



Little Monsters

a novel

Adrienne
Brodeur

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Little Monsters

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Adrienne Brodeur

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For Lauren Wein

If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it
dance.

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

April

Adam

Adam Gardner hadn't slept well in weeks. He awoke daily to random words, incoherent thoughts, and fleeting images, convinced that their meaning, though not yet clear, would develop in the gelatin silver process of his mind. Each morning, buzzing, he slung his legs off the bed and sat bolt upright, naked, allowing his male parts to hang over the edge of the mattress, and did his best to capture these jangled dreams, recording what details he could remember in a spiral-bound notebook kept by his bedside. His daytime musings spread onto legal pads, Post-it Notes, and the backs of envelopes and receipts, mostly in the form of unedited bullet-point lists. His house, located deep in the Wellfleet Woods, was littered with scraps of paper covered with his fastidious penmanship.

- *Deepening pitch of whale vocalizations*
- *Ocean spirals: shells, whirlpools, waves, bubble nets, seahorse tails*
- *Sound's relationship to the inner-ear labyrinth (another spiral?)*
- *Mystery of infinity: $1 = .99999999\dots$*

Adam tried to decipher the clues his mind was depositing. He had one big discovery left in him, he felt sure of that. This thing, whatever it was—an idea? a theory?—was taking its own sweet time to make itself known. He knew he needed to trust the process. If he could practice patience and maintain equilibrium, Adam felt certain that every book he'd ever read, every piece of art that had ever moved him, every conversation, creature, curiosity, and concept he'd encountered in his lifetime would align like cherries in the slot machine of his mind.

For now, the anticipation of it, the pre-buzz of impending discovery, was as mouthwatering as the squeak of a wine cork before dinner. He basked in an exquisite sensation of déjà vu, feeling a comradeship with other great discoverers: James Cook, Charles Darwin, Jacques Cousteau...

To his credit, at the onset of this latest bout of insomnia, Adam followed protocol and made an appointment at the clinic in Hyannis knowing full well what to expect: a blood draw, a barrage of questions, an adjustment of medication. What he hadn't expected was that the doctor who'd been treating him for the last three decades had retired. Why Dr. Peabody hadn't bothered to inform him directly was beyond him. Thirty years was... well, a very long time. Adam pointed out the oversight to the front desk clerk, a busty young woman with blue fingernails, who assured him an email had been sent to patients the previous month. Had he thought to check his junk folder? she asked, clicking together her talons. Adam started to answer but held his tongue. (Who, but an idiot, would bother to check a "junk" folder?) He followed her down the hall to the exam room, still puzzling over why his longtime doctor, at least five years his junior, would have retired. To do what?

In Peabody's place, a kid half Adam's age, outfitted in tight pants and alarmingly bright orange socks, strode into the exam room. Was it too much to ask that the person evaluating his mental state have at least one gray hair on his head? The new doctor acknowledged Adam only cursorily, opting to study his electronic patient chart first—mistake number one. Mistake number two was the doctor's lecture on "sleep hygiene." For the love of God! Why not just call a thing a thing? "Passed away," "big-boned"—what was so wrong with "dead" and "fat"? Euphemisms were tools of the feeble-minded. "Hygiene" brought to mind feminine products, something Adam did not wish to contemplate. But that led him to think about parts of the female anatomy he *did* like to contemplate.

Stay focused, Adam reminded himself. He took notice of the boy's weak chin.

"I don't think we've had the pleasure of a proper introduction," Adam said, cutting the lecture short. "I'm Dr. Gardner."

In his lifetime, Adam Gardner, Ph.D., had had an acclaimed career as a research scientist for the Cape Cod Institute of Oceanography, CCIO to those in the know. His glory days were in the late 1970s when, as a young scientist, he

was part of a team that disproved once and for all the notion that life could be sustained only by a photosynthesis-based food chain. In the pitch-black depths of the Pacific Ocean north of the Galápagos Islands, they'd encountered evidence—in the form of foot-long clams, giant red tube worms, and spiny white crabs—that even in darkness, there was life. Adam and his team discovered and named more than two dozen species. In the decades since those early successes, he'd become one of the foremost experts on cetacean biology, studying the population dynamics and communication of humpback whales. Beyond these professional accomplishments, he was a Vietnam veteran who had single-handedly raised his two children after his beloved first wife, Emily, died suddenly at the age of thirty. In short: he wasn't about to let some kid outrank him.

