly and down her sticklike thighs. Sharon started stirring droppers full of infant Benadryl into her bottles of formula. A sleeping baby wasn't as appealing as a placid, gurgling baby, but it was sure better than a red-faced, screaming-its-head-off baby, and Sharon needed Ashlynnne looking her best for when she'd present her to Kevin, who'd be back on-island over Memorial Day, same as always.

“Go t’sleep,” she said on Friday night, wiping wine off her mouth with her forearm as she settled Ashlynnne into her crib. She gave the mobile’s key a few cranks. The pastel-colored teddy bears started to spin over the tinny, tinkling strains of a lullaby, which was quickly drowned out by Ashlynnne’s shrieks. “Mommy’s gonna take a li’l nap.” She sat down in the rocker, pulled a blanket up to her chin, and shut her eyes. Nine hours later, she awoke. Her eyes felt gluey, and her mouth tasted like a scummed-over pond. Something was wrong. The sunlight was wrong, its slant unfamiliar, and her apartment was too quiet.

Sharon lurched to her feet, sending the rocker into motion, unnoticed, and crossed the tiny nursery in three giant steps. The crib was empty. Ashlynnne was gone.

• • •

What did you do to me?

The laptop sat open on the desk, softly calling to her. Sarah forced herself to ignore it. She’d dreamed that night of a crying baby, and a sharp-nailed claw. A dark forest, a bright moon, and blood. She’d dreamed of blood.

When she’d woken up, her bare feet were filthy, again, and her hands were dirty, again, and, worse than that, worst of all, there was a terribly coppery taste in her mouth, a taste like she’d bitten her own tongue, although Sarah was growing increasingly certain that her tongue was not what she’d bitten.

She reached for her phone and then dropped it. Because who would she call, besides Will? And what would she say, if he answered? He’d done this to her. She couldn’t avoid the truth any longer. This was where stories came from, not the west wind whispering, but a bad man—if Will was a man at all—infecting her with it, somehow. Somehow, Will had gotten the seed of this story inside of her, turning her into its vessel. And oh, how it had grown, and how terribly it had bloomed! Sarah had no doubt that

it would kill her in the end. And maybe she deserved to die. She'd done terrible things in its service, made offerings on its terrible altar. Because "art demands sacrifice," she heard Will say.

She closed her eyes. She was remembering how it felt when her agent told her that her previous publisher didn't want her, that they were dropping her, too, how furious she'd been, how she'd screamed, her blood fairly sizzling with rage. She knew that she was talented enough, deserving enough, that her work was so much better than the shit on the bestseller lists, that she could hit those lists, she could win the prizes, and that she'd do whatever it took, make whatever sacrifices were required, for that to happen. *I'll do anything.* That's what she'd said. If Will had planted some dark seed inside her, she was the one who'd fertilized the soil, who'd made the ground ready, and invited him to work his dark magic. He'd put this story inside her, and now it was hungry, hungry, hungry.

Sarah put her hand in her pocket and groaned out loud when her fingers encountered a scrap of fabric. Part of her knew what she'd see even before she'd pulled it all the way out and that part wasn't surprised when she saw it—white with pink polka dots, barely half the size of her thumb. A tiny baby sock.

• • •

The knock came at the door at almost eleven o'clock at night, Bucky had gotten to his feet, but Laura had been closest to the door. She'd been the one to open it.

"Vaughn!" he heard her say. "What brings you out so late?"

Bucky started across the room, then stopped. For an instant, Laura's face looked green and witchy in the glow of the television set, and, outside, his friend's face seemed to float, ghostlike and disembodied, in the darkness. Bucky blinked, and then Laura was just Laura again. As for Vaughn, he was wearing a dark hoodie and dark jeans, and a black wool hat on his head.

Bucky swallowed hard. “Did you find Anheuser?”

“No,” said Vaughn. “It’s worse.” He turned to look at Bucky, then Laura, and said, “You know Sharon’s baby’s gone?”

Bucky nodded. He’d heard about Elise Crooks, who’d been missing for a few weeks, but Elise was old and lived alone and sometimes went off to visit her sister in Springfield without letting anyone know. There had also been the pets, poor Maura’s kitten and, of course, Vaughn’s dog, Anheuser, but that was probably just foxes. Or the coyotes. Something.

