

REBECCA KAUFFMAN is originally from rural Ohio. She studied classical violin performance at the Manhattan School of Music before receiving an MFA in Creative Writing from NYU. Her previous novels are *Another Place You've Never Been* and *The Gunners*. She currently lives in Virginia.

Praise for *The House on Fripp Island*:

'Brilliant ... It is rare to care about every character in a crime novel. Rebecca Kauffman, in wryly highlighting the inherent sadness of things, ultimately resembles not Alice Sebold but the great Alice Munro' *The Times*

'This is subtly suspenseful, unsettling stuff, the characters drawn with such vivid precision that they fairly jump off the page' *Guardian*

'In watchful prose by turns powerful and delicate, the action builds to an event as inevitable as it was unpredictable. Gripping' *Sunday Times*

'A disconcerting story about the toxic power of suspicion and rumour. A smart summer read' *Daily Mail*

'Rebecca Kauffman has long been one of my favorite writers, and *The House on Fripp Island* is her best novel yet ... Kauffman's latest is a rare and gripping combination of gloriously observed prose and three hundred pages of pure suspense. I loved it' Julie Buntin, author of *Marlena*

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'Rebecca Kauffman turns each cog of this compelling murder mystery with a delightfully sensual slowness. Her taut prose and punchy observations add to her steady, assured delivery ... an excellent summer read' *Press Association*

'Kauffman's characters leap off the page ... Readers will devour this suspenseful summer drama' *Publishers Weekly*



The
HOUSE on FRIPP ISLAND

Rebecca Kauffman



This paperback edition first published in 2021

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

First published in the United States of America in 2020 by
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Chloe Foster

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 521 1
eISBN 978 1 78283 702 2



The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth's part in life, and a day moth's at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meagre opportunities to the full, pathetic. He flew vigorously to one corner of his compartment, and, after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained for him but to fly to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all he could do, in spite of the size of the downs, the width of the sky, the far-off smoke of houses, and the romantic voice, now and then, of a steamer out at sea. What he could do he did.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, "The Death of the Moth"

PROLOGUE

Two decades have passed since the summer my family drove through many miles of remote marshland to reach Fripp Island. Land that smelled of wet dog and wet duffel bag, air as thick and hot as wool. Pro-life billboards with magnified ultrasounds and 1-800 numbers in blood-spatter red. Spanish moss that hung in oversized shrouds from every limb of every giant Southern live oak and bald cypress and swayed in the breeze like gangling drunken dancers. Silent and forsaken land. We went twenty miles without seeing another car on the highway.

We crossed a bridge to enter Fripp Island, a luscious, jungled little thumbprint of land that contains every shade of green you could imagine, from almost-yellow to almost-black. We had to stop the car because an alligator was in the road before us. It was the first alligator I had ever seen and much uglier than I would have expected, its hide dull, dark, and textured, as warty as a toad. Fat thighs. It sauntered across the road like it owned the island. The birds there didn't really sing, I noticed. They clicked and buzzed and occasionally they screamed.

Several days later, I was dead.

My body was recovered by a young surfer named Blade Caldwell and two of his friends. The coroner officially ruled it Death by

Accidental Drowning. My family acknowledged that I was not a strong swimmer and there was a powerful riptide, so no one had reason to suspect that the coroner was wrong. Everyone cried and spoke loving sentiments about me.

In the moment before I passed through the screen that separates the living from the dead, I can recall that something like giddy, euphoric laughter fluttered briefly within me, because the idea of being killed—being murdered, that is—struck me as so bizarre that it was downright comical. Then water entered my lungs as hard and fast as a ninety-mile-an-hour fastball to the chest, and I was enraged by the circumstances that had brought me to this place. But before I could linger on that, oopsie-daisy now, here I go. My mind loosened and skittered across a few beautiful memories that touched me and surprised me, and then it was over. No bright white light. Just a painless little snap as I penetrated the screen.

Twenty years later, I'm still skimming through and around and around the same old places, sniffing about, watching from behind the screen that separates the living from the dead. The dead don't care much for one another, I can assure you of that, we're just a sort of sleazy and unappealing reflection of each other; no fun to be had between us, no comfort to be shared. And to the living, of course, we are formless and imperceptible. Our touch has no imprint and our presence cannot be detected, no matter how relentlessly or lovingly we might stalk a living person and attempt to foist our dead self upon them. We can actually slip into a living body, did you know that?, be swept up by its movements and carry

along with it, feel the banging of that heart as though it were our own. But even still, even then, the living will carry on, oblivious to our habitation. So around and around I go, taking up temporary residence within the people I once knew and attempting to recall the facts and feelings of life.

