

PROLOGUE

The first thing that seems wrong to her is the vultures.

There are five or six of them, perched in a cluster on the peaked roof of the old bird blind, which sits at the edge of the woods and to the right of the stream.

She freezes with a start about twenty yards away from them, unsettled by their presence. What are they doing so *close*? They're usually in the sky when she sees them, riding thermals.

One of them creeps along the base of the roof and drops its beak. Her eyes follow the movement downward and then keep going, drawn magnetically to the ground.

Three more of the birds ruffle about in the knee-high grass by the stream, and they're pecking at something long and tan colored. A deer must have staggered here and died after being maimed by a car. She watches in disgust as one of the vultures beaks the far end of the animal, then tears away a stringy red piece of flesh.

She starts to turn, unable to stomach a second more of the

grisly scene, but part of her brain has gone rogue and won't let her look away, urging her to revise her interpretation.

No, *not* a deer, she realizes. What she's staring at is a coat. And something denim colored near the lower end of it. Her heart lurches.

Stooping down, she grabs a rock off the ground and hurls it toward the vultures, who lift their wings slightly and hop backward.

It's clear now there's a body inside the coat, lying face-down, with one arm flung outward. And there's skin evident below the bottom of it, the backs of two bare calves. The denim, she now sees, is a pair of jeans that have been bunched around the ankles. Her stomach heaves.

A voice in her head screams at her to flee. Before she can propel herself away, she notices the hand protruding from the sleeve, its nails painted a vivid shade of pink. She's seen this hand before.

The day couldn't be more gorgeous. It's late July, and the sky is a spectacular shade of blue, with only a few tiny clouds scudding across. I'm in the passenger seat of our Volvo with my husband, Gabe, behind the wheel and my nine-year-old stepson, Henry, in the back. We're halfway to Gabe's parents' sixty-acre country home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, for our annual family vacation there, a week that I know from experience will involve plenty of swimming, tennis, badminton, biking, hammocking, forest hikes, Frisbee-tossing, stargazing, board games, and epic conversations, to say nothing of fantastic meals and delicious cocktails.

And yet I've got a pit in my stomach that won't go away, no matter how deeply I breathe, release, and repeat.

"You okay?" Gabe asks, glancing over at me and raising a single eyebrow in that way of his.

"Not totally," I admit. "I'm kind of upset about the job I did this morning."

“Gosh, I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to ask how that went. Want to talk about it?”

I steal a glance into the back seat, where Henry, a precocious kid and world-class eavesdropper, appears engrossed in something on his iPad.

“The session turned into a real dumpster fire,” I tell Gabe.

“I thought you were only recording a short story today,” he says. “Wouldn’t that be pretty straightforward?”

I’m an actress, and I’ve been concentrating for the past couple of years on voice-over work. Today’s dumpster fire involved, yes, me reading one story for the audio edition of an upcoming collection by a hotshot writer.

I sigh. “The author convinced the publisher to let her sit in on the sessions, which is a bad idea on so many levels. Two minutes in she starts wrinkling her nose, like she’s smelling a dead yak, and whispering to Shawna, my director. Then, if you can believe it, she started doing line readings for my benefit—to explain how things *should* sound.”

“Did Shawna say anything?”

“Not really. She seemed totally intimidated by this woman. We got through the whole recording, but I think they could tell I was flustered.”

“I’m sure you did fine, Summer, you always do. And besides, it’s just one job.”

I usually appreciate Gabe’s typical glass-half-full attitude, but it’s not as simple as that. Though audiobooks don’t pay as well as some of the other voice-over work I do, like TV and radio commercials, and also IVR (interactive voice response)—you know, those prompts that route your call when you contact your insurance company or internet pro-

vider, the ones that sometimes make you want to hurl your phone against the wall—I love recording them. That’s because it feels like *acting*, and I don’t want Shawna to think twice about hiring me again.

But I just nod. Gabe’s been worried lately that I give my inner critic way too much headspace, and I shouldn’t look like I’m stressing as we kick off our vacation.

“How about you?” I ask. “Are you going to be able to chill this week?”

“Yeah, mostly. Marcus and I need to sit down with Dad about some business stuff, but we’ll get that out of the way this weekend.”

