



Only the brightest can win.

Only the monstrous will survive.

The background of the cover is a dark, moody illustration. It features a person with long, dark hair, wearing a green blazer over a white shirt and a dark tie. A laurel wreath is placed on their head. Their face is partially obscured by a bright pink, brush-stroke-like texture. The title 'When We Were Monsters' is written in a white, hand-painted, cursive font across the center of the image.

When
we
were
monsters

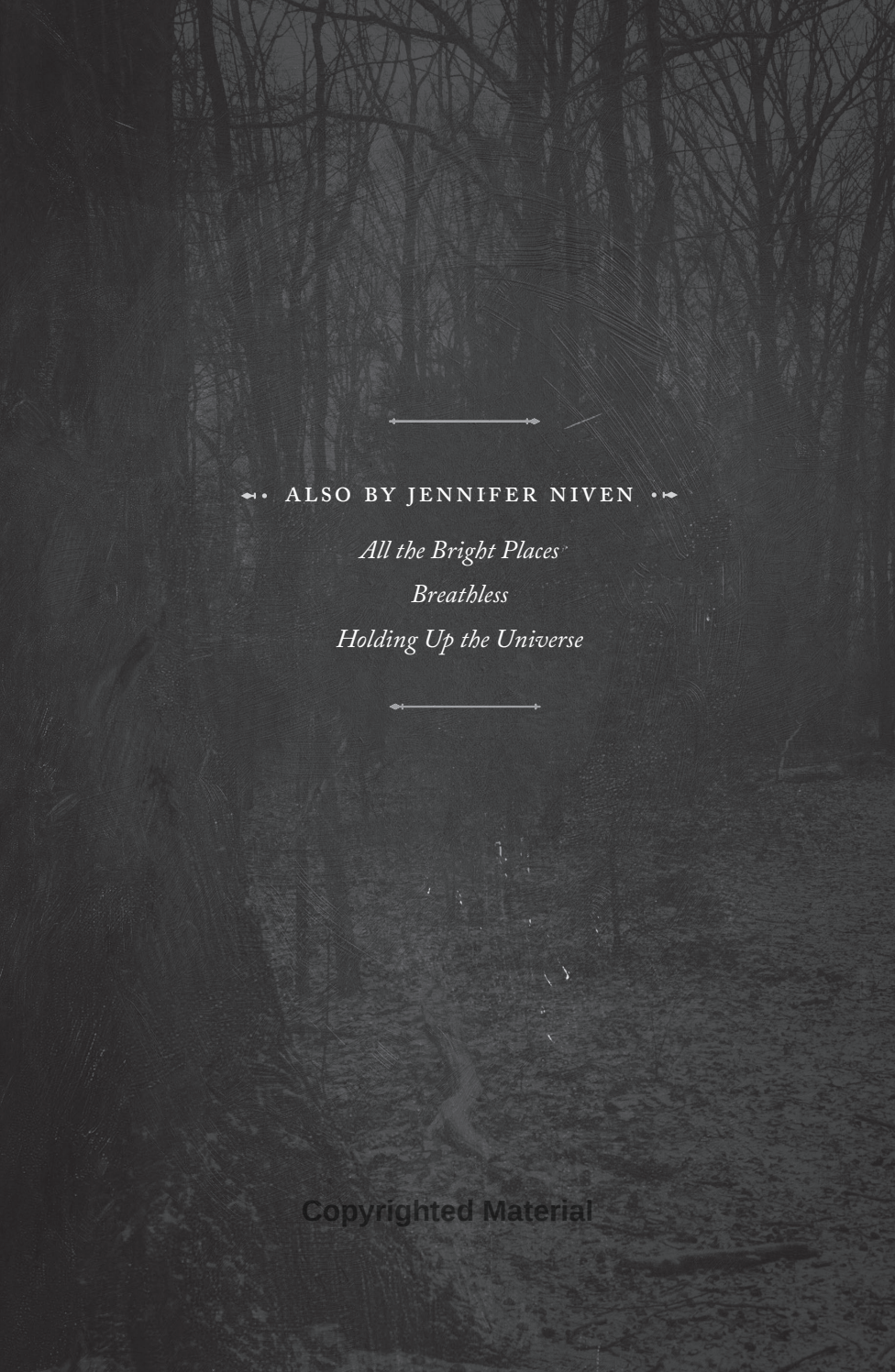
JENNIFER NIVEN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES*