THE HOUSE ON FRIPP ISLAND

1

HOURS BEFORE THE GUESTS were scheduled to arrive, the banquet staff vacuumed up olive pits and croutons smashed into the burgundy carpet of the executive ballroom. They flattened starchy white cloths over tables, assembled the chocolate fountain, and did a test run to make sure all eight tiers were properly attached. They distributed garland and potted poinsettias throughout the room, polished glassware, and folded napkins into stars. When the room was finally ready for service, they slipped outside and stood behind the dumpster, smoking cigarettes in the snow. The dumpster steamed with fresh garbage from the kitchen: coffee grounds and shrimp shells. They passed around a tube of wintergreen Life Savers and watched as the first guests pulled up to the valet station. The driver was wearing a stupid-looking oversized elf hat, and he tossed the contents of a red Solo cup into the snow before passing his keys to the valet.

The Raslowe & Associates employee Christmas party was in full swing by seven o'clock that evening. Open bar. It had been a good year.

Midway through the festivities, Scott Daly was named the winner of the big-ticket raffle, and he dragged his wife, Lisa, onstage with him to accept the award. She was several inches taller than him. He wore a navy blazer, expensive-looking jeans with artificial fading, and Italian loafers. His thick, wavy hair was skunk-like, mostly black with a dramatic white chunk shooting out right at the part; his face was jammed full of teeth. Lisa's dyed red hair gleamed a bit oddly under the fluorescent lighting.

Scott had an arm around Lisa's waist when he reached the stage to retrieve the envelope from the head of HR, who had announced all the raffle winners. Scott took the envelope, then raised and tipped his gin and tonic to the crowd. He was met with blank faces, bored, disapproving, disappointed faces, and some lifeless applause. "Whatever," he murmured. Lisa's pale face shimmered with sad exhilaration.

As the two of them made their way back to their table, the CEO of the company took over the mic to offer a robust little spiel about how well the company had performed that year.

At their table, Lisa didn't hear a word of the speech. She was looking over the contents of the envelope her husband had just received. A small embossed card read: *All Expenses Paid. Four days and nights at Fripp Island Resort. Redeemable through the next calendar year.* A brochure accompanied the card and featured many photographs of the island, as well as a map. The island was situated just off the coast of South Carolina, midway between Charleston and Savannah. A

golf course occupied a large portion of the island, which was six miles from end to end. Several bars and restaurants and crab shacks were advertised in the brochure. Photographs showed bright blue birds with yellow heads, palmettos, a fawn drinking from a fountain on the golf course, an expansive white beach, a footprint in sand.

Scott leaned toward Lisa. "Place looks neat, doesn't it? Figured we'd invite the Ramones."

Lisa's upper lip curled, an involuntary flicker of objection.

Scott whispered, "I know you and Shirley aren't close, but there's nothing wrong with her. And JP's always a great time, loves golf. And the kids actually get along."

That was true. The Ramone kids shared interests with and were close in age to Scott and Lisa's fourteen-year-old Rae and eleven-year-old Kimmy. And Scott was right, there was nothing so very *wrong* with Shirley, it was just . . . nothing was quite *right* about her either.

"Mm." Lisa grunted querulously as she looked back at the brochure. She slowly emitted a soundless burp and adjusted her posture. She was no longer comfortable in her dress. Beside her, Scott resumed the joke he had been telling several minutes ago, just before his name was announced as the raffle winner. He waggled his head around to make sure he had the attention of everyone at the table before delivering the punch line. "Get it?" He snorted wetly, eyes circling the table for confirmation. "You get it?"

Lisa patted the top of Scott's hand, a gesture intended to reassure him of the joke's success and discourage him

from telling any more. As she paged through the brochure for Fripp Island a second time, she felt a fresh wave of agitation that Scott had already decided who would accompany them on this vacation without consulting her. Furthermore, it occurred to her, she hadn't a clue how many raffle tickets Scott had purchased for that drawing. For all Lisa knew, he might've spent more on raffle tickets than they would've put toward an actual vacation. It would be like him to do such a thing, honestly, scoop up all the tickets, any opportunity to win. Oh well, this really wasn't her concern. Scott had provided Lisa with a very comfortable life—she hadn't held a job since she was nineteen years old, for crying out loud—and he rarely griped about the way she spent money. Lisa sipped her martini and drew an olive from the stainless-steel cocktail skewer with her lips. She'd be a good sport, she decided. It was only four days, after all.