Gabe and his brother have a flourishing eight-year-old wine-importing firm, and my father-in-law’s been an adviser to them, as well as an early investor.

“Will we have time to swim before dinner tonight?” Henry pipes up from the back.

“Probably, buddy,” Gabe responds. “I talked to Gee earlier and she said we won’t eat till seven.”

We’d gotten a later start from Manhattan than we hoped for, in part because Gabe’s ex, Amanda, was late dropping Henry off (“You could not *believe* the traffic.”), but the GPS has us arriving by five.

“Do you think I’m gonna be able to swim every day?” Henry asks. “My mom said it’s supposed to rain this week.”

Gabe rolls his eyes for my benefit only. It’s so much like Amanda to put a Debbie Downer spin on a fun vacation, but all things being equal, Gabe’s coparenting experience could be worse. She’s the one who initiated their split (“We were such different people in college, don’t you think?”), and

though she can be a pain in the butt, her guilt about ending the marriage seems to have kept her from turning toxic.

“There might be a few thunderstorms here and there,” Gabe says. “But nothing to worry about. And you downloaded some books, right?”

“Yeah, a bunch.”

“What are you reading now, Hen?” I ask.

“*Brief Answers to the Big Questions* by Stephen Hawking.”

Jeez. Well, hopefully he won’t ask me to elaborate on anything. My BFA theater degree meant that I made it through college without any math or science, but feel free to quiz me on what I soaked up in courses like “Freeing the Expressive Human Instrument” and “Unarmed Combat: Learning Slaps, Punches, and Found Objects.”

“You know what could be fun to do if it *does* rain, honey?” I say, twisting around in my seat to look at him. “We could ask Gee to give us a cooking class.”

“Wow, that would be awesome.”

“Gee,” aka my mother-in-law, Claire, has help from her longtime housekeeper, Bonnie, at the Bucks County house, but she also prepares many of the meals herself. A landscape designer by profession, she’s a natural and talented chef.

I turn back to Gabe. “So you talked to your mom? Has anyone arrived yet?”

“Marcus and Keira drove out early, so did Blake and Wendy,” he says, referring to two of his brothers and their wives. “Not sure when Nick arrives. But—major news flash: he’s bringing a new girl with him.”

“Oh my god!” I punch him lightly on the arm. “Why are you only telling me this *now*?”

“Because I heard it myself only a couple of hours ago.”

I’m happy for Nick. His last girlfriend moved back to Belgium over a year ago, and though I’m sure my charming, dashing brother-in-law hasn’t been lacking for female company, I’ve sensed lately he’s eager for something serious. I just hope a stranger won’t disturb the ecosystem of our family vacation this week.

“He really sprung it on them last minute, huh?”

“Yeah, but my mom seemed cool about it. As you know, Nick can do no wrong with her.”

“Where’s Uncle Nick going to stay?” Henry calls out from the back.

“Probably in the carriage house. Gee’s had it totally renovated with a couple of new guest rooms.”

“What about his date?” my stepson asks.

“Um, probably with him there,” Gabe says.

“Does that mean they’re shacking up?”

I stifle a laugh as I see Gabe’s right brow shoot up.

“Yeah, but let’s not refer to it that way in front of everyone else. Okay, buddy? And speaking of sleeping arrangements, are you sure you want to stay in the main house? You could always bunk down with me and Summer in the cottage.”

“Thanks, but I wanna be in the big house with Gee and Grandpa. Gee said the dogs can sleep with me.”

“Okay, but if you change your mind, it’s not a problem.”

Twenty minutes later we exit the main highway, and in another fifteen, we cross the Delaware River from New Jersey into Bucks County and end up on Durham Road. The sight of the Keatons’ home—a rambling gray stone house with several wings, and dormer windows across the roof—always

lifts my spirits, and I feel my work worries ease as soon as we head down the gravel road that leads to the circular driveway.

As we're parking, my father-in-law, Ash, strides from the house, his six-two frame bookended by two scampering dogs: Ginger, a golden retriever, and Bella, a pug-Chihuahua rescue mutt.

"It's only been three weeks since I saw you, but I swear you've grown two inches," Ash tells Henry, his voice booming, as he envelops him in a hug.

"Did you know you grow more when you're sleeping than when you're awake, Grandpa?" Henry asks.