PENGUIN BOOKS

when
we were
monsters

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All the Bright Places

Breathless

Holding Up the Universe

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When we were monsters

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sustainable business, our readers
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*For James Earl Jones,
who taught me about bone memory
and soul stamina*

*Van Shank,
my sixth-grade teacher,
whose wisdom, humor,
and belief in my big imagination
transcended the walls of Westview Elementary
and accompanied me into the world*

*Lucy Kroll,
who told thirteen-year-old me that
I was destined to be a writer*

*Will Schwalbe,
my very first editor, whose voice
I hear as I write every word*

For my mother, most of all

*And for the teachers
everywhere who nurture
our wild and enormous dreams*

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It is true, we shall be monsters,
cut off from all the world; but on that
account we shall be more attached to
one another.

—Mary Shelley, Frankenstein



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The day before we kill Meredith Graffam is calm and blue. Like Massachusetts in summer after the rain. The scent of earth and flowers and fresh, clean air. Just a perfect sunlit day.

None of us will walk into the forest that night planning to commit murder. It's easy when you're surrounded by beauty and opulence and acres of privilege, when you're young and filled with possibility, to convince yourself that life will always be as rose-colored as this and nothing can go wrong.

At the end of a long, sweeping drive, lined by the tallest trees, surrounded by forest and the sea just beyond, lies the campus of Brighton and Hove. The student body is, for the most part—present company excluded—comprised of the offspring of the very rich and the highly accomplished who can afford to send them anywhere but choose to send them here, to the woods of northeastern Massachusetts.

But like every too-bright place, darkness lingers at its

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edges. The wizard behind the curtain. The painting in the attic. Hyde. It's there in the hazing of first-years that occurs each fall. In the ruthless competition among students. In the surrounding forest, where, each January for sixteen days, eight of the school's best and brightest are handpicked to live and study with someone world-famous and world-renowned at the Moss, the rambling old home of Moss Hove, our founder.

We don't have secret societies at Brighton and Hove. Instead we have Jan Term, its own elite, slightly nerdier organization of students past and present—our equivalent of being tapped. Everyone eager for the *illustrious, powerful connections* it promises outside these halls. In our *real* lives. In our *future* lives.

Built in 1916, the Moss sits surrounded by ten thousand acres of pristine forestland—formally known as Murton Wood, informally as Murder Wood—with whole swaths of primeval trees and miles of unpaved roads, all of it owned by the school. Unless they're lucky enough to be chosen for Jan Term, most students don't wander too deep into Murton. A seventeen-year-old student was killed there in 1995, a tragedy—a blemish—the school has never forgotten.

Proving that bad things can happen anywhere, even on a campus as beautiful as Brighton and Hove. Even on a crisp, star-filled January evening. Even to the four of us.

Effy, the orphan, who doesn't believe in ghosts but is haunted by them.

Isaac, the legacy, who carries the world on his shoulders.

Vanessa, the wallflower, who never thought she belonged.

And Arlo, the prodigal son, who returned to the school he walked away from two years earlier.

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We were just four individual people before Meredith Graffam, *the* Meredith Graffam, arrived at Brighton and Hove. She was the one who brought us together. And the one who tried to tear us apart.

Tomorrow she will die.

I will wish for today, the day *before*, this bright, calm, blue day, like Massachusetts in summer after the rain. Or better yet, three weeks before. The beginning of the new year, back when Graffam was still alive and I couldn't think of anything to write because the only thing that had ever happened to me was too painful. I was anxious for material, for a story of my own. And now I have one.

Here it is.

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BRIGHTON AND HOVE



PREPARATORY ACADEMY

Parkerton, Massachusetts

December 15

Dear Effy Green:

Congratulations on being selected for B&H's annual Jan Term Visiting Artist series. With only eight spaces available, competition for those slots was fierce, and you should be immensely proud of your hard work and talent.

This year's theme will be Immersive Storytelling. During this sixteen-day experience, you will be living in the Moss with our Visiting Artist, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author, Oscar-winning actor, director, and screenwriter, and Tony Award-winning playwright Meredith Giffam.

On completion of the class, one of you will be awarded a scholarship in the amount of \$15,000 and the chance to have your work produced and/or published in your field or genre.

Jan Term begins Wednesday, January 7, and ends Thursday, January 22. Please arrive January 7. Pickup information will be emailed to you.