Fortunately for Lisa, though, the Ramones had already solidified their vacation plans for the entire year and didn't have a day to spare. This was also the case with Scott's sister Nan and her husband, whom they asked next. Lisa's cousin Frank and his wife had a newborn, so they didn't want to fly, and they lived too far away to drive. Scott's friend Liam's wife was going through some weird anxiety stuff, so they couldn't commit. Lisa and Scott were on good terms with his parents but couldn't quite see their way to spending that much time with them under one roof. Lisa's mother was recovering from surgery to remove a tumor from her throat,

so she was in no condition to travel. They considered going with just their kids, but Scott pointed out that “all expenses paid” included alcohol, and the house had five bedrooms, so it would be a terrible waste not to find others to accompany them.

Lisa was the one who eventually suggested her best friend from childhood, Poppy, and her family. Poppy and her husband, John, lived outside Wheeling, West Virginia, where the two had grown up and where Lisa’s mother, Carol, still lived.

Next-door neighbors and both only children, Lisa and Poppy had become fast friends at an early age. Both families’ homes had an open-door policy to the other, and it wasn’t uncommon for them to have sleepovers several nights of the week. They shared adventures, secrets, wardrobes, gossip, homework, inside jokes, broken hearts—years upon years of life. Shortly after graduating from high school, Lisa left the area and she and Poppy kept in touch, but not closely, seeing each other only once every year or two when Lisa’s family was in Wheeling to visit her mother. On these visits with the whole families, there were always other dynamics to manage, and the time together was hurried and high-strung. Between visits, Lisa and Poppy managed to speak on the phone every few months, but these calls were always interrupted prematurely by a kid in crisis or someone at the door. They never seemed to get to the stuff that mattered. There was shared history and love between them, and they could still laugh at the same stupid shit, but it was impossi-

ble to feel as close as they once had, now that they only conversed in fragments and could rarely complete a thought, much less bare a soul.

In the past year, however, the two had reconnected powerfully following Lisa's mother's diagnosis. Poppy still considered Carol a dear family friend, given all the time spent and meals consumed in her home as a child. So when Poppy received word of Carol's illness, she took on the role of surrogate daughter, since she was local and Lisa was not: transporting and accompanying Carol to appointments, taking notes on the results of her scans, arranging her medications in the weekly pill case, delivering quiches and cakes. During these months, Lisa and Poppy spoke often. Lisa was deeply appreciative and touched by Poppy's help with her mother's care. Poppy insisted it was no trouble—she welcomed the opportunity to help and wouldn't accept a dime from Lisa for the gas, meals, or time.

Scott was at the kitchen table, typing something on his laptop, when Lisa suggested inviting Poppy and her family to Fripp Island as a gesture of gratitude. He didn't look up from his computer when he said, "The Fords?," as though they knew more than one Poppy.

Lisa said, "It's the least I can offer after everything Poppy's done for Mom. And anyhow, I'd love to be able to connect with their family, I've been saying so for years. The kids would get along fine, they always have in the past. Alexis is the same age as Kimmy, remember? And Ryan's got to be

seventeen, headed to college in the fall. Who knows if he'd even want to come. Rae will obviously be fine with or without a buddy. She'll spend the whole week with her nose in a book either way."

Lisa could see in Scott's face that he was already trying to work up some reason to shoot down the idea. She repeated, "I've always wanted our two families to connect."

"We've tried," Scott pointed out. "You've invited them to things before."

Lisa lowered her voice, even though there was no one else in the kitchen. "That's because they can't afford the things we do. Poppy's too proud to admit it, she'll always come up with some other sort of excuse, but I know that's why she didn't take us up on the cruise or the Disneyland weekend or Toronto. But a trip like this, all expenses paid, plenty of time in advance to ask for the time off . . . I think they might actually be in a position to accept the invitation. Anyway, Poppy's been my friend since I was five years old," she said. "We barely get any time together anymore."

"You talk on the phone all the time since your mom got sick," Scott said. "You talk to Poppy twice as much as you talk to me."

Lisa wondered if this was true. It was possible. Well, Lisa enjoyed talking to Poppy twice as much as she enjoyed talking to Scott, it was as simple as that.

Scott said, "I know Poppy's your oldest friend and she's done a lot for your mom, but staying in the same house with her for four days? Poppy can be . . . a lot."