Adam looked his so-called doctor in the eye and delivered a formidable handshake. He'd teach this generation proper conduct, one millennial at a time.

"It's a real pleasure, Dr. Gardner," the doctor replied, accepting the rebuke with bemused resignation.

"I believe the word you're after is 'habit,'" Adam said.

The doctor regarded him blankly.

"Sleep *habit*," Adam repeated. "Not 'hygiene.'"

At this, the doctor plastered on the kind of smile a kindergarten teacher might offer an unruly child at the end of a long day. He exhaled audibly and resumed his list of banal recommendations: limit stress, exercise daily, eat a balanced diet. The doctor reviewed Adam's long history of episodes, noting that he generally cycled once a year, typically in the late spring, with symptoms lasting anywhere from ten to fourteen weeks. "Looks like you're not too far off your normal schedule," he said. "We should be able to manage this pharmacologically, no problem. That said, many of my patients benefit from group therapy. Have you considered this option, Dr. Gardner?"

Adam regarded the doctor's garish orange socks, a pathetic attempt at nonconformity. Back in his day, socks like those indicated only one thing: a pansy. Not that he had anything against gays, but when had it become so hard to tell them from normal guys? And when had doctors stopped wearing white coats? No one gave a damn about appearances anymore, as far as he could tell

—full arm tattoos on white-collar professionals, women in their “comfortable” shoes, blue jeans as the pant of choice.

It was the first day of April 2016, and the world was a white-hot mess. Adam was willing to put money down that soon the presidential choice would be between a boorish billionaire and an unscrupulous woman. Hard to say which was worse. He’d vote for the woman, maybe, but he couldn’t stand either of them—the pronouncements, promises, platitudes. But really, how was the billionaire still standing? The things that man said about women, Blacks, Mexicans, Muslims! Adam’s mistakes were never so easily ignored. If he so much as glanced at a woman the wrong way—or, God forbid, commented on her appearance—he’d get an indignant earful from someone, most likely his granddaughter, Tessa, or his daughter, Abby. When had it become a crime to appreciate an attractive woman?

One thing was for sure: he’d be damned if he would abide by the half-baked blather of a child doctor. As far as he was concerned, this young man could take a long swim in shark-infested waters before he’d consent to any of his quack remedies. Adam closed his eyes and massaged his temples with his thumbs as his mind raced.

“Dr. Gardner?”

The voices in his head, which had been passing through for several weeks, seemed to have taken up permanent residency. “Right here, Doctor,” Adam replied, blinking his eyes open and smiling. He tried to focus. What was the question? Oh yes, if he’d considered group therapy. Adam rearranged his features to look as if he was contemplating sound advice. “I get all the support I need from my children. From my family.”

“Okay, then. Is the CVS in Orleans still your primary pharmacy?” the doctor asked, concluding their visit as he’d started it, hunched over his computer.

Adam confirmed that it was.

“Great. I’m emailing in the prescription now.”

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Determined to conduct himself as a model patient, Adam drove himself straight to the pharmacy to pick up his medications.

He waited in line behind a lumpy woman in leggings, an unfortunate fashion choice. Once she waddled off, it was his turn. Adam handed over the prescription slips—although the doctor had emailed them, he insisted on a paper copy—and smiled patiently at the bespectacled man who moved like molasses behind the counter. When the pharmacist finally presented him with his two bags of bottles, Adam could practically hear his doctor’s computer pinging from twenty miles away, alerting the good man that his new patient, Adam Gardner, Ph.D., had picked up his lithium and Seroquel prescriptions and was in medical compliance.

If Adam was serious about his plan, he had to stay in control. He’d had slipups before—too many to count, really—but this time would be different. For the first time, Adam intended to succumb knowingly to the allure of mania. He would enter the state with intention and leverage it to his advantage. *Perhaps with careful planning*, he thought, rattling the pills in their containers, *he could extend his mania beyond its usual course, buying himself enough time to solve the puzzle of cetacean language.* His goal was to announce his breakthrough by his seventieth birthday, August 18. To think, so many people were desperate to get their hands on a bottle of Ritalin or Adderall, and Adam was lucky enough to have a built-in supply. He’d been around this block enough times to know how to read the signals. The trick would be to monitor his moods and avoid spiraling out of control. (Ha! Another spiral.) What did he have to lose? He lived alone: no wife to worry about, no children to neglect. Hell, the simple fact that he was weighing the pros and cons of the decision was evidence enough that he was behaving rationally. That others found his ingenuity threatening was not his problem; perhaps they should be the ones consuming mood-regulating drugs. Soon his brain would be making the types of cosmic connections only possible once liberated from its narcotic anesthetization. He realized now that lithium, the magical salt that had stabilized his moods for years, had also been sapping his energy and brainpower. The lithium rationing would start today. He’d drop his dose by half—maybe three-quarters—and tweak as necessary.