Please note that the attached nondisclosure agreement and waiver must be signed, notarized, and returned before your arrival. This is to protect your work and the work of our Visiting Artist, and to grant permission to be filmed or recorded should the opportunity arise. If you have any questions regarding either document or your upcoming experience, please don't hesitate to reach out.

We look forward to seeing you on January 7!

Sincerely,

Scott Booker

Dean of Students

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A dark, moody photograph of a forest floor. In the center, there is a large, flat, light-colored object that looks like a piece of paper or a small pond. The text "week one" is written in white, lowercase letters across the middle of this object. The background is a dense forest of bare trees, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves and twigs.

week one

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Immersive Storytelling

Wednesday, January 7 – Sunday, January 11

SESSION ONE

- Cast fears and inhibitions aside.
- Do whatever is needed to stand out.
- Lean into your strengths.
- Keep your eye on the end credits—what will you do to be the last one standing?
- If you don't have a story, create one.

Everybody steals in commerce and industry. I've stolen a lot myself. But I know how to steal.

—Thomas Edison

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Effy

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 7

I glance behind us, through the back window of the van, no longer able to make out the distant gleam of campus. Even with the brights on, Murton Wood is the darkest place on earth.

By contrast, the Moss looks warm and welcoming silhouetted against the sky, perched on a cliff overlooking the sea. At forty rooms and over fourteen thousand square feet, its aging beauty makes me think of all the best houses in literature. Manderley. Thornfield Hall. Wuthering Heights.

The seven of us have spent the van ride huddled over our phone screens, making the most of cell service while we still have it. Dean Booker pulls into the drive, gravel crunching beneath the wheels, and silences the engine.

For a moment, we sit there, phones forgotten, staring up at the house. Like every good Brighton and Hover worth their salt, I've heard the stories of Jan Term, that coveted experience enjoyed by only a choice few. Jan Term, which says to us—and

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everybody else—that we are the visionaries of our class, the ones poised to change the world through our art.

“We’re here,” someone says, and I feel the words more than hear them.

The van door opens, letting in a rush of cold air. Ness begins to gather her things, which have, in true Ness fashion, exploded across the seat. “This is what I don’t like about winter,” she’s saying. “The in and out. Heat. Cold. Heat. Cold. The swaddling up head to toe like a penguin.” Even when she complains, Ness sounds cheerful. It’s one of the things I love most about her. Her lightness. Her joy.

One by one, my classmates spill out. I continue to sit there, suddenly wondering why I came, wishing I was home with Gran, a thousand things running through my head:

This is your last year at Brighton and Hove.

You only have five more months left of school.

What if you and Ness go to separate colleges and don’t stay friends?

Why is life so full of endings?

A rap on the window and I jump. A face presses against it, wild coils of black hair, glasses, breath fogging me in. Ness rubs at the fog. Mists it up again. Rubs at it. Mists it up again. Then writes *Open!* backward. Everyone else stands in the drive, loosely assembled around Dean Booker, better known as Books, a bear of a guy, affable and folksy.

I join them outside in the night, my breath creating clouds. Ness, Isaac Williams, Ramon Santos, Joey Fiske, Peter Tobin, and Leela Kim. Seven, including me.

“You may not know,” Books is saying, “that the tradition of

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Jan Term began in 1926. But it wasn't until after Hove's death in 1942 that students were invited to stay here."

"I thought there were eight of us," I whisper to Ness, but she isn't listening because a woman, barely older than we are, is making her way toward us from the house. She has a round, pretty face framed by a waterfall of coppery hair and wears overalls speckled with splashes of paint.

"Drea Garcia," she says, shaking hands. She speaks with a faint Spanish accent. "I'm Meredith's assistant."

Meredith. As in Meredith Graffam. One of the hottest talents in books, theater, and film. And one of the most controversial. I would have traveled to another continent to study with her, but instead she has come to us.

We follow Books and Drea along a path between the house and the cliffs. Below us, the ocean pounds against the rocks, and I can almost feel the spray of water on my skin. I make the mistake of looking down. The drop is sheer—no bottom, just darkness.

I hurry after the others, across the brick courtyard, onto a sweeping veranda, and then finally through the wide, arched doors of the house.

We wind our way to a large room, papered in gold. At the far end is a gilded balcony, a grand piano in the alcove beneath it. The ceilings soar upward like a cathedral. A lone portrait of a man hangs above the fireplace. This would be Moss Hove, the school's cofounder, who fled California and his conservative oil baron family. Who fell in love with his friend Zachary Brighton. And who—two decades after they established Brighton and Hove—accidentally drowned offshore.