“Sure,” Lisa conceded. Poppy *was* a lot. She had strong opinions on absolutely everything, and she could be moody and unpredictable. She never asked before touching dogs, or babies.

Scott fingered his goatee. “And his drinking can get a little out of hand. Right? Do you remember the year we went over the day after Christmas? You remember. John had a few too many, and with all the kids around.”

Lisa exhaled through her nose. Amazing how quickly a good idea or a good mood could be deflated these days. It could happen in the space between an inhale and an exhale. She ran a hand over the marble-topped island before her to check for dust; there was none. She gazed at a pattern of black veins in the marble that resembled gorges on a map, and felt that familiar murky and listless melancholy surging inside, threatening to overtake her.

Scott said, “Anyhow,” and Lisa waited for more, but that was it, he was back to his computer.

Eventually, Lisa said, “If you don’t want to invite them, I won’t. But I’d prefer if you didn’t try to come up with all these excuses, like *they’re* to blame. Don’t make it like you’re all of a sudden . . . well, concerned about John’s drinking, for example.”

“You’re not? I’ve heard some of the conversations you’ve had with Poppy.” Scott’s black, triangular eyebrows arched high.

Lisa blinked, surprised by this. “So you eavesdrop while I’m on the phone with my friend and use our private conver-

sations as ammunition not to spend time with her family? That's nice of you." Lisa wound a thick chunk of her red hair into a rope and tossed it back over her shoulder. "But since you brought it up, it's not alcohol Poppy's worried about. John had surgery on his back a year or two ago and still has a lot of pain. They're trying to work out the right medications to keep it at bay. It's under the close watch of his doctor and they're trying to work it out. But thank you for your concern. Well meaning as ever."

"You always assume the worst of me." Scott looked directly at her as he said this, and it occurred to Lisa that this was the first time their eyes had actually met during this entire conversation, perhaps the first time today. This entire week. She couldn't decide which of his eyes to look at. God, they were out of sync. Things had gotten worse and worse between them over the past few years, and now they were worse than bad—they were complicated. Inscrutable. She looked away, and he looked back at his laptop.

Lisa went to the refrigerator, deciding that she really didn't give two hoots about this vacation anymore, didn't even care if *she* was invited, when over her shoulder Scott said, "Oh, hell with it. Run it by Poppy, then."

Lisa closed the refrigerator and spun to face him, carton of cranberry juice in hand. "Really?" she said. She felt something hopeful spike within her chest.

Scott, staring at his laptop once again, seemingly uninterested in further talk of vacation, looked suddenly enthused by something completely unrelated.

She said, "Scott?"

He looked up, his eyes wide but unfocused on her, empty as poached eggs. "Huh?" he said.

"Did you say I can invite them?"

"Oh," Scott looked back down at his computer. "Whatever makes you happy."

AS THE FORDS waited in a long line of cars to cross the bridge onto Fripp Island, Poppy observed others coming and going from the island in their BMWs, Suburbans, and Audis. She and John and the kids were in their '81 Dodge Omni with rusted-out wheel wells, and the car released a supersonic squeal from below the hood every time they made a sharp left turn.

Poppy pulled down the passenger's visor to look at herself in its tiny, smeared mirror. Her shoulder-length black hair seemed to double in size in the humidity of coastal South Carolina. Her face was deeply tanned from long days in the sun. She worked for an entertainment company based out of Wheeling that provided bounce houses, inflatable pools, photo booths, and other props and costumed characters for special events. Poppy managed the delivery, assembly, and teardown of the bounce houses, dealt with damaged equipment, and handled all the waivers and consent forms. In the off-season, she helped contract out Grim Reapers, Santa Clauses, princesses, and Big Birds. Occasionally, she had to suit up and play Mrs. Claus or Jasmine if somebody called in sick at the last minute. It was ridiculous work, and she

had to deal with more than her fair share of brats and meth-addicted freelance clowns, but it beat waiting tables, which is what she had done from the time she was fifteen until she was almost thirty.

In the mirror, Poppy poked at her symmetrical acne scars, which could almost be mistaken for dimples at this stage of life. Her dark eyes were bloodshot; they had left Wheeling at four a.m. and she was low on sleep, even though John had done a lot of the driving. Her nose looked greasy, so she took a napkin from the glove compartment and rubbed it.

When she looked out her window, she saw some elegant blond people in a Lexus in the next lane over, giggling into fists as they gawked at the Omni. Poppy could feel a familiar and deeply unpleasant volatility stirring inside her. Being around rich people made her feel small and precarious. It made her want to be mean.

