

BAD SUMMER PEOPLE

A NOVEL



EMMA ROSENBLUM

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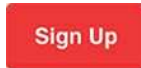
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To Monty, Sandy, and Charles, my best summer people

Prologue

Danny Leavitt, a gangly eight-year-old with a severe peanut allergy, was the one who discovered the body. It was early, maybe 7:30 a.m., and he'd been riding his black Schwinn bike around town to search for snails after the big storm they'd had the night before. The boardwalks were wet and slippery and covered with leaves and small branches blown off by the strong winds. It hadn't been a tropical storm, but it'd been close—an intense microburst that had hit the island unexpectedly, sending deck furniture flying and doing some light damage to several roofs around the village. Danny's house, which was right on the beach, was fine, the power intact, but his mom yelled after him to be careful as he left, warning of potential downed wires.

He'd ridden for about ten minutes, going from the ocean down to the bay on the walk that he lived on, Surf. Then he decided to ride over to Neptune Walk, where the playground was, to see what shape it was in. He turned on Harbor from Surf, passed Atlantic, Marine, and Broadway, and then turned left on Neptune. Something shiny caught his eye in front of the Cahulls', a friendly couple with one little kid, Archie. He stopped and got off his Schwinn to see a bike, nearly hidden in the woody, shrubby area that lined the boardwalks, about a three-foot-drop down. The town had lifted all the walks after flooding from Hurricane Sandy, and Danny's dad, along with many other people in Salcombe, thought they'd gone overboard. "Someone could break their neck," he remembered his dad muttering.

Danny figured the bike had been blown away by the wind, so he grabbed its wheel and dragged it up onto the boardwalk, no easy feat—it was a grown-up's bike, and Danny was small for his age. It was then he saw that the bike had been covering something else: a person, facedown in the reeds. The body was angled strangely and not moving at all. Danny felt his throat close, almost as if he'd eaten a peanut. He hadn't, had he? He ran to the Cahulls' house and banged on the door loudly, shivering and scared. Marina came quickly, in her pajamas and glasses, holding Archie,

a concerned look on her face. Marina was very pregnant.

“Danny Leavitt? Are you okay?”

Danny could barely get the words out.

“There’s someone out there on the ground, I think they fell off the boardwalk on their bike. They’re not moving.”

Marina put her son down and called for her husband, Mike.

“Come inside now. Mike and I will handle it. You just stay here.”

Mike, in sweatpants and a sleep-rumpled T-shirt, passed them by and went out to look at the find. Marina smiled at Danny. They were silent for a minute. Mike came back into the house. He seemed tense, like when Danny’s dad had a bad day at work.

“Take Danny back to his house, and take Archie with you. Don’t look at the body. I’m going to call the police. Or whoever it is out here that they call police.”

The body? Danny had only heard that phrase in TV shows his parents watched. Marina grabbed her son, who was fussing, and led Danny down the walkway toward his bike, redirecting him away from *the body*, as Danny now thought of it. She told Danny to ride home and then put her son in the baby seat of her bike and took off after him.

Danny wasn’t part of the excitement after that, but he did get to speak to two police officers that day (they were real police officers, weren’t they?) and tell them what he’d found and how he’d found it. His parents seemed upset; he’d overheard them speaking in a loud whisper in their bedroom after the cops had left.

“Great, now he’s going to be the ‘dead body’ kid—this is going to be the talk of Dalton,” said his mom, Jessica.

“I wonder if there’s a way we can sue the town,” said his dad, Max. “I’m not paying two million dollars for my beach house, plus fifty thousand in property taxes, for my son to find a corpse. Someone needs to pay for this.”

But overall, Danny felt pretty good about discovering the first murder victim in Salcombe, like, ever. He was looking forward to telling all his friends at camp about it. How cool was that?

PART I

June 26

Lauren Parker

Lauren Parker was in desperate need of a great summer. This winter had been awful. First of all, it had been freezing since December. Lauren hated the cold. If she could move to Miami, she would—it seemed like everyone else she knew was doing just that. But Jason’s job was based in New York, and he needed to occasionally stop by the office. He was the boss, after all. (“If you’re the boss, why can’t you just *declare* you’re moving to Florida?” Lauren kept asking. “You don’t go in during the summer!” She never got a good reply.)

Secondly, the Upper East Side school that Lauren’s kids went to, Braeburn Academy, had been embroiled in a public scandal, and for months, it was all anyone within a twenty-block radius could talk about.

