anyone who has become

by ellydash

Summary

Frankie's moving to Santa Fe, probably, and Grace is fine. Honestly. Everything's just fine.

Notes

it's been literally years since I've written anything for a fandom, & I was pretty sure I was done with fic, but then the third season of this show came along & unexpectedly ruined my life! cool! so here we are.

(the title will make sense eventually.)

also, if you want to yell with me about grandmas in love, I'm endlessly spiraling tumblr user ellydash.
Chapter 1

“Robert,” Grace begins. She’s grateful to be not exactly there, the two martinis she’s downed setting her just to the side of her body, a little away from herself, just enough to get the question out of her mouth. “How did you know?”

They’re sitting together at the table on Robert and Sol’s patio, drinks at hand like accessories. The outdoor fireplace is redundant on a typically mild San Diego evening but crackling nonetheless. It’s just the two of them; they’ve managed to beg out of celebrating Bud’s half birthday at some ridiculously gauche Old Town restaurant with mariachi waiters. (Frankie, wheedling earlier: “They’ve got margaritas bigger than my memory foam sex wedge. One of those babies and you won’t even be conscious for the part with the trumpets.” It nearly worked.) Tonight’s the first time she’s been alone with Robert in weeks, and quite frankly, she’s a little amazed by how much of what’s between them she’s let go since his mother’s death. To look at her ex-husband’s face and not feel the immediate upsurge of hot white fury, that unstoppable jolt of humiliation streaking up her neck and down her arms—that’s something. She might even call it progress.

Robert doesn’t pretend to misunderstand what she wants to hear, doesn’t ask Grace to elaborate on her question or clarify further. It’s a gift nicer than any scarf.

“Well,” he says, slowly. “I didn’t know, for the longest time. And then—I suppose I did know. All at once.”

So far she’s managed to deny herself what’s on the table, certainly wouldn’t dream of letting herself touch the cheese spread or the charcuterie plate or the artichoke leaves soaked in artisanal butter, of all things. (Frankie, mocking: “What’s the worst that could happen, Grace? You gain half a pound? Sit on a chair without a six-inch cushion? You’re like the princess and the pea, if the pea was an ass bone.”) But there’s something in her throat anyway, hard and insurmountable.

“Are you sure you really want to hear this, Grace?”

Christ, no, she thinks. “I asked you, didn’t I?”

“You did.” Robert pauses, takes a sip of his drink before putting it down. Reaches across the table to slice some camembert off the rind, and Grace knows he’s stalling, knows his tactics the same way she knows her own.

Finally, he says, placing the cheese on a cocktail napkin, “Do you remember, years ago, when Sol was thinking about taking that job in Seattle? Back when the firm wasn’t doing so well. The kids were little. You might’ve been pregnant with Mallory, then, I’m not sure.”

Grace doesn’t appreciate the intrusive memory. She’d hated being pregnant, hated feeling like she’d been invaded, hated the reminder that her body could grow and change without her explicit permission. But what Robert’s saying about Seattle rings a faint bell. Somewhere in the back of her mind there’s the faint echo of Frankie yammering on about the medicinal benefits of rubbing your face on fir trees.

“It was when he told me about the job. When he said he might take it. For the first time since I’d met him, I had to think about a future without Sol, and I realized—” Robert takes a breath. “I realized that that future was incomprehensible. That I simply couldn’t live without him.”

The temperature’s dropped a few degrees in the last hour or so, and there’s a bit of a breeze now.
Grace isn’t wearing a jacket, which is why she’s shaking.

Reflexively, she tips her martini glass to her mouth before realizing that it’s empty.

“Do you need a refresher?” Robert asks, a question she knows is just as reflexive as her reach, and then, “I’m sorry, Grace. This must be—uncomfortable for you. We don’t have to talk about it.”

“Yes. I need a refresher,” she says flatly. Hell, she can afford another drink. Frankie’s her ride home, assuming she hasn’t fallen chakra-first into one of those gigantic margaritas. But there’s something not quite right about this, something’s that’s not lining up. “Wait a minute. You told us—told me the affair began twenty years ago. Twenty-three years, now. Mallory’s thirty-two.”

Robert smiles, a sad smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, and places the cocktail napkin with the uneaten cheese back on the patio table. He stands. “You didn’t ask me when the affair started. You asked me when I knew.”

Nine years, or thereabouts. So much time to carry that quiet knowledge inside him without Sol or anyone else knowing: nursing it carefully, pruning it back aggressively when it got too unwieldy and overgrown for the life she’d had with him. She’s not particularly inclined towards sympathy, not for the man who’d ruined her life (Frankie, in her ear: “Thanks a whole fucking lot, Grace.” You know what I mean, she thinks, and of course, Frankie does. Would). But there’s something about the better part of a decade of self-contained silence that strikes her as unbearably sad. It’s unbearably sad for him.

While Robert’s busying himself at the drinks cart, Grace stares ahead at the window into his living room, at the signs of a life he’s curated with Sol. Dark warm walls, leather chairs, abstract realist paintings. A motif afghan she can just make out, draped over the back of their gunmetal gray couch, perfect for a cozy night in front of the television. All of it couldn’t be more different than what she’d had with Robert in their horror of a house. Of course, she hadn’t put an ounce of energy into that sterile downstairs redesign back in ’08; it was all that unctuous decorator’s fault, the one with the teeth, and when he’d finished she’d done her best to pretend for dinner guests that the six-figure invoice was worth it. (“It looks just like you, Grace. I really mean it. Congratulations. Come on, Sol. Let’s go home.”)

That future was incomprehensible. I simply couldn’t live without him.

Robert’s asking her something. She shakes her head to clear it, refocus, as he walks towards her with her third martini of the evening. Well, shit, no one’s here to count. She reaches for it. “What?”

“I said, ‘How are things with Frankie?’”

It’s close enough to what she hasn’t been thinking that Grace startles a bit, nearly spilling what’s in her glass. “Fine. Well—no, things are fine.” She takes a swig, and good lord, it’s just what she needs, that familiar warmth down her throat and good in her stomach. “She’s moving to Santa Fe with Jacob.”

“She’s going?” Robert takes his seat again, and the expression on his face—shit, she must’ve said it differently than she’d meant, because he’s looking at her like he’s concerned. For her. That’s the last thing she wants.

“It isn’t completely settled yet,” she admits, “but I told her to go. She’s going later this month. To visit. See if she likes it.”

“You told Frankie to go to Santa Fe,” Robert repeats.
The drink’s halfway empty, somehow. It’s been two minutes. That doesn’t seem particularly plausible. “She loves Jacob and he loves her, and it’s not like they’re getting any younger. I couldn’t live with myself if I held her back from, you know.” She shrugs. “Being happy.”

He splaying his hands on the table, a gesture she knows well. It’s the kind of thing he does when he’s being careful with his words, would touch and arrange them in a line if he could. “Are you happy now, Grace?”

Yes. I was. I have been. I am. When she is.

“As any of us ever are,” she says, instead, and laughs. It’s not a great laugh; it’s got too many corners, too sharp to be anything but what it is. Thankfully, she can always count on Robert to be oblivious. He’s extremely good at it.

Obliging her, he says, “I’m glad. I want you to be happy.”

Grace finishes her drink.

“That third martini was a mistake,” she says two hours later, or tries to. Half of the sentence dies in her mouth when Frankie yanks the steering wheel, takes them into the next lane with all the subtlety of an uppercut punch. Her stomach lurches dangerously. “You know what a turn signal is, Frankie? It’s that lever to the side of the wheel. You push it down when you’re merging to the left.”

“Ha, ha,” Frankie says. “Thank you very much, Miss Supercilious, I know exactly what a turn signal is. I just choose not to be part of its story. Oh, shit, the on-ramp.”

They cut across three lanes and onto the on-ramp in approximately four seconds, leaving Grace’s stomach back somewhere near the Arco station.

“Oh, I wish you’d been there tonight, Grace. I learned something. Did you know there’s no phrase in Spanish for ‘half birthday’? And we couldn’t sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to Bud, because it wasn’t his actual birthday. You know how I feel about acknowledging half birthdays.”

“Strongly,” Grace says, focusing on the overpass in the distance so Frankie’s weaving doesn’t make her feel like vomiting. “Aggressively, bizarrely so.”

“Right. So I ended up composing a little something on the spot for the mariachi waiters: ‘Feliz Día de Seis Meses Antes o Después de la Fecha en que Cae su Cumpleaños.’ The title is a little problematic and unwieldy right now, but hey, that’s what workshops are for.”

“Did Bud have a good time?” She spaces out the words carefully, doing her best not to slur them together.

“Oh, sure. I mean, it wasn’t all great. There were trumpets, and I’m really not a fan. I’ve never been able to figure out why, but, you know, right now it’s coming to me, and I’m thinking it might have something to do with a past life experience.”

“What one,” Grace says, dryly.

“Well, how the hell should I know, Grace? I’ve lived hundreds of lives. It’s why I got straight As
in all my high school history classes.” She taps her head. “I bet you that somewhere, inside this noggin, is the deeply repressed memory of an ancient and possibly violent encounter with a trumpet, just waiting to be psychically extricated. You see, this is why I have a standing weekly appointment with Guru Kevin.”

“Trumpets are desperate. They’re desperate instruments. No one likes a desperate instrument.”


“Eyes on the road, Frankie.”

Incredibly, Frankie obliges. She’s smiling, briefly radiant with the easy joy of being understood.

When she was a girl, maybe eight or nine and in unrequited love with the future, Grace, always hovering during her mother’s nightly cold cream ritual, had asked for and received permission to look through the jewelry case on the dressing table. “One piece, five minutes, then put it back,” Mother had said, not looking, and Grace remembers tracing her favorite brooch, a cluster of Tahitian pearls nearly the size of her small palm. Trying to memorize the feeling of it in her hand, its contours, the quiet pleasure of guarding something this precious. Trying not to think, *just three more minutes left before I have to give this back. Two more minutes. One.*
Chapter 2

It’s noon on a Sunday, and the gray marine layer that’s been encasing the house all morning is finally letting go, yielding to the growing heat. Grace supposes it doesn’t really matter whether or not she can see past the sea wall now. It’s not like she’s got time to stand on the beach with Frankie, eyes straining south, and look together for the distant smudge of coast they’re both pretty sure is Ensenada, all because Frankie wants to make sure it’s still there. Hell, Frankie isn’t even up yet.

So, sure, it’s a Sunday, but when you’ve got a small business just getting off the ground, Grace knows there’s really no such thing as taking an entire weekend off. There are, however, business-related activities better for a Sunday. Less intensive ones, activities more conducive to—well, to sharing the experience with a mimosa. She’s picked something on her to-do list that doesn’t require too much effort: writing the copy to give Vybrant’s opt-in email subscribers a free shipping upgrade with their next purchase. It’s the fourth suggestion in Chapter Six of *Upload Your Way to #Success!: How to Incentivize Your Twenty-First Century Small Business*.

Everything’s all set up at the table just the way she likes it. Laptop open and powered on, with the zoom on her word processor at 180%; mimosa to her left, a jaunty little concoction with one part pomegranate orange juice to four parts champagne; doors wide open to the back patio so the intruding breeze makes Grace feel a little like she isn’t working. Reading glasses on, along with the slight resentment she can’t seem to shake over needing them.

The cursor’s winking vertically at her, and it’s the only sign of life on the white screen. Grace watches as it leaves and come back, leaves and come back, leaves and come back with the regularity of a quick heartbeat.

It’s just that what Robert said the other night keeps digging at her. Keeps playing in her head, his voice soft around the words like time had been inexplicably kind to the memory: *That future was incomprehensible. I simply couldn’t live without him.* Was it really that straightforward for him, that uncomplicated? Feelings like you’d find in a half-price Hallmark card, the kind with pastel floral designs and sinuous script and the word “beloved” like someone’s died? She fucking hates Hallmark cards.

What would it be like to be with a man she couldn’t live without?

Well, it’s probably for the best she has no real idea, at least for the moment. Life’s busy enough as it is, and with Frankie headed to Santa Fe the amount of work on Grace’s plate is bound to increase exponentially. There’s no room right now for someone new, even if she wanted to find someone new, another—

No room, but soon she’ll have more space, yards and hours of it. There won’t be any more bongs in the dishwasher. No more paint splatters inexplicably ending up on her cardigans, or Purim costumes for the refrigerator, or beeswax doorstops that get wedged between the door frame and the floor, or the worst celebrity impressions anyone’s ever attempted. Frankie’s Cary Grant sounds disturbingly like Colonel Sanders, so much so that during *Bringing Up Baby* the other night Grace had been obliged to debut her own carefully rehearsed imitation of Katharine Hepburn ordering a bucket of extra crispy tenders. Frankie had laughed so hard she’d pulled a muscle. Clutching her neck, still giggling, she’d hollered, “Again, again! I can take the pain, just give me another hit, baby, don’t bogart that talent,” and in Grace there’d been a flare of delight so strong it might’ve wandered over from someone else’s life.
She hasn’t had a friend like Frankie in her life since—well, ever, really; no one’s like Frankie—but the last person she was this close with must’ve been Judith Campbell, back in high school. God, she hasn’t thought about Judy in years. Luminous Judy, with those freckles on her face that always darkened in summer, and that massive mane of dark hair she’d refused to style into a bouffant, even when it was social suicide to have anything but a perfect cylinder-shaped end curl. They’d listened to records together at Judy’s house after school, on weekends. Painted their toenails. She remembers—it’s right there, all of a sudden—Judy’s foot poking her own, leaving an accidental wet streak of Slightly Scarlet on her skin. It’s the damndest thing, what comes back when the tide’s been out so long you forget the wave exists. Can’t remember the birthdays of Mallory’s children unless they’re written on the calendar, but now she’s thinking about Judy laughing, nudging her foot, the groundswell of it like 1961 is cresting just over the sea wall.

(Of course, she hadn’t been Judy Campbell for long, even if Grace still thinks of her that way. She’d married Richard Romero soon after graduation, moved to San Francisco, sent Grace a birth announcement five months later. For a year or two, Grace wrote letters, polite perfunctory things she made quite sure were drained of all blood and feeling, nothing real in them for Judy Romero, no you never told me about or I thought we were or the simple, stark truth of I miss you. There’s more than one way to leave.)

The screen in front of Grace still doesn’t have a single goddamn word on it when the door bangs open and Frankie barrels in, all hurricane and hemp as usual, heading straight for the kitchen. “Good morning!” she announces, then immediately launches into an extremely profane rendition of “Good Morning” from Singin’ in the Rain that would probably make Andrew Dice Clay blush.

Grace, however, is three years past pretending to be offended or surprised by anything that comes out of Frankie’s mouth. After two-and-a-half verses, she points out, “It’s afternoon for most of us.” Frankie stops singing and waggles her hands. “Eh. You say po-tay-to, I say po-tay-to,” she says. “Potato, po-tah-to.”

“Let’s call the whole thing off. Speaking of carbs, have you even sniffed at the baked goods I sent us for Bud’s half birthday?” She grabs a croissant out of the basket on the counter, tears out a large bite with her teeth, and puts the rest in the front pocket of her overalls. “Forget it. I’m not sure why I bother asking. The day you voluntarily get near a pastry is the day I start caring about Scrabble.”

“No, thanks.” Grace pauses. “As a matter of fact, the only ‘baked good’ I’m possibly interested in is me, later this afternoon, after I’ve finished my work. If you catch my drift.”

“Nice,” Frankie says, still chewing. “A little awkward, sure, but that’s some extremely respectable and self-affirming ganja-related wordplay. I catch your drift, sister, and throw it back with a thumbs up.” She juts an approving thumb towards Grace.

“Care to join?”

“Nope, no can do. I’ve got a very busy day ahead of me. I have to find at least seventy-five square feet of open space in Horton Plaza.”

“Horton Plaza?”

“M.C. Escher’s wet dream, sponsored by Macy’s and the Gap.”

“I know,” Grace says, “what Horton Plaza is. I’ve spent thirty years avoiding that horror of a mall like the plague. What I don’t know is why the hell you need to find seventy-five square feet of
open space there.”

“Manny’s going to help me—you know, my friend Manny—”

“—from the airport parking lot, yes, I’m familiar—”

“—he’s got a fantastic sense of direction, probably from watching all those planes land every day, and the last time I was there I looked for the food court for two hours before giving up. I’m still not positive that fucker exists.”

Living with this woman is a doctoral education in the art of having patience. Grace removes her glasses, tossing them on the table. “For crying out loud, Frankie. Why do you have to find space in the middle of Horton goddamn Plaza?”

“Because, Grace,” Frankie says, like it’s completely fucking logical, “if I’m going to organize a poetry reading for mall shoppers to educate them on the evils of modern capitalism, there needs to be enough room to set up a small stage. We’ve absolutely got to look like professionals if we want the Gaslamp Quarter Democratic Socialists to take us seriously. There may be only seven of them, but they’re a big seven.”

“We are not going to stage a communist poetry reading in the middle of Horton Plaza,” Grace tells her, knowing full well that all of this ends, somehow, with a communist poetry reading in the middle of Horton Plaza.

“Excuse you, Democratic Socialist, not communist. Read a Daily Kos diary entry once in a while, Grace. There’s a major difference.”

“Oh, please. First of all, poetry is functionally worthless, and secondly, Emma Goldman, I happen to like capitalism just fine, thank you very much. It’s been extremely good to me over the years. And to you too, as a matter of fact. I certainly don’t see you complaining about living in this house. Or did you redistribute that fat settlement you got from Sol when I wasn’t paying attention?”

“Abstainer,” Frankie mutters, hoisting her satchel on her shoulder. It’s been her go-to insult ever since the 2016 election, when Grace’s decision to write “Mitt Romney” on her absentee ballot led to a half-pound of cauliflower pasta salad flung against the kitchen wall and a forty-five minute, two-slide PowerPoint lecture titled What in the Ever-Living Fuck is Wrong with You, Grace Hanson, by Frankie Bergstein, MFA. There’d been a star-wipe transition between the two slides. None of it had made a difference.

“Hypocrite.”

They glower briefly at each other.

“At any rate,” Grace adds, getting up from the table for a good reason that she absolutely has, “what about Santa Fe? You’re supposed to be heading there with Jacob later this month—do you really think you have time to plan a poetry reading before then? Get a permit, find participants, rehearse?” Conveniently, there’s a stack of papers on the other side of the table she can move closer to her laptop. That’s something to busy herself with.

“You do not rehearse poetry, Grace,” Frankie says, like it’s ludicrous for Grace to even entertain the idea. “You give birth to it. Metaphorically. It’s a very painful and organic process, like childbirth, and from what I understand you also feel it in the vagina. I’m not going to Santa Fe.”

“I think you’ll find that the—” She stops, puts down the papers, and now she’s looking at Frankie again, except that this time Frankie isn’t looking at her. That’s odd. Frankie loves sustained eye
contact. “Wait a minute. You’re not going to Santa Fe? Is that some kind of metaphor too?”

“Sure. It’s a metaphor for me not going to Santa Fe.”

“This month.” Grace says it very carefully. “You mean you’re not going this month.”

Frankie still won’t look at her. “What I mean, Grace,” she says, and the volume of her voice is subdued, enough so that she doesn’t sound much like Frankie Bergstein at all, “is that I’m not going.”

“You’re not—”

“I told Jacob my decision and we broke up.” She shrugs, a gesture that falls short of casual. “He cried, I cried. Mildred cried when I told her. Or at least I think she did. It’s difficult to tell with goats. They hide their emotions so well.”

“Oh, Frankie,” Grace breathes. She’s experiencing the oddest sensation in her stomach. It’s not all that different from the feeling she gets standing where the ocean meets the shore, the water rushing away to build a wave, pulling wet sand fast around her feet, sinking her down. “I’m so, so sorry.”

And now Frankie’s looking right at her again, her eyes narrowed. “Are you? Really?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “Of course I’m sorry! You’re my best friend! What the hell is that supposed to mean, Frankie? I’m not the one who burst in here earlier singing obscenities and eating croissants like I didn’t have a care in the world.”

Frankie points an accusatory finger in her direction. “Don’t you dare grief-shame me, Grace Hanson. I don’t need something else to add to my inventory for Guru Kevin’s sensory deprivation emotional processing yurt. As it is, it’s going to take me at least two hours to work through ending things with Mildred, let alone Jacob.”

“All right, fine. I guess I’m sorry for that, too.” She can afford to be a little nicer right now, Grace reminds herself. After all, Frankie’s just lost her boyfriend—

(—not lost, which sounds like she’s accidentally misplaced Jacob in the house somewhere; it’s not at all that Frankie lost him, that’s not what it is, what it really is is that Frankie chose, she thought about it carefully and made a deliberate choice and her choice was—)

“Grace,” Frankie says, and Grace starts a little. “Hellooooo.” She’s waving a hand like a windshield wiper, taking a few steps towards her. “Where’d you go, lady?”

“Nowhere. I’m right here. Why?”

“Because that patrician face of yours is more glazed over than one of those donuts in that pastry basket you’re never going to touch.”

“No, that isn’t what I’m—why aren’t you going to Santa Fe?” The question falls out of her before Grace can stop it. She isn’t sure she wants to hear Frankie’s answer; isn’t ready for the wave of guilt she’d feel if it’s I’m too afraid to go. “Is it Bud and Allison’s baby? Are you still worried about Coyote’s sobriety holding up? Does Lil Wayne not tour in New Mexico?”

“He does,” Frankie says, too lightly, and offloads her satchel onto the table. “I did a Google to make sure. And yes, of course I want to be here for our kids, and their kids, and Manny’s kid, you know, Manny from—”
“—the airport parking lot, yes, I know—”

“—he’s got this loose tooth, Grace, Manny’s kid, not Manny, he’s very nervous because he doesn’t want to lose a part of himself, so I’ve been talking him through his body integrity phobia. And besides, I decided I just couldn’t live without you.”

She’s still stuck on the concept of body integrity phobias, and then what Frankie’s saying breaks against Grace like surf or understanding. “You—what?”

Nonchalantly, Frankie repeats, “I couldn’t live without you,” and smiles at Grace. It’s small, but it’s in her eyes, too, her whole face. She’s luminous, softer in the afterglow of it, and Grace gasps, puts her palm to her mouth, thinks,

*God, my God, oh my God—*

“Grace?”

*That future is incomprehensible.*

She staggers a little, grabs the back of the nearest chair for balance, and bursts into tears.

“Grace—!”

*I’m fine,* she tries to say, hand still on her mouth, but can’t get out the words. There’s a dense pain blooming hot through her chest, like nothing she’s ever felt, the way it’s choking her, coming out of her throat in serrated sobs. Maybe she’s having a heart attack. Maybe this is exactly what a heart attack feels like. Her heart, attacked.

“Grace, please talk to me—”

A heart attack would be fine right now. Preferable, even. Then there’d be a physiological reason big enough for Grace to hide behind.

Frankie’s right in front of her now, hands pressing on Grace’s shoulders, her face wrinkled with worry and confusion. That’s some small miracle, at least. Frankie has no idea what’s happening to her. “This is all my fault. I knew you’d been working yourself too hard, because you’ve been way more Grace than usual lately, and that’s really saying something because most of the time you maintain at, oh, around 85%, 90% Grace. 95% Grace tops. I should’ve known you’d get emotional about this, I’m—What do you need? Do you need your sternum rubbed? I can—”

“Stop touching me!”

She pushes Frankie’s hands away and—I have to get out of here, I have to get out—runs for the stairs, taking them two at a time. The sounds coming out of her are alien in her own ears, like someone else is sobbing, someone she’d mock, someone overindulgent and undisciplined and shameless. She’s never felt this mortified in her life, never more exposed, and that’s a hell of a thing for a woman with an ex-husband who left because

*(I simply couldn’t)*

he’d fallen in love with someone else, another—

The bedroom door slams behind her, and she has enough self-presence to remember to lock it before she stumbles towards the bed, sitting down hard enough for her ass to protest. Grace is not going to faint. She’s not. The only thing more embarrassing than all this would be Frankie having to call the fire department. Getting carried out on a stretcher, all because Frankie just happened to say a few words that really don’t mean anything at all. They shouldn’t mean anything. There’s no
reason for Grace to feel like the world’s been stripped away from her. Frankie’s staying—hadn’t Grace wanted that all along? Frankie’s staying. Because Frankie can’t live without her.

And here’s the plain and simple truth of it, rising up inside Grace, naked now and unmistakable for anything but what it is: she can’t live without Frankie.

The pain in her chest constricts like a hand making a fist. Any minute now she’ll be able to regain control over herself, stop crying like a child. Any minute.

“Grace!” The door handle rattles briefly.

Oh, goddamn it, Frankie doesn’t ever know when to give up.

“Grace? Is it something I said?” A pause. “Okay, that’s probably not funny. Would you please let me in? I’ve got three Valium. And a bag of mushrooms, although I’m really not sure if they’re psilocybin or portobello. Wouldn’t it be fun to figure it out together?”

“Fuck off, Frankie.” Her voice cracks on the second word. It’s all she can manage.

“No Valium. Okay, wow. This must be serious. Don’t worry, Grace, I’m going to get you through it. Panic attacks are like a rip current. Remember, we’ve talked about that before? You don’t fight it; you swim parallel to the shore. Listen to my voice, kiddo. Breathe. In, out, in, out, in, out. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Grace thinks: that’s what terrifies me. She thinks: the reason it’s a bad idea to go swimming in the ocean is that sometimes people can’t find their way back.

“Grace?” There’s a gentle tapping sound on the door. “Are you listening?”

She presses a hand to her breastbone and tries to breathe normally, with marginal success. Please, God, she says to herself. Oh, please. And again, over and over, please, please, please, please. This is how Grace prays. Not the way she was taught as a child, not with both palms together, but with one hand pushed against her chest to stop the tide, the other hand Frankie’s, asking to come in.
Thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who’s commented and left kudos so far! Your feedback means a lot to me, & I appreciate it so much.

Also, just a heads up: the chapter following this one will take a little longer to be posted than the first three did—likely mid-May or so—since the next month is a super busy one for me & I won't have as much time to work on fic. Rest assured, though, that updates will still happen! This entire thing is sketched out in detail & the second half is the part I'm most excited about.

If there’s anything Grace Hanson knows how to execute perfectly—besides organizing kitchen drawers and packing a carry-on so that nothing wrinkles and working the room at fundraisers and haggling down vendors and, hell, everything else she attempts—it’s a performance.