"I didn't know that, but you're going to sit next to me at dinner and tell me all about it," Ash says, hugging me and Gabe in turn. Though I know my father-in-law has a reputation for being tough and exacting in his commercial real estate business, he always has plenty of warmth to spare for us. "Now let's go say hi to Gee."

We follow him in, and I'm newly struck by the fact that Gabe, with his slate-blue eyes and hawklike nose, looks a lot like his handsome dad, minus the silver hair.

Claire is in the large kitchen, wearing a cook's apron over stylish beige trousers and a cream-colored blouse, and julienning basil, which she pauses doing to hug us. As I set two bags of bagels on the countertop, I spot a few people hanging by the pool through the rear window of the kitchen.

"Can I get my trunks on?" Henry asks, noticing, too.

"You bet," Ash tells him. "Why don't you carry your bag upstairs first? You're in the room next to Gee's and mine."

"I think I'll swim, too," Gabe says. "What about you, Summer?"

“I’m going to stay here and catch up with your mom for a bit.”

“Okay, I’ll take our stuff to the cottage. Unless you need any help here, Mom?”

She shakes her head. “No, darling, enjoy yourself. There are snacks and drinks by the pool.”

After they depart, I take a minute to let my eyes roam the room. If Gabe’s business keeps growing like it has been, we’re hoping to buy a small weekend home of our own, and this is the kind of kitchen I’d kill for. All the white keeps it fresh, but there’s also a charming rustic feel thanks to the exposed ceiling beams, apron sink, and painted wood floor.

“How about an iced tea?” Claire asks, nodding toward the brown ceramic jug that she keeps filled on the counter.

“Not right now, thanks.” My mother-in-law brews it herself with herbs like fennel and sage, and though I’m sure it has all sorts of antioxidant properties, I’ve always preferred the stuff that tastes like Snapple.

“You look lovely, by the way,” she says. “The green in your dress perfectly matches your eyes, and the style suits you to a tee.”

I cherish compliments like that from Claire as she always looks so pulled together. Her blond hair, a shade or so lighter than mine, is pulled back today in a flattering French twist.

“Do you think so? I wore it to work today. A lot of voice actors dress down for recording jobs, but I always feel I perform better when I make an effort.”

“I think we all do. Like it or not, people notice our clothes and judge us on them, sometimes without even realizing it, and you pick up on those vibes in the studio, I’m sure.”

I'm momentarily tempted to tell Claire what happened today at the recording. She's a fount of wisdom on everything from how much a wedding gift should cost to turning any kind of negotiation into a win-win. But I don't want to bother her when she's in the midst of making dinner for all of us.

"Where's Bonnie?" I ask.

"She went out to pick up a few more supplies. Turns out Nick's date for the week is a vegetarian and we'll have to add extra side dishes while she's here."

"Do you know anything else about her?"

"Not a thing. He only told us two days ago that he was bringing her."

She returns her attention to the basil on the butcher-block-topped island and scrapes it into a huge white bowl, one already filled with diced tomatoes, chunks of Brie, and olive oil. My mouth waters as I realize that it's for one of the delicious pasta dishes Claire loves to serve in summer.

"Do you think that after Marcus's wedding, Nick started to feel pressure to settle down?" Marcus is Nick's fraternal twin, and he married a lovely woman named Keira last summer.

Claire shakes her head. "Nick? I think the only pressure he allows himself to feel these days is work-related."

For the past several years, Nick has been involved in Ash's real estate business.

"Or," she adds smiling, "on the squash court. I just hope when he *is* inclined to marry, it's to someone as terrific as you."

"Oh, Claire, that's so kind of you to say." She's warm and generous to all three of her daughters-in-law, but I know we

have a special rapport. “And, of course, it’s entirely mutual. But I should have asked you before—can I help with anything?”

“No, Bonnie and I have it under control. Go start your vacation, dear.”

I head out to the patio, near where Henry’s already splashing around at one end of the kidney-shaped, black-bottom pool with Gabe and his grandfather. Blake, Gabe’s oldest brother, is swimming laps, while Marcus, Keira, and Blake’s wife, Wendy, are clustered by the beverage trolley. They wave me over.