It started in February, when the school’s board received an anonymous email about Mr. Whitney, Braeburn’s revered headmaster of twenty years. Mr. Whitney was a Braeburn legend—British, in his late sixties, fond of bow ties and fountain pens, he’d taken the academy from B-list to a true competitor on the scene. Braeburn was now the preferred choice for the most discerning New York City parents, including the Parkers, who bragged to all their friends about Mr. Whitney’s unwillingness to bend to the winds of social change.

So, when the board received the accusatory email, it was as if a bomb had gone off on Ninety-third Street and Madison: Mr. Whitney wasn’t who he said he was. He was a fraud, according to the widely forwarded screed, a community college dropout who’d forged his résumé two decades ago and tricked Braeburn’s leadership into hiring him. They’d all been had by a swindler, a guy from New Jersey who’d pretended to be from England, who’d created a character that specifically, smartly, preyed on the status-obsessed dupes of the Upper East Side.

The story leaked, ending up as a cover in *New York* magazine (“How Francis Whitney Tricked New York’s Upper Crust”). Lauren and her mom friends were completely mortified. They’d all gone to great lengths to secure spots for their children at Braeburn and shelled out \$50,000 per kid for the privilege of attending. To have it all revealed as a scam, as the rest of the private school circuit sniggered, was a real blow.

“I still can’t believe this happened to us,” said Lauren’s friend Mimi Golden recently, sighing. They were having a glass of wine at Felice, on Eighty-third Street. Mimi had come from a Botox touch-up, and her forehead was speckled with red dots where the needle had entered. “I don’t want to talk about it for one more second. We’re decamping for the Hamptons next week. When are you heading out to Fire Island?”

“On Saturday,” said Lauren. “Jason’s been busy with work, so we haven’t had a chance to open the house yet.”

“How’s everything going with you two?” Mimi asked, staring at Lauren with what Lauren imagined Mimi thought was a “concerned look,” but the toxins wouldn’t allow for that. Lauren, after three wines and no food at a fundraiser, had mentioned that Jason had been completely ignoring her. Mimi had pressed her about it since.

Lauren looked down at her glass of chardonnay. She strived to project an image of perfection and stylish ease; messiness and vulnerability had always been weaknesses to avoid. But this year had been a doozy, and for the first time in her life, she was struggling to keep up the charade. “Fine, fine. All good.” She quickly changed the subject—Mimi was fun, but you couldn’t trust her as far as you could throw her. “I’m also done with this year,” Lauren continued. “I need to go sit on a beach, read a book, and never hear the word *scammer* again.”

She and Jason had discussed pulling Arlo, seven, and Amelie, five, out of Braeburn, but ultimately, the board was able to salvage the school’s reputation by stealing the headmaster of Collegiate, Mr. Wolf, a veteran who brought clout and legitimacy. None of the parents cared that tuition was raised to fund Mr. Wolf’s wildly high salary. They’d pay anything for this nightmare to end. The Parkers put next year’s deposits down at Braeburn for Arlo and Amelie. All was right again on the Upper East Side.

The temperature in the city had started to warm, and the tulips had already bloomed and died on Park Avenue. Lauren couldn’t wait to get to their beach house in Salcombe, on Fire Island, which had been sitting

empty since last Labor Day. (Salcombe, named after a British seaside town, was pronounced “Saul-com,” with a silent *b* and *e*. The townspeople liked how refined it sounded and scoffed when outsiders called it “Sal-com-BE.”) The Parkers usually started going for weekends in late April, but because of a glut of birthday parties, plus Jason’s packed work schedule, they hadn’t yet had a chance. Lauren had a team of cleaners arrive at the house the week before to open it up—get rid of a winter’s worth of accumulated dust, make sure the bike tires were filled with air, unpack the multiple deliveries she’d had sent from FreshDirect and Amazon, plus the cheeses, olives, and meats from Agata & Valentina.

Once they went out to the house, they stayed through the summer; Jason used to travel back and forth just for weekends, but the new world order allowed everyone to work remotely, so all the dads were there, too (a development the wives pretended to be thrilled about). The kids attended camp, and Lauren spent her days hanging with girlfriends at the tennis courts and the beach—there was really nothing more to do than that. They also brought their nanny, Silvia, a Filipino woman who had raised three children of her own, to live with them for the summer. During the rest of the year, Silvia worked from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., commuting to Manhattan from Queens. Occasionally, Lauren wondered if Silvia, who was just the right combination of self-sufficient and unobtrusive, hated it in Salcombe. But having her there meant Lauren and Jason were free to go out with friends, be on their own schedules, and not have to deal with the hassle of making breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the kids, even on weekends.