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“Housekeeping will come once a week,” Books tells us. “Wesley, our caretaker, will remain on-site. Ms. Graffam has brought her own chef, who will provide your meals. If you need anything, let Wesley know. He has the master key to the gates that let you in or out of the property.”

Drea starts handing out index cards. Our names, numbers, and emails are printed there, as well as room assignments and Wi-Fi info.

“Aren’t there supposed to be eight of us?” Ramon asks.

“Our missing student had a flight delay,” Drea says. Then she holds up another card. “Each night, you’ll receive one of these under your door, giving you the schedule for the following morning.”

She and Books go over the rules then, including no sharing of beds. No leaving the house after dark. If we’re going outside, be sure to prop the door or unlock it because—as we will see—all doors leading out of the house are kept locked at all times, with the keys inside them. No roughhousing, as most of the items in the house were collected by Moss Hove himself. Jan Term is a privilege, blah, blah, blah. If the tradition is to continue, we need to behave, blah, blah.

“The house is”—Books squints into the distance—“well, it’s a bit of a maze. They call it the house with no hallways. As you’ve already seen, the rooms feed into one another, so that you never have to return to the main entryway. The ceilings vary in height. The floors too—there’s a lot of stepping up and down, short staircases and long staircases. Treat the Moss as if it’s your own.”

We follow him to the front door. Dean Booker twists the

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key that sits in the lock and steps through into the courtyard. “One more thing,” he says, holding up a finger. “Just like on campus, the forest is off-limits.”

Even though Lara Leonard was murdered decades ago, it’s a sensitive topic for the school. We murmur our understanding. Then Books is off, with a wave and a wink, swallowed by the darkness outside.

MY ROOM IS the Belfry, a turret with windows looking out over the sea. I drop onto the bed and pull the envelope from my coat pocket, smoothing the edges. I have carried it with me ever since it arrived. It looks thumbled and worn, as if it was mailed a decade ago. The handwriting is innocuous. Short, fat letters all in caps. The envelope addressed to OPHELIA GREEN. If I had known who it was from, I wouldn’t have opened it. But he must have realized that because the return address is simply BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS.

I open the letter and read in the soft glow of the uranium glass that edges the windowpanes.

DEAR EFFY,

YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN TOO YOUNG TO REMEMBER THIS, BUT THE SUMMER YOU WERE SIX WE TOOK YOU TO NEW YORK CITY. EVERYONE SAID TO LEAVE YOU AT HOME, AND MAYBE WE SHOULD HAVE BECAUSE YOU HATED IT ON SIGHT. HATED THE NOISE AND THE TRAFFIC AND THE CROWDS. BUT IT WAS WHERE YOUR MOM AND I MET, AND SHE WANTED

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YOU TO SEE IT, TO BE PART OF THE US BACK THEN THE
WAY YOU WERE PART OF THE US THAT SUMMER. THE
FUNNY THING IS, DISASTER THAT IT WAS, I CAME AWAY
FROM IT WITH ONLY HAPPY MEMORIES. YOUR MOM'S SMILE.
YOUR HAND IN MINE. THE WAY WE WOULD SWING YOU
BETWEEN US.

YOUR HEAD HEAVY ON MY SHOULDER, SLEEPING AS I
CARRIED YOU BACK TO THE HOTEL. I'VE THOUGHT A LOT
ABOUT THAT TRIP OVER THE PAST 4,017 DAYS. I GUESS I'M
HOPING THAT NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU HATE ME, ONE OR
TWO HAPPY MEMORIES MIGHT HAVE SURVIVED . . .

Eleven years ago, my father was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. After his conviction, he told me goodbye, and just like that, all contact stopped. He decided he wasn't fit to be a dad, so I not only lost my mom, I lost him too. This past September—on the 29th, to be exact—he was released early for “good behavior.” Three weeks later, I received the letter. The first I've heard from him since I was six.

For the past eleven years, while he was in prison, I was able to tell myself that he died too. I didn't have to think about him because he was locked away like a memory. But I don't know what the fuck to do with this.

I slide the letter under my pillow. The day after it arrived, Gran received one of her own. I watched as she fed it, unread, to the shredder, as the ribbons of paper dropped into the trash, which she bagged and immediately took to the curb. She wanted to shred mine too, but I lied and told her I'd destroyed it already.