Exiting the pharmacy, white prescription bags tucked under his arm, Adam felt giddy at having outmaneuvered his odiously smug new doctor. So much so that when he saw the overhead camera suspended in the corner, he flipped it the bird. *I wasn’t born yesterday, Socks.* With a spring in his step, he climbed

into his beloved 2002 Subaru, patted the steering wheel, and noted with satisfaction that the odometer had just passed 208,000 miles.

Route 6 was chock-full of incompetent drivers, as usual, people who had no business being on the road. Adam swore under his breath at an old lady driving forty in the fast lane and raised his arm out the window at a lunatic in a convertible cutting in and out of traffic. It would only get worse in the coming months when knuckleheads from around the country descended on Cape Cod for their summer vacations, cars loaded down with bikes, surfboards, and diapered toddlers.

• • •

At home, Adam tossed the pharmacy bags on the kitchen counter and made himself a cup of tea, which he took outside. He wrapped his teabag around a spoon and set it aside so he could use it again later. Pine needles had gathered between the slats of his large wooden deck, and Adam contemplated giving it a sweep but instead sank into the Adirondack chair facing the pond. A gentle breeze stirred the budding leaves in the topmost branches of the trees, but the air was still at ground level, the pond water glassy. It was a mild day that signaled spring was arriving on schedule: cattails rising, waterfowl returning to nest, frogs croaking lusty songs. But the evenings were still cool enough that he'd pull the extra blanket at his footboard over himself as he went to bed. Time was passing. The end of another decade loomed. If he was lucky, he figured he might have five—maybe ten—good years of brilliance left in him. The only thing that mattered now was coaxing this new idea out of hiding. An overhead movement caught his attention, an osprey being driven over the tree line by a group of smaller birds. Adam could relate—those aggressive, young scientists at CCIO clearly wanted him gone.

Adam willed his gaze to soften. The pond and the woods blurred, and he turned his concentration inward, hovering over the dazzling presence of his idea, which was still just out of reach. It was like swimming beyond the coral reefs and snorkeling out to where the shelf dropped off. One moment, you're studying the white-pink sand below; the next, you're over a blue-black abyss and staring into darkness. The only way to proceed is to steady your nerves, take a breath, and plunge into the depths, trusting that the darkness will hold you. Like birth. Or death.

Ken

When the call with his lawyer concluded, Ken Gardner bowed his head, placed his hands together in prayer, and pressed his thumbs to his forehead, absorbing the magnitude of what had just happened: the deal was inked.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you, Brian.” (His business partner.) “Thank you, Phil.” (His lawyer.) “Thank you, Stefan.” (His lender.) “Thank you, God.” He noted the date, April 7, and committed it to memory. Ken would make more money in 2016 than he’d expected to earn in his lifetime. The thought of the tax implications sickened him, but Phil would figure out the loopholes. That’s what he was paid to do. He was a genius at it.

For now, Ken would focus on the positive. At this very moment, money was being whisked electronically out of one account and into another. To be precise, money was flying into the account of a shell company Phil had created for just this purpose. Ken could practically hear the delightful percussive sound of flipping bills, like an ATM delivering cash. He was sitting behind his large and tidy desk, alone in what his twin daughters had dubbed “Command Central,” a high-tech workspace set off from their home overlooking Stage Harbor in Chatham.

“Thank you,” he said again.

Having married into an old Boston Brahmin family—one that took pride in tracing its ancestry back to the original seventeenth-century clergy of the colonial ruling class—Ken already had social status and access to money, plenty of it. But this deal changed the balance of things. For starters, he’d no longer feel beholden to his wife. He’d be pulling his own weight; this money was all his. Well, technically not *all* his. His father-in-law had been the angel investor who’d put up the dough in the first place, but that’s what Theodore Lowell did: invest the family money. Ken would take enormous pleasure in paying the old man back. The Lowell family stood to make lots off this deal, perhaps even

enough to feel indebted to Ken for a change. Probably not. But the bottom line was, this windfall was his.