“Great to see everyone,” I say, hugging them all. “We had dinner with these two just last week,” I tell Wendy, cocking my head at Marcus and Keira, “but it seems like ages since we’ve seen you and Blake.”

“I know, that’s the problem with moving to the burbs,” Wendy says, flicking a strand of her chin-length hair off her face. “Plus, we’ve both been crazed at work lately.”

“Everything good in the art world?”

“Definitely, but you can’t make some of this stuff up,” Wendy says. She’s an art dealer who now runs her own gallery. “I sold two very expensive candle sculptures to a collector in Texas a month ago, and his wife accidentally lit them at a party she gave. He ended up ordering two more.”

“Why would an artist bother making candles if he didn’t want anyone to light them?” Marcus asks.

Wendy smiles, unruffled. She’s been married to Blake for ten years, and she knows this is a typical response from Marcus. He’s the quietest of the brothers, but when he does have something to say, he cuts straight to the chase.

“Blake asked me the same thing. He thinks a lot of modern art is the emperor’s new clothes. But a good artist simply wants you to pause and stare and be provoked and maybe see things in a totally different way.”

“I guess the wife missed the point. . . . Speaking of Blake, I may take a dip, too.” Marcus glances at Keira. “You want to join me?”

“You go ahead,” she tells her husband. “I’m going to wait until tomorrow.” He nods and her eyes linger on him as he strides off toward the pool.

“I was just hearing about Keira’s wonderful new job,” Wendy says to me.

“Well, not wonderful yet,” my other sister-in-law insists, shaking her head. “I’m still trying to get my bearings.”

I don’t consider either Wendy or Keira to be close friends, but I get along well with both of them, as different as they are. Wendy’s outgoing and self-possessed, thirty-eight as of last month. Though she seems to favor mostly black designer clothes for work, on weekends she goes for more of that preppy-bohemian Tory Burch style of dressing, which fits well with her white-blond hair and blue-eyed good looks. I’ve seen her be snooty to waiters but never toward anyone in the family. It drives Gabe nuts that she talks with a faint British accent, even though she only lived in the UK for a year—and it was the year she was twenty-two. But if Madonna can be forgiven for doing it, so can Wendy, I suppose.

Keira is thirty-three like me, supersmart, and as of a few weeks ago, a relationship manager for an organization that guides philanthropists on where to donate. She’s attractive, with long brown hair, brown eyes, and flawless light brown

skin, and though she dresses nicely enough, it's a classic, fairly conservative style that suggests fashion didn't make the cut on her list of major priorities. Mostly she's friendly and thoughtful, though less self-assured than Wendy. Sometimes she can even be a little awkward in social situations, maybe due to anxiety. She'll walk into a room and for no obvious reason will be wearing this worried frown that makes you wonder if she knows something you don't about an approaching swarm of killer bees or a massive asteroid headed straight toward the earth.

"I hate to be a party pooper, but I have to excuse myself," Wendy says. "I need to check in quickly with a client."

"No problem," I tell her. "We'll have plenty of time together this week."

She sets down a half-empty glass of ice water and as she turns to go, I notice a tiny swell at the waist of her sundress. Could this mean she's finally pregnant? I know from Gabe that she and Blake have been trying on and off for ages, and we'd all be thrilled if they're expecting.

I turn back to Keira. "Were you able to get the whole week off?" I ask her.

"No, I'm going to take the bus back to the city early Tuesday morning, and then come out again on Friday."

"Oh, that's a bummer."

"I know, but I really need to get up to speed in the new position," she says, not looking all that sad about it.

I can't help but wonder if work is the true reason she'll be here only part of the time. She's an only child, whose parents—a Black father and Caucasian mother—divorced when she was three. Though Keira says they were both loving

and did a good job of coparenting, neither remarried or had other children, and perhaps as a result, she sometimes seems uncomfortable in a big family group, especially one that can get as loud and rowdy as the Keatons.

“Of course, maybe I *should* be sticking around,” she adds. “You heard about Nick’s mystery guest, right?”

“Oh, yeah. But don’t worry, I promise to text you regular updates if you want.”

“It’s not that.” The tiny fissure between her eyes deepens. “She used to date *Marcus*.”

“You’re kidding,” I say, taken aback. “When?”

“Around two years ago, right before he met me.”