She glanced backwards over her shoulder to make sure both Ryan and Alex were still asleep, and they were. She said to John, "Did you see those people staring? Looking at us like we're from the goddamn moon."

"What people?"

"In the Lexus."

John said, "Who cares?"

Poppy gazed out her window. She was sweating. On full blast, the AC offered only an abysmal lukewarm breeze that smelled weird. She opened her window a few inches to see if she could catch some fresh air. The Omni buzzed while idling and sounded more like a lawnmower than any sort of vehicle for transportation.

"I just find rich people so . . . useless and predictable," she said.

John chuckled. He was a big bear of a man, six foot six and three hundred pounds, and when he laughed, his belly jerked around beneath his shirt like it was trying to make a break for it. He said, "We talked about this, though, Pop. *You're* the one convinced *me* this would be a good time."

"I know, I know, I know," she muttered. "I'll be fine once we get ourselves settled. I'm just in a mood. How's your back?"

"It's fine," John said, shifting in his seat, far too big for this car, arching his shoulders in a stretch. The muscles of his neck bulged. "I'll be ready for a pill soon as we get there."

Poppy looked at the digital clock. "I'm glad the higher dose isn't messing with your stomach."

John said, "I swear they're doin' something to my sense of smell, though. Ever since they started me on these ones, coffee don't smell like coffee. And my short-term memory's for shit. Speaking of, what's their older one's name again?"

"Rae," said Poppy. She reached for her purse at her feet, pulled out a piece of Big Red. "She starts high school this fall."

"And the younger one is Kimmy, right?"

Poppy nodded. She folded the gum into thirds on her tongue, balled up the foil wrapper, and set it loose, hip-pety-hopping across the dashboard. "Kimmy's just a few months older than Alex," she said. "And I did warn Lisa about Alex, by the way, just so there's no . . . confusion."

The two of them shared a smile, and Poppy glanced over

her shoulder again to make sure both kids were still sleeping.

John said, "What did Lisa say?"

"She said, 'You know, there's a transgendered in Rae's class.'"

John made a face like he'd walked into a spider web.

Just a few months earlier, Alex had announced that she wanted to go by "Alex" instead of "Alexis." Several days later, she had cut off her foot-long black ponytail, then asked Poppy to finish it off with electric clippers, a buzz cut, like she had seen Poppy do for Ryan many times. There had been no talk of changing pronouns, using the boys' restroom, or switching from the softball team to the baseball team. Nothing like that. But Alex was reveling in her new look, that much was clear, asking for a fresh buzz cut every week or so since the first.

John said, "Crying out loud. She's eleven years old."

Poppy snapped her gum. "I just told her, you know, 'Alex can be whoever the hell Alex wants to be.'"

John grunted. "And she's got plenty of time to decide that on her own, without a bunch of grown-ups slappin' labels."

He glanced at his daughter in the rearview mirror. Alex slept peacefully, mouth sagged open, a tiny thread of drool connecting her lip to her Cincinnati Bengals T-shirt.

Alex and her father shared a special bond. Ever since she was small, she loved helping John change the oil in their vehicles, stack firewood, and clean out the gutters, and she begged to accompany him on trips to the lumberyard, the

shooting range, and Ace Hardware. Alex's most coveted possession was her BB gun, and she and John spent countless hours doing target practice on Coke cans in the backyard. Alex would mimic everything John did: wear her cap backwards, roll a toothpick back and forth across her lips, sniff defiantly as though someone had changed the rules every time she missed the can altogether. When she was a toddler, she'd sit on the bathroom counter and watch her father shave, then ask to have shaving cream put on her own chin, which she would remove with a comb in the same long, measured strokes that John used with his razor.

Alex's idolizing of John flattered him, especially since Ryan had never shown an ounce of interest in his father's hobbies. Furthermore, in the last year or two, Ryan had become downright judgmental about John's love of hunting and fishing. One of Ryan's high school teachers had taken the kids on a trip to the Shenandoah River, done a bunch of tests on the plants and the water, photographed the animals they saw, and picked up litter, which got Ryan all wound up about the ecosystem. Even before this, Ryan had always been happier reading books about anything from aliens to Antarctica to forensic psychology, or going on long bike rides by himself, rather than accompanying his father on tasks and excursions. Lately, Ryan's solitary bike rides had gotten longer and longer, but John didn't ask questions.

Ryan was a much better student and just plain much smarter kid than either John or Poppy had been. Fast reader.