“You’re the greatest actress I’ve ever seen,” Robert had told her years ago, in the middle of a vicious argument, and although he’d thrown it at her like it was something that hurt, she’d smiled to herself at the truth of it. She’s always been the one who’s decided exactly what others see: the consummate executive whose femininity kept her from being too threatening, the impeccable wife and mother who’d loved her family in precisely the ways that had guaranteed admiring comments from outsiders. Even with Phil, who’d given her the closest thing she’s had to real love, she’d never been able to stop herself from working to make sure the woman in front of him was the woman he wanted. No one gets a glimpse of Grace that she hasn’t pre-directed towards the parts of herself meant for consumption.

Except Frankie, of course, goddamn it.

She’s been locked in her bedroom for just over an hour, long enough for the panic and desperation to fade generously into something like dull uneasiness, something much easier to swallow and keep down. It’s against all reasonable odds, but she’s hoping the silence outside her bedroom door means Frankie’s given up and gone back to her studio. Grace knows better than to think she’ll get away completely without some sort of an eventual explanation. At some point she’ll have to address her outburst, give Frankie an air-tight reason that wipes away what’s happened enough for both of them to move on and for Grace to pretend she hasn’t made a complete idiot out of herself. Over nothing, really, at all. But she needs a little more time to pull herself together, wash her face, come up with a good smile that says What, that? You’re sweet to be concerned, but see? Everything’s just fine.

And everything really—truly—is fine. Frankie isn’t going anywhere, and for Grace that thought feels like waking up after one of her dreams: realizing, suddenly, that she isn’t late for an important meeting, that no one’s chasing her, that her teeth are still in her mouth. Nothing’s going to change. She’ll still find batteries where the spoons should be, pick off dog hair from the remote even though they don’t have a dog, wait after Frankie makes a terrible pun for Frankie’s slack laugh to come tumbling into the room. The language of their lives is a kind of speech outside naming, and they can both go on learning it.

(I couldn’t live without you, Frankie had told her, so plainly. Like it was something recorded and
solved, like yesterday’s weather.)

When she opens the bedroom door, praying for an empty hallway and an easy getaway, she’s met instead with the foregone conclusion of Frankie, who appears to have fallen asleep waiting for Grace to emerge. She’s sitting on the floor, her back against the wall next to the bedroom door, knees drawn up to her chest, and head leaning against the cutout corner for support.

“I don’t believe it,” Grace says out loud to no one in particular, although she’s not one bit surprised. Frankie can sleep anywhere sitting up, and often does, no matter how uncomfortable the spot. “Would you look at that? She’s taking a nap.”

Without moving or opening her eyes, Frankie says, “Believe it, sister. I learned it from the rhinos. It was all that time on behind-the-scenes safaris at the Wild Animal Park, you know, when I was doing reconnaissance for Codename Prison Break. Remember Codename Prison Break?”

“I still think you should’ve picked a less obvious codename. Or, at the very least, refrained from bedazzling it on your poncho.”

“If those precious baby rhinos taught me a life lesson besides ‘holy shit, never get out of the cart at the Wild Animal Park,’ it’s that you should grab a snooze whenever you can.” She looks up, then, and her legs fall flat to the ground. “Grace, are you all right? You’ve got me worried, lady. What’s going on? You ready to talk yet?”

There’s an irritating mess of hair obscuring part of Frankie’s face. It’s a little less brown than when they’d moved in together, the gray having found new territory to grow in. Grace knows what that hair feels like in her hands. Occasional French braid plaiting and more than one session combing out cruelty-free vegan honey has left her casually familiar with its soft mass and weight, conversant with the stubborn mélange of pot and sage and tea tree oil that sticks to Grace’s palms for an hour, maybe two if she doesn’t wash them thoroughly. Hair belongs off the face, even hair like Frankie’s with a mind of its own. Unbidden, one of her hands lifts from where it’s been hidden behind her back.

The thought goes through her mind before she can stop it: don’t you dare touch her or you’ll make everything true.

Her hand drops.

“I’m all right,” she says, calmly, “now,” and it’s pretty convincing, if Frankie were anyone else.

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Here is part of the story Grace tells herself: she’s always loved men. Loved them since she was fifteen and turning heads in the hallways of Coronado High School, quietly thrilled at the way her talented body knew, without instruction, how to command interest. She blooms under the heat of male attention, and thinks of it as proof she’s moving through the world exactly the way she should be, living up to her fullest potential. Admittedly, the overall amount of attention has diminished noticeably over the years, but Grace knows she’s still perfectly capable of making men of a certain age think she’s the most fascinating creature who’s ever lived. It’s effortless, like breathing or criticism. She turns her head, and smiles, and finds that low pitch of promise in her voice. They always give her what she needs in return. Validation, maybe, or a better deal, or the knowledge she’s been seen.
She loves men, or she loves the way they make her feel.

So this thing beyond language and maybe even friendship, what this is with Frankie, whatever this is (she can’t bring herself to be more specific than the tightly locked container of this), Grace is absolutely certain she can fit it into everything she knows. Eventually.

Almost absolutely certain.

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Mostly certain.

There’s a restaurant at the La Valencia Hotel that serves a very respectable Vietnamese shaken filet mignon salad, which goes wonderfully with a terrace view of the gardens and the La Jolla Cove below. On occasion she meets the girls there for lunch, the three of them making their way through those mother-daughter afternoons Grace knows you’re supposed to enjoy. And because lunch at La Valencia is now something of a tradition, or close enough to one, it’s perfectly unremarkable to ask them to join her on this particular weekend. There’s nothing surprising about that request, even if she makes it during her third martini and over a group text with only sixteen hours’ advance notice, and even if after they confirm plans Mallory writes hey, is something up? and Brianna sends her one of those yellow smiley faces that looks like some sort of skeptical expression.

She’s ten minutes early to the restaurant, as always, and no one else is, as always, which affords Grace the opportunity to sit alone at the terrace’s corner table, staring out over the lovely gardens and beach cove and seeing none of it. The thing is, all of this is categorically Frankie’s fault, in more than one way. First, she’d made that cataclysmic announcement, the announcement that hadn’t even been cataclysmic, honestly, except it was, it is, and Grace can’t talk to Frankie about it, because—well, she just can’t, that’s why. It’s just that the worst part of not being able to talk to her best friend is that for the first time in her life, Grace is realizing that she actually wants to talk. Or: wanting might not be the right word for what she’s feeling, but it’s there, anyway, something quieter than need but just as insistent, something spilling over in her without permission. And that, too, is all on Frankie. It’s clear that Frankie, who can’t even sneeze without processing the experience with at least three other people, has slowly acclimatized Grace, somehow, into a thing that looks remarkably like self-disclosure.

Brianna and Mallory sure as hell aren’t Frankie, but they’re hers, at any rate. And what are kids for if you can’t rely on blood and three decades of strained history to make them listen, even if you aren’t completely sure yet what you’re going to say?

As if on cue, both of her daughters emerge onto the terrace at the same time, acknowledging Grace with the kind of perfunctory greeting that can’t sustain manufactured enthusiasm for more than a couple of seconds. Right, Grace thinks, we need a lot of alcohol, and she calls over to the startled waiter four feet away to bring them a bottle of the Yarra Valley chardonnay—“and another one in about twenty minutes, please”—as Brianna and Mallory take their seats on the other side of the table, facing Grace. There’s an empty chair on her side, but the dividing line between them is quietly clear, as it’s always been.

“You look lovely today, girls,” Grace says, and then, reflexively, because she can’t help it, “Brianna, are you entirely sure that dress is the right size?”

Brianna lifts both eyebrows, settling back in her chair. “Okay, wow. Not even ten seconds in and the wine isn’t here yet. What a fun and exciting afternoon for me.”
“Honey, you know I’m just trying to be helpful.”

“Well, you sure did it, Mom. You helped. Helping’s over now. Let’s immediately change the topic to something more uplifting, like nuclear war.”

Mallory looks at her watch. “You both should know that I can’t stay for more than an hour. The kids’ babysitter has last-minute surge pricing on weekends.”

“And I had to break a date,” Brianna announces, “so whatever this is, it better be good.”

“I thought Barry was still in Baltimore?”

“Staying in bed until one and dropping my phone on my face while I try to watch videos of small children falling down and crying counts as a date.”

“I see,” Grace deadpans. “I’m so proud.”

“You’ve made that very clear, Mom, thank you.”

The waiter appears with the bottle of chardonnay and promptly dispenses the first pour into Grace’s glass, barely waiting for her approval before filling all three. Well, Grace supposes she doesn’t blame him for wanting to do his job and get away from the table as quickly as possible. There’s a part of her—more than a part—that feels precisely the same way.

All three of them drink simultaneously. It’s something to do.

“Thank you for coming,” Grace says, finally. “I appreciate—”

“Wait a minute.” Mallory’s eyes widen. “You’re not sick, are you? Oh, God, are you sick? Is that why you asked us to come here?”

“Oh, for crying—”

“Mal, have you met our mother? You think she’d tell us she has cancer over—” Brianna gestures at the table and their menus. “—mid-priced Australian chardonnay and a grilled prawn saffron bucatini?”

“You’re ordering the saffron bucatini?” Grace asks. “Really?”

Brianna’s mouth pulls back in a gesture that on someone else might look like a grin. “See. I rest my case.”

“Jesus, Bree, why does everything have to be a joke with you?”

“She doesn’t have cancer, Mallory,” Brianna says, and then turns to Grace. “You don’t have cancer, Mom. Right?” There’s a tiny catch in her voice that belies her projected certainty.

“No, I do not have cancer. I’m in perfect health, as always. Honestly, do I have to have an ulterior motive for wanting to have lunch with my two beautiful daughters?” She puts on her best smile, aiming hard for unaffected and, in case she doesn’t hit her goal, obscures her mouth with a generous sip of wine.

“Yes,” Mallory says, and Brianna adds, “Since 1985.”

Great. Five minutes in and this is already looking like a train wreck. “I’d just like to catch up with you both. Hear how your lives are going. Is that a crime? Mallory, tell me, how are the kids? Is
Madison still eating Kleenex? Have—you know, the babies—oh, help me out here, what the hell milestone are you supposed to be excited about at six months?"

“See, she can’t remember their names either,” Brianna stage-whispers to Mallory.

“They’re nine months old,” Mallory says, “Macklin’s the one who eats Kleenex, and okay, what the fuck, you literally never ask about my children. What’s going on?”

It comes out in a rush, the words too loud and stumbling over one another on their way out of her mouth. “Frankie isn’t going to Santa Fe.”

Her daughters look at her, clearly nonplussed, and just then the waiter reappears on the terrace, walking towards them with his pad and pen, all readiness and inquisitive expression. Brianna turns her head, just a few inches, and glowers at him. The waiter doesn’t hesitate; he immediately does an about face, heading back inside.

Mallory says carefully, “Okay. So Frankie’s staying. That's great.”

"You must be,” Brianna begins, and then pauses. “Uh. What’s the word I want? That thing people get at Midwestern parades.”

“Happy?” Mallory suggests.

“Yes. That’s it. Happy.”

Grace empties the rest of the wine into her glass and prays Brianna hasn’t scared the waiter enough to prevent his returning with a second bottle. “I am happy. I mean, of course I am, although I’m sorry she’s ending things with Jacob, even if he and I had our differences—”

“That sounds extremely sincere,” Mallory interjects.

“—because Frankie loves him. Loved him. She really loved him. I know that. God knows I spent those three hours of my life helping her collect seaweed and seal shit to make Jacob that disgusting fertilizer. You don’t do that for people you don’t love. I mean, Frankie doesn’t.”

“Frankie loves you too, Mom,” Brianna says, and for once there’s nothing noticeably sharp in her voice. “Clearly.”

“What do you mean by clearly?” She takes a long swig out of her glass and doesn’t ask: what do you mean by love?

“We all know emotions really aren’t my thing, but come on, Mom, everyone's seen how she looks at you. Those big eyes she gets? It’s exactly the way my dog looks at me when he wants me to take off my socks so he can eat them. You know how much Spit loves eating socks.”

So they’ve all seen how Frankie looks at her. Like a sock-eating mutt, apparently. Grace doesn’t exactly know how to feel about that.

“And Frankie talks about you constantly when you’re not around. It’s always ‘Grace thinks this,’ and ‘Grace said that,’ and ‘Grace always brings me home two bags of Gummy Tummies Penguins whenever she stops at Trader Joe’s,’ and ‘Grace has the time between my one phone call and bail delivery down to a cool ninety minutes’ and ‘don’t be so hard on your mother, Brianna, she tries her best.’”

“Frankie really said not to be hard on me?”
“Repeatedly. It’s extremely annoying.”

“She said something else, too, the other night. She said she couldn’t live without me,” Grace tells her daughters, doing her best to deliver this fact with the equanimity and poise something so straightforward warrants, and fails completely. Horrified, she feels the tears rising in her eyes, and she holds them open without blinking as long as she can—close to ten seconds—to keep anything from falling. It’s unsuccessful.


“Oh, my God, she’s crying,” Brianna says, helplessly, and turns to Mallory. “Mallory, she’s crying. Do something.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Mallory hisses.

“Why are you asking me? Which one of us has seventeen children?”

“Just because I have children doesn’t mean I know how to handle—”

Grace, blinking furiously now to get it all out of the way, manages, “There’s absolutely nothing to handle. I’m fine, it’s just—Frankie said that. And I can’t stop thinking about it, about her. Because, the thing is—” She can do this. She can say it out loud. “The thing is that I don’t think I can live without Frankie, either.”

Silence. Mallory and Brianna are staring at her, slightly openmouthed.

“Would somebody please tell me what this means?” Grace wails, and then immediately shuts her mouth, remembering that there are other people on this terrace who might not want to witness a seventy-three-year-old woman having an existential breakdown. Their waiter takes the opportunity to sidle up to the table without making eye contact; he removes the empty chardonnay bottle and deposits another in approximately four seconds, all but running away as soon as he’s finished.

“Mommy,” Brianna says quietly, once the waiter’s gone. Grace feels the name like a pull in her stomach. “Is this—are you trying to tell us you have feelings for Frankie?”

“Obviously I have feelings for her,” she snaps, and wipes her cheek with the back of her hand before she replenishes her glass. The wine pours in uneven spurts, her hand not altogether steady. “She’s my best friend.”

“All right, fantastic, you’re going to make me spell it out for you so we can all be even more uncomfortable. Yaaaaay. Mom, are you trying to tell us that you have romantic feelings for Frankie? And please, let me be clear that you should feel extremely free to respond in a way that traumatizes the two of us as little as possible.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Brianna, I’m not a lesbian. Let’s not be preposterous.” She’s known gay women before—Patty Johansson had moved in with a woman after her divorce, and although she’d kept it quiet, the entire La Jolla Improvement Society knew exactly what was happening. Robert had had one working for him at the firm a few years back, a lawyer with a confident swagger. That women’s consciousness raising group she’d visited precisely once in the mid 1970s was full of them, looking like an especially hirsute page out of Our Bodies, Ourselves. So it’s not like she’s not ‘with it,’ or that there’s something wrong with being a lesbian, because it’s the twenty-first century and being a lesbian is perfectly fine if that’s who you happen to be. It’s just simply that Grace is not one of those women. Has never had anything in common with them.

“What I think Mom is trying to say,” Mallory interjects, “is that she loves Frankie, and she wants
to be around Frankie all the time, and she can't stop thinking about her, and she’s realized that she can’t live without Frankie, but that doesn’t mean she’s in love with Frankie. Right?”

Some small relief spreads through Grace. At least one of her daughters seems to be able to frame this in a way that seems reasonable. “Yes. Thank you, Mallory.”

“Okay,” Mallory continues, “but see, the thing is, Mom, that reasoning? Makes absolutely no sense.”


“I am not denying anything, Brianna. I just—I don’t know what Frankie meant by saying she couldn’t live without me. And it’s, it’s extremely important to me to figure that out. I won’t apologize for that. So either help me, or you both can just go home.”

“All right, fine,” Mallory says. “I haven’t had nearly enough wine to get the twins’ screaming out of my ears, so going home isn’t happening for at least another glass. What exactly did Frankie tell you? There’s a big difference between ‘I didn’t want to live without you’ and ‘I couldn’t live without you.’”

“No, it was not ‘I didn’t want to live without you.’ She told me ‘I couldn’t live without you.’ Word for word. I’m absolutely certain. It was casual, the way she said it. And she smiled at me. God, that was terrible.”

Mallory and Brianna exchange a deliberate and meaningful look, the kind that’s made Grace feel like a fifth wheel for twenty-five years, even though she knows she should be happy her daughters have that kind of shared understanding. “What?” she asks.

Brianna tents her fingers on the table, a gesture undeniably her father’s. “Okay. Was it ‘I couldn’t live without you’ like ‘I’m too used to you going around the kitchen and picking up my scattered used tea bags after I make kombucha’ or ‘I couldn’t live without you’ like ‘I would rather wallpaper my studio in inspirational quote posters than be somewhere where I couldn’t gaze at your impossibly symmetrical face first thing in the morning?’”

Miserably, Grace says, “I don’t know. But Frankie really does hate those inspirational quote posters.”

“And you looooove that about her,” Brianna croons. “You looooove Frankie.”

With a concerted effort, Grace resists the temptation to put her hands over her face. “Brianna, you’re thirty-five and the CEO of a Fortune 1000 company. Act like it, for God’s sake.”

“I am acting like it. Childish mocking is a perfectly respectable negotiating tactic.”

“Well, we’re not negotiating anything right now, except maybe my sanity.” Of course she loves Frankie, has loved her since—as a matter of fact, she knows exactly the moment she realized it. They’d been sitting on the curb outside that club on their Say Yes night, and she’d been tickling Frankie’s arm, which was weird but also kind of nice, while telling her all about Guy’s love confession, gone unanswered. Frankie hadn’t offered Grace any advice. She’d just grabbed Grace’s hand and squeezed, and it was there, suddenly, for Grace. What she felt for Frankie was just as clear to her as what she hadn’t felt for Guy.

“Have you tried just asking her what she meant?” Mallory suggests. “I know open communication isn’t exactly how we tend to handle things in this family, but there’s a first time for everything.”
“Oh, right. So I’m just supposed to walk up to Frankie, and say what? ‘Hey, Frankie, that’s a great stain on your caftan, it really complements your shoes. By the way, when you told me you couldn’t live without me, what exactly did you mean by that? Because I’ve just realized that I can’t live without you either, and I really need you to tell me what that means so I know what it means, and then maybe I can stop feeling completely fucking terrified all the time and can start living my life again like a normal person whose roommate just happens to keep her ayurvedic toothpaste in a sandwich bag. Loose.’ How about I do that?”

“Great,” Brianna says. “Yeah, everything you just said sounds super chill and totally not like you’re in love with Frankie and her weird habits at all. You know, maybe I’ll write a sequel to *Heather Has Two Mommies* and call it *Brianna Has Four Parents and They’re All Gay, All of Them.*”

“You know, Brianna, there are other reasons women commit to one another besides sex. Platonic reasons, normal reasons. Frankie and I could be like—you know those nineteenth-century women who lived together without a man? Educated women, with careers. Women who didn’t want to marry but who wanted a lifelong companion. A Boston marriage, that’s what they called them. Frankie and I could have that. Couldn’t we?”

“Sure. Sure, you could have that. Just FYI, most of those nineteenth-century women were probably fucking each other.”

“Okay, time out,” Mallory interrupts, glaring daggers at Brianna. “Mom, I really think you should do whatever makes you happy. And no matter what that is, we’ll support you. Right, Brianna? We’re going to be supportive?”


“Thank you, sweetheart,” Grace says dryly. “I sort of ‘that whole love thing’ about you too.”

“What I’m trying to say is—the thing is, Mallory and I, we really can’t tell you what Frankie meant or what you mean. Or who you are, or who she is. Maybe you’re gay—*stop*, Mom, let me finish. Maybe you’re bisexual. Maybe you’re straight and you just need a really good nap. I don’t know, maybe you’ve just got a thing for Frankie. The point is, figuring that out, that’s not up to us. So you should probably spend some time on your own thinking about what you want. Emotionally. And physically. Please don’t make me be any more specific than that. But consider it. Not—” She makes a large circle with her hand that includes the table, herself, and Mallory. “Not in this general vicinity, here. Think about it far away, at home, by yourself, where you’ve got—”

Mallory smacks her sister’s arm and hisses, “Brianna, I swear to God, if you bring up her vibrator right now, I will—”

Brianna smacks her back, hard. “—where you’ve got some peace and quiet, Mal, what the fuck is wrong with you, why would you put that image in—”

“How about,” Grace interrupts, her face now fully on fire, “we talk about something else? Like investment portfolios, or interior decorating, or literally *anything* else except the extremely personal direction this conversation is headed in right now.”

“Great!” Mallory says, brightly, and Brianna adds, “Extremely fucking fine by me.”

The rest of lunch is surprisingly agreeable, given the intensity of the first half-hour. They order, eventually, once the waiter gets brave enough to come back, and Grace even manages to refrain
from any comments on Brianna’s saffron bucatini, for which she congratulates herself. But even though the discussion turns to Mallory’s plans to rejoin the workforce and Say Grace’s most recent quarterly report, two perfectly engrossing topics, Grace finds herself drifting. Remembering some months back, when Frankie had shared her bed after the break-in, and Grace had taken forever to fall asleep on her side of the mattress. She’d tried as best she could to maintain an appropriate distance from Frankie, who was snoring in a starfish pose, arms and legs splayed. At some point in the small hours she’d been pulled back into semi-consciousness to realize slowly that the warm length of Frankie was pressed up against her back, one arm draped over Grace’s body, Frankie’s face pushed into her hair.

She’d kept her eyes closed, stayed still, and told herself that moving away was acknowledging there was something to move away from, a kind of confession she couldn’t make. Ten minutes later, something unnamed and heated and restless still holding her that was and wasn’t Frankie, Grace had understood that not moving was a kind of confession, too. At least it was made in the dark, somewhere she could leave in the morning. She’d left, or thought she had.

Afterwards, the girls follow her out to the parking lot, the three of them walking together exactly like family. It’s surprisingly nice.

“Bye, Mom. Love you. We’ll see you at the house next weekend for Mother’s Day brunch.” Mallory tells Grace, and kisses her cheek, or something very close to it. “Remember, all you and Frankie have to do is sit back and relax, okay? Brianna and Bud and Coyote and I are going to take care of everything. It’s our gift to you.”

Brianna clears her throat.

“All right, I am going to take care of everything,” Mallory corrects, “as always, while Brianna and Bud and Coyote draw giant dicks in the sand.”

“Thank you,” Brianna says. “I’m so glad you’re finally acknowledging my contributions.”

Once Mallory’s said her goodbyes to Brianna—and Grace definitely catches Mallory's mouthed holy fucking shit, we'll talk later, since it's not exactly subtle—she leaves them both, walking towards her car. Lingering and a little awkward with it, Grace turns to face her eldest. She adjusts her purse on her shoulder, opens her mouth to speak, and then closes it again. Brianna looks at her expectantly.

“Yes?” she asks, and it’s actually kind of pleasant. “Can I help you?”

“Brianna, I know you said you can’t tell me anything definitive, about myself or about—I understand it’s an impossible question. But do you really think—Frankie might—?” She isn’t sure, exactly, how to ask this, can’t finish the question properly. Her hands, looking for somewhere to go, each grab the opposite elbow in a defensive cradle. “Could she—?”

Brianna looks at her. There’s a smile on her face, a real one, no mocking or hardness in it. “Yes, Mom,” she says, and reaches out to grab one of Grace’s arms, a gesture that astonishes Grace almost as much as everything else that’s happened this afternoon. She squeezes, briefly, and then lets go. “Yes. I really think Frankie might.”
And then Grace is alone, and for some reason, her body doesn’t want to move. It’s stuck standing in the middle of the hotel parking lot, in the middle of what she’s asked, in the middle of what Brianna heard. In the possibility of might, a thing closing in on her and maybe unfolding at the same time.

Her breath stutters on a shaky inhale. She hugs her arms tight against her stomach; looks around, finally, at where she is. It’s a parking lot, but beautiful.
so I know I said I wouldn’t be updating with a new chapter until mid-May due to lots of Life Events, but apparently this fic really really really wants to be finished & will not listen to me when I tell it to take a backseat. responsibilities be damned, apparently.

once more, thank you all so much for your comments/kudos, & as always, please do let me know what you think of the chapter if you’re so inclined!

Think about what you want at home, by yourself, Brianna had suggested, but the thing is, Grace knows she just can’t do that. There’s no such thing as by yourself in a house where Frankie’s in every room and corner, casually haunting the periphery of Grace’s vision even when she’s there alone. And it’s not just the permanent faint orange spots on the couch arm in the smudged shape of Flamin’ Hot Cheeto-encrusted fingerprints, or the forty-seven episodes of All In with Chris Hayes recorded on their DVR that Grace isn’t allowed to delete because Frankie’s saving them up for a binge-watch, or the way the arms of their patio lounge chairs are touching now so Grace doesn’t have to get up when Frankie wants to practice their special handshake. It’s that looking everywhere around her and seeing Frankie leaves no space for Grace to look at herself and see just how much Frankie’s there, too.

So, standing in the middle of the parking lot, she decides not to get in her car—probably better to wait out those glasses of wine she’d had at lunch, anyway—and instead, head down towards the park on the bluff overlooking La Jolla Cove. It’s a steep incline down Girard, and sure, she isn’t wearing her sensible walking heels, but Grace has never been someone to let a little thing like three-and-a-half inch pumps and mild discomfort stop her. She adjusts her blazer, smoothing the lapels with her hand, and tugs it down so it sits just right on her frame. No point in getting lost in thought if she doesn’t remove all distractions first by making sure she’s presentable.

Out loud, because she needs to hear it spoken and Frankie isn’t there to say it for her, she tells herself, “You can do this. You can do anything. You’re Grace Hanson.”

The first few steps across the parking lot are a little shaky, a wobble that would probably be imperceptible to anyone but herself, but her head is high and her posture is perfection, and by the time she’s reached the sidewalk there’s not a sign of tremor in her legs or feet, despite the incline.

Brianna, in her head: Think about what you want. Emotionally. And physically.

Emotionally. That seems doable. She’ll start there. Small bites. Digestible ones. Well, Grace supposes she wants what everyone else wants: to feel safe, to feel cared for, to be seen, to feel heard. That certainly seems like a reasonable list of requests to start with. Nothing too lofty or spectacular. It’s not like she needs someone to give her the moon. Just someone, maybe, who asks her to look at it.

She’d spent forty years with a man who hadn’t provided her with any of those wants, despite the vows he’d made in front of family and friends and God. And maybe she’s mostly forgiven Robert for being gay, for cheating on her, for humiliating her, for sending the last decades of her life into a
vortex of doubt, but there’s a hard kernel of pain that pricks Grace when she thinks about those forty years, and she knows time or understanding won’t ever be able to dislodge it. The pain isn’t about Robert not truly loving her—she can’t sensibly hold him accountable for something she’d never managed to accomplish, either. It’s that Robert had known for two entire decades that there was more brilliance to life than the gray steady existence they’d built together, and in all that time he hadn’t let her in on the secret.