I can’t imagine having one of Gabe’s exes show up during our family vacation. “Ugh, I’m sorry. Will this be weird for you guys?”

“Marcus swears not, at least on his end. They apparently only went out a few times before he broke it off. Says she wasn’t his type. So I guess I shouldn’t be bothered, either.”

“Of course not,” I assure her. “How did Nick end up meeting her, anyway?”

“Through the same friend Marcus did. Someone they know in the city.”

“Well, I feel confident you have nothing to worry about,” I tell her, and I do. She and Marcus clearly have a strong bond.

The sun has now sunk low enough in the sky that it’s cast a shadow across most of the water in the pool, and though Gabe and Henry are still happily splashing around, I take it as my cue to freshen up before dinner. I tell Keira I’ll see her shortly and walk around to the western side of the house,

then make my way down a long path to the stone guest cottage, which sits nestled against the edge of a wooded area.

Because Gabe and I often come out here on weekends, Claire offered us first dibs on the refurbished carriage house, but the little cottage will always be my first choice. In our early days of dating, it gave me a needed sense of privacy, as comfortable as I felt with Gabe's parents right from the start.

The cottage is actually an old springhouse, dating back at least a hundred years. It's where food used to be stored before refrigeration because the spring below cooled the building. The lower level features a cozy sitting room with a fireplace and a small kitchen; upstairs are two bedrooms and a bath.

After unpacking my duffel bag—and discovering that Gabe, in his typical thoughtful way, has already hung my dresses—I brew myself a cup of tea, then carry it out to the small patio in the rear. It's rimmed by a gorgeous border garden bursting with reds, blues, and purples. After settling at the table, I sweep my gaze over the Monet-like setting.

I wish I could really savor the scene, but my anxiety about the morning's recording session has somehow crept back in. I have to do better at not letting stuff like that eat at me. Besides, I shouldn't let a setback in this arena bug me. Though I enjoy voice-over work and appreciate how well it pays, the jobs are only a means to an end. If I had to spend my life recording prompts like "Please listen carefully because our menu options have changed" while people I knew were acting in movies and series or scoring lead roles off Broadway, I'd shoot myself.

What I ultimately want, and have wanted ever since my mother took me to see a touring company perform *The*

Fantasticks when I was twelve, is to engage fully in theater and film, both as an actor and writer. This fall, a short play I wrote is going to be staged as part of a small theater festival just north of the city, and I'm hoping that will help me make more inroads in the theater world at least. Plus, playwriting and possibly screenwriting, too, will be a way to stay involved in my career when Gabe and I have a baby—which we hope to do next year.

As I finish my tea, I discover to my shock that it's closing in on six thirty. I run upstairs and quickly wash my face, dab on fresh makeup, and grab a cotton sweater. I'm halfway up the path to the house when Henry comes tearing toward me, dressed now in khaki pants and a white polo shirt.

"I'm on a mission to find you," he calls out as he approaches.

"Mission accomplished. And my, don't *you* look smashing," I say, wrapping an arm around his shoulder.

"Gee bought the shirt for me," he says, wrinkling his nose.

"Don't you like it?"

"The little polo player looks stupid."

"Well, wear it just tonight," I say as we resume walking. "It'll make your grandmother happy."

"Yeah, okay. Guess what?" He flashes his dimpled smile, and his blue eyes twinkle.

"What?"

"The mystery date is here!"

This kid doesn't miss a thing. "Ah, so what do you think? Does she meet with your approval?"

"The jury's still out."

I laugh out loud at his choice of words. “I’m sure she’s perfectly nice.”

“And guess what else?”

“What?”

“She’s an actress, too.”

Oh *fabulous*. I have plenty of friends from my college acting program and years in the business, but meeting other actors is rarely fun—because an ugly compare-a-thon is almost always unavoidable. As Billy Dean, a pal from college, says, “Two actors at a dinner table is, at the very least, one actor too many.”

“What’s her name?”

“She told us it’s Hannah, but do you think that’s her real name?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, your name isn’t really Summer. My mom said it’s Sara.”

Bless your heart, Amanda. I wonder how she’d feel if I told Henry everything I knew about *her*—like the fact that her “outgrowing the marriage” coincided with a fling with a coworker. Not that I’d ever do that, of course.