A surge of electricity shot through his limbs, a tingling sensation that made him feel like he was having an out-of-body experience, watching himself from above both as the quarterback and the fan. One minute, he was on the field; the next, he was in the bleachers. On the field. In the bleachers. Field. Bleachers. Even though Ken had known for months now that it was all systems go—the deal was going to happen—the gulf between anticipation and realization was more profound than he'd imagined. This was what power felt like. There was something else in the mix, too: relief. Huge. Fucking. Relief. All these years of planning, effort, and discipline weren't for naught. No one would be laughing at him now.

Ken said a quick prayer. He'd converted to Episcopalianism—if going from nothing to something counted as “converting”—when he and Jenny had married. His father-in-law had encouraged it, pointing out the advantages: country club memberships, a wealthy network, political connections. “If you haven't heard, son, God is an Episcopalian from Boston,” Theo had joked.

But to his surprise, Ken took his conversion and vows seriously and, over the years, developed a solid personal relationship with God. He prayed nightly, attended services on Sundays, and created rules to make sure he stayed in line. He could look but not touch, for example. Ken felt sure God understood the baser male inclinations, having created man in his image and all, so he negotiated a fair deal, a deal he could live with, a deal in which he would not cheat on his wife. Ken allowed himself regular use of porn—what red-blooded American male did not?—but limited visits to strip clubs to out-of-state business trips. Lap dances were for special occasions only.

Ken pumped the air with his fists. “Yes. Yes. Yes,” he repeated until the words blended into a serpentine hiss, a sound that transported him back to his sixth-grade biology lab and a room full of reptiles and amphibians. He stood holding a scalpel over his frog, but instead of diving in like the other kids, he paused, bile rising in the back of his throat. It took him only a second or two to regain his composure, steady his breath, and drag the knife down the two inches of body. But in those two seconds, all was lost. Danny McCormick, the most popular kid in his class, had seen his hesitation, and Ken's reputation as a

loser was sealed in middle school as it had been in elementary, where he'd been teased for not having a mother and crying easily, but most of all, for being fat.

Well, who's crying now, Danny McCormick?

Ken had kept an eye on that dickhead's net worth, and from now on, it would be from his rearview mirror. Adrenaline coursed through his bloodstream, and he stood up. The experience felt physical, as if his body was expanding in tandem with his financial portfolio. He'd just joined the ranks of men who owned the world and could buy whatever they pleased: a \$2,000 bottle of wine, a Ferrari, a box at Fenway.

Ken had always wanted to be rich, but, like most people, he didn't know how to get there other than to keep running faster on the treadmill. After college, he'd made a better-than-average living by flipping houses, but still, it was real estate development with a lowercase "r." It wasn't until Jenny came into his life and her father encouraged him to broaden his horizons that the playing field changed.

"To quote Yogi Berra, son," Theo said, "A nickel ain't worth a dime anymore." At Ken's blank stare, he added, "If you're going to be part of the family, you need to start thinking like a Lowell. And that means *big*. Don't build residences, Ken, build communities. What's the next housing trend? That's the question you should be asking yourself."

At those words, something clicked. The next big trend was obvious. Ken had studied the census figures and knew that there were close to fifty million people in the country older than sixty-five. In another twenty years, that number would increase again by half. *Cha-ching*. He'd been only thirty-one when he bought—albeit with a seven-figure leg up from his father-in-law—a tract of land with a singular vision: to create a state-of-the-art retirement facility for discerning and exceedingly wealthy seniors. These would not be your grandmother's cookie-cutter assisted-living apartments.

From the start, Ken had zeroed in on the 1 percent of that senior population, betting that if he spared no expense in creating stunning prototype designs for homes and communities that not only were Green but also took advantage of all the latest technology—integrating exterior-space planning with health-focused and ergonomically thoughtful interiors—wealthy seniors would line up to pay top dollar. Ken's mother had been an architect, and Ken liked to think that he'd inherited her sense of proportion, space, and light.