Because, dammit, she wants brilliance, too. Not just safety, although that’s important. She wants glitter, and she doesn’t mean the kind that keeps ending up in the spice rack because Frankie always mixes up the jars, although she supposes that’s probably inevitable. Light, like what sparks in Grace each morning when she opens her eyes, because she remembers there’s a place for her she doesn’t have to fight to make, a day ahead she can’t fully predict, and someone downstairs waiting. What she wants, Grace supposes, is what she and Frankie have together, and what they have together is what she wants. Simple as that.

Except—

She stops abruptly just as she’s about to cross the street in front of the park, standing by herself on the curb while the other pedestrians enter the crosswalk.

Except that what Grace wants isn’t only what she has right now with Frankie. She wants certainty—or as much certainty as they can get at seventy-three and with a stroke history—that what they have, she’ll get to keep. Not being able to live without Frankie, taken to its logical conclusion, means that it’s no longer enough to live with her if their life together is bent in the shape of a question mark. So if Frankie doesn’t want to live without her, if Grace doesn’t want to live without Frankie, if they can’t live without each other (and that line she’s disregarded all her life as clichéd sounds, all of a sudden, ludicrously close to romantic) then it follows that something needs to happen so they can be reasonably sure nothing separates them again.

By the time she’s on the other side of the street she’s crossed over from certainty and arrived at the word commitment.

What would that look like, in practice? A verbal promise? Something more contractual? She’s already Frankie’s emergency contact, and Frankie’s hers, even though she’d had to make Frankie promise not to write “smoke signals” on that insurance form as her third-ranked method of preferred communication. Before all that Santa Fe business, they’d been seriously talking about taking steps to give one another power of attorney, possibly even altering their wills to provide provisions for the other. Or Grace would, anyway, since Frankie’s will happens to be scribbled on the back of a Chinese take-out menu and attached to their fridge with a Dr. Evil magnet. But a real commitment would be something beyond emergency contacts and powers of attorney and wills. A commitment would mean the two of them choosing to prioritize the other for the rest of their lives.

Do you really think—Frankie might—and Brianna, smiling, had told her yes. Yes.

Realistically, that kind of commitment would also mean no more dating, even casually, an insight that startles Grace a little. Sure, she hasn’t been particularly interested in seeing anyone lately. Nick’s attentions, while undeniably flattering at first, had rapidly become exhausting to parry, and she’d stopped answering his texts and calls. But it’s one thing to put dating on hold, and quite another to voluntarily give it up for the rest of her life. Well, maybe she could be okay with that. Self-imposed celibacy isn’t the worst thing in the world, if it means she’d get to keep her life exactly the way it is. And she’s always got her vibrator to turn to when the mood strikes.

She’s reached the fence perimeter at the edge of the park, overlooking the ocean below, and she impulsively grasps the bar at the top of the barrier with both hands, feeling the rough recesses
where salt and wind and time have successfully corroded the metal.

*Emotionally. And physically.*

There’s a sudden giggle just to her left, and Grace, startled into discomposure, turns her head to follow the sound. Two girls—or women, probably, since lord knows the older Grace gets, the harder it is to tell the difference between eighteen and thirty—are standing together at the barrier just a few feet away, watching the water, too. Only not, maybe, because the taller one, the one with tight corkscrew curls and brown skin, the one who’d laughed—she doesn’t appear to be looking at the ocean at all. She’s watching her friend, leaning towards her, head inclining to rest against the top of her friend’s head, and that’s when Grace realizes the two of them are holding hands.

Oh. Not friends, then. Something else.

It should’ve been obvious sooner. The shorter one’s clothing is somewhat masculine, her hair asymmetrical and stained an unnatural shade of green. An alternative lifestyle haircut, although that’s probably not the politically correct language to use nowadays. Grace watches, unable to break her gaze, as the shorter one tilts her head up to kiss the side of the taller one’s head, the kind of kiss that lingers, that wants to stay for a while. Watching something this personal is obviously the height of rudeness, but she can’t turn back towards the ocean no matter how much she knows she should. It’s frankly astonishing to see two women behaving this way, right in public, being intimate in front of Grace and tourists and the seals in a way that can’t be denied. An entirely different world from the one in which she’d grown up, with no one around them caring or noticing a thing. No one except Grace.

“Can I help you with something, lady?” the shorter one says suddenly, an edge in her voice, and Grace flinches, embarrassed at being caught staring. “You got a problem?”

“Jess,” the taller one warns. She drops her girlfriend’s hand. “Don’t start. Please. It isn’t worth it, okay?”

“I don’t have a problem,” Grace says quickly, wanting to reassure them. “I’m so sorry, it’s just—”

Just what? What could she tell these two that would explain why she’d been looking at them, when she can’t even clarify it for herself? “I think it’s really great that you’re, um, open. No, proud. That’s the word I want.”

Both Jess and the taller one visibly relax, the tension in their shoulders vanishing. It isn’t until she sees their anxiety dissipate right in front of her eyes that Grace realizes just how apprehensive they’d been about what she might say to them.

So she continues, too fast, too upbeat: “I’m a very big supporter of your rights. I actually gave some money last year to the Human Rights Campaign, and they sent me one of those equal sign stickers to put on my car.” Of course, she hadn’t, in fact, put the sticker on her car—for Christ’s sake, it isn’t 1992 and she doesn’t have a Geo Metro—but these two don’t need to know that. “You see, my ex-husband is gay. And his husband is, too. Well, obviously. That goes without saying. So—I guess what I’m trying to say is—good for you. And I hope you two have a very nice day. Together.”

The corners of Jess’s mouth twitch. “Uh,” she says, “Thanks? I guess? I hope you have a nice day, too, ma’am.”

She takes her girlfriend’s hand again, and they’re turning away from Grace, probably planning on heading somewhere else, somewhere that isn’t here, talking to some eccentric old lady. Both of these girls are perfect strangers. There’s no reason at all for Grace to want them to stay, no real
reason for it except looking at them makes her feel a little like she does when Frankie pats the seat next to her on the couch and says *hey, kiddo, I’ve been waiting for you.*

“Wait,” she begins, and they turn back expectantly to face her. “Wait. Please. I have a friend—”

Her voice wavers a little on the last word, so she stops there, and she's not sure how the sentence would’ve ended, anyway. The taller one seems justifiably puzzled by her unexpected outburst, but for some reason Jess doesn’t. She looks at Grace, really looks at her, and then, inexplicably, she smiles; it’s a little pained, a little sad, as if she’s understanding something Grace can’t. Which would irritate Grace, probably, except for the fact that in the face of this unfamiliar person there’s somehow more compassion than anyone, maybe even Frankie, has given to Grace in a long, long time.

“I did too,” Jess says. "Once."

Grace nods, because there’s nothing she can bring herself to say in response, and after a moment Jess nods back, and that’s it: the punctuation on this strange encounter. She watches the two of them walk away, hand in hand, down towards the part of the park near Seal Rock, and now it’s just Grace, alone at the barrier, standing there with empty hands. With a mouth that suddenly feels like it’s late to where it’s supposed to be. Against the side of a head, maybe, or a cheek, pressed there for the first time, or the thousandth.

It’s a ridiculous thought, and after a minute she’s glad they’re gone.

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So, all right. Jess and her girlfriend aside—and the sooner she puts that embarrassing encounter behind her, the better—Grace pulls into the driveway of their house thinking the afternoon has been a remarkably productive one. She’s settled on something real, a word she can cling to as proof that she’s done some real contemplation. Commitment. She wants commitment.

“Okay. I want commitment,” she says, out loud, and then, as she gets out of the car, “God, I really need to stop talking to myself like this.”

Down the stairs towards the front door, moving carefully because her feet really are smarting a bit after that steep walk back up Girard, Grace thinks she has the general perimeters of what she wants figured out, or mostly. It’s the kind of emotional commitment where they’ll live together for the rest of their lives and never date anyone else and possibly, once in a while, when Frankie’s hands are peeling badly from all the oil paint chemicals, Grace will grab a tube of intense repair lotion and get to work, because Frankie simply can’t be trusted to apply it correctly or thoroughly enough. Whatever kind of commitment that is. It’s a rough sketch of a life, sure, but that’s plenty enough to realize for one day, and she feels surprisingly all right with where she’s ended up, at least for now.

Her keys fumble in the lock of their front door before she realizes that it’s already unlocked—of course it is—and she pushes it open, thinking that it’s almost late enough for her pre-cocktail hour martini.

“Grace!” Frankie shouts, from where she’s sitting on the couch near the back patio, and Grace has to physically stop herself from ducking down behind the foyer half wall so Frankie won’t see her. Which is patently ridiculous, but then again, Frankie’s hold on object permanence isn’t one
hundred percent secure, either, so there’s a small chance the effort could pay off. “That must’ve been a jim-dandy lunch. I was beginning to think you got lost coming home.”

“I don’t get lost. That’s you.”

“True, true. True dat. Hey, come over here and sit down with me, Grace. I need to talk with you about something, in the conversational sense of the word ‘talk.’”

Well, fuck. This isn’t good.

The cloth-covered altar set up in front of the couch is littered with a relatively restrained assortment of Frankie’s Hippie Hodgepodge: the collective term Grace assigns to anything that was probably purchased in a New Age shop, retained from Bud and Coyote’s years at the Waldorf School of San Diego, manufactured as part of some deodorant-abhorring underground gift economy, or pulled out of a dumpster. From the foyer, she can see a couple of large quartz pieces, a clay bowl filled with what looks like sand, an unwrapped skein of orange yarn, and four lit candles of different sizes, widths, and colors. There’s also an amorphous hunk of wood that Grace recognizes, something Coyote had carved as a kid, allegedly in the shape of a dwarf or a hobbit or some other fictional creature Frankie believes in.

“Are we talking about how you’re going to burn down the house if you don’t move that yarn off your altar?”

“The yarn is at peace where it is,” Frankie says, calmly. “But you’re not, Grace. That’s why we need to talk.”

Oh, dear God, Frankie wants to talk about her.

“Is this about my drinking?” she demands, and drops her keys in the bowl resting on the half wall, defenses rising with her horror. “Because if it is, then Frankie, you’re just about the last person in the world who can lecture me about being under the influence. People in glass houses really shouldn’t get stoned on a regular basis.”

“Not that kind of intervention. An emotional intervention. Although, now that you mention it, you have been pretty well hydrated lately.” She peers at Grace, her eyes narrowing. “More so than usual, which is saying something. How many glasses of wine did you have at lunch? I’m guessing three.”

“We are not talking about my drinking,” Grace snaps, “that’s not available for discussion, period,” and then realizes what Frankie’s said. “An emotional intervention? What godforsaken Burning Man workshop did you smuggle that one out of?”

“Damn your nose for accuracy, Grace Hanson. If you really must know, it was the 2009 Check Your Baggage at OpenAir event. This—” Frankie gestures around her, at the couch and altar. “—is a heavily adapted version. I thought about having you pack your problems in our suitcases before we burned them in the fire pit, but I can’t justify releasing that many dioxins into the air even for you. Invisible suitcases it is. Incidentally, I made sure yours is big.” She flings her arms out as wide as they’ll go to demonstrate, nearly knocking over one of the candles in the process.

Grace is in no mood to deal with this right now. “Frankie,” she says, walking past the dining room table and towards the staircase, “you can pack as many make-believe air suitcases as you want, but you’re going to have to do it without me. I’ve had a long and difficult day, and all I want to do right now is lie on that deck chair out there with my Barbara Kingsolver book and not talk about a damn thing.”
“You were crying,” Frankie says, gently, and the tone of her voice freezes Grace’s foot on the first step up the stairs, hand tensing on the banister. “When I told you about Jacob and Santa Fe. I’ve never seen you fly off the handle quite like that before, and we both know I’ve talked you through a couple of pretty intense panic attacks over the last few years. You completely lost your shit, pal. And maybe lost isn’t even the right word. More like your shit made a getaway so fast it left behind one of those cartoon dust clouds. It scared the hell out of me. That’s my truth. What’s yours?”

It’s a heavy dose of purestrain Frankie Bergstein concern, way more than Grace cares to receive or acknowledge at the moment. Flushed with embarrassment, she stays where she is at the bottom of the staircase, not ready to turn around yet.

“All right, look, Grace. I know you’re a crier, even if you refuse to admit it to anyone—don’t you whisk that hair helmet at me, you know damn well you blubbered at the end of that ER episode we watched the other night. Hey, there’s no shame in that. I happen to believe crying is a perfectly appropriate response to the disheveled beauty of one Señor George Clooney in his primo-prime. Remember that movie he did, The Perfect Storm? They should’ve called it The Perfect Behind.” She chortles, delighted with herself. “Oh, damn it, I got side-tracked. Help me out. What was I getting at?”

Summoning up all the patience she knows she’ll need to get through this, Grace pivots to face Frankie and says, “I was crying.”

“Right. Thanks. You were crying. And those definitely weren’t George Clooney tears. I sat outside your bedroom door for an hour and listened to the sound of your soul bleeding out and I had bandages at the ready, Grace. Emotional bandages, if you’d only let me use them.”

“I’m sorry I scared you. Truly. And don’t worry, it won’t happen again.”

“That sure must’ve been a hard thing to go through all by yourself,” Frankie observes, quietly, and for some idiotic reason Grace feels new tears sting at the corners of her eyes. She’s not going to cry again and prove Frankie’s point. She isn’t.

“It’s over, anyway,” she says.

“Oh, like fun it is. I’ve given you your space for the last week, and plenty, because I know how much you need it. Really, I do. Too many questions and you shut down faster than the Ocean Beach People’s Collective Organic Foods Market after an E. coli outbreak.”

“I thought you said it was salmonella?”

“Eh, it’s really more of a two-front war they’re waging over there. Well, three if you count the disaster that’s happening with the granola aisle. Arlo says that—hey. Nice try, lady, but no dice. You can’t distract me. Yeah, that’s right, I remembered to take my Echinacea supplements today. I’m like a feelings laser.” She points at her eyes with two fingers and then jabs them towards Grace. “Focused as shit. You’re not getting away from here until you tell me what’s going on with you.”

It’s clear that Frankie means it, as much as Frankie ever means anything—which is a hell of a lot of meaning—so Grace sighs, hangs her purse on the banister post, and proceeds to kick off her heels, one at a time, with way more force than is absolutely necessary. The jolt of each foot sends a shoe clattering loudly across the room. It’s petty, but it feels just great to kick something, even if it’s air.

Frankie pats the couch cushion and waits patiently for Grace to join her.
As she sits down next to Frankie, Grace says, pointing at the indeterminate hunk of wood on the altar, “That’s the dwarf Coyote made for you in school, right?”

“No, it’s a phoenix.” Frankie picks up the piece, turning it around before setting it back down. “Okay, so it’s a little dire. Coyote’s best school subject was always blacksmithing. But the phoenix is a metaphor for renewal and repair, and I guess I figured you might need a little of that. So I dug it out of my memory trunk.”

Something about a worried Frankie taking the time to dig around in her memory trunk for Coyote’s stupid twenty-year-old school project makes Grace’s chest ache.

“All right, Grace.” Frankie leans back against the couch, putting her hands behind her head. “My chi is unburdened; now it’s time for you to do the same. Divulge away. I’m listening.”

This is just unfair. That’s really the right word for it: unfair. Grace has spent the entire goddamn afternoon agonizing over the nuances of her relationship with Frankie, of their possible future together, thinking more about herself and what she wants than she has in her entire cumulative existence to date. She’s even gone so far as to speak about some very personal feelings with her daughters—her charming girls, who are no doubt on the phone with each other right this second, breathlessly raking over her private life in the crudest of terms—and now, here’s Frankie asking her to keep talking. To the very person who’s responsible for provoking all this insanity in the first place, no less.

Well, no one ever promised Grace that life would be fair. She watches one of the candle flames flicker. Takes a deep breath and says, trying not to listen, “I can’t live without you either.”

There. It’s out of her, or part of it is.

“You what?” Frankie sounds startled.

“Last week, you said—you told me you couldn’t live without me. You said it was the reason you didn’t go to Santa Fe. Or one of the reasons.” God, if Frankie walks that back, or laughs it off, Grace might actually physically fold in on herself with humiliation, withdraw in between the couch cushions with the mislaid loose change and stale caramels. “I feel the same way. Or, I think I feel the same way. I don’t know for sure what you—Shit. What I’m trying to say is that it—it terrified me when I realized it. Terrifies me still, actually. So much so that I think I want to ask you something.”

Gently, Frankie says, “You can ask me anything. You know that. The two of us, we’re like the internet. Permanently connected in magical ways I don’t understand at all.”

“Frankie, our wifi connection in this house drops all the time.”

“It’s called a simile, Grace. It’s a non-literal figure of speech meant to create meaningful emphasis, which I think we can both agree I achieved. Don’t dismiss the marvels of figurative language just because you’re afraid. Go ahead. Tell me what you want.”

And Grace turns her head, finally, so that she’s facing Frankie, and possibly herself, too.

“I want,” she says, and it spills out of her, “for us to spend the rest of our lives together. Just us. Just you and me, like this, in our house, together, both of us working on Vybrant and you trying to bounce gumdrops off my hair and me putting out your kitchen fires. No more Phils. No more Jacobs. I want to promise you, and I want you to promise me. For us to promise each other. I’ll even do it the way you like, with the whole forehead thing, whatever you want, Frankie, just please
—” Too much. Way too much. She stops. Starts again. “I don’t know how many years I’ve got left. Or how many you have, either. And I guess I’m all right with that. I have to be. No other choice, right? But I do know—I know for an absolute fact—that no matter how many years there are, I want all of them to be with you.”

There’s a pause, a long one, while what she’s revealed sits heavy in the room with them, and then Frankie exhales. “Oh,” she says, finally. “Wow. Wow.”

“And?” She waits a beat. Nothing. “Jesus Christ, Frankie, I walked myself out on the plank, here. I deserve a little something more than ‘wow’ in response.”

“You just asked me to marry you, Grace.” Frankie stands up. “I think I’m entitled to a ‘wow’ or six. Or fifty-four.”

“What? I most certainly did not ask—”

“Spend the rest of our lives together.” She begins to pace between the couch and the altar, ticking off each sentence on a finger like she’s making a list. “No matter how many years we’ve got left, you want them to be with me. And you want us to make a never-ending promise to each other.” Frankie hesitates, perceptively, and then adds a fourth finger. “With a kiss. I don’t know about you, but all of that sounds pretty friggin’ conjugal to me.”

“A kiss on the forehead. And that’s your thing, not mine. Oh, Frankie, you’ve got this all wrong. I’m not asking you to marry me, I’m asking you for a lifetime—commitment. Okay, I’ll admit that when you say it that way, it sounds a lot like marriage, but there’s a big difference.”

“All right, let’s say there’s a big difference. What difference, exactly, are you seeing? Is it, perchance, that a non-marriage commitment means we’re not registering at Spencer’s Gifts? Because I’ve really had my eye on one of their Bob Marley t-shirt prints, you know, the one with ‘420 University’ across the front in big letters.”

“Please stop joking around. I’m being serious.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Frankie asks, and stops pacing. “Are you new here, Grace? Does today happen to be your first time taking a spin in this luxury ride known as the Frankie Bergstein Experience? Because I hate to break it to you, but joking around is precisely how I deal with serious shit.”

Grace stands up, too, and shoves her hands in the pockets of her jeans because it’s something to do, something that doesn’t make her feel defenseless. This is not going well at all. She doesn’t know exactly what she’d hoped to hear—more enthusiasm, certainly—but Frankie’s response sure isn’t it.

“Are you trying to tell me we don’t want the same thing?” she asks, barely getting it out.

“You want me to commit to you for the rest of my life, Grace. That’s big. I’m not telling you no. I’m telling you I don’t take that kind of request lightly. Look, I know you and Jacob had your issues with one another—no, don’t bother protesting, I didn’t have to be a little psychic to pick up on that, and I am, as you well know, more than a little psychic. The thing is, I happened to love the guy, and it’s only been a week since we ended things. When I give my heart to someone, it doesn’t come back so easily. You know that. You were my primary witness during the 2015 Solpocalypse. If you want an up-or-down answer about this right now, you’re going to be disappointed.”

“Right.” God, how could she have been so stupid about this? “Yes, of course, Frankie, you’re—of
course you’re right.”

Frankie reaches over suddenly and grabs her wrist, pulling Grace’s unenthusiastic hand out of her pocket. She clasps it between both of her own and squeezes, hard. “That was brave,” she says. “Thank you for sharing your truth with me. I’m glad you did it.”

*Her* truth. Not their truth. Grace’s laugh is sharp and trembling. “Fantastic. That makes one of us.”

“Grace—”

She’s blinking back tears. Again. “You may not feel about me the same way I feel about you, but—”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, you chowderhead,” Frankie says fiercely, and she’s not releasing Grace’s hand. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. You’re more important to me than just about anyone else in the world, with the exception of my kids, of course, and maybe Art Garfunkel during his solo career, although I could really give or take his 1979 album *Fate for Breakfast.* But the point I’m trying to make, Grace, is that I love you. Don’t you get that? I love you more than shredded cheese. I’ve loved you like crazy ever since you got on that bar top and flaunted your terrible dance moves in front of all those preppy sellouts just to cheer me up. Maybe even before then, but that’s when I remember knowing it. How I feel about you has nothing at all to do with what I’m saying.”

“It doesn’t?” She’s still thinking about Frankie loving her more than shredded cheese, which just so happens to be Frankie’s favorite cheese, closely followed by Brie and string.

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“It doesn’t?” She’s still thinking about Frankie loving her more than shredded cheese, which just so happens to be Frankie’s favorite cheese, closely followed by Brie and string.

“Of course it doesn’t. The last time I made a commitment to someone else for the rest of my life, he ended up lying to me for twenty years and breaking my heart so completely I thought I’d never be okay again.”

Grace can’t help herself. “This wouldn’t be like Sol. In the first place, I’m not g—I wouldn’t—I would never betray you like he did. And secondly, you were married to Sol. He was your husband. This is different.”

“Yeah,” Frankie says. “Yeah, you keep saying that.”

“I keep saying it because it is.” She pulls her hand back abruptly and turns away from Frankie, taking a few steps towards the dining table before twisting back around in frustration. “Why is that so hard to understand?”

Frankie plops back down on the couch. “Okay, Grace, then walk me through this idea. How, exactly, is what you’re proposing different from a marriage?”

“It’s—”

“Wait, don’t answer that yet. I’d like to take a brief time out from this conversation to congratulate myself on my apropos word choice just now. *Proposed.* Way to language, Frankie. Great work, self-friend. Okay, time-in. You may continue.”

“It’s nothing like a marriage. Nothing at—well, maybe it’s a little like those Boston marriages women had in the nineteenth century, the ones that enabled them to focus on their own lives and careers rather than taking care of men. But what I’m suggesting really has nothing to do with the definition of marriage as it’s understood in the twenty-first century, the one with—”

“Sex,” Frankie says. She grabs her bent knees through the skirt of her dress and holds on. “You mean sex.”
“I was going to say the one with an ironclad legal definition, but—” Grace swallows. “Now that you’ve said it.”

“So we wouldn’t—”

“I never said we would.” The far side of the room is extremely interesting, all of a sudden, mostly because it isn’t Frankie’s face. Entirely because it isn’t Frankie’s face. “I didn’t say that.”

“You also didn’t say we wouldn’t.”

“Is it really necessary to stipulate? I think the answer is obvious.”

“Increasingly, yes, it appears that it is necessary to stipulate, since right now you’re being more evasive than yours truly when basic math is required. Multiply the ambiguity, Grace. Be specific.”

“I think you mean subtract the ambiguity,” Grace says. “Boy, you really are terrible at math.”

“If you’re evasive and you know it, clap your hands,” Frankie sings, and then, in a loud whisper, pointing, “That’s you, Grace. Clap your hands.”

Had Frankie and Brianna had some sort of meeting recently where they’d decided it was a great idea to bother the hell out of Grace today with modified versions of children’s playground rhymes? “All right, give it a rest. Of course sex is off the table. Happy now?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say happy, exactly. If there are no more Phils and no more Jacobs, and it’s just you and me, then it sounds like this plan would mean I’m never getting my amorous needs met by another person again. And I’m a woman with amorous needs, Grace, even if one admittedly has to stand on one’s tippy toes to see those needs over my extremely high inner defensive walls. Considering that you won’t let me do stuff to you as a consolation prize if we enter into this lifetime commitment, that’s something we’d need to discuss first.”

A consolation prize? A motherfucking consolation prize? “Cut it out, Frankie,” Grace snaps, abruptly annoyed. “Let’s be real about this, for once. Okay, sure, you talk a big flirtatious game, because it’s part of your whole non-conformist thing. It’s just beautifully on brand, really. But if I actually said yes? If I said yes, you wouldn’t for a second—” Her fingers slice vehement quotes into the air. “Do. Stuff. To me. Not in a million billion years.”

“Oh, like you’d ever say yes, Felix Unger in a Rag & Bone peaked lapel blazer.”

“Oh, like you’d ever say yes, Oscar-whatever-the-fuck-his-last-name-was-in-a-caftan-from-eBay.” She’d hated The Odd Couple. Fuck that hackneyed show. “Honestly, tell me. How would it make you feel if I asked you if you wanted me to do stuff to you?”

Frankie shrugs. “Honestly? I’d be cool with it. That kind of thing doesn’t bother me. But if it really upsets you, Grace, I’ll stop asking.”

She doesn’t stress the I or the me or the you, but Grace hears it all the same, knows exactly what Frankie means, and it sends her from irritated to incensed in no time at all. Silly uptight Grace, too straight-laced to just go with the flow like a normal person and casually brush off a teasing come-on. Of course it doesn’t bother Frankie. Because it’s all just a big joke to her, the mere premise of doing stuff: a big funny ridiculous easy joke that’s so comical precisely because it doesn’t seem remotely plausible. It’s not like it’s the kind of thing Frankie’s spent two full weeks trying desperately not to think about because the prospect of entertaining it, even as a theoretical possibility, makes her want to get in a car, drive out of her life, and never come back.
There’s a charge in the air, crawling up Grace’s arms, pressing on her chest, burrowing inside her. Unable to keep anger out of her voice, she says, “Okay, Frankie. You think you’re so open, so down with whatever? Fine. Then I’ll take a shot. I’ll show you what it feels like.”

“Yes,” Frankie says, and she seems a little startled, but not nearly startled enough. Not nearly as startled as Grace needs her, suddenly, to be.