The Wi-Fi doesn't connect right away, but once it does, I

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text Gran to let her know I won't have reliable service while I'm here, and I give her the number for the landline.

And then I pull out the books I brought with me to read over the next three weeks. A dog-eared copy of *Frankenstein* that once belonged to my mother, her notes and highlights filling the margins. *The Hunt*, Meredith Graffam's first book. And *The Lie*, her second.

The Hunt was an overnight literary sensation, hailed as one of the most bloodcurdling true crime books since Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Graffam was lauded with awards and accolades around the world for her account of her best friend's murder and her personal crusade to put the killer behind bars. The acclaim turned to blame when, six years after publication, new evidence exonerated the man Graffam helped convict for the murder of Lara Leonard. By then he'd already served eight years for a crime he didn't commit. The public went after her with their proverbial torches as if she had personally betrayed them. She issued an apology to the man and then disappeared from the public eye.

Ten years later, she reemerged with another memoir—this one titled *The Lie*, in which she came clean about her past. Not only documenting every lie she'd ever told, but the shame of putting an innocent man in prison. *The Lie* was turned into an off-off-Broadway show, which became an off-Broadway show, which became a film, which led to other films and other books, and by the time she was forty-five, Meredith Graffam's career was bigger than ever.

As much as she fascinates me though, Graffam is not the only reason I'm here. I'm here because I have a story to tell. A story of lives changing in a single moment. The way mine did

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when my father drove his truck into a tree and killed his only passenger—my mom. She was twenty-eight years old.

As Victor Frankenstein says, *Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change.*

Something scratches against the window, and I start. Gran and I live in an old house, so I understand their creaks and groans. There's always an explanation—old pipes, tree limbs that need pruning, changes in temperature that can make wooden floors and doorframes contract, a general settling of the foundation over time. Gran says houses have aches and pains like we do. The Moss has stood on these cliffs for over a hundred years accumulating aches and pains of its own.

I lean into the window, my eyes adjusting to the night. There aren't curtains because I'm high above everyone else, too high for anyone to see in. If I wanted to, I could step right into the trees.

Have you ever stood on the edge of a rooftop or bridge—someplace high up—and thought about jumping? I'm not talking about suicidal ideation. I'm talking about a primal instinct, a what-if response. As in *What if I hurled myself into the abyss?* And the more you think about it, the more worried you are that you'll actually do it.

There's a name for it. L'appel du vide. *The call of the void.* You technically don't want to jump, but the impulse to jump remains. Scientists have concluded that the call of the void stems from a deep desire to live. And this is true, at least for me. It's a reminder. *I could crash my car into the guardrail. I could leap onto those train tracks. I could dive off this cliff.* I imagine my body crumpled at the base of the rocks before being carried out to sea.

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I turn away, catching sight of my face in the old mirror above the mantel. The glass is wavy and speckled, as if I'm seeing myself through a dusty field. *Do I look as empty as I feel?*

I smile. Not with teeth. That's not my thing. But enough so that people can tell it's a smile. Corners of my mouth lifted. Catlike, Gran says. The smile doesn't reach my eyes or light them up, as if my mouth and my eyes aren't connected at all. As if they belong to two separate people.

Arlo

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 7

Since Boston, I've been talking nonstop to my Uber driver, Barry. We've covered everything from Jack Kerouac to my favorite cryptids to the epidemic of strange blue sea creatures that washed up on our beaches last summer.

"Picture it, Barry. These blobby blue discs as far as the eye could see. *Verella verella*, they're called, like tiny Frisbees with a clear sail on top."

Barry appears unmoved.

"They spend most of their lives surfing around the Pacific Ocean. But the really cool thing is that each sailor is actually a colony of animals working together. You've got one for feeding, one for reproduction, another for defense. But they can't survive alone, they have to rely on each—"

"School starting a little early this year?" Barry asks, eyeing me in the rearview like I'm up to something.

I don't bother explaining the concept of Jan Term to him, or the fact that my being here isn't exactly a choice. That, truth

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be told, my academic livelihood depends on it. That's what happens when you miss the first five weeks of senior year due to crippling grief. You end up short of credits to graduate and your parents and brother decide the only solution is to ship you off across the country to your old alma mater. Thankfully for me, I'm a skilled enough bullshitter to have landed a spot in Bullshit Prep's most coveted course.