Ten long years of negotiating, financing, designing, and marketing later, his gamble paid off. Not only had his designs won every “silver” architecture award out there, but they’d also garnered accolades in mainstream architectural journals for their “innovative and purposeful aesthetics” and “seamless attention to form and function.” Yes, his mother would have been proud. Most remarkably—and what his lawyer had just confirmed—Ken had been able to translate and leverage his original vision for a blue-ribbon senior community on Cape Cod into a viable business model that could be duplicated in tony zip codes across the country. What Melvin Simon did for the American mall in the 1980s was what Ken Gardner would do for retirement communities nationwide today. Best of all, the money he made would pave the way for his political aspirations. He had plans to run for the House of Representatives in 2018. Then the Senate. And after that... Well, he didn’t allow himself to say it aloud.

“Alexa, call Jenny,” Ken said.

His wife’s voicemail picked up.

“Babe, where are you? Call me as soon as you get this. I just closed. Everything’s real now. I want to celebrate.” Unexpectedly, Ken felt turned on, some conspiracy of adrenaline, nerves, and blood vessels. Already, the power dynamic in his marriage was shifting. “I’d like to meet in Boston. Tell the babysitter we need her to spend the night with the girls. Don’t take *no* for an answer. Pay her triple time, whatever. Reserve a room at the Ritz. Meet me at the bar at seven p.m.” He loved the way it felt to talk to Jenny this way.

“Alexa, call Abby.”

Voicemail again. Ken hung up without leaving a message. *Probably for the best*, he thought. Abby wouldn’t quite get the significance and, if they spoke, she would likely say something annoying. Something sanctimonious. Something emasculating, like, “Oh, that’s wonderful, Ken. If it makes you happy, that’s all that matters.” And then he’d want to kill her. Abby competed with Ken by pretending not to care, which he had to admit was a fucking brilliant strategy. No way to win. She was just like their father, two peas in a pod with their moral superiority and talk of purposeful work. They never put it exactly that way, of course, but they both acted as if the pursuit of money was somehow vulgar, beneath them. But guess who they ran to whenever they needed help? He’d been bankrolling his sister for years, allowing her free use of

their mother's studio space (technically his), and he'd loaned his father money on occasion.

Ken decided then and there that he would sit on the news until he figured out the best way to share it. But what would that be? He could show up for the next family dinner in a Lamborghini (not really his style). Or treat the whole gang to a first-class trip to Tahiti. Or—now here was a good idea—he could give his father an extravagant gift for his upcoming seventieth birthday, a gift so over-the-top that the old leftie might think twice about his condemnations of capitalism, religion, and freedom.

Ken stood, reached into his pants pocket, and pulled out his lucky golf ball, placing it carefully on his putting mat, a long and narrow rectangle of green that ran almost the length of Command Central. He wagged his club, which had a sweet spot the size of a nickel at best, and squared off. *Concentrate*, he told himself. "Listen to me, you dimpled son of a bitch," he told the ball. "You were put on this earth to do only one thing: go into that hole." Ken focused, drew the club back a few inches, and gave it the restrained tap that sent the ball rolling in a perfectly straight line, up the tiny slope, and into the hole. *Yes!*

"Alexa, turn off computer. Turn off lights. Shades up."

As the blinds lifted, Ken blinked against the morning sunlight, glinting off the scalloped waves of the inlet. Then he noticed the exposed root system of a shrub that had gone over the edge of the embankment. Despite the fortune he'd spent shoring up his property line, nature seemed to be winning.

"Alexa, play 'Like a Rolling Stone' by Bob Dylan."

His mother's favorite song. He flashed back to his childhood, him swaying on her feet, and felt a stab of longing.

"Alexa, louder," he said. His mother had been dead for thirty-eight years—since he was three and a half years old. He had no idea why she was suddenly on his mind all the time. He needed to fire that damn shrink of his. Vulnerability was overrated. But then Ken felt his mother's presence, along with a swelling in his heart that he read as her approval of his success. Emily Gardner wanted this for him. She was proud of his accomplishments, and he could feel it. Ken recalled how she used to kiss the top of his head and say, "I love you more than anything in the whole wide world." She'd inscribed those words into his copy of *Where the Wild Things Are*, which he kept hidden at the back of the bottom-left drawer of his desk, so he could pull it out from time

to time and run his fingers across the words she'd written just for him. Sometimes, knowing that his mother had loved him the most felt like all he had.

When the song ended, Ken opened the door to Command Central and took in the smells of the harbor—the brine, the seaweed, the distant fumes sputtering from the stern of a fishing boat. The tide had turned and was starting to come in, slowly at first with a deceptively thin membrane of water gently licking the shore. But soon it would gather strength, stopping at nothing until the harbor was filled to the brim. Then, after a moment of slack, it would reverse itself, rushing back through the channel, dragging bits of his precious shoreline along with it. Today, Ken would try not to let thoughts of erosion ruin his good mood.