So she lets instinct assume responsibility over her body, straightening her shoulders and pulling them back a bit, earning every inch of her height. Takes a slow deliberate step towards the couch, and another, and another, until she’s just a foot or so away. Grace stares at Frankie, watches with satisfaction as the seconds tick by and the faint interest on Frankie’s face slowly fades into uncertainty. She’s staring back like she can’t glance away from Grace either, the two of them caught together, now, on something invisible. It’s not as though Grace can explain, exactly, just how she knows how to do this at a moment’s notice: take up all the oxygen in the room, pull focus, silently promise. The difference, of course, is that Frankie’s never been on the direct receiving end of it before.

“Frankie,” she says, softly, “hey, Frankie,” and she’s still angry but there’s heat here, too, licking up her words, stoking them into something larger. “How would you like to play a little game with me? We’ll play on the couch, so you don’t even have to move. Just lean back and let me do all the work. You’d like that, right?”

Frankie’s eyes are wide.

“Here’s the game. You lie down, right there on the couch, and get comfortable first. Put your feet up, put your head back. Relax. Then I want you to pretend your thighs have a disagreement.”

“I don’t underst—”

“Spread your legs for me, Frankie,” Grace tells her, and she’s hearing someone else say this, someone extraordinarily calm, someone who sounds like she’s in perfect control of herself. “And don’t you worry, it’s a temporary separation. Because that’s when I’ll kneel down next to you and start negotiating between them.” She raises her left hand, the one attached to the good wrist, wriggling her fingers. Frankie inhales sharply. “You know how much I love negotiating deals. But what you don’t know is just how good I’ve gotten over this past year at giving myself exactly what I want. I’m slow, Frankie, because that’s what I like. I take my time. I’m extremely patient, even when I’m getting desperate for an outcome. I’d like to think you’d find me persuasive, too. What do you say? Is that the kind of stuff you’re interested in doing with me?”

There’s an unfamiliar expression on Frankie’s face, something dazed and wanting, all at once. “Grace,” she says, and it’s low, pleading.

Just her name like that in Frankie’s mouth, that’s all it is, just the single syllable of her name, the unmistakable sound of arousal forming it, and there’s a dull ache beating in response between Grace’s legs, strong enough that she can’t convince herself it isn’t there.

Frozen in place, looking at Frankie, new panic flickering, she thinks, What the fuck am I going to do if she says yes?

She doesn’t know.

She doesn’t know and not knowing is what makes her gasp out loud, realizing all of it.

“Frankie,” she breathes, more than one kind of desperation overwhelming her, and backs away
from the couch. Narrowly avoiding the altar, she retreats towards the nearest chair, collapsing into it. “Frankie, oh, my God.”

“Yeah,” Frankie manages, leaning forward on the couch. One of her hands grabs the other, pressing them both into her lap, knuckles visibly whitening. Apparently Grace isn’t the only one trembling. “Yeah. ‘Oh, my God’ is right.”

“I’m sorry,” she blurts out, and it breaks the spell around them, or mostly. Frankie looks away. “I’m sorry, Frankie, I shouldn’t have said all that—I was trying to prove a point to you, I didn’t mean—”

“You did mean. Don’t you back away from this. You meant it, Grace. You meant the hell out of it.”

And there’s nowhere to go to look away, the truth of it all around her, in Frankie’s words and droning through her body, too, parts of her awake that haven’t come alive for a very long time. Since 1961 and Judy Campbell’s toe, streaking wet polish across Grace’s foot. Since the mid-1970s, when she’d left that women’s consciousness raising group clutching a piece of paper and a number written on it, discarded quickly into the trash. Since the female lawyer who’d worked in Robert’s office years ago, catching her eye during a Christmas party and holding it, Grace looking back at her too long for it to be anything but what it was. Since that sleepless night she’d spent with Frankie in her bed, not moving, not thinking about the full length of Frankie pressed hot against her back and ass and thighs. Since that time about a month later, when she’d been alone with her vibrator, mind defenseless with arousal and wandering aimlessly into some dormant sense memory of Frankie’s skin under her hand, warm and soft. She’d cried out while coming, clapping her mouth with her free hand, not wanting to hear herself.

She hears herself now.

“I did,” she tells Frankie, and it’s astonished, barely audible. “I did mean it. I did. Oh, God. I meant it.”


Grace’s breath catches in her throat, and that ache, Christ, that ache between her legs is definitely still there, hard and insistent. She squirms a little in the chair. So that hadn’t been her fevered imagination, what she’d thought she’d heard from Frankie, what she’d thought she’d seen in her face. This isn’t one-sided, this isn’t just Grace stepping outside all good judgment, and that realization feels like the end of the world, or the beginning of it. “You, you wanted—?”

“I need to get out of here,” Frankie informs her, standing up abruptly. Her hands palm through her hair, pushing it off her face, once, and then a second time, and then a third, in a nervous tick Grace recognizes. “Right now. Right this second. I really need to be somewhere else. Somewhere that isn’t here, in our home. I need to think. I need to think about so much.”

It stings, even in the middle of every other feeling assaulting her. But Grace can’t deny that running away is an entirely understandable reaction to what’s happening. In fact, it’s not all that different from what Grace herself is feeling, has been feeling for the past two weeks. Of course Frankie wants to get away from her immediately, given what she’s just told Grace. To be someplace quiet, all alone, and try and figure it all out. Find logic, somehow, in the illogic of what’s just happened. That’s exceptionally reasonable. Frankie shouldn’t be denied that opportunity, even if the thought of her running out of this house, leaving Grace behind, all alone with what’s just happened, feels suddenly less than bearable.
And that’s when Frankie asks her, “So are you going to help me figure out where we’re going?”

We.

Grace leans back involuntarily, stunned and wordless. Not alone, then, like she’d assumed. Not an anywhere else that doesn't have Grace in it. An anywhere else that does.

“Grace?”

The two of them together, and now this new thing growing. Although new isn’t right, exactly, it’s not the word she wants, because it isn’t new, at least for Grace. She can admit that, finally. Visible, then. Acknowledged. Taking shape around them, all of a sudden and slowly, everything tangled up in it. The kind of thing that seems increasingly pointless to run away from, because at the end of the day it turns out there’s no difference, really, no boundary that distinguishes between it and you.

“Yes,” she says. “I’m ready.”

Silently, Frankie holds out her hand to help her up, and Grace doesn’t hesitate. She reaches back.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

so the total number of anticipated chapters for this fic is now at seven, up from six, which means there are two more planned updates after this one!

comments & kudos continue to be the best possible renumeration, so please do let me know what you think. all the hearts & stars in my eyes for everyone who’s taken the time & effort to leave feedback.

one last thing: this chapter has a content warning for a brief and unspecific reference to bulimic behavior, nothing more detailed or explicit than what the show's implied, but I'm mentioning it here as a heads up just in case.

In the end, the two of them still in the living room, self-conscious and apprehensive, it’s Frankie who decides their spur-of-the-moment destination, since nothing’s coming to mind for Grace. Nothing, that is, other than the words my bedroom, blaring in her disobedient brain over and over, liquidating any possibility of coherence, and obviously my bedroom is just really not a viable option to voice out loud for several excellent reasons. So she keeps her mouth shut. Whatever Frankie wants is fine. Just as long as Frankie wants her there.

Just as long as Frankie wants her.

It's late in the afternoon, but despite the time they're heading to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, about two hours inland without traffic. Grace hasn’t bothered to visit the desert in years, maybe decades—her idea of a fun day trip involves precisely zero rocks, unless they’re the kind that come in a highball glass—but apparently it’s Frankie’s favorite thinking place in all of Southern California. Or would be, anyway, if the Costco food court didn’t dominate so thoroughly in both the accessibility and the deliciousness categories. But she’s reluctantly sworn off their churros post-stroke, so deliciousness as a deciding factor is out, and two exits down the 5 freeway isn’t exactly the escape Frankie clearly has in mind.

“I know that desert like the back of my hand,” she tells Grace. “And, by the by, I know the shit out of the back of my hand because I spent the nineties wandering around Anza-Borrego staring at it while bombed out of my fabulously coiffed gourd on salvia. Have you ever realized how much veins look like tiny rivers?”

“I need to get out of these clothes first,” Grace says, wondering frantically what the hell you wear on a spur-of-the-moment road trip to the desert provoked by the sudden realization of a major life-upending identity crisis. Linen?

Frankie makes a weird strangled sound, and then coughs, loudly, in what Grace belatedly realizes is a terrible cover-up attempt. “What?” she asks, and then realizes. Heat floods her cheeks. Oh. “That wasn’t—”

“I know,” Frankie says, and her eyes seem a little too big for her face. “But I’m an extremely visual person, Grace, and you’re too late. Oh, boy. It’s happening. I’m picturing it."
Well, she can’t stay within several feet of Frankie after hearing something like that, not if she wants to remain in the general neighborhood of self-possession, so Grace says, sounding a little strangled herself, “Good lord,” and turns, rushing towards the stairs and her exit from the room.

“Grace? It’s still happening.”

“Oh, Frankie, please stop talking.” She pauses on the stairs, facing forward. “I’m going to say this as delicately as I can, okay? Right now, I happen to be feeling pretty overwhelmed. Physically overwhelmed. By a lot of feelings. And you saying things like that to me, when you do that, all these feelings? They’re too much. Much too much. If you’re going to tell me you’re thinking about me in that way, I don’t think I can manage to stay in the same room with you. To say nothing of being in a car together.”

Silence from the living room. And then, a quiet, “Oh. Yeah. Sure. I get you.”

“Just distract yourself, all right?” Grace advises. “Think about an oil spill. Or massive cuts to all your favorite entitlement programs. Or that time I made you scrub my shower grout with a toothbrush to get out the chana masala. Just—do whatever you need to stop thinking—”

—about me getting out of these clothes. Stop thinking about my blazer crumpled on the staircase and my shirt halfway off and your hand working at the button on my jeans, stop thinking about stumbling together into the hallway wall because we’re both too desperate to make it just a few more feet to the bedroom, stop—

“Grace, what’s—”

“Oil spill, Frankie,” Grace croaks, “a really big one, FEMA’s involved, there are dolphins, I’ll be right back,” and practically runs up the rest of the stairs.

In her bedroom, the door safely closed behind her, she stands in the middle of the room and tries to recover, breathing in and out, in and out, aiming for a passable imitation of someone who isn’t rapidly losing her mind. Half an hour ago, she’d been—what? Not herself, maybe, not the Grace Hanson she’d always thought she was, but not this, either. Not this incoherent shamble of electric nerve endings masquerading as a human being. It’s one thing to realize she’s attracted to Frankie in this way, but the intensity of what she’s feeling is something else, her body all dumb hunger, any reason or discipline apparently drained into residue.

In and out, in and out, in and out. She breathes, deeply, until the parts of her begging to be touched begin to quiet down.

She’s never felt anything like this sudden and cataclysmic need in her entire life. In fact, she’d always assumed desire this strong was a myth, something manufactured to sell romance novels and movie tickets. For more than forty goddamn years, she’d smiled and nodded along whenever her women friends had chattered about their husbands, giggling over something that never seemed worth their nervous energy. Oh, George is just so attentive. I’m glad Roger has a hairy chest; I just love a man with a hairy chest, you know, like Burt Reynolds. My favorite thing about Steven, well, goodness, it’s got to be his broad shoulders. Would you believe Sam is an animal between the sheets? I know, he’s so mild-mannered in public! What about you, Grace? What does Robert do that drives you wild?

I don’t kiss and tell, ladies, she’d tell them, but let me assure you, he’s no slouch in the boudoir, and she’d wink. The gesture was always over-exaggerated, a bit of showmanship to misdirect them into squawks of delight on her behalf, and misdirect Grace from that ever-present stomach twinge brought on by this sort of girl talk. All their laughter did for her was hammer home
the knowledge that she and Robert weren’t like the others, despite all the work they’d done to ensure they were. Or, possibly, because of it.

For almost three years, she’d thought she’d had the perfect answer to the question she’d never wanted to ask: it was all Robert’s fault. Robert was gay. Robert was the reason she’d had a large bank of excuses ready to go for the rare occasions he’d put his book on the nightstand and say, “Well, Grace? Should we?” She’d rotated them like kitchen towels, putting out a new one when the old one got worn: not tonight, I’ve already put on my face mask, I’ve got to go over these figures again, I’m too bloated, it’s just that the girls tired me out, you’ve got to get up early tomorrow, I’ve got that morning meeting. Learning that Robert hadn’t wanted her in that way was plenty enough to keep Grace from thinking about the fact that she’d never really wanted him, either.

But the thing is, it’s always been more than just Robert. She can concede that, finally. Robert isn’t her forty-year exception, he’s her rule, and the rule includes the men she’s dallied with since the divorce: Byron, Guy, Phil, Nick. Oh, sure, she’d enjoyed their attentions to a certain degree—that moment with Byron had been the closest to something real, a truly erotic encounter where she’d felt wholly desirable, pulsing with the pleasure of being wanted that much—but at the end of the day, much like Robert, they’d all proved entirely unsuitable. Men whose presence in her life never really posed the slightest risk of prolonged intimacy. Nothing that threatened to breach her life permanently. Nothing like what she has with Frankie, nothing like what Frankie’s made her want.

(They’d tested the vibrator prototypes in separate rooms, but it hadn’t felt separate at all, not really. Knowing exactly where Frankie was, knowing exactly what Frankie was doing, knowing Frankie knew exactly what Grace was doing, too. What they were doing together. All that knowledge building in her, consolidating like a shockwave, and despite how hard she’d tried to drag it out, Grace couldn’t make herself last past the first speed setting. She’d blamed her body’s extraordinary haste on how good the vibrator clearly was.)

Robert hadn’t wanted her. Hadn’t wanted any women. And Robert turned out to be gay. She hadn’t wanted Robert. Hadn’t really wanted any of the men in her life. And that could mean—

Grace remembers, suddenly, playing knights and princesses as a child. How she’d burned with anger and humiliation when Morris Nelson and the other neighborhood boys wouldn’t let her take a turn at rescuing Mary Cowles, and laughed at her for asking. She feels that old throb of injustice like something unaccountably fresh, still tender and squirming when she turns over the ancient memory.

She’s breathing hard again, and this time, it isn’t something she can blame on her feverish body.

*Frankie’s downstairs waiting for me*, she thinks, *Frankie, my best friend, the person I just asked to commit to me for the rest of our lives, and I want to touch her. And I think she wants that, too.*

She’s glad that they’re leaving the house, with its walls and doors and partitioned spaces. The desert is the only place big enough to hold what’s happening.

They take Grace’s car, because Frankie has a lot to think about, and even though Frankie tries to insist on driving there’s no way in hell Grace is going to let her get behind the wheel while under the influence of more than two thoughts. For the first time in recent memory, Grace is entirely sober after five in the afternoon, so she figures she might as well put it to good use. And besides, there’s a seven-foot stuffed neon orange rabbit occupying the front passenger seat of Frankie’s car,
something she’d won last week at a midway game down at Belmont Park and managed to stuff in with the help of four college students, all paid off with a spare joint. No one’s getting that rabbit out without the Jaws of Life.

It’s not just the two of them. Grace is distinctly aware that there’s a large blanket in the backseat of her car, too, one of the brightly colored ones Frankie buys in bulk from that tacky souvenir shop in Old Town she loves so much. The desert gets cold at night, Frankie tells her, too casually, which is both true and convenient. One blanket, not two, and Grace isn’t going to think right now about how this ends for them, what they’re driving towards.

When she turns on the car, the stereo starts up, too, resuming Carole King’s cover of “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” right in the middle of the first verse. Oh, for fuck’s sweet sake. She’d completely forgotten about playing Tapestry on her way home from lunch earlier, humming a little during “You’ve Got a Friend” and doing her best not to listen to the lyrics too closely.

Embarrassed, Grace reaches to turn off the CD.

“No!” Frankie interjects, and puts out a hand to stop her, but she doesn’t touch Grace’s fingers. Not directly. “Don’t do it. It just so happens, Grace, that this is my favorite song that isn’t ‘I Feel the Earth Move’ on my favorite solo album not released by Art Garfunkel or Chuck D. Don’t stand in the way of the universe and her aural plan for us. Let Carole take us on a melodic journey.”

“Fine. As long as you don’t start—”

“Tonight with words unspoken,” Frankie sings, her gravely voice wobbling in a register approximately half an octave below Carole King’s, and Grace groans, clutching the steering wheel. Evidently nothing about this is going to be easy. “You say that I’m the only one/But will my heart be broken/When the night meets the morning sun/I’d like to know that your love—”

“Frankie, you’re the worst singer I’ve ever heard in my entire life,” Grace tells her, and proceeds to pull out of their driveway, backing into the street. “And I’ve heard myself sing, so that’s saying something. Maybe think about pursuing another career as a night watchman. You’ve certainly got enough keys.”

“Deal with it, lady,” Frankie says. She puts her feet up on the dashboard, crossing her legs. Grace can see that she’s wearing her favorite socks: a pair dotted with tiny pug faces. “Will you still love me tomorrow?”

And she doesn’t sing it, not really, but it’s close enough to a melody that Grace can get away with not answering.

They make a detour for the Del Taco in Escondido on their way up the 15, despite Grace’s vehement protests. “You’ve been doing so well with your food, Frankie,” she warns, already exiting the freeway despite what she’s saying, “and I know you’re—there’s a lot going on at the moment, but that doesn’t mean you have to overdose on sodium. If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for—” For me, she almost finishes, and thinks better of it. “For Bud and Allison’s baby. You want to live long enough to hear that kid to call you Grankie, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Frankie says, intently. “I extremely freaking do. God, I can’t believe I’m going to have to
wait at least two whole years for that transcendent moment. Well, maybe fewer if the kid is a total genius, and, oh, she \textit{will} be, mark that prophesy. You know, it’s too bad we weren’t real friends yet when Macklin was born. I could’ve come up with a radballs grandma name for you, too, but you never would’ve let me. Not then. ‘Grandma Grace,’ ugh. Sounds like someone who plays pinochle five days a week and never wins. How about Gracema? Mimsy. Gram. Gram of Kush. Hah! Nah, the muse isn’t cradling me in her soft arms at the moment. Maybe an ethnic alternative. What’s the WASP word for grandmother?”

“Withholding,” Grace says. “Which is exactly what I’m going to do with your wallet if you don’t promise right now that you’ll eat something healthy. Don’t doubt me, Bergstein.”

“All right, I’ll make you a deal. Chicken Bacon Avocado Salad without the bacon, and I’ll even swallow the non-avocado, non-chicken plant parts, as long as you order an 8-Layer Veggie Burrito and eat it in front of me. The whole thing.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She’s completely horrified. “I may not have a stroke history, Frankie, but I have arteries, too, you know. Arteries that aren’t exactly clamoring to get hardened up by high cholesterol wrapped in a fresh-frozen tortilla.”

“Wee-ooh, wee-ooh, wee-ooh. Guess what that sound is, Grace? That’s my first-rate bullshit detector going off because it’s sensing some first-rate bullshit. Don’t give me that artery bafflegab. It’s the calories you care about. You can eat one burrito; I promise it won’t kill you.” She pauses. “And hold onto it, too. That’s part of the deal.”

It’s the closest Frankie’s ever gotten to openly acknowledging something they’ve never talked about before. Well, another thing they’ve never talked about before. Once or twice, it’s crossed Grace’s mind that Frankie looks at her a little strangely after Grace returns from a post-meal bathroom trip, but she’s managed to dismiss it as her own paranoia. And anyway, she doesn’t do that kind of thing very often. Not anymore. Only on the very rare occasion she slips up and indulges herself more than she’s allowed.

Choosing to ignore Frankie’s aside, she makes a left-hand turn into the Del Taco parking lot. “Why?” she asks, as she pulls into an empty parking space by the door. “I mean, why do you want me to eat that thing? Why does it matter to you?”

“As a certified amateur pleasure shaman and a four-time Del Taco customer of the month,” Frankie says, lightly, “and, by the way, Del Taco means ‘of the taco,’ they tell you that when you join the fan club—I want to extend to you, Ms. Empress of No-I-Don’t-Want-That, a formal invitation to total fucking nirvana. Guacamole, Grace. It’s a very powerful thing.”

“In other words, if you can’t enjoy yourself, I have to take the bullet for you.”

“Or, and here’s another way to think about it, you get to let me enjoy you enjoying yourself.”

Grace’s mouth is suddenly dry.

“Well, when you put it like that,” she says, and puts the car in park.

Inside the Del Taco, it’s a fluorescent and neon nightmare, the sad miniature ficus trees on top of the trash bins doing precisely jack shit to make the place any less formulaic or depressing. Thankfully, it’s mostly empty, with only a couple of tables occupied near the front register. Grace picks an out-of-the-way booth in the back corner while Frankie orders for them, and reluctantly slides into one of the seats, resigning herself to the disgusting onslaught of lard about to assault her mouth and stomach. But if Frankie’s taking care of herself, that’s really what matters most. She’ll
do whatever’s necessary to encourage that, up to and including subjecting herself to some of the worst garbage American culture has to offer. At least it isn’t one of those synthetically-colored bacon cheeseburgers, the kind with sauce advertised as secret because “ungodly mix of ketchup and mayonnaise” doesn’t sell nearly as well.

She’s startled when Frankie returns after only a few minutes with two trays, a meal and a drink on each. “Already?” she asks, as Frankie sets her tray in front of her. The burrito isn’t as big as she’d thought, thankfully, not nearly as big as it looks on the advertisements plastered around the room, but it’s still a burrito, and it’s still waiting for her. “Did they actually make the food to order, or is it just hanging out in the kitchen all day waiting to assassinate some unsuspecting taste buds?”

“You can build a publically traded multimillion dollar company, start a new rockin’ business in your seventies, and program the DVR for me, but you can’t figure out that fast food means fast food. Go know.”

“I really have to do this, huh,” Grace says, and pokes at the wrapped burrito with a suspicious finger. “You’re really going to make me do this.”

“I’m not making you do anything, Grace. Look, if you honestly don’t want to eat that burrito, then don’t. You’re a grown woman. It’s your decision. No one’s forcing you to get on the flavor party train to Cheese Town. If it really makes you that scared to think about eating it, then maybe—”

“Scared?” Never mind that Frankie’s right. Like hell she’ll ever admit it out loud. “Fuck that noise. I’m not scared of anything this low-priced ancillary hellscape has to offer.”

Frankie sits back in the booth, her salad bowl still untouched. “Good girl,” she says, warmly, and Grace’s face heats in response. She’d like Frankie to say that to her again, she realizes, in another time and place. Maybe whispered into her ear. “Okay, then. Whenever you’re ready.”

So Grace unwraps the burrito, and of course Frankie hasn’t brought her a fork and knife, meaning she can’t do this in any way that’s approaching dignified. Well, nothing about her life at the moment is dignified. Why should this particular instance be any different? She picks it up, aware Frankie’s watching her intently, and she makes a decision. No dainty nibbling. No way in hell. If Grace is going to commit to this, she’s going to cannonball into the deep end.

She shoves way too much of the burrito into her mouth and bites down.

There’s a shocking burst of salt and succulence, the texture of it like nothing she’s eaten in years, sour cream and guacamole and refried beans and lime kicking her tongue and teeth and throat as she starts to chew. It’s been so long since she’s had anything outside her normal rotation that Grace had forgotten, almost entirely, what it feels like to be taken aback by the overwhelming force of something flavorful. Her mouth swelling with taste, she makes an astonished sound, something involuntary, something not all that far from a groan. And just like that, Frankie’s intent expression shifts, that staggered look she’d had at the house restored without warning. Her lower lip disappears briefly under her front teeth.

“God,” Grace manages finally, swallowing. “Oh, my God, that’s good. Frankie, you were right. This is incredible. I can’t believe you gave this up. How could you give this up?”

“Grace Hanson, I’ve never felt closer to you in my entire life than I do right this second.” The words are right but Frankie’s tone isn’t. It’s off, the chronic note of levity completely gone. “By the way, you’ve got some of it on your face.”

Oh. Well, that’s probably inevitable, given how much she’d tried to stuff in her mouth just now.
She looks around her tray for napkins, not finding any. “I should get—"

“Let me,” Frankie says, “please,” and she reaches across the table, touching her two extended fingers to the side of Grace’s mouth.

Grace momentarily stops breathing.

Slowly, Frankie grazes her fingers against Grace’s skin, slipping through whatever smeared morsel she’s targeting. Which can’t be much, not enough to make this necessary, since Grace can’t really feel anything on her face except Frankie. It isn’t exactly that time is slowing down, she thinks, even though what’s happening right now feels suspended in some separate dreamspace, it’s that Frankie doesn’t need to take nearly this long to touch her, make an epicenter out of her cheek. But she is. And there’s no earthly reason for it, except. Except.

Then the excruciating brush of light pressure on her face lifts, finally, and Frankie’s fingers are suspended right in front of Grace’s face like an offering. Frankie isn’t pulling back. She should be pulling back. Why isn’t she pulling back?

It isn’t clear who moves first, whether it’s a dazed Grace who parts her mouth just a bit, or Frankie who touches her two fingers to Grace’s lower lip, or maybe it happens at the same time, the two of them tumbling together into the second when Frankie’s fingers slip inside Grace, just barely. They’re shocking the tip of her tongue, tentatively grazing the edge of it, and when Frankie makes a small noise in her throat, Grace has to close her eyes briefly in response, reeling. Without permission, her tongue twitches, licking out at the pads of Frankie’s fingers, tasting what’s there, tasting her.

Frankie sucks in quick air and abruptly retracts her hand.

Faintly, in the distant background, there’s the sound of orders up and cash registers ringing, a few customers chatting on the other side of the room. The signs of a normal world. It might as well be another planet as far as Grace is concerned.

They breathe, letting their bodies resume their ordinary borders on opposite sides of the table, and after about a minute Frankie says, quietly, “Too much.”

Grace, stricken with remorse, rushes to apologize. “Oh, Frankie. I’m sorry.”

“That ‘too much’ wasn’t for you.”

It doesn’t sink in; Grace is too wound up. “I shouldn’t have—this is supposed to be time for you to think. I shouldn’t get in the way of that. Of you thinking. Are you thinking? I mean, have you been able to think?” She can’t help herself. “What are you thinking?”

“Earlier, when we were at the house, you told me not to tell you what I was thinking. You want to hear it now? Are you sure?”

“That’s different. At the house, what I meant was that I couldn’t listen to you telling me you were thinking about me in that way.” She can’t be too specific. “Romantically.”