“Bucky.” Vaughn was holding something in his hand. Bucky blinked and saw it was a tiki torch, the kind the Kaplans had, around their pool. As he watched, his friend touched a lit match to its crown. The torch flared, and Laura came back from the kitchen with a cleaver and a butcher knife. She handed the butcher knife to Bucky, who stared down at it dumbly.

“What—what are we...”

“You know,” said Vaughn, in a solemn voice.

And Laura said, “That poor baby.” Her tone was sympathetic, but her eyes had a hard, pitiless glitter, and there were spots of red glowing in her cheeks. “Come on, honey. It’s time.”

“Time for what?” Bucky said, but his tongue felt thick and slow, and the butcher knife’s handle felt just right in his hand. He stepped outside, into the cool, star-pricked night, and saw the crowd of islanders making their way up the hill.

“That’s right,” said Vaughn, even though Bucky hadn’t spoken. “We’re doing the right thing.”

“She’s an outsider,” said Laura, and Bucky didn’t have to ask who *she* was, because, somehow, he already knew.

“This is how it’s always been,” Vaughn said. “How it’s supposed to be. We’ve got to look out for each other. For this place.”

“If we don’t, who will?” asked Laura. She sounded sincere, almost pious, but behind her eyes, he could glimpse something that wasn’t pious at all, something that capered and grinned. Something that saw a murdered infant as nothing but a permission slip to rend and slash and kill. The tendons in her wrists stood out in sharp relief as she gripped the knife.

“Come on,” she said. “For the Island.”

“For the Island,” said Vaughn.

“For the Island,” said Bucky. He found that his feet knew where to take him. He had no doubt that he’d know what to do—that all of them would—when they arrived.

• • •

Sarah lifted her head when the knocking on the door began. It could have just started, or it could have been going on for hours.

She hit “save,” stood, and walked, dreamlike, to the window. Down below, she could see a crowd and the bright flare of fire. Torches. The villagers had torches. She wondered how they knew to bring them, and if they had pitchforks, too.

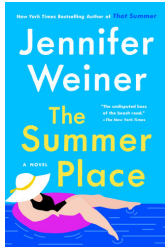
Dimly, she remembered being at a party, how another author, an MFA classmate, had told her that what publishers most longed for were authors who wrote brilliant books, then died before they came out. “That way, they don’t have the trouble of dealing with crazy writers, or the expense of sending us on tour,” this friend, whoever it had been, had said. “And they especially like it, if the death was scandalous, if there’s a story behind the story. A murder, an overdose, or a suicide. That’s best of all.”

She walked back to her desk and gently closed her laptop. The book was still a first draft, still rough in places, but she had no doubt that Will would make sure it was properly polished and, eventually, published. And he’d never lied to her. He’d told her that art demanded sacrifices. Maybe agents, and islands did, too. She supposed she had no one to blame but herself. She’d read the

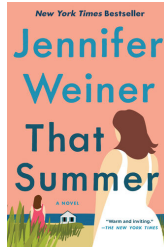
stories, and should have known better. When making deals with the devil, you had to be careful about the particulars. You had to pay attention to the fine print. Don't just say *I want my son back*, before you wish on the monkey's paw, make sure you specify, *And he has to be alive, and not a rotting, walking corpse*. When you tell your agent you'll do anything to be a bestseller, make sure that he knows that means you, not just your books.

And now my tale is told, thought Sarah, and stepped outside to meet her end.

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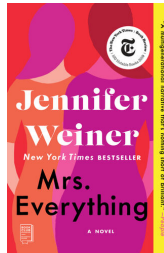
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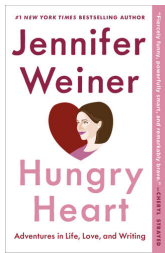
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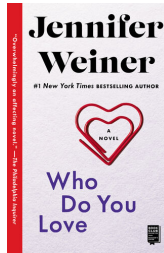
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First Atria Books ebook edition October 2021

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ISBN 978-1-6680-0274-2