In truth, buying a house on Fire Island hadn’t been Lauren’s choice. It was Jason’s thing, this island, this tiny town, Salcombe. His best friend from childhood, Sam Weinstein, had grown up spending his summers in Salcombe, and Jason used to stay at Sam’s house for months at a time. He was a built-in playmate for Sam, an only child whose parents were eternally in the midst of contentiously breaking up and getting back together. The boys had a group of Salcombe friends they palled around with, and Sam and Jason continued to use the house long after Sam’s parents ended up getting a divorce and buying separate vacation spots in the Hamptons (his dad) and Nantucket (his mom). Sam and Jason spent their teenage summers together in the Salcombe house, working as camp counselors, drinking at the beach at night, sailing and capsizing Sunfish for

fun. Lauren had heard *all* about it.

Twenty years later, Sam still had the house, a blue-shingled stunner that overlooked the Great South Bay and had the best sunset views in town. He and his wife, Jen, and their three kids, Lilly, Ross, and Dara, came out in June and left in September, just like Lauren and Jason. Sam and Jason were still best friends, though Sam lived in Westchester (Scarsdale; full of strivers but the best schools around) and Jason and Lauren were in the city. But Salcombe remained their special place.

When the kids were small, and it became clear that Jason's job was going to earn them some real money, he began talking about finding a spot to buy in Salcombe. Lauren had spent her twenties partying in the Hamptons, and all her friends were starting to settle there, buying beachfront in East Hampton and Amagansett and Sag Harbor. She resisted the idea. Why would she want to be stuck on Fire Island all summer, where she knew no one? They'd had a blowup about it one night after the kids had gone to sleep.

"I feel like you're forcing this on me, and I don't want to do it," Lauren had said to him. This was two apartments ago, in the modest two bedroom they lived in on Eighty-eighth Street and Third Avenue (they'd since upgraded to a four-bedroom on Park).

"Lauren, listen to yourself," said Jason calmly. It always pissed her off when he answered her anger with moderation. "I'm saying we can afford to buy a summer house! My only ask is that it's in the town that I grew up going to. The kids will love it, I'm one hundred percent sure."

"*You* didn't grow up going there," Lauren spat back. "Sam did. You were always just a guest."

"Lauren, the Hamptons are a nightmare. You know that. The crowds, the overpriced restaurants, the traffic to get there. It's like the worst parts of the Upper East Side transported three hours east. Four if you take the LIE."

"Yes, I'm aware of what the Hamptons are; I've been there a million times. I've also spent summers with you and Sam and Jen on Fire Island. I'm bored there! What will I do all day?"

"You'll figure it out," said Jason. "You'll play tennis. You'll make friends. The people who have houses in Salcombe are as rich and powerful as your friends in the Hamptons—they're just not wearing shoes."

Lauren had known she'd lost the argument before it had even started.

And she knew she was acting spoiled. But she'd finally found a community in their neighborhood; at that point, Arlo was in kindergarten at Braeburn, and Amelie was at the Brick Church preschool. The thought that all her mom friends would be spending the summer together without her made her anxious and jealous, and she hated that Jason needled her about it. "You need to stop doing things just because everyone else is," he'd say, after she'd insist on going to a certain vacation spot in St. Barts, or hiring the most sought-after tutor, or joining the golf club in Westchester that half of Braeburn belonged to. It's not like Jason was some renegade. He'd grown up on the Upper East Side and had returned to the city after college, he worked in finance, he wore the same Brooks Brothers button-downs that all the other dads did. Where did he get off telling her she was a sheep? Jason had gotten a big bonus that year, and so that had settled the conversation. They'd bought a gorgeous, upside-down modern-style house in Salcombe, right on the ocean. Lauren had pretended to be happy about it. And though she'd never admitted it outwardly, Jason had been right. Now she loved it there.

Fire Island was just a sliver of land off the south shore of Long Island. A barrier island, flanked by the Great South Bay on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, it was approximately thirty miles long—its widest point, which happened to be in Salcombe, was only about half a mile. Small towns dotted the island, the most famous of which were Cherry Grove and the Fire Island Pines. If you weren't from New York and you'd heard of Fire Island, it would have been in this context—as a gay party haven, a wild summer retreat filled with fit homosexual men.