“Some actors have to change their names—because there’s a more famous actor with the same name.” What I don’t add is that in my case I was mostly going for something more memorable than Sara.

Henry grabs my hand, urging me to speed up, and as we round the house to the back patio, I see that everyone else is there, talking and sipping cocktails against a soft, early evening sky. As Henry darts away to romp with the dogs, I spot Gabe in a circle with Blake and his aunt and uncle, who have

driven over from New Jersey for dinner along with their recently divorced daughter. Gabe cocks his chin up in greeting and I signal to him that I'll be over in a sec.

I step toward the drinks trolley and pour a glass of sparkling water, knowing there'll be plenty of wine later. Spinning back around, I finally spot the mystery guest, dressed in a summery red dress with a deep-V neckline and lips painted to match. Nick's arm is locked around her waist, and they're chatting with Ash, who's wearing a grin the size of a cruise ship.

And I realize at that moment that I've met her before. Three—no, two—years ago. We were both performing in a theater showcase involving an evening of very short plays, each one by a different aspiring playwright. She was in the last one of the night, so I not only mingled with her backstage but also had the chance to watch her performance after I was done.

It's no surprise I remember her. She's about five eight, a little taller than me, with brown eyes and wavy, dark brown hair worn just below the ear—so different from the long hair that I and everyone else our age seem to favor. Probably around twenty-seven. Not a bad actress, if I recall correctly, but if she was in a showcase only two years ago, she's probably still struggling like I am.

As I rake my memory for her name, which I can't recall at the moment, Nick spots me, flashes his trademark half-cocked grin, and beckons me over to the trio, his light blue eyes sparkling.

"Summer," he says, enveloping me in a hug when I reach him. "It's been wayyyy too long."

“I know, I know. Is your dad working you to the bone?”

“Only twenty-four, six—he actually lets up a tiny bit on Sundays,” he jokes, glancing at his father. Then, looking back at me, he says, “Summer, this is Hannah Kane. Hannah, this is my amazing sister-in-law Summer Redding.”

Hannah Kane. Funny how I remembered her stunning looks but not her name.

“Lovely to meet you,” she says, as a blend of patchouli and vanilla wafts from her creamy white skin. “Nick’s absolutely gushed about you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I reply, realizing she has no recollection of me. Good to know I leave such a lasting impression.

“Summer,” Ash says with mischief in his tone, “can you assure Hannah that she’s under no pressure whatsoever, but that we desperately need her for the badminton tournament this week? Keira’s had to bow out.”

Before I can respond, Hannah does. “Oh, absolutely count me in.”

“Fabulous,” Ash exclaims. A split second later I see Claire signal for his assistance from the other end of the patio, and he excuses himself and hurries off.

Nick shakes his head good-naturedly. “I’d promised Hannah she wouldn’t have to engage in a single group activity the entire time she’s here, and now she’s just been railroaded into a badminton tournament that will probably go on for days.”

“I’d actually love to do it,” she tells him.

“Seriously?” he asks.

“Absolutely.” She eyes him flirtatiously. “I’m actually pretty good with a shuttlecock.”

Oh please, I think. *Get a room*. But before I can duck away from this exchange, Nick redirects his attention to me.

"I've been so eager for you guys to meet. You're both in the same field and I'm sure you've got a ton to talk about."

He starts to elaborate, but then Henry pops over, begging Nick to pull a quarter out of his ear, and suddenly Hannah and I are left alone, like we're two characters in a movie scene in which everyone else is frozen.

"What a fabulous place this is," Hannah says, sweeping her gaze around the grounds. "You must love coming out here from the city."

"I do, very much. And I'm glad you could join us. How long have you and Nick been dating?"

"About two months," she says. "It would have been great to have met Nick's family sooner, but with work, this was my first chance."

"Actually, you and I have met before."

"*Really?*"

"We were both in the same playwriting showcase. Two Octobers ago."

She tips her head in confusion. "Showcase?"

"Yes. One with six or seven ten-minute plays. Down in the West Village."

"Hmm, I'm afraid you must have me mixed up with someone else," she says. "I've never done a showcase in the Village."

This is totally bizarre. I have no idea why, but I'm sure that she's just told me a big, fat lie.