Instead I say, "You can't keep me away, Barry. I'm that guy who just lives for school."

Barry pulls into the drive, the Moss rising up and around us, windows lit, looking almost friendly. He tells me to get out, happy to be rid of me. I pick up my hat and put it back on, even though my hair refuses to be contained. It's a vintage Lakers baseball cap that I've been wearing since summer. I unfold myself from the car and stand there as Barry roars off. Jesus, there are a lot of trees.

For the past few weeks, I've been planning my return to Brighton and Hove. My comeback, if you will. Now that it's here, now that I'm here, I feel awash in loneliness. It's the product of being a military brat, of having parents who are almost always overseas. Of having an unreasonably perfect older brother who represents everything I'll never live up to.

But it's also the product of the past year. Of last summer. Of you. Jonah. My best friend. Dying as I watched.

I DELAY GOING inside, reveling in my aloneness a little longer. I stand on the cliffs, where I can breathe, drinking in the sight of the great and powerful Atlantic, the world's second-largest ocean. Nothing but a fathomless black void stretching across

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the horizon. The only thing disrupting it is a small expanse of rock several hundred meters offshore and the lonesome beam of the lighthouse, searching. The tide seems to be going out, but the waves still rush in, and in the dark it's hard to tell if there's a beach at all.

I dig through my bag till I find the joint, the one I've been carrying around for months. It's not actual marijuana. Weeds, yeah. Weed, no. It's just a bunch of grass, dandelions, and dirt we rolled together, Jonah and me, one night when we were bored.

My hand is shaking as I reach for a lighter. The stars are bright overhead. I search, as always, for Ophiuchus, my favorite celestial dude.

Look up, I hear you say.

Your voice is so real that for a second I'm back in the sea cave on a hot July day. You were always saying things like that. *Look up. Look around. Be here now.* So when you said it that day in the sea cave—*Just look up*—I didn't think twice. I see your head bobbing above the water and we're laughing and in that moment I'm thinking how it feels like you've always been there, all my life. And then. *And then.* It's the *and then* that will always be right here lodged in my chest like a bullet they can't dig out.

Just look up.

I light the joint, take a long, deep inhale—and start to cough. I cough and hack and hack and cough and there are these alarming croaking sounds coming from somewhere, and it's me. I'm the one making the croaking sounds.

I glance back at the Moss, where a shadow stands at one of the windows. Is someone watching me cough my lungs out

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like an idiot? Is it *her*, the one and only Meredith Graffam? I double over as another series of hacks overtakes me. And when I look up again, the shadow is gone.

Bullshit Prep never was the most welcoming place. While I didn't expect a parade—not even close—the sad truth is that I don't have anywhere else to go. It's not like I can join my parents in Kuwait. It's not like I can stay with Aaron and his boyfriend and their dog in their cramped Tribeca studio. All I have is the next sixteen days here at the Moss and this last semester at school. After that, beyond that, I've got nowhere.

Effy

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8

I feel it before I hear it—the deep, resounding toll of a bell. The vibration reaches into my bones as it rings and rings and rings. I force myself out of bed, warm feet hitting the cold floor. The room is drafty, the windowpanes vibrating from the wind and the power of the ocean below.

A woman stands in the courtyard. I recognize her immediately. Meredith Graffam.

I'm dressed in minutes, but Ness is already gone. As I race down the hall from my room, I collide with another body and go sprawling onto the floor.

“Shit,” he says.

He holds out a hand to me. The hand is attached to an arm that's attached to a body dressed in jeans and a Bigfoot T-shirt that reads *Leave No Trace*. His voice is lower and huskier than it was at fifteen. He's still lanky, but more man, less boy. Beneath a baseball cap, his hair is windswept and

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disorderly, wild and dark. Eyes that seem to be laughing at some private joke that only he finds funny. A generous mouth that might be called sensuous if it wasn't always yammering away. Good-looking—objectively speaking. Unless you know him. Which I do.

Arlo.

Arlo, who left at the end of sophomore year without a word, as if—like the rest of us—he'd be back in the fall. Arlo, who never told anyone where he'd gone or why.

I stare up at him and he stares down at me, and for a long, excruciating moment it's as if we are frozen.

"Hey," he says finally. "Elsie, right?"

Elsie.

Suddenly all I can hear is the furious thump of my heart. I push myself to my feet, ignoring his hand, which falls to his side, rejected. And that little motion, that hand dangling there empty, makes me feel like somehow I've won. Or at least recaptured a scrap of my dignity.

