

LBRIS

We know  
books

← ALSO BY JENNIFER NIVEN →

*All the Bright Places*

*Breathless*

*Holding Up the Universe*

When  
we were  
monsters

JENNIFER NIVEN



PENGUIN BOOKS

LBRIS

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books

week one

## 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

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

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

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 thumbed 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

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

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.

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. *Velella velella*, 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

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