“You’re a smart woman, Grace,” Frankie tells her, “despite your not-infrequent moments of total obliviousness. Which I’m pretty sure are at least semi-related to all that propylene glycol you inhale from—” She briefly mimics the act of hair spraying, with an accompanying shhhhhh sound effect, and molds the air with her hands about three inches above her head. “Right, I know, I know, the point. Hold your ponies, I’m getting to it. Like I said, you’re a smart woman. So if you’d just take a couple of seconds to really think about it, I think you’d figure out all on your own that
I am thinking about you. In that way. Romantically. And it’s very important to me that we keep respecting one another’s boundaries through all this, so—” She zips her mouth. “Not another word about it until you tell me differently.”

Grace grips the seat of the booth, one hand on each side, feeling the plastic press into her palms. She’s dizzy. Two contenders in a single day for the most erotic moment of her life, both of them with a woman who believes wholeheartedly in the medicinal benefits of psychic surgery, and the latest one happens to be taking place in the corner booth of a Del Taco in Escondido. “Again? You’re thinking about me like that again? Like earlier?”

And Frankie unzips her mouth, says with so much love in her voice that Grace almost can’t stand to listen, “Oh, honey. Not ‘again.’ Don’t you get it? I haven’t stopped.”

Back in the car after dinner, heading east, the sun sets behind them over the city they’ve left and together, they speed away from it, driving towards the distant mountains and the welcoming dark. For maybe forty-five minutes, neither of them talk, the quiet only interrupted by occasional intrusive suggestions from Grace’s GPS: turn left onto Bear Valley Parkway, continue onto Valley Center Road, turn right to merge onto the 76 East. The houses are further and further apart, interrupted by the occasional lonely gas station, and the roads contract, narrowing from four lanes into three into two. All around them are hills, dim things Grace can’t make out after the sun’s gone, but she’s grateful for them anyway. They're something concrete to hold onto.

It isn’t until they’re driving in the shadow of Palomar Mountain, looming over the freeway, that Frankie breaks her silence without any prelude or warning.


She’s still got her legs up, pug-bedazzled feet planted firmly on the dashboard, reclining back in the passenger seat, and until this moment Grace hadn’t been completely sure whether or not Frankie was actually awake. Apparently she is.

So Frankie likes men. A lot. Fabulous. The hell is Grace supposed to do with that bit of predictable information? Congratulate her? Throw a party? Announce “wow, me, too, Frankie!” when there’s a rapidly growing part of her that thinks it might not, in fact, be true?

After a moment, she ends up going with a noncommittal “All right. You like men.”

“What I’m trying to say is that I’ve liked them my entire life. Let me throw out a few representative names for you, so I can illustrate the spread more effectively. George Clooney, natch. Ken Watanabe, obvs. Liev Schreiber, duh. Idris Elba, who wouldn't. Steve Buscemi—”

“Wait a minute. Steve Buscemi?”

“Don’t Bu-shame-me, sister.” Delighted with her terrible pun, Frankie laughs, a throaty cackle that trips up a note: ha-HA. “What can I say? He’d make more of an effort because he has to, and I can’t deny that a hard worker in the sack is very appealing.”

“Fine. Steve Buscemi,” Grace says, wearily. “You’re attracted to Steve Buscemi. Great. I’m going to pretend I understand any of that and move right along. So you’re telling me that you’ve never been, uh. Interested in women.” Before now, she doesn’t say. “What about all your vaginal paintings? That collection of yours sure makes Georgia O’Keeffe look like a master of subtlety.”
“I won’t deny that it’s been my heart’s lifelong goal to convey to the public at large the abstract interpretation of all things yonic, but I’m an artist. Loving vaginas professionally isn’t nearly the same thing as loving vaginas personally. And by the way, I’ll have you know that not every vagina belongs to a woman. Liberate yourself from the cisgender heteropatriarchial system, Grace. Watch some YouTubes.”

“I’ll be sure to get right on that as soon as we get home. Now back to you liking men.”

Frankie takes a breath. “The thing is, my extremely prolific yet admittedly vague fantasy life aside, for my entire adult life until Jacob, it was always Sol. Just Sol. From the moment we met on workshift duty in our Berkeley co-op, it was Sol. We were supposed to clean the communal hot tub together, but I ended up taking a dip instead. Into his eyes. Or something romantic like that, I don’t know, I was totally blazed. Homeopathically and organically. All he had to do was look at me, and the world went completely upside down.”

“You really loved him,” Grace says. It’s ridiculous to feel this much jealousy over a relationship that’s been dead for years, impossible to resurrect. “And he loved you, in his way. You loved each other. Not everyone gets to have that.”

“Yeah. I really, really loved the guy.” Nothing about Sol loving her back, Grace notices, but before she has time to think too much about it, Frankie adds, “He was my first, you know.”

“Your first? You mean—” She struggles to comprehend this new information. Hadn’t Frankie always let Grace think she’d spent most of the sixties at least three bodies deep in a pile of squalid hippie fumbling? Or—now that she’s thinking about it—had it all been Frankie tossing out lurid details about orgies and free love pulled right out of some Timothy Leary lecture, all without ever placing herself in the middle of it? “Frankie, are you telling me you’ve only ever slept with two people? In more than seventy years. That’s it? Just two people? I know physical intimacy is a big deal for you, but I never thought for a second— Wow. Only Sol and Jacob?” No wonder she’d been so loathe to sleep with someone new after the divorce.

“Well, Ms. Expert, what’s your big impressive sex number? Feel free to bowl me over with it.”

Silently, Grace counts. Robert, of course. Guy. Phil. Losing it to Jerome Hodges in eleventh grade, when it was as good a time as any to get it over with. She’d gone steady with Johnny “Duke” Lightoller during her freshman year at Smith, kept him at bay until his respectful admiration for her self-restraint slid into puzzled frustration. That one Beta Theta Pi from Amherst she’d screwed in the upstairs bathroom at his frat house, both of them too drunk to remember much the next morning. And the big regret, the one she’d take back if she could: the naval officer she’d met at her father’s retirement party, two years into her relationship with Robert. Grace had thought he might’ve been the solution to what was wrong, the thing she didn’t know how to talk about, the stain of loneliness spreading in her life. He’d dumped her, though, after a month of sneaking around, and when Robert found her crying from guilt and something else she couldn’t qualify, he’d been surprisingly solicitous, even though she hadn’t told him what was wrong. She’d stayed, of course, convincing herself inertia wasn’t the easier choice.

“Seven,” she says. “Seven, ranging from thoroughly unsatisfying to moderately decent. Assuming we’re only counting the ones who rounded all the way to home base.”

“All men, I take it.”

“Of course they were all men, Frankie. What, do you think that I’ve been sleeping with other women this whole time? That I’ve spent my entire life as, I don’t know, some sort of secret—” She stops, her face hot.
“You can say the word, Grace. Lesbian. It won’t hurt you. It’s not going to grab your purse in some gay alley and run off butchly into the night. It’s just a word.”

No. Frankie’s very wrong about that. It isn’t just a word. Not at all.

“But yes,” Frankie continues, “I have to confess, I’ve been wondering. So you’re telling me you haven’t been hiding this from me? You haven’t, I don’t know, popped your collars extra high over the years to keep me from getting a good look at all these sapphic feelings you’ve apparently been having?”

“I didn’t know,” she says, and reaches over to turn up the air conditioning a few notches. It’s way too warm in the car. “I didn’t know about any of it before this afternoon. Before I—well, I guess you’d call what I did making advances.”

“Yeah, in 1960. Here in the twenty-first century, we call what you did a full-scale deployment of plutonium-grade bow chicka wow wow.”

She’s so grateful to be driving. It’s the perfect excuse not to have to make eye contact with Frankie while they’re having this conversation. “Call it whatever you want, as long as you don’t call it premeditated. Because it wasn’t.”

“So this is totally new for you, then.”

“I—no, I don’t think that’s right, either. The thing is, Frankie—” She can say this. She can give herself permission to say this. “—I’m starting to let myself look back on my life, and there are all these little moments over the years. These encounters I’ve had. With girls. With women.”

“Who? How many? How many of them do I know?” Now it's Frankie's turn to be jealous, the note of envy in her voice sharp and unmistakable. “Oh, that obnoxious Purple Orchid woman. I knew she was flirting with you during our meeting. Did something happen with her at that conference in Denver? Did she purple your orchid, Grace?”

“Absolutely not!” she exclaims. “Nothing happened with Mimi, nothing’s happened with anyone before. I’ve never acted on anything because I never knew I had anything to act on. What did you call me earlier, the empress of self-denial? That pretty much sums it up. Oh, God, I feel like such an incredible idiot.” Her voice shakes. “I’m seventy-three, Frankie. Seventy-three goddamned years old. Isn’t seventy-three far too late in life to be having this kind of crisis? If this is—if I’m really like this, if this is really what I want, if you’re who I want, shouldn’t I have realized something before now?”

“Maybe. And maybe not. Feel like being as hard on me as you are on yourself? You want to tell me I should’ve realized something?”

Grace exhales. “So you’re saying you have something to realize, too.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Frankie says, slowly. “Could be. Probably. I’ll go with a soft yes. My subconscious is yodeling pretty loudly right now, and she only does that when she really wants me to pay attention to something important. Lots of vocal runs happening at the moment. Grace?”

“Yes?”

“This is heavy.”

It’s oddly comforting to hear Frankie say it. At least Grace isn’t the only one who’s frightened, looking into the future and seeing only vague shapes of what’s ahead. “I know. I’m feeling it too.
There’s so much to take into consideration. And I haven’t even begun to think about other people yet. Our families—” She stops. “For crying out loud. Brianna. Oh, Frankie, she’s going to be so fucking smug about this.”

“Why would Brianna be smug? Did you tell her about us before you told yourself or me about us? Because that sure sounds like something you’d do.”

Us. There’s an us to tell someone about. “No. I didn’t tell— Never mind.”

“What’s bothering me has nothing to do with other people,” Frankie continues. “Actually, I’m pretty jazzed about getting to hear Sol’s snort-honk noise when he finds out. It’s one of the all-time great human noises, let me tell you. He makes it when he’s really surprised.” When, Grace hears, not if, and she’s never cared more about the difference between future and conditional tenses in her entire life. “Sol and Robert and our kids aren’t my problem. Either they’ll deal with it, or they won’t, and if they won’t, fuck ‘em. No, my chakras are all in a twist for two big reasons. Do you remember earlier, when I told you that you were the best friend I’ve ever had? That you’re more important to me than anyone other than Bud and Coyote?”

“It’s not exactly the kind of thing you forget hearing.” Grace hasn’t been that important to anyone since Mallory and Brianna were little. Even then, Nanny Louise had been fairly stiff competition.

“Well, I left someone essential out. I’ve got two best friends. There’s only one person who’s closer to me than you are, Grace, and that’s Ms. Frankie Bergstein, B.A., M.F.A. Me, myself, and I. The old je mois. If you have feelings for me, and if I have feelings for you, then that means that I had no clue whatsoever about something really important having to do with both of my two best friends. And I’ve gotta be honest with you, that’s really fucking with my head. I thought I knew both of us better than that. In case you don’t get this about me yet, knowledge is kind of my thing.”

“You had no idea either. About yourself.”

“None whatsoever.”

“What about in hindsight, though? When you look back at your whole life, nothing? I’m not talking about an actual romantic exchange here, Frankie. You’ve really never noticed a woman in that way? I’m sure that co-op you lived in was crammed with bra-hating girls in Nehru shirts.” God knows she’d sneered at plenty of them during her Smith years. “You’ve never looked at anyone a little too long?”

“Well, I may have executed a casual head-to-toe scan a time or two over the years, but nothing like —” She breaks off, gasping. “Oh, motherfucking shitbricks.”

“What?”

“That one time.”

“That one time what?” She looks over at Frankie, and even though it’s pretty dark, she can see well enough to distinguish Frankie’s hand, clapped over her forehead. “Frankie? What one time?”

Frankie removes her hand and says, hesitantly, “Do you remember when we went to see that opera? You, me, Sol, and Robert. It must’ve been, I don’t know, fifteen years ago.”

It’s ringing a bell. The first, last, and only time she’d let Robert allow Frankie and Sol to accompany them to a theatrical performance. “You mean when we saw Tristan und Isolde and you fell asleep next to me during the first act and snored loudly all the way through intermission? I was apoplectic. I fantasized about stuffing that homemade scarf of yours into your mouth.”
“Yes. That’s the one. But what you don’t know, Grace, is that I was executing a little something I like to call defensive sleeping, where I force myself to fall asleep to avoid dealing with a difficult situation. It’s like I’m an opossum, only the predator I’m fighting is my own intrusive thoughts.”

“I’m highly aware of that particular practice of yours.” She’d nearly had a heart attack the time Frankie fell off the high stool at the car dealership. “Did I say something mean to you? I know I did a lot of that back then. Although, to be fair, you weren’t exactly nice to me either.”

“You did, but that wasn’t why I went into defensive sleeping mode. We were in the lobby before the performance started, Sol and me, waiting for you and Robert to show up, and I was looking at my watch, you remember that watch I had, the cat head one with the tongue as the hour hand. And then I looked up and I saw you walking towards me. Well, towards us, I guess. It felt a hell of a lot like you were walking towards me. Like you wanted me to watch you. Like you were asking for it.”

Grace swallows. Adjusts her hands on the steering wheel. She’s remembering. “Keep talking.”

“It’s funny. I can see you even without closing my eyes. You had your hair pinned up—that was back when your hair was longer—and these dangling gold earrings, and you were wearing this incredible dress. Maybe you’d call it a gown. God, Grace.” She shifts in the passenger seat. “It was dark blue. Long. Tight around your waist and hips, with this kind of flared skirt thing. No sleeves or straps on the top part, no necklace. I don’t think I’d ever seen your naked shoulders before. I couldn’t stop looking at that place where your neck slopes into your shoulder, the way it curved. I had this feeling, like I wanted to paint you more than I’d wanted to paint anything in my entire life. Of course, at the time, I simply assumed it was my artist’s soul naturally responding to a particularly exquisite materialization of the patriarchal feminine, but now I’m beginning to think maybe painting wasn’t what I wanted to do to you.”

“Oh,” Grace says, a little faintly. She’s had men call her exquisite before, too many times to count, but somehow it’s never made her feel as light-headed as she is when Frankie does the same, even if the Grace she’s describing is fifteen years behind them both. “Oh.”

“And then you said ‘Hello, Frankie, I see you’ve decided to wear culottes to the opera,’ so I got distracted for a little while thinking of something mean to say back. But I couldn’t for the life of me figure anything out, and then I had to sit next to you because Sol and Robert were sitting together, and you were wearing this perfume that smelled like jasmine, which happens to be the flower I love third-most. I was emotionally distressed and emotionally confused and emotionally pissed at you and emotionally still thinking about your naked shoulders. And as you know, more than one emotional response at a time is way too intense for me to keep all this moi going at full speed. So defensive sleeping was really the only option I had left to clear my head. When Sol woke me up to go home, I’d successfully forgotten about it. Until now, I suppose.”

Fifteen years ago. Has this really been waiting between them all that time? Lying dormant until circumstance and chance forced it into the light? “Maybe you knew yourself a little better than you thought. And—I don’t know—maybe I did too. We just couldn’t see it.”

“Probably for the best in that particular instance,” Frankie continues, “since we happened to be married to other people at the time. Under different circumstances, that night could’ve ended with the two of us getting it on in a bathroom stall. Me with my hand over your mouth, ruining your perfect makeup trying to keep you quiet.” She inhales suddenly. “Whoo, boy. Okay. Now that’s an extremely specific sexual fantasy checkbox I didn’t know I had until right this second. Wow.”

Just barely, Grace gets out a sound that might be “uh” or maybe “um,” and now despite herself
she's thinking about how good she'd felt in that navy gown, how much she'd gotten off on being the nucleus of everyone's attention as she walked through that lobby. Frankie's eyes had been on her, too, but not Frankie's hands. Not then. Not yet. Not her hand stifling Grace's mouth in some barely concealed public place while Grace whimpers, both of them knowing beyond a doubt that she's too far gone to control herself on her own.

She grabs her own thigh with her left hand, nails digging in hard to distract herself, and breathes. In and out. In and out.

“Grace? You all right?”

“I will be in a second,” Grace says, roughly. “Just—driving a car on the freeway, here, trying extremely hard not to think about your checkbox.”

“Oh. I see. You want any help? Because I happen to have a lot of guano facts at the ready, and I'm getting the sense that this could be a really good occasion to use them. Here goes. Fact number one: the word ‘guano’ comes from the Quechua language, meaning, and I'm loosely translating this, ‘agricultural dung fertilizer.’ Fact the second: while bat guano is largely found in caves, mining the guano from those caves poses an extremely grave risk to the survival of the bat colonies themselves. Third fact: if a bird of any kind poops on you, it's a brocheh, a blessing. Good luck for an entire year. Sol's mother taught me that. Number four—”

“Thank you, Frankie.” And she actually means it; for once, Frankie's litany of useless disgusting information has been surprisingly productive, the cold shower she badly needed. “That's enough. Hold onto the rest of your guano facts for now, all right?” I might need them later, she thinks, and then shakes her head, trying to clear it. They need a new topic of conversation. Something different. Something that isn't going to trick her body into rebelling any further than it already has.

In about another mile, it finally occurs to her: what they haven't discussed yet. “Frankie, you said earlier you were upset for two reasons. The first has to do with not knowing any of this about yourself or about me, right? So what’s the second?”

There’s a hesitation, a long one, and then it gets longer. In that gap Grace realizes, with an accompanying lurch of unease in her stomach, that she’s inadvertently stumbled across a question Frankie, of all people, doesn’t want to answer. That can’t be a good sign. And then she hears the sound of Frankie’s seat moving back into an upright position, which, shit, that really can’t be a good sign. Frankie never likes to be vertical in the car, unless she’s got something important to say.

Grace waits, trying to keep out dread.

Finally, Frankie says, “Okay. The second reason. Total honesty. I owe you that. To start with, I’m not sure if you recall this, Grace, because I know all too well what a first-time Del Taco visit can do to the human brain, but about three hours ago, you proposed to me.”

“I didn’t—”

“Don't minimize what you did. You proposed to me,” Frankie continues, ignoring Grace’s stammered dissent, “told me it was completely platonic, and then five minutes later you asked me to spread my legs for you, which I think we can both agree is the kind of request that’s just a teensy bit incongruous with the whole platonic thing. Right?”

“Right,” she concedes, awkwardly. So much for an entirely new topic.

“So between that and some other pretty unsubtle clues you've been darting my way tonight, I'm
guessing that means we’re officially talking about putting sex on the table. Well, not literally on the table. When it comes to amorous encounters, I make it a personal priority to be good, giving, and game, but I really don’t think I could handle that with my disc issue.”

She’s probably blushed more today than she has cumulatively in her entire life. Thank God it’s dark in the car. “No sex on the literal table. Fine by me.”

“What, in a bed, then? I’m going to make you say it to me, Grace. Tell me what you want.”

Quietly, Grace says, “Yes. A bed. I want that.”

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere. So the offer you’re making me, as it currently stands, is now exclusive commitment for the rest of our lives, with sex in a bed, specific bed yet to be ascertained. Still want to tell me that’s something different than I had with Sol?”

She understands what the problem is now. “I’m not Sol, Frankie. I’m not him. You of all people know how much I’m not Sol.”

“You told me that before, too. At about the same time you told me that what you want would be nothing like a marriage. This would be like a marriage, Grace, and I don’t care how many times you say it wouldn’t be, because that’s exactly what you’re asking me to have with you. My second marriage. With the one person who was really there for me after the first one ended, the person who took me out for frozen yogurt and reminded me about good boundaries and who showed me that top secret water compartment inside our iron, which completely transformed how I feel about ironing. The only reason I got through that total nightmare of a year with my sweet self largely intact was because I had a Grace. Because I had you. So what happens if you become Sol and I don’t have a Grace anymore?”

“Frankie, I’m—” She stops. Knows what Frankie needs to be told, knows she needs to say it. The truth, no part of it simple. “The reason I’m not Sol doesn’t have to do with marriage, all right? I’m not Sol because I could never leave you. I can’t live without you. I meant every single word of what I said in the living room this afternoon. When I thought you were leaving me for Jacob, for Santa Fe—Frankie, if we weren’t in the same house, if we weren’t together, I honestly don’t know how I could get up in the morning. I’m not going anywhere. I think I’m actually incapable of it.”

From the passenger seat, Grace hears quiet sniffling sounds.

“Oh, Frankie, please,” she whispers. “Don’t cry, okay? This is different. I promise. This time will be different.”

“You’re right,” Frankie says, at long last, and her voice is wobbling. “This is different than what I had with Sol. And that’s why I’m scared. It’s more.”

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It isn’t until the GPS announces they’ve arrived at their destination that Grace realizes she has no idea, exactly, where in the park Frankie wants them to stop. The moon is up and blooming, the only source of illumination other than the car’s headlamps, casting a muted gray light on the endless stretches of alien land that unfold out of the road, expanding for miles. Tall shrubs and small bushes speckle the dirt as far as she can see, generating all the way back into the black mountains, barely visible against the night sky. If there are other people or cars here, the desert’s hiding them.
They continue to drive, winding around curve after silent curve.

“Should I—?” Grace asks, finally, into the still car, and Frankie tells her, “Take the next scenic pullout on the right. This is a good place.”

“A good place for what?”

“A moment,” Frankie says. “Yet to be determined. My instincts are telling me this is the place, so I'm gonna go with it. Whenever I'm in the desert, I let my decision making process come to me organically.”

“And that’s different from your usual, how?” Grace asks, but there’s a sign up ahead heralding some expansive vista they definitely can’t see in the dark, so she heeds Frankie’s request and pulls off the road into the designated stop.

She’s hardly got the car in park before Frankie’s unbuckling her seatbelt and opening the door, climbing out. “Wait,” Grace says, “Frankie, wait a minute,” but she’s already gone, and Grace watches as she runs away from the road and into the desert, kept visible by the car’s headlamps, her arms up in the air in exultation, velour dress and loose outer layers flapping behind her.

“Follow me, Grace,” Frankie calls back, not bothering to turn her head. Her voice is amplified beyond its normal volume in the surrounding silence. “Leave the car on so we’ve got some light. Also, heads up, I can’t see for shit right now, so this probably ends with you unsticking various parts of me from a cholla cactus. But I’m cool with that, because there’s no way I’m gonna let a little fucker like cholla get in our way of comming with some of nature’s less moisturized marvels.”

Grace gets out, closing the door behind her, the engine still going. “Frankie, we’re a million miles from anywhere. It’s dark out. We haven’t seen a single person pass us on the road for at least fifteen minutes. I know I’m not an expert on the desert, but I’ve seen Lawrence of Arabia enough times to know that getting too far out in the middle of nowhere isn’t the greatest idea you’ve ever had.”

From the distance ahead Grace hears, “It’s fine, I can navigate pretty well with my third eye;,” and then, “Ow. Fuck.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” she mutters, and then sets off in pursuit. Running in dirt, of all things. At least she’d had the instinctive foresight to wear sneakers.

By the time she catches up with Frankie, they’re far enough from the car that she can’t hear the engine, the headlights still reaching them but just barely. Frankie’s standing still, looking up, and Grace can just make out her profile in the dark, or sees what she remembers from knowing Frankie’s face so well. “Are you all right?”

“What? Oh, yeah, it’s no biggie. That ocotillo back there got the worst of it. Come over here and look up with me.”

She obliges. The wry joke she’s about to make about third eyes dies in her mouth when Frankie grabs her far shoulder with one hand, pulling her close so that they’re standing side by side, arms touching.

“Look up, Grace,” Frankie tells her, so she does, and gasps.

There are thousands and thousands of stars spread above them, pinpricks of sharp light standing out against the deep navy basin of the endless night sky. She’s never seen so many stars in her whole
life outside a planetarium. Had never really thought about what the night could give her, this far away from the city and its light pollution. Without buildings to break it, the sky stretches on and on and on around them, a lid for the world that seems lidless, and it’s comforting, somehow, to be so small at the base of all this vastness. It makes the enormity of Grace’s unfolding life feel manageable.

“Hello, universe,” Frankie says, loudly, to the sky, “hello, cosmos. It’s me, Frankie Bergstein, of the San Diego Bergsteins, and the lovely Grace Hanson is here with me, too. Say hi to the mother of us all, Grace. She’s listening.”

“Hi there,” Grace adds, because why the hell not. “Thanks for coming, I guess.”

Frankie continues. “I’m glad you’re here watching over us, universe, because we’re in the middle of some pretty intense self-realization shit, and we could sure use your loving guidance. This one next to me might be a lesbian.”

“Frankie.”

“I said might, Grace. Don’t worry, I didn’t out you to the universe. She knows who you are, anyway.”

That isn’t exactly reassuring. “I’m glad someone does.”

“All in good time.” Frankie tilts her head back up again. “Universe, it’s me again. Frankie. See, just this afternoon, Grace here sexually propositioned me in our living room—well, of course you know she did that, because you’re everywhere, universe. But since that encounter, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and a lot of talking, and a lot of feeling, some of it in and around my genitals, and I’m starting to be open to the possibility that I might have more in common with David Bowie than just our shared artistic genius and intense raw physical magnetism. Namely, that I, like Mr. Bowie, could also be of the bisexual persuasion. Somewhere around a Kinsey 2, maybe plus a couple of decimal places depending on the day or what Grace happens to be wearing. Do you have any input for me?” She exhales slowly, a long drawn-out breath. “Thank you, universe. Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“Well?” Grace asks. “What’d she say?”

“She says she wants to talk to you.”

“She did not.”

“I swear.”

“Frankie, the universe did not tell you she wants to talk to me. And the universe doesn’t have a gender, for heaven’s sake. I don’t even know why I’m using a female pronoun.”

“Because it’s what she prefers, Grace. I’m just the messenger. Up to you.”

“So, what, I’m supposed to just have a whole conversation with the universe now? Like it’s a normal thing that normal people do? Speaking to the sky?”

Affectionately, Frankie says, “Grace, let’s face it. You are not normal, lady. And neither am I. We’re both so much better than that.”

Not normal. It’s what she’s always feared more than anything else, on some level. To be outside what she’s supposed to be, always tapping on the glass, staring at everyone else, needing to be let
in. But she’d spent forty years in a marriage that was nothing but tapping on glass, hadn’t she? The two of them, Robert and Grace, tapping together, never talking about it, never inside anything real.

And behind her, for more than thirty years, there’d been Frankie, outside too and never giving a shit about it. More than thirty years Frankie’s been there, holding Grace’s glass-tapping hand for the last two or three, and now, for the first time, Grace thinks she might be ready to turn around.

So she looks up at the sky and lets herself get lost in it.