"I'm back," he says, opening his arms wide.

"Well," I reply.

And then, because there's too much to say and none of it is nice, I turn and walk away.

MINUTES LATER, THE eight of us assemble outside on the cliff. The air smells of salt and a pale dankness of leaves. The wind whips our hair and stings our cheeks.

Here in the daylight I can see the jaggedness of the descent. No sand, no beach, just these enormous slabs of rock, sloping

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down, down, like steps, cascading into the sea. The cliffs are fractured by a narrow gap, no more than ten or twelve feet wide, an open wound in the landscape.

Drea appears at my side, red hair bright against her jacket. “Stray’s Chasm,” she says cheerfully. “The name of it. A sixty-foot drop from here to the ocean. You always want to watch where you walk, especially at night.”

My eyes find Arlo. When he catches me looking, he tilts his head back and winks, and I imagine shoving him off into the abyss.

Fucking Arlo Ellis-Noon.

The last time I saw him, we were sophomores. And we were naked. I wish I didn’t remember his mouth. His lips soft but electric. The way he leaned in and I leaned in and we both leaned until we were falling through the ground below, through the outer ring of damp, cool earth to the core of fire at its center. So much possibility and maybe and might have been.

“I should probably warn you,” a voice booms, jolting me back to the present, “that your time here is going to be unconventional in ways you might not expect.”

Meredith Graffam stands, looking like a great and powerful witch, between us and the water. If she feels the chill, she doesn’t show it. She wears her dark hair long, as in her earliest author photo. It swirls around her now like smoke. Beneath it, her face is colorless except for the arched brows, the large eyes, the pink shine of her mouth. Very little makeup, skin clear and luminous, as if she washed her face in a cool mountain stream.

“I believe you can’t teach writing,” she says. “You simply

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have to write. It's the only way to learn. As storytellers, we need to be able to excavate. Starting with ourselves. Go places no one else has gone, not even us. Get uncomfortable, be afraid. That's when and where you write. I haven't won two Oscars and a Tony Award because I played it safe. As a student at this school, you expect the world to be handed to you, to come out on top. But here, with me, you'll have to fight for it. If you want to be a storyteller, in whatever form, in whatever space, you need to be willing to do anything for the story, no matter how uncomfortable it makes you. No matter the cost."

In person, she's a presence, the molecular energy of the air charged around her. Her voice is a furnace, articulate and impassioned.

"How many of you didn't have a say in ending up at Brighton and Hove? How many of you don't have a say in your own lives? How many of you would be somewhere else if you could?"

Isaac raises his hand, followed—one by one—by the others. I'm not sure whether to raise my hand or not, and so I don't. I want to stand apart. It seems to work because Graf-fam's eyes linger on me.

"The power of choice," she continues, to me. "The challenge is to live outside the box. To live and then to create."

Peter coughs loudly, drawing her attention back to the group.

To all of us, she says, "I can make you into real storytellers. I can help you distinguish yourselves from the thousands and thousands of writers and creators trying to make it in their industry. But you have to trust me. This won't work if you

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don't. You should assume everything is part of class, even if I'm not present. And that you are always being graded. In each exercise, there will only be one winner. I promise there's a method to my madness. Effy." She smiles, and it's as if the sun has chosen me, out of everyone, to shine on. "Hold this."

She hands me her phone. I stare down at the case, which is a blinding fluorescent yellow—the poster for *Whittier*, one of her more recent films. Then she sheds her coat, letting it drop onto the ground.

"Metaphorically, you have to jump into that deep end. Once you leave the Moss, you can choose to stay inside, where it's warm and dry. You can choose to be safe—or not. Joan Didion said, 'You have to pick the places you don't walk away from.' Let this be one of those places."

And then, Stray's Chasm to the left of her, she glides down the natural staircase formed by those enormous rock slabs. She comes to a ledge maybe twenty feet above the water. And steps right off. Into the ocean. The eight of us draw a collective breath.

We descend quickly to the ledge where she stood just a moment ago, salt spray hitting our faces. From up here, there is only a sheer drop into the sea, and my heart knocks against my chest. To the left of us, the chasm. To the right of us, the giant's staircase continuing until the lowest level of rock disappears beneath the water. Ness accidentally bumps me, and I grab on to Arlo to keep from plunging over the edge.

He looks at me. I look at him. I immediately let go and move away.