Each community on Fire Island had its own ferry line from the mainland—the only way to get there, as the island didn't allow cars—and its own personality. Ocean Beach was a bustling town with restaurants, bars, and hordes of twentysomethings from the city doing share houses. Point O' Woods was an exclusive hamlet with large homes that passed down through the generations (no Jews allowed). Then there was Salcombe, a tiny family place filled with a mix of Jews, WASPs, and Catholics, with the commonality of success and a studied, low-key vibe. Like the rest of the island, Salcombe was 99 percent white. (In fact, Lauren could think of only one Black person she'd met in Salcombe, and like her, he'd married into it.)

Salcombe was an incorporated village of about four hundred houses,

some traditional summer cottages dating back to the 1920s and some, like Lauren's, newly built, modern and beachy, with open floor plans and rooftop decks with water views. Everyone knew everyone (and everyone knew everyone's business). There were eighty-year-olds who'd been coming to Salcombe for fifty years, plus their adult children who'd been coming their entire lives, plus their grandchildren who were now the inheritors of the sailing lessons and the day camp. You could see a little face on the playground and know, just from the shape of his nose or the swoop of his hair, that he belonged to the Rapner family or the Metzner family or, God forbid, the evil Longeran clan. The village was made up of a web of connecting boardwalks leading back and forth to the beach and the bay. Everyone rode bikes—rusty, squeaky things—to get where they needed to go. You had no choice. A bike ride from the bay on one side of the island to the beach took less than five minutes. Because there were no cars, just some village pickup trucks to transport packages and tote garbage to the dump, children were set free at an early age. Packs of seven- and eight-year-olds roamed alone, riding bikes to each other's houses or bringing fishing rods to the dock, no parents in sight.

Salcombe had one general store, referred to as “the store,” which carried basic groceries and prepared foods, and that charged about double what you'd pay off island. For years, the store held residents hostage to its outrageous prices, but now mainland superstores delivered to the ferry, and so you could stock your house at a reasonable cost, which is what Lauren and her cohort did. There was a connecting liquor store, a closet filled with wine and vodka, basically, for those who hadn't the foresight to bring enough booze from the city. Down Broadway, Salcombe's main boardwalk drag, were a quaint white, wooden town hall and an adjoining library that smelled of oak and dust and was filled with well-worn summer reads and children's books from the '70s and '80s. A little farther toward the beach was one baseball field, which hosted an avid adult softball league on the weekends and was the scene of the kids' camp during the week. A small playground sat next to the field, home to a rickety jungle gym, likely not up to current safety standards, and a swing set that croaked with every push.

The only other communal area in town, really *the* communal area, was the Salcombe Yacht Club, which sat on the bay, right near the ferry dock. “Yacht club” was truly a stretch. It consisted of a small marina, with about

twenty spaces to dock sailboats and motorboats, plus a petite beach area for kayaks and Hobie Cats. The main yacht club building, on the other side of the boardwalk, looked somewhat like a large beach house and had two interior rooms: a restaurant set up with a bar in front, and a bigger, open area in back with a little stage, a pool table, and space enough for toddlers to run around while their parents ate dinner. There was also an outer deck that overlooked the bay, perfect for sunset drinks. Five tennis courts appeared around back, all clay, four smooshed together in stacked pairs and one outlier closer to the club. All in all, it was an unimpressive affair, as these things go, but it fit with the shabby chicness of Salcombe just fine. Crowds gathered there every night for drinks and dinner, and every day for tennis and gossip. And Lauren felt good telling her friends in the city that she hung out at a “yacht club” all summer. Let them think what they wanted to.

It was now late June, and she was finally sitting on a painted blue bench on the top of the Fire Island Queen ferry, headed for Salcombe. She’d spent the previous week in the city dealing with the kids’ graduations, getting a haircut at Sally Hershberger, getting a wax, getting her nails done, and seeing friends for “until September” drinks. The sun was shining on the Great South Bay, and the black-and-white Fire Island Lighthouse stood in the distance, welcoming the Parkers back to their summer home. Arlo was next to Lauren, messing with his iPad, and Amelie and Jason were sitting behind them. Amelie had spotted one of her little friends, Myrna, and had insisted they sit together. Lauren could hear Myrna and Amelie having a five-year-olds’ chat, talking about the names of their teachers and discussing their favorite kinds of animals.

Lauren closed her eyes behind her Tom Ford sunglasses. She felt the breeze ruffle her newly shorn, newly highlighted blond bob. She heard Jason say hi to Brian Metzner, Myrna’s dad, and Brian slide into the seat next to Jason.