Eventually, she starts to speak. “Okay, universe, if you’re out there. I mean, I know you’re out there, you’re the combination of all time and space. I’m not some crazy science denier. What I’m trying to say is if you’re out there like Frankie says you are, if you’re listening, if you know something about me, if you’ve known all along—” There are tears in her eyes again, for what must be the fifth or sixth time in the last twelve hours, and she’s really getting sick of it, but apparently this turncoat body of hers has given up listening to her brain in every possible way it can. “I’ve got, what, maybe twelve, fifteen good years left? And that’s if I’m one of the really lucky ones. Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Why didn’t anyone tell me? Why couldn’t I know this about myself? What did I do that was so wrong, so awful, that I didn't deserve to have this until now, when it’s almost too late?”

“Oh, Grace,” Frankie breathes. “Oh, my sweet friend.”

There’s the soft squeeze of a hand on her left bicep, holding her in, keeping her upright, and she feels new weight on her right shoulder as Frankie inclines her head, resting it there.

Feeling ridiculous and raw, Grace stops speaking. She waits for an answer from the universe she knows she isn’t going to get, and that’s probably a good thing. Difficult enough to consider that God’s been keeping this insight away from her; on top of that, Grace really doesn’t want to think about the universe’s larger purpose or intentionality. If there’s some greater cosmic plan out there, religious or pagan or both, if there’s some design that’s kept her from waking up to what she’s always been, well. Whatever it is, it’s unaccountably cruel.

They stand there together, Frankie’s head on her shoulder, both of them looking at the sky, and the sky looks back at them, heavy and silent.

After a while, Frankie drops her arm, lifts her head. “Okay. Let's hang up our cosmic phone, all right? Change of plans. Totally new tactic. It's coming to me right now, as I'm speaking. I think I know exactly what you need.”

“A drink?” Grace asks, and wipes quickly at her eyes. Jesus, she could use one or three really dry ones right about now. It’s been hours since she’s had anything stronger than a Diet Coke, and the craving’s starting to get to her.

“No, not a drink,” Frankie says, taking a few steps backwards, “this,” and, incredibly, unaccountably, she starts to spin in circles, flinging her arms out wide as she turns. Grace jumps back to avoid being collateral damage.

“That’s what you like to do in the middle of the desert? Spin? Are you five?”

“Like I said earlier, everything that happens in the desert happens organically. I like to do whatever my body tells me in the moment. She’s a wise vessel. And right now, my body wants to spin, so we’re spinning.” She stops, swaying a little. “Spin with me, Grace.”

She laughs at the absurdity of it, still sniffling a little. If Frankie’s trying to distract her, it’s
“Spin with me,” Frankie calls, holding out her hands to Grace, and clenches them multiple times in the universal sign of grab on. “C’mon.” She starts singing, or something like singing, and after a couple of bars Grace figures out it’s supposed to be a version of that A-ha song. “Spin with me/spin me on/I’ll be gone/in a day or twooooooooo—"

“No way, Frankie. I know exactly how this ends. Me losing my balance and flying into one of those tiny cactuses and breaking a hip at least an hour away from medical assistance. I’m way too old for spinning.”

“If I’m not, you’re not. First of all, my sense of equilibrium is functionally perfect, even under the influence of extreme centrifugal force, and secondly, like I’d let you lose your balance for even a second. It’s fun, I promise. You once told me you did this kind of thing all the time when you were a kid.”

“Made an idiot out of myself in the middle of the desert? At night? Not me. I spent my childhood in Connecticut, remember. No desert there. A whole lot of country clubs.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Climb a tree with me,” Frankie says, “just like you’ve always done. Just like we always do together. Right here, right now.” She clenches-unclenches her open hands again, still holding them out in Grace’s direction. “Grab onto both of these branches, Grace. Haul yourself in. I’m up here waiting. You’re not too old, and it isn’t too late. You’re still here. You still have time.”

A pang of sudden longing wrenches in her chest. She thinks about that oak tree in her childhood backyard, the one with the short branch parallel to the ground, worn smooth from the repeated clutching of her hands over the years. The feeling of holding onto it, walking her legs up the tree trunk and swinging up off the ground, inconvenient dress skirt and saddle shoes be damned. She’d been so happy in that tree, shimmying higher and higher, flushed with the pride of being able to make her body do exactly what she wanted. The view from the top unrolling back beyond what she could make out, an implicit promise of a future waiting just for her. God, she’d loved how good that felt. She wants that again, or as close as she can get.

So she wipes the palms of her hands on her shirt—something gauche she’d never do at home, but it’s more important to get rid of any incidental moisture—and says, “Okay. Okay, fine. Ten seconds of spinning. That’s it, or I’ll aggravate my arthritis. And don’t you dare let go of me, Frankie, all right? Remember, if I break something, you’re the one who has to clean the kitchen.”

“I won’t let go if you won’t,” Frankie tells her. “Just keep your eyes on my face and you’ll be fine.”

Somewhat reluctantly, she places her right hand in Frankie’s left, her left hand in Frankie’s right, Frankie’s fingers closing forcefully around hers. “Like this,” Frankie says, crossing their arms over their wrists, “hold on tight, here we go,” and then—Grace can’t believe she’s doing this—they’re spinning in a circle, they’re in the middle of the goddamn desert a hundred miles away from anything, two tiny specks shuffling together in the dirt under the huge night sky, whirling around and around.

First fast, then faster, and Grace wants desperately to close her eyes, the feeling of all of it too much to bear, but then Frankie shouts, “Keep looking at me!” so she obeys, the sheer exhilaration on Frankie’s face almost as overwhelming as anything else that’s happening. Frankie squeaks with delight as the blurring world drops out from under them, and there’s nothing left for Grace now but what she needs, Frankie’s strong hands clasping hers and Frankie’s beautiful face laughing, the only thing Grace can see or wants to, and Grace hears herself let out a single shriek, a sudden peal
of unexpected delight, as they spin and spin and spin.

True to her word, Frankie doesn’t let go, and Grace doesn’t either. Instead, they come to a sudden stop, stumbling a little in the dirt, and after they’ve released one another Grace has to bend over a bit, putting her hands on her thighs while she catches her breath and the world returns to its proper place.

“Okay,” she manages, finally. “That was fun. You were right. I’ll admit it.”

Frankie, breathing a little hard, too, grins at her. “Thanks for climbing that tree with me.”

“Right to the top,” Grace agrees, and she thinks, briefly, about the perfect view she’d had.

“Together.”

“Jiminy crickets, I wish I’d known you when we were kids. You must’ve been a force of nature.”

She straightens up. “Damn right I was. Did I ever tell you about the time I priced out all the other lemonade stands around the neighborhood and made record profits without raising my overhead? It was the summer of 1955. Morris Nelson’s operation around the corner went under so fast he couldn’t use all the lemons he’d made his mother buy him, and she wouldn't let him throw them out. I took them off his hands at one cent apiece.” Laughing a little, she thinks about the expression on Morris’s face when he’d handed over the lemons and the money. The sweetness of that moment isn’t something she’ll ever forget. Her first true business deal, and no professional triumph since has ever felt more satisfying. “You better bet that little shit never pulled my braids again.”

“Oh, I love you,” Frankie blurs out, all in a rush, like she can’t hold it back. The longing in her husky voice is undeniable, tremendous. “Grace, I love you so fucking much it hurts.”

Startled, she looks at Frankie, faintly visible in the combined light from the moon and the distant headlamps. Frankie’s hands are at her sides, her loose hair falling into her face, and she isn’t pushing it away. She looks smaller, somehow, than she usually does, more vulnerable, and maybe it’s a trick of the light, and maybe not. It’s not like Frankie hasn’t said those three words to Grace before—she’d said them just a few hours earlier, in fact, that lifetime ago in their living room—but the way she’s said them just now feels untouched, shaped with new meaning. Another horizon they’re crossing. The kind of crossing that requires a real response.

She can’t say it. She can’t speak.

So instead, she does what she can, reaching over to take Frankie’s hand in her own, raising it to her lips. Gently, she kisses the back of it. Despite the cracks of paint that never seem to be completely washed off, despite the fact that she never remembers to moisturize, Frankie’s skin is softer on her mouth than Grace had ever let herself imagine. Softer than anyone’s skin has a right to be. She lingers longer than she’d planned, and even though she can’t see Frankie watching her, she knows what’s happening, feels Frankie’s gaze on her like a sudden burn.

The wind kicks up, blowing around their bodies, stirring up the ground, and after a moment, Frankie says, quietly, “I’m getting cold. Are you?”

She’s trembling a little, sure, but it isn’t the temperature. She’s thinking about that blanket in the backseat of the car, the one Frankie brought along, and where they’re going.
“Time for a feelings check-in,” Frankie says, her mouth muffled a little by the blanket. “I’ll go first, okay? Roll call. Extreme Nervousness, reporting for duty. Salutations from my lifelong pal Intense Excitement. And a big wave in your direction from Holy Fucking Fuck I Can’t Believe This Is Happening Right Now.” She lets out a short squeal.

They’re sitting in the backseat of Grace’s car, still parked in the same spot just off the main road through the desert, the shade on the moonroof open so Frankie can look at the stars. Both of them are tucked underneath the large blanket Frankie’s brought along, and Frankie keeps pulling it up to cover her head whenever she speaks, like it’s too hard for her to say anything to Grace right now without an extra layer between them. It’s a comfortable blanket, Grace has to admit, for something purchased in a tourist gift shop. Not too scratchy, and it’s heavy, with the kind of weight that accompanies surprisingly good quality. It smells faintly of turmeric, or sandalwood. Some kind of musky spiced scent she’s come to associate with home.

“Frankie, nothing’s happening right now.”

“Oh, word? We’re still playing that game? Considering that this very morning I woke up, as one does, assuming the two of us were straight as the lines on loose-leaf paper, I’d say something pretty flippin’ remarkable has occurred. FYI, in that same timespan I’ve also done a complete 180 on my belief that there’s nothing erotic whatsoever about Del Taco. You do realize my body’s now completely rewired to respond Pavlovianly whenever someone mentions the words ‘sour cream.’ I might have to excuse myself the next time Bud makes latkes for Hanukkah.”

“That’s not what I meant. Obviously a whole lot has happened over the past however-many hours.” It might be the understatement of the century. “Nobody’s disputing that. What I mean is that nothing’s happening at this very minute. I’m on my side of the car, you’re on your side of the car. We’re on different sides of the car. You can relax. I’m not going to—jump you immediately or anything.”

“I don’t feel like you’re on the other side of the car,” Frankie says, and pulls her head out of the blanket, although it’s still tucked up against her neck. “I feel like you’re right next to me. Sure, you might happen to have suitcase handles for pelvic bones, but that aura of yours definitely isn’t skinny. It’s large and in charge. Voluptuously womanspreading all over this backseat.” She wiggles one arm free and juts it in Grace’s direction. “Look what you’re doing to me. I have goosebumps.”

“Just from me?” Grace asks, a little amazed. “I’m doing that to you?” God, they’re two feet apart and Frankie’s acting like Grace is already on top of her. The sudden mental picture makes her flush. “How the hell am I doing that? I’m completely wrapped in a blanket. And I’m positive you can barely even see my face in this light. I can hardly make out yours, and between the two of us, my eyesight’s definitely better.”

Frankie pulls her arm back. “I don’t have to see you or touch you to feel you, Grace.”

It’s not a seductive turn of phrase, or not intentionally seductive, anyway, but regardless, the growing flush in Grace’s face answers it, spreading down her neck, filtering lower. Because the thing is, she really does understand, on some level, what Frankie means about the connection pulling the two of them together, even taking into account the physical distance dividing their
bodies. For Grace, two feet might as well be no feet at all. It doesn’t matter if they’re not right next to one another; all of her senses are coming awake, alert, stretching quietly in Frankie’s direction.

“Back to our feelings check-in,” Frankie continues. “I took mine out for a twirl, now it’s your turn. Who’s visiting you right now?”

She takes the question seriously, thinking for a minute about how best to articulate what she’s feeling, and finally says, “Anticipation.”

No answer, at first, and then Frankie releases a long breath, a little shakily. “Oh. Anticipation. I really wasn’t expecting you to say ‘anticipation.’ That’s a good one. And by anticipation, I’m assuming you mean—” She trails off. Starts again, this time formally, awkwardly. “Grace, I would be interested in you elaborating further on that particular topic, if that is something you would also care to mayhap partake in.”

Grace leans her head against the window, the glass cool on the temple of her warm forehead. Not looking at Frankie, facing forward, she says, softly, “Okay. I can elaborate. Why don’t I tell you about the other time I remember feeling like this? That time I ran out of the living room to—you know. Call my cousin. You remember, right? When we first unboxed the vibrator prototypes.”

“Remember? Like I could ever forget. You booked it, sister. You double-booked it. And that cousin line never fooled me for a hot second, by the way. When it comes to female masturbation, I’m the metaphor champ. Twirling the pearl’s a good one. Taking my talents to South Beach. Ooh, I know. DJing. That’s my favorite.”

She won’t let Frankie’s unnavigable mental detours distract her. “The thing is, I realized on my way out of the living room that I’d grabbed your vibrator. The one you’d been holding the whole time. Do you remember that? I’d grabbed it from you just before I’d left the room. You’d had your hands around it the entire time we were talking, telling me about the ‘trial run’ you were going to give it. I didn’t even figure out what I’d done until I was halfway up the stairs.”

“Ah,” Frankie says, quietly. “Now that you mention it, that does sound vaguely familiar.”

“And there I was, holding your vibrator in my hot little fingers. Now it was our vibrator. Of course, I didn’t think about it. I couldn’t let myself think about it, not consciously, because if I had, it would’ve been admitting something I didn’t want to recognize. Not then. But at the same time, on some level I knew, I knew that in just a few minutes, what you’d been touching would be touching me.” She pauses. “No, that’s not it, exactly. Not just touching me. Inside me.”

There’s a soft gasp from the other side of the car, yanking Grace right out of the memory and back into the backseat, where the Frankie who’s here and now is making a sound that pulls the empty space between them tighter than ever. Pleasure shudders briefly through her, and Grace shifts a little in response, crossing her legs at the knee, pushing her thighs together a little more snugly. She’s done that, just with her voice, with her words. She’s made Frankie sound like that.

“So when I say ‘anticipation,’ that’s my point of reference. How I felt then, heading to my bedroom, knowing what was waiting for me. What I was going to do to myself with your vibrator. And that happens to be a lot like what I’m feeling now, here with you. Is that the kind of feelings check-in you were interested in hearing from me, Frankie?” Some impish part of her can’t resist asking the question, knowing with delicious certainty what she’s making both of them feel. “How am I doing?”

“Grace Hanson,” Frankie breathes, “Christ on a cracker,” and it sounds a little like prayer or pleading. “I think you know exactly what you’re doing to me, you brazen hussy. Is there some sort
of off-the-books night class at the community center on how to talk dirty that you didn’t tell me about, or are you just naturally gifted as shit at this?"

What’s heat from blushing and what’s heat from arousal isn’t all that easy to tell apart, and in the end, they’re too close to the same thing for Grace to bother spending much time distinguishing between them. Dirty talk. Oh, gosh. She hadn’t thought of it like that, not in those words. To some extent, she’s simply letting herself voice out loud what she’s thinking about, what she’s remembering. But that’s what it is, really—dirty talk—and besides, Frankie’s right. Grace really does seem to be naturally good at it.

Who knows. Maybe she’s had some practice. Maybe her line of work’s helped Grace to polish an unconscious gift over all these years, becoming better and better at organizing her speech to get the results she wants. In countless meetings, phone calls, conversations with suppliers, distributors, her job’s been to choose the right words, braiding her sentences together into the story she wants to tell. But what she’s able to do to Frankie just by speaking isn’t only about language, and knowing it well. It’s about knowing Frankie, too, and in some ways far better than Grace has ever been able to know herself. Knowing just how Frankie’s body responds to all sorts of intimate stimuli no one else would bother to notice. The way Frankie always shivers, head-to-toe, when a loose strand of hair tickles her collarbone. The loud sigh of delight she reserves for an overripe nectarine, index finger and thumb holding the stone fruit at her wet mouth as she takes a too-large bite. The spot at the small of her back that always itches when it’s hot out. How thoroughly Frankie melts when someone scratches her scalp, sliding down into the couch cushions, whimpering with contentment at a job well done.

If there’s anything Grace enjoys, it’s being good at what she does.

“I didn’t realize,” she says. It’s partly true, or it could be, depending on how the dangling sentence ends. “If it’s too much for you, talking like this, I can—”

“No,” Frankie tells her, and the shy wonder in Frankie’s voice makes Grace shiver a little, even though she’s warm. Too warm, really to be under this blanket. “Not too much. Maybe earlier it might’ve been, but not now. I think—I could— Let’s keep going. If you want.”

“Keep going?” Oh, dammit, why did her voice have to squeak? “Are you sure?”

“I can’t deny that I’m scared. I’m scared as all hell. But I’d be lying if I didn’t tell you my other truth, and that truth is—I want this. I want this more than I’ve ever wanted just about anything, and that includes the five hours I stood in line for the midnight premiere of Carlos Castaneda: Enigma of a Sorcerer. Well, admittedly, I was the line.”

“I know. I know you want this.” She’ll never stop being astounded by it, that something she needs this badly could be matched in return by need that mirrors her own. “But I also know how important it is for you to take things slowly, one step—”

“Do you want to touch me, Grace?”

It’s astonishing, how the unexpected question lands like a punch to her solar plexus, actually winding her, and her legitimate concern about moving too quickly for Frankie’s boundaries is no match for the impact. For a few seconds, she can’t even speak.

“Yes,” she manages, finally. “God, yes. Yes.”

“My razor-sharp instincts are sensing that you’re pretty into this whole touching idea, what with three yeses all lined up in a row, but humor me just a wee bit, will you? Say yes again for me one
more time. I like hearing you say it. You see, the word ‘yes’ is the lifeblood of openness, and, well—Grace, if you want to—to say yes to touching me, then I think I’d—” Frankie’s head is under the protective layer of the blanket. “I could be open for it. For you.”

Another mental image flashes unbidden through Grace’s fevered head, this one far more pornographic than the first, and she bites her lip. For you, not to you. Does Frankie have any idea what she’s implying through all her stammering? Grace honestly can’t tell. But she’ll say yes a hundred times, if that’s what Frankie wants from her. She’ll say any goddamned word Frankie likes to hear. “Yes.”

“Thank you,” Frankie says, and pulls down the blanket, exposing her face again. “Bhavatu to you too. And for the record, I know exactly what you’re wondering—remember, intuitive powers—and the double entendre there with ‘open’ was super intentional. You’re not the only one in this car who knows sex words, Grace. I have at least ten really great ones stored away in the old noggin.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s the case,” Grace says, a little weakly. “I’m sure you know a lot more than ten, given all those seasons of Taxicab Confessions we have on DVD for some reason.”

“I sincerely appreciate your show of faith in my powers of sex word knowledge, but before we get too distracted by what’s awaiting us down that alluring road, let’s get back to the part where we’ve established, definitively, beyond a doubt, that you want to touch me and I want to touch you back. Did I say that second part yet, Grace? If not, you should know that I—I really want to touch you. Badly.”


“You obliquely mentioned my boundaries just a minute ago, and you were right, they do need some meticulous weeding and pruning right about now. As do yours. And I think the best way we can do that is by taking some time to establish what we want, what we don’t want, and how far we want to go. In other words, if we’re seriously entertaining this idea of making the leap from uncommitted platonic roommates to lifelong amorous bedmates, we’ve got to have a real sex talk first.”

“How far we want to—” Grace is still back on the idea that there’s now, definitively, a physical destination for them to negotiate, and then she realizes what Frankie’s said. “Wait. A sex talk? But you never want to talk about physical intimacy when it has anything to do with your physical intimacy. Not seriously, anyway. The last time the two of us talked about you and sex—” She stops herself. Shit. The last time they’d talked about sex in any real confessional or lurid detail had been before Frankie slept with Jacob for the first time. Before the afternoon when Grace, sloppy drunk and throbbing with pain she couldn’t mute, had thrown Frankie’s anxieties about vaginal sex right in Jacob’s disbelieving face. She’d hurt Frankie deeply, Grace knows, and the guilt still claws at her chest when she thinks about how angry she’d been, how much she’d needed to strike out blindly at the soft source of all that pain. Of course, she hadn’t meant any of it. The thing is, she never means any of it.

She tries again. “Talking about sex isn’t all that easy for you.”

“It isn’t,” Frankie agrees. “And I know admitting what you want isn’t exactly an afternoon with mod podge and beach litter for you either, even though we’re both discovering you happen to be an out-and-out savant of titillation. But it’s extremely important to me that this time, I do things the right way. Full disclosure. No holding back. That way, it’s less likely someone ends up getting hurt.”

*This time.* Frankie’s thinking about Jacob too, Grace realizes, and winces. What had she held back
there? What couldn’t Frankie tell him?

“Full disclosure,” she repeats, and decides not to let herself wonder any further about Jacob, at least for the moment. He doesn’t need to be here with them. “All right. I can go along with that, I suppose. But you should know that I really have no clue how one actually goes about having a sex talk.”

She’s never discussed sex or sexual preferences with any of her partners. Not directly. Sex has always been something you do, and quietly, with the lights out, making sure you’re on your back as much as possible so the skin of your face falls back attractively for the man on top.

“Beats me,” Frankie says, shrugging enough to pull the blanket a bit. “I’m new here, too.”

“Is there some kind of standard sex talk agenda women use that we could be following? Maybe a checklist of some sort? I’m guessing there’s no cell reception all the way out here, otherwise I could do an internet search on my phone.”

“No, no, wait a tic. I’m getting a brainwave. What if I just start naming some specific physical activities we could do, and for each specific physical activity, I could also say something like, ‘Show of hands: how many people in this car would like to try motorboating?’ Anything that gets at least one hand from each of us, so that’s two hands, four at the max—voila, green light.”

“Motorboating. Motorbo—? You have got to be kidding me. Who the hell do you think I am, Jayne Mansfield?”

“It’s a sample placeholder, Grace. I mean, I’m really not completely sold on that particular exchange, to be honest.”

“Fine. Good. I think I’d prefer a less, uh, demonstrative discussion than your idea, if you don’t mind. No show of hands, no lights of whatever color, no distractions. Just the two of us, talking about what we want, in a dark car. Do you think we can do that?”

“Oh, sure, we can do that. No problem. Cool, cool, cool. Cool beans. Just one thing, though. If we’re not using our hands as part of this, could I hold yours while we talk? I’m thinking maybe it’ll make me less nervous about the whole process.”

Holding hands. Frankie wants to hold her hand. And that’ll make her less nervous? Jesus, how is that humanly possible? Grace’s heart is pummeling hard against her ribcage just thinking about an uninterrupted length of time with Frankie’s hand in hers.

“All right,” she concurs, “we can hold hands,” and—oh, she hadn’t thought about this part—now Frankie’s sliding closer beneath the blanket, edging towards Grace into the center of the backseat. In the span of about five seconds, the two feet separating them becomes a matter of spare inches. It’s odd, the charged hum of her skin, the vertigo she’s feeling. For years, she’s been able to sit right next to Frankie on the couch or on the patio and be perfectly fine, hardly a frisson of responding excitement at all. Or if there’d been anything, it was more than small enough to dismiss. Now, though, what she feels is overpowering. Like Frankie’s transformed, or Grace has, or they’re both stepping into what they’ve been to each other all along.

There’s a hand right next to hers on the leather seat, even though she can’t see it. Her body knows this like it knows gravity or how to wake up.

“Frankie,” she asks, and her voice is more or less steady, “how do I do this?”

“Motor neurons, chiefly.”
“No, I’m not talking about—I don’t mean literally ‘how do I hold your hand.’ I mean, how do I do —this. You and me. I was always so good at this sort of thing, with men. Before Robert. And after Robert, too. A look here, a line there. There was a kind of sense to it, like a part I knew how to play, and now I feel like there’s no sense or structure at all. Just—just this wanting. Oh, Frankie, what if I say the wrong thing? What if you don't like—" No. Too close to some primal cord of fear she can't bring herself to touch. "I guess what I’m asking is—what do I do? What do other people do, when they need something like this?”

“Just take it, honey,” Frankie says, softly, “take my hand,” and Grace, shaking, obeys.

Under the blanket, where neither of them can see what’s happening, her left hand fumbles on the seat between them, and there’s a couple of clumsy groping seconds before she’s rewarded with the thrilling pressure of Frankie’s fingers, stroking briefly against hers as their hands move together, interlocking. Instantly, all of Grace’s attention, everything in her that’s kindling for Frankie, reroutes to this new focal point, the press of warm skin on skin. She’s touched Frankie already tonight, and sure, Frankie’s touched her back, with each time seared onto the implicated places of Grace’s body, but what’s new here is the intention of it, what the coupling of their hands silently promises.

Take it. All right. She can do that. What she wants is right here, touching her, saying yes.

“Maybe we can start slowly,” Grace begins, hesitantly, “for both of us. Kissing.” She’s going to say something like do you want to do that with me, since that’s the plan, that’s the script Frankie’s already set up for them, but it isn’t what comes out. “I want to know how you like to be kissed. Tell me.”

After a moment, Frankie says, “Authentically. Sincerely. I like the person I’m kissing to really mean it. That’s more important than anything else. No emotional detachment, no secrets, and, of course, a little tongue. I like regular kissing a lot, but I also like it on my earlobes. My neck, too. I have a—my neck is extremely sensitive.”

“I know,” Grace agrees, without thinking, and then prays Frankie doesn’t ask how she knows. A couple of months ago, she’d pulled one of her good scarves right off Frankie’s neck, chiding her for not asking permission before borrowing it. The complaint had died in her mouth when she’d seen the small purple mark the scarf had been hiding, about the size of a nickel. Did you hurt yourself, she’d started to ask, but that hadn’t been the right question at all, and in a few seconds, it wasn’t necessary to inquire. From the look of embarrassment on Frankie’s face, the way she hadn’t been able to meet Grace’s eyes, it was suddenly clear exactly how the mark on her neck had gotten there. Clear, too, what Frankie liked, what she’d wanted Jacob to do to her.

They hadn’t discussed it. Frankie wore turtleneck dresses for the rest of the week.

Now, though, Frankie thankfully doesn’t seem to register Grace’s automatic response. She’s still talking, running down the litany of places she likes to be kissed. “On my shoulders, especially the right shoulder. My clavicle, natch. Oh, my arms. That’s a big one.”

“Your arms?”

“Of course. Arms are absolutely the most critical of all the minor erogenous zones on the human body, with the possible exception of the stomach. Hasn’t anyone ever kissed you on your arms before?”

She thinks back, as far as she’s able to let herself, and can’t come up with a memory. “No.”
“Oh, Grace,” Frankie says, squeezing her hand once, hard, and there’s a surprising amount of emotion in her voice for what’s really an insignificant reason. It’s not like arm-kissing is some tremendously important life experience. “That’s terrible. Your arms should be kissed, and as often as possible. They’re beautiful.”