Overhead, the wind pushed ivory clouds into silver-edged mountains and, looking at them, Ken felt transported, as if for one moment, he understood everything important in life. But when he tried to zero in on the sensation, it was as elusive as a dream. No matter. He tossed a balled-up to-do list into his wastebasket—score!—and redirected his thoughts back to the tangible: planting more vegetation to stabilize his embankment, determining locations for the next three Gardner retirement communities, and raising capital for his congressional campaign. With this deal, Ken had created a path for himself. He punched the air. He was untouchable.

Abby

By the time Abby pulled into the small parking lot above Coast Guard Beach in North Truro, she was fifteen minutes late and annoyed with herself. It was an interview, for God's sake. She'd been the one who suggested they meet here and start with a beach walk, and she couldn't even arrive on time. This profile, national coverage in a prestigious art magazine, was a huge deal for her. As was her upcoming group exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in October, where her work would be included in a show called "Identity and Self-Portraiture."

The contemporary art world was more localized than people realized, and it was rare to succeed if you didn't live in a major art center—New York, Los Angeles, Miami. People who were part of the art scene understood this. But from the outside—where her father and brother stood—it seemed ludicrous. Paint. Brushes. Canvas. Couldn't that be done anywhere? But how to explain to two men who didn't know how to listen that to get traction in the art world—with dealers, critics, buyers, and other artists—convenience and accessibility were key? The public needed to be able to visit your studio and experience your work, not easy on this sandbar with its single main highway. But remote as her location was, Abby did have an advantage that most artists didn't and that was the Arcadia, her glorious and free studio space in the dunes, designed and built by her mother. It was also Abby's home, having a small bedroom and bathroom off the back, everything she needed.

Abby glanced at herself in the rearview mirror. She put on a knit cap, sliding a forefinger along each side to smooth down her hair. Better.

Frida's tail pounded maniacally against the passenger seat and door. "Hold on, girl," Abby said, reaching under the seat for the leash only to realize she'd forgotten it on the peg beside her front door. Her fingers found a poop bag

among the detritus of the passenger-side floor. Hopefully, the reporter from *Art Observer* magazine wouldn't notice she was a total mess.

Rachel Draper was easy to spot, propped against the only car with New York plates, staring out at the vast ocean and looking more stylish than any local. She wore dark jeans and a gray turtleneck, and was huddled into a lightweight, fitted down jacket. Her delicate scarf, the color of blood, fluttered on the breeze like a living thing.

When Abby opened the driver's side door, she was smacked by a brisk ocean wind. Frida bounded over her lap and sprang down the sloping dune to the shoreline, where a flock of gulls lifted lazily to avoid her. Abby pulled the tab on her jacket's zipper, knitting its teeth, and stepped out of the car.

Rachel's gaze went from the dog to Abby, and she pushed her sunglasses onto her head. "Abigail?"

"Yes. Hi, Rachel," Abby said, reaching for Rachel's outstretched hand. "I'm so sorry I'm late. And please, call me Abby."

"It's so nice to finally meet you, Abby. I'm a big fan. And who's that?" she asked, her eyes following Frida as she raced along the water's edge.

"That's Frida," Abby said.

"Frida," she repeated and smiled. "Such a great name. I love goldens. I have two at home."

A dog person. Rachel looked to be in her late fifties with blue-gray eyes and a kind, open face. Abby liked her immediately.

From where they stood, the beach below seemed to stretch indefinitely in both directions. The Atlantic was unseasonably calm, sending in waves that didn't so much break as dissolve when they came ashore, depositing thin lines of lacy foam as the water retreated. The sandbars were submerged, visible only as green patches beneath the dark water, and the tide was still going out, which meant that walking conditions would be excellent for the next several hours.

At the edge of the parking lot, a smocked artist in fingerless gloves stood behind an easel facing the dunes to the north. This was the stereotype that Abby was up against, that Cape Cod artists painted the visual equivalent of romance novels: sunsets over marshes, plovers scurrying along the wave line, lobster boats followed by flocks of gulls. Pleasing vistas to hang over a mantel. This artist was putting the finishing touches on a cumulus cloud, and to Abby's dismay, she'd missed everything unique about it: the gradations of