“Hey, dude, how are you?” Brian asked, clapping Jason’s back in greeting.

“Not bad,” Jason said. “How was your winter? You guys make it out to Aspen this year?”

Brian was a hulking guy. His checked button-downs strained at his stomach, and he’d shaved his head when he’d started to bald in his twenties. He was a hedge funder, a very successful one, and whatever he

spoke about, no matter the subject, he framed in financial terms.

“Oh, man, yeah, we killed it in Aspen,” Brian said. “At first, I thought we’d only have marginal success, with Myrna especially, but then we got her to level up and get her game on. By the end of the trip, she was racing down black diamonds. Her execution was high, dude.”

“That’s awesome,” said Jason flatly. Lauren could tell he was dreading the boat-ride-long conversation. Jason and Sam tolerated Brian, but they didn’t like him. She wondered where Brian’s wife, Lisa, was. Lauren and Lisa were friends—they all lived on the Upper East Side—but their kids went to a different school (Horace Mann, all the way up in the Bronx), and so they mainly communicated over text during the winter, exchanging occasional gossipy tidbits and DM’ing each other Instagram posts in which mutual acquaintances looked fat or old. Lisa was “studying” to be a life coach, the trendy new career of choice for bored stay-at-home moms who may have once chosen to become interior decorators or handbag designers. Lauren thought it was ridiculous—what advice could Lisa give? Marry rich? Lauren took her AirPods out of her Celine bag. She’d listen to a true-crime podcast and tune out Brian and Jason. Before she had the chance, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Lauren, oh my God, hi! I love your hair!”

Standing to her right was Rachel Woolf, a longtime Salcombe resident who’d befriended Lauren, by force, when Lauren had first arrived. Rachel’s family owned a house right by the yacht club, and she’d inherited it when her mom died a few summers ago (her dad had died in a car accident when she was barely a teen). In a town of gossips, Rachel was the reigning queen, and you couldn’t do anything—from having an affair to having a new tennis partner—without her knowing about it. Rachel was forty-two and still single, unhappily, though she’d dated about half of Salcombe in her youth. Lauren suspected she’d even slept with Jason at some point, but if that was the case, Lauren didn’t want to know.

Rachel was thin, almost too thin, with brown straight hair and buggy blue eyes. Some men thought she was attractive, perhaps in a puppy dog kind of way, but Lauren didn’t see it. Even if Lauren hadn’t wanted to be friends with Rachel, which often she didn’t, she was an impossible person to avoid. Rachel went to every party, hosting many, and you had to stay on her good side if you wanted to have any Salcombe social life whatsoever. Lauren patted the seat next to her, motioning for Rachel to sit down.

“How was your winter?” Lauren asked as Rachel settled in, pushing her L.L.Bean monogrammed tote under the seat. Rachel was embarrassingly unfashionable. “Have you been coming out here a lot?”

Though nearly all Salcombe’s summer residents lived in the city, they rarely saw each other outside its confines. The relationships were very much June through September, and the townspeople kept it that way through an unspoken pact. Rachel lived about ten blocks from Lauren and Jason in Manhattan, but Lauren never socialized with her there. Their friendship existed in this very specific bubble.

“Good! I mean, fine. I was dating this guy for about six months. Divorced, lawyer, two kids. But we broke up last month. He didn’t want to get married again and, well, you know how I feel about that,” said Rachel.

Lauren did.

“How about you?” Rachel continued. “I read that stuff in *New York* magazine about your kids’ school. Sounds like a nightmare.”

Lauren cringed at the thought that Braeburn’s stain had even reached childless Rachel Woolf.

“It was,” said Lauren. “Thankfully it’s behind us now. We have a new headmaster, Mr. Wolf, and the school is now in good—heavily vetted—hands.”

The boat was chugging along, cutting through the water at a clip. The ferry ride took about twenty minutes from Bay Shore, on Long Island, to Salcombe, just the right amount of time to switch your mind from city to beach mode. Brian was still rattling about his family ski trip, and Lauren looked back to check on Amelie, content to stay silent as Myrna pattered on about nothing. Like father, like daughter.

Rachel was checking her phone; Lauren thought she caught sight of a dating app—men’s smiling faces—before she quickly put it down.

“Have you been playing much tennis?” Rachel asked. Rachel was seriously competitive about tennis, though she wasn’t very good, and always wanted to know who’d been practicing over the winter and how much. The yacht club held annual doubles tournaments for its members, and Rachel was determined each year to win. She and her partner, Emily Grobel, generally made it to the semifinals or finals before being knocked out by one of the stronger teams. Lauren wasn’t an amazing player, but she wasn’t terrible. She’d been on her high school team and had a decent backhand and a terrific lob. Rachel, who played all year round, resented

that Lauren could pick up a racket after months and easily play at her level.