Suddenly—a pool of black appears just below the surface of the waves. We leave our perch and clamber downward as

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Meredith Graffam rises from the water like Aphrodite, hair and clothes plastered to her skin. She pulls herself out of the water and stands.

“Now you,” she says as we reach her. “Each of you. No more safe. Safe gets you nowhere.”

We stare at her, at the ocean, back and forth as if we don’t understand.

“In fifteen days, I’m going to choose one of you to have your work produced, filmed, or published. Not eight of you. *One* of you. I have the power to make that happen. A film. A TV series. A book deal. A play. Whatever it is, just imagine. One of your greatest wishes coming true. Like *that*.” She snaps her fingers. “But I can also send you home right now. There’s no reason to waste my time.”

Ness and I exchange a look. I can hear her teeth chattering over the sound of my own.

“Whoever is still on these rocks by the time I count to ten will vacate the Moss today. One . . . Two . . .” Graffam’s mouth wears a half smile. Her eyes are glittering.

Because I, Effy Green, have decided to stand apart, because I want to win and because I have nothing to lose, I hand Meredith Graffam her phone, shed my own coat, walk to the edge of the rock, and jump.

My heart explodes with the shock of the cold. Everything stops—breath, heartbeat, pulse. Time slows down, the world in slow motion. I feel heavy. I feel light. My eyes close against the freezing water. Body suspended.

A memory. Winter in Maine. Gran and me on the beach. Me dodging waves as the tide came in, Gran wading right through it in bare feet.

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“Don’t catch pneumonia,” I said because I didn’t want Gran leaving me too.

Her response: “I don’t plan to.”

She was wearing all white and had this scarf around her neck that blew away in the wind. I reached out to catch it and nearly pitched headfirst into the sea, but just in time she grabbed hold of me and said, “It doesn’t matter, it’s only a scarf.” As I watched it float away, I imagined a girl my age finding it on the shore of some far-off land—Ireland, Wales.

Now I burst through to the surface, to the wind and the blue above, and I am gasping from the cold and trying desperately to fill my lungs with air. I look up as Isaac executes a perfect swan dive. As he sputters to the surface shouting expletives, I start to laugh, the skin of my face threatening to crack. He sends a wave of water at me, and I send one back.

Leela cannonballs in, followed by Peter, who starts to scream as soon as he hits the water. Joey shrieks and then leaps, weightless for a second before hitting the ocean like a slap.

“Come on in,” I shout at Ness, teeth chattering. I splash water in her direction, sending her skittering backward.

The others join me in chanting, “Come on in, come on in . . .”

“Ahhh.” Ness glances at Graffam, at the water, at me, at Graffam again.

“Six . . .”

Ness sets her glasses on the ground, and then she is running toward me across the rock and launching herself into the air, arms wide. At the last minute, she wraps them around herself and hits the water hard. A few seconds later, she reappears, hair curling around her face. I throw my arms around

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her, and we bob like buoys, the waves catching us and pulling us forward, pushing us back, so that we lose our footing. The water is shallow here, but the current is powerful and it keeps trying to yank us under. I imagine it dragging Moss Hove out to sea. How terrified he must have been when he knew he couldn't fight any longer.

"Seven . . ."

Ramon lumbers forward, and I expect him to take flight. Instead he sits on the edge of the rock, where he removes his shoes and socks, rolls up the legs of his jeans, and—bitching the entire time—drops his feet in, first the left, then the right. We tread water, waiting for him to submerge himself, but he only sits there.

"For the record," he says to Graffam, "I don't see what this 'exercise' has to do with storytelling." He makes air quotes around *exercise*. "Or even creativity. Me not wanting to catch hypothermia during school hours is just good common sense."

Graffam counts, "Eight . . . Nine . . ."

As Ness and I hoist ourselves back onto the rocks, I sneak a glance at Arlo. He stands with hands in coat pockets, head turtled into his collar.

The moment Graffam utters "Ten," Isaac grabs Arlo by the arm and yanks him in and dunks him like it's a baptism. The water starts to churn around him and over him, and I watch as, like that, he is gone. *Don't come back up*, I think. *Stay down there so I don't ever have to think about you again*.

Arlo disappears completely, consumed by the tide. Waves roll in and out. Now I'm the one counting to ten. By the time I get to fifteen, he's still gone.

Isaac shouts, "Noon!" He glances up at Graffam, at me,

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