“Yeah, right. Maybe twenty years ago.” She hates her triceps with the kind of disgust she usually reserves for incompetent people. They’d betrayed her, the skin gradually slackening over the years, and she’d been in her sixties when she’d finally allowed herself to acknowledge that no amount of weight-lifting could be enough to successfully fight time and gravity. “They’re not my best feature, not by a long shot, and that’s just objective fact. You haven’t even seen them, Frankie, not really. Not uncovered. So how would you know?”

“Because I know. I’m omniscient, Grace. Like a narrator in a nineteenth-century British novel, just, you know, sans all the imperialism. And knock off that self-critical shit right this second, you hear me? Nobody gets to talk about my girl like that, not even you.”

“I’m your girl?” Grace asks, disbelieving. There’s that goddamn idiotic squeak again. “Me?”

“Well, who else?” And then Frankie lets go of her hand, and before Grace has time to let herself feel bereft for more than a second or two, she senses the left sleeve of her shirt sliding up, slowly. Frankie’s pushing it past her elbow, bunching it at her shoulder. “What you said is true, by the way. I haven’t gotten a close-up look at your arms before. But there’s no time like the present, right?”

A new shock of expectation surges through her at being touched this casually. “Aren’t we supposed to be in the middle of a sex talk?”

“I’m hitting the pause button on that. It can wait a mo’. To be continued.” She’s stroking Grace’s exposed bicep now, her fingers gentle, exploring, and Grace closes her eyes, indulging herself with the permission to enjoy it. There’s a pure exhilaration in desire, she’s finding, when it’s not reluctant. “God, you’re soft. How are you this soft? It’s like touching bamboo yarn. By the way, I get it now.”

“Get—what?” She’s spinning in place. Muscle and skin are starting to disconnect from her control, reinventing themselves as things that exist for the sole purpose of wanting. “What do you get?”

“Why you always try to help me with my blood pressure cuff, even though I keep telling you to stop being such a Hovering Harriet all the time. But you’re not just a Hovering Harriet, are you? That’s part of it, sure, but it’s not the whole story. Not at all. I think you managed to find a really convenient excuse. If you put on my cuff, you can make sure I’m doing it right and you have a reason to get your hands on me.”

It shouldn’t be nearly this exciting, hearing how obvious she is, seeing herself through Frankie’s eyes. “No, I—”

“I don’t blame you one bit,” Frankie says, “I just wish it hadn’t taken me so long to figure out I wanted to do the same thing,” and now she’s lifting Grace’s arm at the elbow, just slightly out of the blanket. Eyes still closed, frozen with what she knows is going to happen, Grace can’t do anything but lean back into the headrest, waiting, waiting, until Frankie’s warm mouth presses softly against the muscle of her bicep.

Her back arches slightly at the light weight of contact, the pressure of the kiss. The first time she’s ever felt Frankie’s mouth anywhere but her cheek, and she’s already far gone enough that she’s wondering where else that mouth could go, where else she needs it. Unthinking, ordered by
something silent, her thighs part a little, knees spreading. The sound of denim moving against the leather seat is conspicuous in the quiet car.

“Oh,” she implores, not able to stop herself, “oh, please—” She takes back her earlier skepticism. If this is what arm-kissing is like, if this is what she’s been missing—

Against her skin, Frankie whimpers, the tiny noise vibrating into Grace’s arm, and hearing it, feeling it, Grace twitches. With the last vestiges of rapidly fading self-control, she manages not to push herself down into the seat, not to seek out the pressure she needs.

“Jesus, Grace, you’re so turned on, aren’t you?” The tips of Frankie’s fingers are traveling down Grace’s arm, nails scraping just slightly against the inside, over her elbow, down to her wrist. “I can hear you, I can hear it in your voice—I’ve barely touched you, and you’re, you’re this ready for me—”

“Frankie—”

“I told you what I like. How I like to be kissed. Tell me—” She pauses, and Grace, almost delirious, thinks she knows exactly what Frankie’s going to ask: *tell me how to kiss you*. But that’s not what she hears. “Tell me how you touch yourself.”

*Christ.* Her breathing is loud even in her own ears, shallow, rapid. Sex may not be so easy for Grace to talk about, but masturbation—well, that’s a little different. Safer. Maybe it’s the professional veneer they’ve built up together around the act, and maybe it’s all the practice she’s had in the last year or so, learning how to be hungry for her own body, but she’s on far steadier ground here than she would be with invoking past partnered encounters. And Frankie knows that. Frankie knows her. The two of them, casually tangling their lives together so thoroughly over the past few years that they’re waking up, somehow, already inside this ripe intimacy.

“Tell me about it,” Frankie continues, “and look at me, too. Please? I need—I need to see your face. I need to see you tell me.”

“Just—keep touching me.” She doesn’t recognize what she’s asking or the sound of her voice. It’s thin. Frayed. “I’ll tell you, I’ll look at you, whatever you want, just whatever you do, I need you to keep touching me.”

“Promise. I promise.”

She turns her head to the left, then, to look at Frankie, and even though her sight isn’t great in the dark, the two of them are close enough that she can see Frankie just fine. She’s staring back at Grace, the side of her head resting against the top of the seatback, eyes open wide, and she’s matching Grace breath for shallow breath. The dazed expression on her face is surprisingly familiar. It’s the same one she’d worn earlier, sitting on the couch while Grace promised her something they’d never known she wanted. The same one she’d had at the Del Taco, watching Grace give herself something good. Frankie, she realizes with dizzy astonishment, is just as aroused as she is, trying just as hard as Grace is to hold back.

Her hands find Frankie’s again, open and grasping, and what Frankie’s doing isn’t holding them, not really, because her fingers won’t stay still, stroking inside Grace’s palms, pressing down.

“I told you before,” Grace says, a little roughly, “what I like to do to myself, didn’t I? When we were in the living room.”

“You said slow.” Frankie doesn’t hesitate. “I keep thinking about it. I’ve been thinking about it all
night. You said you like it slow. That you’re patient with yourself. What do you do?”

“I try to clear my mind, first. I try not to think too much so I can relax. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. Once—” She isn’t going to close her eyes. She’s going to be brave. “One time I thought about you. What your skin feels like. I couldn’t help it. It made me so— You were right, before, about me finding excuses to touch you. I didn’t realize it, but that’s exactly what I was doing.”

“You thought about me during? And you never told me?”

“When, exactly, should I have dropped that little tidbit into casual conversation? Before or after we talked about replacing the deck chair cushions?”

“Point taken. Go on. Keep talking.”

She breathes in, thinking about what she wants to say, what she needs Frankie to learn about her. “Almost everything I know I like in bed, I’ve learned over the last year or so by teaching myself. Alone. The thing is—this sounds so absurd, saying it out loud—before, I’d always thought about sexual pleasure as something women get from a man. I know, like some kind of idiot.”

“But I—I’m both a good teacher and a quick learner. It didn’t take me long to figure out how to make myself want it. How to make it build gradually. How much pressure I need to get just close enough—and then stop for a minute, because it’s too good, because I can’t let it end yet. I want more. Stopping, though—that’s the difficult part. Holding myself back. Because when I’m at that point, I need so badly to—” Without planning it, she lifts her hands to hold Frankie’s shoulders, fingers grasping what’s waiting for her beneath the fabric, the sinew and warm muscle of Frankie’s small frame. The blanket falls down, collapsing into their laps. “It doesn’t always work, though. I’m not always able to stop. I couldn’t, when I thought about you. And that time with the prototype, the same exact thing happened. It took almost no time at all. Like I’d been warming up before I’d even laid down on the bed. Like I’d already been making it build inside me with every time I touched you.”

“Oh, I wish—I really wish I’d been there for that, with the prototype,” Frankie says, stammering a little, and Grace’s breathing hitches audibly at the thought of it, “although, I guess, hey, I kind of was, from what you’re saying, in a sense, or a part of me was, some kind of, I don’t know, some energy thing, some spirit shit, I mean, if you—Grace?”

“No idiot,” Frankie interrupts. “Be kinder to your sweet self than that.”

“Misinformed, then. But I—I’m both a good teacher and a quick learner. It didn’t take me long to figure out how to make myself want it. How to make it build gradually. How much pressure I need to get just close enough—and then stop for a minute, because it’s too good, because I can’t let it end yet. I want more. Stopping, though—that’s the difficult part. Holding myself back. Because when I’m at that point, I need so badly to—” Without planning it, she lifts her hands to hold Frankie’s shoulders, fingers grasping what’s waiting for her beneath the fabric, the sinew and warm muscle of Frankie’s small frame. The blanket falls down, collapsing into their laps. “It doesn’t always work, though. I’m not always able to stop. I couldn’t, when I thought about you. And that time with the prototype, the same exact thing happened. It took almost no time at all. Like I’d been warming up before I’d even laid down on the bed. Like I’d already been making it build inside me with every time I touched you.”

“Yeah?”

“If you don’t kiss me soon I think I’m going to pass out.”

“I can—I can do that,” Grace falters, feeling a bit like she’s going to faint herself, “Don’t pass out, please, I can—” and her hands slide up from Frankie’s shoulders over the curve of her neck, searching past the thick soft tangles of her hair for the back of her head. “What about our sex talk? We never finished discussing how far we want to—”

In a rush, Frankie says, “Nothing below the waist, I’m not ready, not yet, also feel free to vocalize as much as you want, because I’m finding that really does it for me in a big way. I’d be into a little hair-pulling but not too hard. Eye contact, and a lot of it. I think that’s all for now. How about you? Any requests?”

It’s extremely difficult for Grace to get past the hair-pulling invitation, especially with Frankie’s
hair already around her hands. But Frankie’s asked a question that deserves an answer, and a true one, if they’re going to do this the right way. “Just—” She presses the tips of her fingers into the hidden place where Frankie’s hairline meets her neck. “Just want me, Frankie. That’s all I care about. That’s it. Want me.”

“More than you know, sweetheart,” Frankie tells her, and that’s when Grace leans in, kissing her for the first time.

Their kiss is a kiss in the same way the ocean is a tide pool; technically, that’s what it is, molecularly, it fits the definition. It’s tentative, at first, and for a few seconds, neither of them move, acclimatizing to the pressure of mouth on mouth, not disturbing the new and wondering thing they’re creating together, letting it grow slowly. Grace’s heart is all bell, all blood, ringing sticky in her chest, throat. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind a shaky thought forms: this is it, this right here, I’ve found it. I’ve found the thing that I am.

Her hands slip to Frankie’s jawline, pulling her closer, and she’s vaguely aware of the blanket falling down from her lap to the floor as she moves, turning her body, shifting her legs towards Frankie. She has Frankie’s lower lip in her mouth, Frankie pushing forward for more, her own hands rising to cup either side of Grace’s head. Frankie, who wants her. Frankie, who tastes exactly like the eucalyptus cough drops she always keeps stashed in her purse, the tang of it sharp, and it isn’t a surprise, that taste, but it’s no less astonishing to have it for her own. She feels Frankie’s jaw relax in her fingers before she feels Frankie’s mouth open under hers, just slightly. Just enough to invite Grace to deepen the kiss further, her tongue acting like it knows just what to do, like her keen body’s somehow been smarter than she’s given it credit for all along. No part of her feels detached or like an onlooker. She’s found the secret no one would give her, and she’s inside it.

When they finally pull apart, it’s in name only, mouths barely separate, foreheads still pressed together, hands still keeping contact, and eventually, Frankie whispers, “Oh, sweet mother of mercy.”

“I think—” Grace is breathing hard. “I think I’ve been saving up for something like this for a very long time.”

“I know a place where you can cash that check.”

“I bet you do.”

“With limited interest. 0% APR. No, wait, that’s a credit card. Low transaction fees? Terms and conditions apply—oh, for Christ’s sake, Grace, just make me be quiet, already—”

She does. Her fingers thread back into Frankie’s thick hair, because they can, and she can’t imagine ever finding that permission anything but extraordinary. Grace gets to do this now, touch Frankie like this, without pretense or dissembling. Take her time. Kiss Frankie’s lips, and her cheeks, first the left one, then the right one, and then her forehead, lingering there for as long as she wants, simply because she wants. It’s just as much a promise as it’s always been.

Next is Frankie’s nose, the cute little shrub of her nose, which deserves some attention, given how nicely it sits on her face, and Frankie makes a little surprised sound when Grace softly kisses the tip.

“That’s new,” she offers. “I don’t think anyone’s ever done that before. I like that. I like that a lot.”

Being first shouldn’t matter—this isn’t a race—but it does matter, dammit, and it feels great. She’s
given something to Frankie no one else has, and when she kisses her mouth again, it’s clumsy at first because they’re both still smiling, delight flooding in just as much as desire. Happy. Oh, good lord, she’s so happy. Grace is in the middle of the godforsaken desert, in the backseat of her own car, making out with her ex-husband’s husband’s ex-wife like there isn’t a whole world out there waiting for them to come back to it, and she’s unimaginably, indescribably, incandescently happy. This—this is what she could have, this beautiful trembling thing, this saturation, this growing starvation getting fed.

Withdrawing just enough to speak, Frankie asks, hesitantly, “Can I—? Please?”

Her hands are poised at the top button of Grace’s blouse, and Grace, speechless, nods her approval, head falling forward a bit, her cheek brushing against Frankie’s in the process. She can’t see what Frankie’s doing, but she can hear and feel it just the same: the popped release of each button, one at a time, unbearably slowly, the tight restraint of her blouse loosening a little more with every success. Any second now, she’ll be uncovered. Her sternum prickles.

Not enough to wait for it. More. She pushes Frankie’s hair off her neck and moves her head down a little to suck at the exposed skin just below Frankie’s jawline, needing to make her react. Instantly, Frankie gives her exactly what she wants, gasping loudly, tugging down the plackets of Grace’s blouse like an unthinking reflex. “Harder,” she instructs, strangled. Grace does what she’s told. “Like that—oh—ah—”

Somehow, Frankie’s hands are inside her top before she’s even aware they’ve moved there, spanning Grace’s bare waist. She feels the pinch of fingers into the soft edges of her stomach, pressing in, kneading at her, as her mouth works at Frankie’s neck, breeding increasingly desperate sounds out of Frankie—and then, suddenly, she’s propelled backwards. Her spine knocks into the door behind her as Frankie abruptly pushes her away, breaking the contact.

“I need,” Frankie stutters, “Grace, I need a minute, otherwise I’ll— I don’t think I can— Christ almighty— Are you some, I don’t know, some kind of sex witch? I’ve never—not once in my entire life— How, how are you doing this to me?”

She can’t answer, not right now. Panting, Grace leans back at an angle into the door where Frankie’s left her, the window hard against the back of her head, and she doesn’t care that it’s a little uncomfortable. All she cares about is Frankie, staring at her, panting too, looking like she’s been slapped.

They’re so caught in one another that it takes them both a few seconds to realize Grace’s blouse is now split open, exposing what’s underneath. Frankie’s gaze drops to her chest, and Grace knows exactly what she’s seeing: one of her La Perla bras from her favorite set of underthings, all black with slightly scalloped edges and see-through lace cups. The one she’d changed into upstairs before they’d left for the desert, her fingers clumsy with expectant possibility. Prone and helplessly aroused, Grace lifts her chin a little, breaking eye contact, and she can feel her chest rising and falling, rising and falling with each quick breath. It’s too much to look down at herself, remembering precisely what’s there. Frankie can do that for both of them.

Frankie isn’t saying anything. For an impossible length of time, Grace waits, still looking up, and their rapid breathing is the only sound she hears, filling the car.

Eventually, she hears herself ask, “Are you ever going to do more than look at me?”

“You’re damn right I am, you impertinent minx,” Frankie tells her, sounding a lot like she’s trying to get control of herself and failing utterly. “But not just yet. I want—I want to watch you first. Show me how you like it.”
Show me. Grace doesn’t have to be told again. Her right hand touches her stomach first, tentatively, fingers spreading out, until her palm rests flat against the plane of her skin. For a moment, she’s still, getting used to the pressure, and then she slides it higher, inhaling with the flicker of pleasure she feels as her hand settles over her left breast, the small relief that comes with finally getting to touch herself. Index finger and thumb press together around the nipple, already hard under the lace. Feeling the scald of Frankie’s stare, letting it thrill her, she pinches her nipple lightly through the fabric, giving herself what she likes. There’s an answering shock between her legs, violent enough to make her hips jerk, her feet come briefly off the floor. “God,” she gasps, astonished with herself, a little frightened by the intensity. It’s never been anywhere near this strong before. “Oh, my God —”

“Grace—”

With her free hand, Grace reaches out blindly and grabs at the collar of Frankie’s dress, bunching it between her fingers, pulling her in. “Please,” she says, no longer caring what she sounds like, “please, Frankie, looking’s over now, you have to—” Before she can get out the rest of her plea, Frankie’s there, above her, and she leans down to kiss Grace with astonishing focus for a woman who normally gets distracted by her reflection in the toaster. The concentrating pressure of it is exactly what Grace needs: deep, deliberate, Frankie wholly present.

Without breaking away, she pushes off her sneakers with each foot as leverage for the other, and lifts her legs up onto the seat, stretching them out against the side of Frankie’s body. They kiss, and they kiss, and they kiss, sinking into each other, and the force of it pushes Grace down a little further, the back of her head banging against the door, bumping up against the armrest. She’ll have a hell of a headache tomorrow, and some neck spasms, too, probably, but right now, that concern is at the very bottom of her priority list. Much higher on that list is her growing awareness of how much their bodies have shifted in just the last ten minutes or so. Somehow, they’ve gone from sitting up straight to Grace mostly recumbent in the backseat and Frankie—well, there’s no other way to put it. Frankie’s lying on top of her.

At some point they’ll have to stop. At some point.

She touches Frankie’s back, feeling the tense muscles there, the sharp ridges of her spine tangible beneath the cloth. It isn’t that she’s surprised by how different this is, here with Frankie, then it’s been with anyone else; of course being with a woman is different. She’s surprised by all the small things she’d never thought to anticipate. The immense relief of not having to pretend. No concern wasted on what her ruined makeup must make her face look like, or how messy her hair is. How good it feels to follow her instincts, letting go fear, and be rewarded again and again by the sound of need in Frankie’s voice, meeting her halfway. And—oh—the soft push of Frankie’s breasts just below her own, the perfect sensation of it only just now entering into Grace’s smeared awareness. Hand slipping down, her impatient fingers graze the edge of Frankie’s chest, the side swell of her breast, the little she can reach. In response, she feels Frankie wiggle a little against her.

It’s still not enough. Breaking the kiss, she gets out, “Your dress—Frankie, I can’t touch you the way I want. I can’t get to your skin— Can you—” She won’t ask for anything like what she’s imagining, out of respect for Frankie’s earlier guidelines. “If you rolled up the sleeves, your arms, maybe I could—”

“They’re too tight, they don’t roll very well,” Frankie says, breathlessly, “but I’ll think of something. Keep your shirt on.” She laughs into Grace’s ear, a giddy hiccup. “Grace, get it, it’s funny because you don’t have—”

Grace nudges with her mouth against the same tender spot on Frankie’s neck from earlier, and just
the promise of what she can do to her is enough. Frankie stops talking immediately, the laughter in her voice hitching on an inhale.

“I wish I’d known this secret years ago,” Grace murmurs, against Frankie’s neck. “How to get you to hush. Turns out all you need is my mouth. Right here. It drives you absolutely crazy.” She licks out at her skin, tasting salt, and Jesus Christ, she can feel Frankie’s hips buck impulsively into her side, pushing against her thigh, asking silently for more. “Look at you. You couldn’t hide this from me even if you wanted to.”

After a few moments, once Frankie’s evidently managed to recover enough to speak again, she says, pulling back a little, “You’re one to talk, Ms. Transparent. Ms. Exhibitionist. Like this,” and now her hand’s stroking Grace’s breast, lightly, tracking the small curve of it. “You put this on for me, I bet. This bra. Before we left. Just in case. You wanted me to see you in something pretty. I know you.”

Grace is past denying anything now. She nods readily, breathing through her nose.

Frankie’s shifting down a little, the friction of her movement the best kind of torture. Without thinking consciously about it, Grace moves, too, her left leg taking advantage of the opportunity to rearrange, and then—she gasps a little when she realizes what’s happened—one of her legs is on each side of Frankie’s body—Frankie, no longer just on top of her, but between her legs, too.

She’s so focused on what’s happening, this new position they’ve found themselves in, what they’re moving towards with lightening speed, that it doesn’t register what Frankie’s doing until she feels the heated lick of Frankie’s mouth at the top of her breast. Frankie’s pulling down the bra cup, her tongue teasing at Grace, hair spilling over Grace’s chest. For some reason, it’s that sensation above all others—the overload of Frankie’s hair, unbound, uncontained, brushing against her bare skin—that deepens the ache, makes her start to wonder how in the world she’s going to get the release she desperately needs.

And still, still she hasn’t touched Frankie, not the way she wants, not her hand on Frankie’s skin, all because Frankie’s wearing a goddamn impenetrable dress that doesn’t open—

“—Frankie, please, I need you to—” and just then, just as she’s asking, Frankie’s mouth closes around her nipple, the perfect shock of it immediately answering lower, stronger. As if it’s all one word, she begs, “Ohyou’vegotobefuckingkiddingme. Frankie—”

Frankie makes an approving mmmmmm against Grace’s skin. Her tongue is doing positively unholy things to Grace, who bucks up into her mouth, moaning.

“Oh, my dear sweet God.” She hasn’t invoked the Lord’s name this frequently since Sunday school. “Frankie, I’m not joking, I—I’m really—you’re making me—”

There’s a stroke of cool air on her breast as she’s released. “Where’s your—” Frankie’s saying, fumbling at Grace’s side, near her hip. “Give me your—” Hand, Grace realizes, and complies, grasping it as Frankie shifts up again so that their bodies are parallel, chest against chest, stomach against stomach. She’s not lying fully against Grace, so there’s a little space between them—how, she wonders dimly, is Frankie this strong, to be able to hold herself up like this?—and then the thought dissipates as she figures out what Frankie happens to be doing with her hand: pulling it down between them, working it under the skirt of Frankie’s dress.

“Frankie,” she manages, understanding for the first time why heart attacks in the bedroom are a thing. “Frankie, you said—you told me you didn’t want anything below the waist—”
“New plan. It’s the only way I can think of for you to touch me without my taking off—” She moves her leg up towards Grace for easier access, bending it at the knee, and seriously, *how is Frankie this unbelievably flexible? The woman never exercises, notwithstanding her Costco’s-closing-in-five-minutes-and-I-have-to-hit-up-ten-sample-stations-first run. Grace would call it unfair, except for all the possibilities Frankie’s flexibility puts into play, a number of them flashing through her mind right now and every single outcome more than fair to Grace. “Can you—can you reach—?”*  

Her hand closes around the muscle of Frankie’s leg, the lower part of her thigh. Oh, God, she feels so unbelievably fucking *good*. Warm. Soft here, too, maybe even softer than her arm, if that’s possible. “Yes—I can reach—”  

And she can, slipping up the tender inside of Frankie’s thigh, her fingertips teasing out faint and frantic sounds from both of them. She’s trembling a little, thinking about what she could do, what’s right there waiting for her if she moved her hand up higher just a few more inches, past the boundary they’ve set and into the hot slick place Grace knows must be just like her own, begging to be filled. What she could make Frankie do with just a couple of clever fingers, or the push of her palm, how Grace could make her sound and shake and fall apart—  

“Oh, fuck, I’m so close,” Grace chokes out, realizing that it’s true, that it’s been true for a while and becoming clearer, more defined with each building second. Hearing herself say it makes it even worse. “I’m too close, honey, I need, I don’t think I can stop—I’m sorry, it’s too much, I—”  

She hears her name somewhere else and she’s arching back again, the hand she’d had on Frankie now pressing hard between her legs, over her jeans and past shame, past embarrassment. So fucking close, the heel of her hand rubbing against her clit exactly what she needs, but she doesn’t need much; she’s already there, so easy for it after the long slow tease of the night. After months of wanting Frankie, maybe. After the decades she’s spent pushing need back, down, away. The surge of herself is rolling in, now, unstoppable, and suddenly she realizes there’s a hand cupped over her hand, pressing down too, helping her along. She cries out.  

“It’s all right,” Frankie’s saying, above her, “it’s all right, Grace, it’s okay, you’re okay, oh, my sweet darling girl, I’ve got you,” and with a sob of relief, she comes, everything contracting to a single point of dense and unbearable joy. The orgasm pulses through her in a long series of convulsions, one after another, hard and fast. Together they’re strong enough to make her head slam back against the door, gray out the edges of her vision, remake the world.  

The echoes last, duplicating until Grace isn’t sure how she can keep on surviving it—and then, finally, they fade, exiting the talented shell of her body. In the aftermath, she’s utterly limp, poured out. She can’t move, her hand still resting between her legs.  

After an eternal minute, she feels a soft kiss pressed against her mouth, fingers stroking briefly against her cheek. She opens her eyes to see Frankie pulling back, smiling at her. “That looked like a *really* good one,” she says, watching Grace, her voice hoarse with emotion. “One of those tippy-top all-timers, right? Hey, pretty lady. Nice work. I’m so happy for you.”  

Belatedly, Grace realizes she’s crying. Not much, just a little, but there’s moisture in her eyes just the same, spilling over when she blinks, uncontained like every other part of her seems to be.  

“Oh,” she gets out, and clears her throat. Then, remembering she’s got limbs attached to the rest of her, even if they feel more like foam right now, she forces herself to swing her legs down to the floor so Frankie has room to sit back. With one hand braced on the seat by her shoulder, she pushes herself up into a seated position, and by this point, the adrenaline’s receded enough for her body to remember it’s not thirty-five anymore. Her neck is already starting to complain. Her back, too, and
loudly.

Wiping under her eyes with an unsteady hand, she realizes something. “Frankie—you didn't—”

“Climax? No clitoral stimulation, no—” Frankie mimes an explosion with her hands. “I have to tell you, though, I sure got close. You were—man, you were something magnificent at the end there. I think I'm going to remember that for a long time.”

“Oh.” She flushes, a little self-conscious, imagining how abandoned she must've looked. “Do you want me to—”

“Get me off? Nah. I'll take care of myself when we get back home. ASAP, if I'm being honest. We're probably talking car to studio in thirty seconds flat. But thanks.”

“Oh,” she says again, and apparently her body’s not entirely done feeling things other than pain; there’s a gentle curl of fresh arousal at the thought of Frankie taking care of herself. Needing to finish the job Grace started the second they get home. “All right. You—you do that.”