“Not really,” said Lauren, truthfully. This year she’d gotten really into the Tracy Anderson Method. She’d had to schlep all the way down to a studio in midtown for it, so hadn’t had the time to join her usual league at Roosevelt Island. “But I’m planning to take a few lessons this week to get back into it.”

“There’s a new pro at the club,” said Rachel. “I took a lesson with him last weekend. His name is Robert, and he is totally hot.”

“Who’s hot?” Brian leaned over, having heard them during a brief pause in his own monologue.

“You, Brian, of course,” said Rachel, giggling. All the wives hated how much Rachel flirted with their husbands, but no one said it out loud.

“Yeah, I’ve been working out, maximizing body profits, investing in myself,” he said. Lauren couldn’t tell if he’d realized Rachel was kidding. Brian turned back to Jason, launching into another earful about his Peloton obsession.

“The pro was at some fancy country club in Florida before this. I’m not totally sure what he’s doing up here now, but he’s definitely going to be a favorite with the women,” said Rachel. “Plus, he already helped fix my janky serve.” Rachel was known for her janky, loopy serve.

“Looking forward to meeting him,” said Lauren, bored of the conversation. Why was Rachel annoying her so much? She was in for a long summer if she couldn’t even stomach a boat ride with her. Rachel sensed Lauren’s disinterest, so she dropped a nugget of gossip to lure Lauren back in.

“Did you hear about the Obermans?” Rachel bent closer to Lauren, lowering her voice.

Lauren shook her head.

“They’re splitting up. Apparently, Jeanette caught Greg having an affair with their dog walker.”

“Their dog walker? How weird,” said Lauren.

“She’s also an aspiring actress, I think,” said Rachel. “Anyway, Jeanette will be out here with the kids, but Greg is spending the summer in exile. He’s trying to work it out, but Jeanette wants nothing to do with him.” Lauren had always thought Jeanette and Greg hated each other. She must have been right.

The boat lurched, pulling into the dock in Salcombe. It jutted out from the bay, one hundred yards long, crafted from the same boardwalk that laced the town. Lines of old-fashioned wagons were locked up near the end of the dock, waiting for owners to pile them with the summer's goods. Lauren felt relief. She'd made it.

She took Arlo's iPad from him ("Mom! I wasn't done!"). Jason helped gather Amelie and the rest of the bags. The view from the top of the boat encompassed the entire shoreline of Salcombe, including the bay-beach area—a square of sand and a lifeguard chair, perfect for little kids to search for crabs and take seaweed-y swimming lessons—plus the yacht club and surrounding bayfront homes. People were pulling wagons and riding their bikes, and a small crowd had gathered to greet the arrivals. It could have been 1960 or 1990 or 2022. That's what Jason said he liked best about the island, that sense of timelessness, that nothing had changed, that the modern world didn't exist. Lauren was fine with this so long as they had fast internet and good satellite TV.

"I'm going to have some people over for drinks tonight," said Rachel as they disembarked. "Are you guys free?"

"Sure," said Lauren. "Sounds great." Why not just rip off the Salcombe Band-Aid on their first night? Silvia was coming on the next boat, and Lauren would have to get it over with at some point. As they stepped off onto the dock, Rachel forcefully tugged Lauren's arm.

"Look! There's the pro, Robert," she whispered into Lauren's ear, too loudly to not be overheard. Rachel physically turned Lauren's head toward a man standing in front of them, carrying two tote bags filled with groceries and wearing a white polo shirt and khaki shorts. Lauren could only see his back. He was about Jason's height, maybe six foot two, with light brown, close-cropped hair. He walked like an athlete, fully in control of his body. Lauren noticed how nicely tanned his legs were. Someone called his name to say hello—Lauren couldn't see who—and he turned to look for who was greeting him. Instead, he made eye contact with Lauren, meeting her gaze with deep blue eyes, a straight nose, and a smile of perfectly white teeth. She looked away immediately, pretending to be searching for something in her bag, and he walked on down the dock toward the yacht club.

"See, I told you he was hot," said Rachel with a giggle. "He's coming tonight to my house for drinks—we can flirt with him there." Lauren felt

her cheeks flush. She rolled her eyes playfully at Rachel and started to think about what she was going to wear.