For a while, they sit together in silence, the two of them adjusting to this new altitude, this uncharted territory. Grace presses her palms against the outsides of her thighs, gently, holding herself in, feeling a little in awe of what she’s accomplished.

She looks up at the moonroof, at the few stars she can see through the glass from this angle. At Frankie’s mother-universe, the threshold of the great Mystery she’d been taught as a child was the deep veil between this life and the next. Earlier this evening, the last time she’d stared at the sky, talked to it, she’d been so damn resentful. Raw with the pain of not understanding. Now, on the other side, she feels just as raw, but in a wholly different way: peeled, somehow, and tender with gratitude, with relief. She’s touching this moment in the late years of her life, yes, and maybe in the days ahead she’ll take the time to think more about why it’s taken so long to get here. In the aftermath of what’s just happened with Frankie, though, the lateness seems less important, suddenly, then the arrival itself.

Call it the universe, call it the realm of heaven, call it comprehension. For as long as she can remember, Grace has believed that the higher world was something separate and unknowable in this life, preserved for the righteous, the good. That if she lived just so, if she stayed between the lines of her duration, she’d go there, someday, and meet her undefined reward, the compensation this existence could never give her. *The perfect fullness of communion,* she thinks, that phrase reaching her from some long-ago distant homily, and for the first time, it means something to Grace. Not another place, then, not somewhere separate she’d travel after death. She’d been wrong about that. Not a place, but a homecoming, just the same.

A kind of mercy. One she can give herself here and now.

For no other reason than because it’s possible, Grace reaches for Frankie's hand, taking it between her both of her own, and pulls it into her lap, cradling it. Silently, Frankie shuffles a little back in her direction, so that they’re sitting side-by-side again, arms and legs touching. It isn't long before Grace lets her head fall against the crook of Frankie’s neck and shoulder, letting it rest there, snuggling in.

She feels Frankie turn towards her and press a gentle kiss into her hair. It’s the kind of kiss that lingers, that wants to stay for a while. Just Frankie, with her mouth against the top of Grace’s head, breathing warm and evenly, the sweetness of it spreading through. Grace closes her eyes. They’ll go back, at some point, back to the house, and she doesn’t think about the word *home.* It’s already here.
all right, so: the story grace tells in this chapter about grabbing frankie’s vibrator out of her hands right before leaving the room with it? that is an actual thing that she actually does on the actual goddamn show, & I will probably never be over it.

the /? up at the chapter count means I have officially given up trying to estimate how long this thing is going to be. we’re definitely a lot closer to the end than to the beginning, but I’ve been saying “two more chapters” for two chapters now, & I still think there are two more chapters? probably? we’ll see.

finally, in a coincidence that is not very important to anyone but myself, today happens to be my birthday, so any comment or kudos you might feel like leaving on this chapter would be an especially delightful gift! regardless, thank you so much for reading, as always.
apologies, all, for the delay in updating! it's been a far busier summer than I anticipated, & the amount of time I've had to write in the last month has been pretty limited.

so the total chapter count is now officially & irrevocably at nine, which, yes, means two more chapters following this one. (I know I've been saying that since the fourth chapter, but I really, really, really mean it this time.) the end is finally in sight!

your incredibly generous comments & kudos have helped make writing this story an incredibly gratifying experience, & I cannot thank you enough for all the feedback you've given me so far. if you'd like to leave your thoughts on this update, in whatever long or short form those thoughts might take, I'd appreciate it enormously.

Morning light on the lids of her eyes, first, and then Grace opens them. Everything looms into focus immediately: the nightstand in front of her and what they’ve done.

What she’s done.

The enormity of the thought freezes her. She stays still on her side underneath the cool sheets, knees bent and tucked slightly towards herself, the pillow pushing against her cheek, and she breathes as best she can, waking up in this strange world where Grace asks for what she wants. It’s unrecognizable. She’s unrecognizable. For years, she’s prided herself on how consistently she’s been able to say no, to keep herself contained within narrow perimeters. *I don’t. I’m not. I can’t.*

It hasn’t been all misery. There’s a kind of sour joy she gets from abstaining, something small and hard. She’s fed on it, telling herself that it’s enough to live with. That, and the temporary break alcohol provides. Until this past year, drinking’s always been her sole physical indulgence, the one gift she’s given her body without resentment. The warm fuzz of inebriation is as close as she ever gets to a rest from herself. It’s why the idea of cutting back, just the idea of it, has always made instant panic rise inside Grace like an animal. She’s taken so much away from herself already.

A few drinks a day, sometimes a couple more than that, the mean high of triumphant self-control, and now the occasional pulse of her vibrator. Enough for her body to get by, or it had been until yesterday afternoon, when she’d sat across a lunch table from her astonished daughters, said between swallows of wine *I don’t and I’m not and I can’t* like always, and taken no pleasure from it. Nothing. Ten hours later, in the backseat of her car, she’d used the same exact words, pleading them out of her mouth, frantic and rocking under Frankie’s touch. Her shamelessness, making new meaning out of refusal.

*I don’t, I’m not, I can’t*, only now they’re promises to accelerate. *I don’t want to stop. I’m not going to. I can’t go back.*

(Back into her car, though, back into the late hours of last night, that’s somewhere Grace wants to
take herself, now that she’s a little more awake. Last night, when she’d driven them both home from the desert, her right hand resting on Frankie’s thigh as often as she could spare it, marveling quietly at the rebound of her own desire. And Frankie, still wound up tight with what they’d done together, reclining back in the passenger seat. Frankie, who’d told Grace earlier not to get her off, that she’d run to her studio and take care of herself as soon as they arrived home. Staying silent, except for the times Grace’s fingers would curl, pressing through the fabric into Frankie’s tender skin, an abbreviation for what she wanted to do. Then Frankie would sigh, or her inhale would falter. Or one time, still fifty minutes away from the house, she’d said, quietly, “Can you drive faster? Please?” The sound of Frankie needing it that badly, a hot arrow splitting up and through Grace.)

She’s starting to learn that desire stammers first in her chest and shoulders before spreading elsewhere. The flat of her palm presses in the V formed by the neck of her pajama top, good against bare skin. Beneath the sheets, she curls her legs further in and stretches them back out, restless now while she’s remembering. Heating up again.

(Two in the morning on their front porch, both exhausted and close to senseless. A goodnight kiss before going their separate directions. Just one more kiss, or it started out that way and became something else, Grace’s back thumped up against the shingled wall, Frankie’s hands on her ass like she’d been stopping herself from grabbing it all night, and maybe she had. They’d been right next to the front door, not fifteen feet from the couch by the kitchen, forty feet from her bedroom. That close. Grace hadn’t been able to hold back from asking, even though she’d known Frankie’s intentions, had spent the whole drive back imagining Frankie touching herself in her studio. Clutching at Frankie, breaking the kiss, she’d implored, “Come inside with me,” and what she’d meant to say began breaking too, fragmenting to expose the root of what she really wanted. “Inside me—please—” Incoherent. Obvious, not caring. Frankie gasping against her cheek.)

There’s lubricant in her nightstand drawer. Not much left in the jar, but enough. Grace fumbles for it, clumsy with sleep and need, knocking over the empty water glass in her sudden haste. No vibrator, not this time. She needs her fingers. Something human.

(Her right leg nudging up into the center of Frankie’s dress, pulling Frankie flush against her. You need this, she’d whispered, still astonished by it, let me, and Frankie had begged something wordless into the curve of Grace’s neck, at the same time sinking down onto her thigh. The unambiguous heat of Frankie’s arousal, perceptible even through their layers of clothing. She’d groaned at first contact, grinding against Grace, too far gone after hours of stimulation to do anything but chase relief. In Grace’s ear, fragmented, desperate: push me off, you have to do it, I can’t stop, push me off you or I’m gonna come, Grace, you’ll make me come just like this, is that what you want, tell me—)

One hand pushes below the waistband of her pajama bottoms, inside her underwear, searching for what she needs. Normally, Grace is naked when she does this, hates her clothes getting in the way, but right now the fabric pressing back against her hand, frustrating and impossible to dismiss, helps her bring last night here. Already, her clit feels tender and distended to the touch, slick underneath her coated fingers. She strokes herself, shocks herself. Shakes. Thinks back to the two of them, all hands and mouths and soft noises on the porch, right there in front of the moon and sleeping neighbors. Frankie, nearly insensible, rubbing into her thigh, tell me, and then Grace had heard her own voice pleading—

(—yes I want to feel you come—)

—and she’s only been touching herself for a minute, maybe a little more, but that doesn’t matter. It’s right here in the room with her. Frankie, last night, suddenly stiffening against Grace. Then,
whimpering oh oh oh oh into the muzzle of Grace’s neck, she’d moved faster on her thigh, seizing, and under the morning light Grace comes with her, lets memory make another wreck of herself. It’s good enough to taste.

This time, the aftershocks of the orgasm aren’t quite as strong—less buildup—and so it doesn’t take too long before she’s back to her senses, or close, anyway. Breathing hard, she lies there in her own collision, and her unoccupied hand moves to cup the side of her face, pressing against her cheek in quiet amazement. Jesus Christ. She’s done it again. Twice in twelve hours, and that’s not counting the front porch, where just a little more pressure would’ve gotten her there again.

*What a little hussy I’m becoming,* she thinks, unreasonably delighted with herself, and starts to laugh.

All of this is absolutely and objectively ridiculous. Grace Hanson, CEO, CFO, insatiable wonder. But it feels so fucking *good,* too. Self-indulgent beyond anything she could’ve let herself imagine two days ago, to touch herself like this and not force her mind into blankness, to be downright greedy for the best thing she’s ever had and ask herself for it again without shame.

She says, into the room, “Well, good morning, Grace.” Her voice is a little hoarse, but she hears the wide smile in it, too.

Barely still morning, though, according to the clock on her nightstand. Somehow it’s already past ten, and Grace squints to make sure she’s reading the little hand correctly. She never sleeps this late, not unless she’s sick. That’s Frankie’s protocol, to stay in bed until the middle of the day as often as she can, but Grace always treasures the first hours on the weekends, that time when she drinks her coffee, enjoys her quiet, holds close her sure knowledge that Frankie, at some point, will walk through their front door. She’ll be able to have a little of that time today, if she stops lying around in all this decadence and gets going sooner rather than later. Frankie’s certainly still asleep, and will be for a little while longer. After all, she’d had an exhausting evening. They both had. She’s tired, Grace figures, and then, *but she’s tired because of me, I tired her out.* The idea of it is so pleasing, so unfamiliar, that she laughs again.

What isn’t especially funny, though, is the way her head and neck and back are starting to insist on hard penance for what she’d made them do last night, in the backseat of her car. She unfolds carefully out of the bed, doing her best to avoid touching the sheets overmuch with her left hand, and finds herself amazed, again, at how caught off guard she can still be by the realities of aging. Apparently you can be seventy-three and seventeen, too, for the first time and all at once, your loud body craving all sorts of things simultaneously. Sex, a heating pad, ibuprofen. A shower. Oh, God, a shower.

“I *want* that,” she says, out loud, imagining the pulse of hot water on her head and shoulders. Hearing the sound of her own self-agreement in the room might be a little strange, but it’s nice, too.

Slowly, Grace stands up, wincing, ligaments cracking into her full height. Pain shocks briefly down her neck. Worth it. Worth ten times the punishment. She’d take every bit of this and more in a heartbeat if it meant she’d get to reenact every second.

And—the realization swamps her with relief so immense it makes her lightheaded—she will. She’ll have this again. Not in a car, not next time, but here, in her bed, or in Frankie’s bed, or maybe someday in a bed that’s theirs. Once, twice, a dozen times, more, and now and then in some renovated Palm Springs inn with 450-thread count sheets and understanding owners. All over again, only without their clothes getting in the way and nothing to hide behind. Because Frankie wants her. She’d said so over and over last night, with her words and her hands, that struck look in her eyes. What she’d done on their front porch, unable to hold herself back when she’d heard Grace
say what she'd needed.

Unbuttoning her pajama top, lost in thought, Grace works down the long row, and for a brief sweet second her fingers belong to Frankie.

She’d wanted commitment in the way you’d feel for a handrail in the dark. Walking in the park at La Jolla Cove yesterday (and good grief, how had that afternoon been only yesterday?), Grace had realized that somehow, without knowing it, she’d kept around her lifetime’s worth of discarded wishes for this one precious thing. Real and unwavering commitment beyond the shaky uncertainty of two separate paths temporarily overlapping. She’d take whatever she could get from Frankie that would prevent the possibility of another Santa Fe, or even a smaller and less shattering Santa Fe, something like a new boyfriend. So she’d stumbled fear-blind into a marriage proposal while sitting right in front of a goddamned altar like some sort of cosmic joke, the words spilling out of her frantic to be heard.

Proposed. Well, she might as well own it. Frankie’s right, after all: that’s exactly what she’d done. She’d proposed marriage while calling it by every other name in the book, unwilling to look directly at the thing she desperately wanted. Now, though, as she steps out of her pajama pants and underwear, lays them on the bed next to her top, the future is slowly taking shape in front of Grace’s open eyes, the rough outlines filling in.

And it’s funny, really, how familiar their future seems to be. It looks a whole lot like what they’ve already got, but with a few important differences—

—sitting on the beach together in their usual spot, only now she’s leaning up against Frankie, holding her hand, and they’re close enough that the wind drives some of Frankie’s hair against Grace’s face. Grace wouldn’t mind—

—slow-dancing in their living room to Johnny Mathis, patio doors open to let in the slight breeze. Grace is leading, of course, since Frankie’s dance skills are far better suited for mosh pits and fire circles. When she closes her eyes it’s the best of high school and the best of now, wrapped in “Chances Are,” Frankie’s arms—

—getting dragged all the way down to the Ocean Beach People’s Collective Organic Foods Market because Arlo really needs to offload a couple of extra Capricho de Cabra shipments before they go bad, and Grace’s car has way less shit in it. Grace would tell her all right, fine, I’ll go, if only because she’d hope, silently, that Frankie might introduce her to Arlo—

Honestly, she wouldn’t give a damn about Arlo. Arlo wouldn’t be the point. This is Grace. Frankie would say, proudly, my wife.

Hello. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Grace. I’m Frankie’s wife.

There’s movement just out of the corner of her eye, and Grace, startled, twists her head towards it, neck protesting as she turns too quickly, only to realize she’s caught herself in her own periphery. She’d glimpsed the motion of her reflection in the standing mirror near the corner of the bed.

At first, she doesn’t recognize what she sees. The woman in the mirror is naked, touching her neck with her fingertips, cheeks flushed pink from what she’s been imagining, hair rumpled. There’s sun from the windows everywhere on her skin, too, giving no compliments, and that’s when Grace starts to become familiar to herself again, taking in the litany of her deficits. She wants badly to look away from what she normally tries her damnedest to avoid: the uncompromising honesty of a body looking back. Her body, for better and worse, and she’s always fallen heavily on the latter. Her aging, unacceptable, stubborn body.
For some reason, despite her discomfort, Grace won’t let herself look away.

There it is, pulling her eyesight first: the slight small hill of her stomach, eternally curved despite the decades of exercises she’s done to exhaust it into flatness. She places her hand on it, cupping the little mound, caught between resignation and antipathy. After Brianna and Mallory, she’d never been able to get back the perfect firm line she’d had in her twenties, and the faded cesarian scar just above her pubic bone is there to remind her why, underscoring the soft arc of her belly. And God knows her stomach isn’t the only part of her that doesn’t measure up to her own standards. The less Grace thinks about the slack elasticity of her upper arms, the better. Her thighs and chest are marked with moles and faint age spots, uneven in tone, nothing like the smooth consistency she’d had in decades past. While she can’t see the creases on her skin very well from this distance, she knows what’s there, knows her own topography from the practiced touch of her fingers.

At least her breasts are acceptable. She’d had them lifted about ten years ago, a cheering-up present to herself after Phil had walked out of her life for the first time, and it’s undeniably the best thing she’s ever done for herself. If Grace squints a little, ignores the valley that’s widened a little between them and what’s above or below, she can pretend they’re more or less the breasts she’d had during the Carter Administration, back in the days when she’d used her cleavage to help her out of inconvenient situations. But the rest—the rest of her is something she wants to forget, or shove into submission, or paint up with pretty distractions that provide the confidence she presents to the world.

Out of nowhere, she wonders, what will Frankie think of me?

Frankie hasn’t seen her naked yet, not like this, but that’s where they’re headed, and as she considers it Grace flushes with a combination of elation and fear. She wraps her arms around her middle, holding herself close, keeping her gaze on that woman in the mirror, who’s seeming increasingly strange again, flustered. Show me how you like it, and Grace had obeyed, shirt pulled open and touching herself in the backseat of the car, spreading under the heat of Frankie’s gaze. She’d watched Grace with the kind of looking that’s sightless to defects. Although Grace can’t help but worry what Frankie will think about her body, it’s difficult for her to imagine anything but total compassion.

Most likely, she’d ignore the soft slope of Grace’s stomach—wait, no, she wouldn’t. Frankie would go out of her way to touch it, take her time, stroke the scar left by Grace’s second pregnancy with one reverent finger and say do you have any idea how freaking lucky you are? You made a miracle and your body reminds you about it every single second. Kissing her thighs, spots and all, whispering wait, baby, just be patient for me, I need to do this, I need to love this part of you first, while Grace lies back on the bed, legs spread and eroding into desperation. And her breasts. She’s already learned how Frankie would treat her breasts. Like something that’s fallen out of her mouth and meant to be taken back inside.

Frankie would be so kind.

The reflection in the mirror is still clutching her own waist, arms overlapping, and Grace can make out the pale splotches of color reddening on her upper chest and neck, her tightened nipples. The visual markings of her own need, now apparently infinite. She doesn’t have time for this again, not right now. She needs a shower first, before she does anything else. Then breakfast. Eggs. Or waffles. She could treat herself to waffles. Both, she thinks, with a rush of exhilaration. There’s no good reason I couldn’t let myself have both.

And then—
In her studio, Frankie’s still asleep, and somehow, Grace will manage to stop herself from walking over. She won’t open the unlocked door and tiptoe into the back and pull open the wrinkled bed sheets, sliding in. Won’t curl up close against Frankie’s warm body, face pressed against the back of her head, and tell her I want to keep saying yes.

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By the time she’s done with her shower, dressed, hair dried and sculpted into reasonable obedience, a light layer of makeup applied, it’s close to noon and later than she’d planned. Grace isn’t quite sure why she’s hesitating at the top of the stairs.

It’s unlikely that Frankie’s awake, and if she is, she’s not in the living room, or in the kitchen. Possibly painting in her studio, just like she usually seems to do in the aftermath of pivotal life moments, planting the emotion of the event into a canvas. It’s almost certainly something Frankie thinks is more abstract than it ends up being: a brunette and a blonde, fingertips touching, cactus needles. She’ll show Grace, later, and Grace will marvel at Frankie’s talent, what Frankie always manages to pull through her brushes, this silent understanding—

There’s a loud clatter downstairs from the direction of the kitchen, and Grace jumps, hand still on the railing.

Oh, shit. Frankie’s awake.

Frankie’s awake, but that’s fine, there’s nothing wrong at all with Frankie being awake, because she’s still Frankie, in spite of everything that’s happened. She’s still the same person Grace has shared a house with for nearly three years, and there’s no reason on earth she shouldn’t be in the kitchen, getting breakfast, her face probably scrunched up in concentration as she attempts to calculate the perfect milk-to-granola ratio. There are two small vertical lines that show up between her eyebrows whenever Frankie thinks especially hard, and Frankie always thinks especially hard about breakfast. It’s her favorite meal of the day, Grace knows. So many different kinds of bread.

She takes one step down at a time, slowly, walking with the same care she usually takes in stilettos—even though this pair could be mistaken for flats, the heel’s that low—and she can feel her heart beating wild in her throat and chest. Almost there. Almost back inside what they’re starting, and then she’s at the bottom of the stairs, rounding the corner towards the kitchen, wondering why am I so nervous, why am I—

When she sees Frankie, somehow her body figures it out first. There’s an immediate wrench in Grace’s stomach, entirely erasing the appetite she’d worked herself into upstairs, and it isn’t until after the sick lurch of worry takes over that she realizes what’s happening in front of her.

Frankie’s cleaning.

With her back to Grace, she’s in the middle of rubbing down the cabinets next to the double oven, stretching her cleaning rag as high as height permits, which is only about halfway up the cabinet face, and there’s no stepladder in sight. Scrubbing hard and fast, like there’s dirt on the dark blue paint that neither of them can see but Frankie seems to think is there, nevertheless. She’s wearing headphones, not her usual earbuds. They’re the kind with a black headband piece, and when Grace glances down, following the wire, she sees Frankie’s holding a portable CD player in her free hand, a Discman she hasn’t seen anyone use in at least fifteen years.

Frankie’s cleaning, and in Grace’s experience, that’s never once been a good sign.
If she waits for Frankie to turn around, she’ll probably be standing here for at least another five minutes, given how vigorously Frankie’s concentrating on the cabinets, so Grace clears her throat.

Nothing.

“Frankie,” she says, loudly.

But even without the noise she’s got blasting in her ears, Frankie’s deaf as a post. She stays where she is, still pushing away at the cabinets with her cloth, and Grace realizes that she’s scouring over the same place, again and again and again. So forcefully, in fact, that Grace, whose stomach is multiplying new knots the longer she stands here, is starting to believe that Frankie will end up wearing through the paint if she keeps this going.

Again, this time closer to a shout: “Frankie.”

Still nothing.

So she walks into the kitchen and past the island, until she’s right behind Frankie. Lifts her hand, about to place it on Frankie’s shoulder, and hesitates. She’d had her hand on this same shoulder last night, more than once, and although she’s touched Frankie’s shoulders before and thought nothing of it—forced herself to think nothing of it—right now she’s remembering what they feel like under her fingers. The bird bone of Frankie’s thin frame. Surprisingly vulnerable, making Grace think of everything that could break easily if Frankie isn’t careful.

Just before Grace touches her, Frankie freezes, maybe sensing her presence, and whirls around, wide-eyed and startled. The spoon she’s got dangling from her mouth drops to the floor.

“Grace!” she exclaims, and pulls the headphones off, shoving the Discman onto the countertop. Next to a half-eaten snack pack of butterscotch pudding, Grace notices, which explains the dropped spoon. Frankie’s off her diet. “You’re awake! But it’s so early. Shouldn’t you be in bed? In bed sleeping, is what I mean, which as we all know is the principal use of beds, per usual definition. A thing that we sleep in, most of us. Okay, starting over. You should be in bed, asleep.” Her cheeks are noticeably pink.

“It’s twelve o’clock,” Grace points out, doing a remarkable job of keeping the anxiety out of her voice, “and you’re the one who likes to stay in bed late, not me. What’s going on, Frankie? Why are you scrubbing those cabinets like Cinderella asked you to pinch-hit?”

“They’ve got to be clean first if I’m going to wax them with jojoba oil,” Frankie says, as if this statement makes total sense, emphatically waving the cloth she’s holding in the direction of the kitchen island. Grace glances over and sees the cluster of dark glass bottles with eye-dropper lids. “Jojoba oil is first-rate for wood cabinets, or so says online, and since Ambrosia got mad lazy with her oil-themed May Day gift baskets this year, I’ve got thirteen of these babies just sitting in my bathroom, collecting dust. So around about four-thirty I had a forceful talk with myself, which quickly became a cornucopia of self-berating. Richly deserved, I might add. How could I even let myself squander these bottles when they’re right here, begging to be a part of something special? What kind of person does that, Grace? A selfish person, that’s who.”

At least one of them needs to remain calm during this conversation, and clearly it’s not going to be Frankie. There’s an edge of hysteria lacing her nonsense, enough to make Grace realize she’s going to have to set aside her own mounting fear and deal with whatever this is they’re facing. Well, she’ll figure out a way to rise to the occasion, just like she always—oh, dear lord. Oh, no. Four-thirty, Frankie said. Four-thirty in the morning.
“Don’t tell me you’ve been—Frankie, you haven’t been awake this entire time, have you?”

Frankie swivels back to the cabinets and resumes her vigorous scrubbing. “Who needs sleep? Not me. I’ve been watching a lot of woodworking YouTube videos made by someone who goes by the name ‘birchplease.’ You wouldn’t think it matters, but let me tell you, the pun really adds to the general experience.”

“The general experience of what? A panic attack? Frankie, honey, please put down the cloth and talk to me.”

She doesn’t notice the term of endearment until she sees Frankie freeze mid-scour with her hand still on the cabinet, and then realizes what’s come out of her mouth, so easily and without thought. As if she were someone else. The kind of person who uses pet names naturally, and not the woman who’d had to train herself into them through repeated practice when her daughters were young.

“Honey,” Frankie repeats, to the cabinets, and why does her voice have that pained quaver in it? “Oh, God, I like hearing you call me that. I really, really do. You said it to me last night, too, you know.”

“I did?”

“You were a little busy at the time, so you might not remember, but I sure heard it loud and clear.”

“Oh.” Grace says, and blushes, guessing at what she might have been preoccupied with. “I see. Well, if you like it when I call you that, and if—if I like calling you that, then I could keep calling you that. If you wanted.”

It’s silent long enough for Grace’s stomach to twist again, harder this time, and then Frankie drops her cleaning hand, the cloth clenched tightly between her fingers. Still facing the cabinets, she says, quietly, “Grace.”

Just like that, all the manic energy propping Frankie up is gone, stripped away completely. The only thing Grace can hear now in Frankie’s voice is pain, shot through her own name and unmistakable.

The fear she’s been forcing down rises like something she needs to purge immediately, to evacuate out of herself before it makes her sick or faint, and before she can think better of it, she bursts out, “Frankie, what is it? What’s wrong? You’re worrying the hell out of me.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do! I don’t want to worry you, I just—”

“Then fucking talk already!”

“Ohay,” Frankie exclaims, and tosses aside her cleaning cloth, turning around, “okay, okay, I can do that—I need some tea. Would you like some tea, Grace? I’ll make us some tea. Tea is good. I’ve got some tiramisu rooibos that’ll really curl your lashes.”

Of all the things in the world Grace cares about at this exact moment, tea wouldn’t make the top five hundred. She backs up into the island, hands behind her, and realizing she’s blocking the range, sidles a little to her right, while Frankie fills the kettle at the sink. Deep breaths, one at a time. Deep, even breaths, but not showy ones. Normal breathing, the kind you do when you haven’t spent the morning confidently imagining a future that now, all of a sudden, seems like it could pull away.

(On the front porch, lowering her leg back to the ground and trying not to stagger with the shaking
weight of Frankie still against her, she’d lifted her hands to either side of Frankie’s face, pressed her lips to Frankie’s. “Oh, gosh,” she’d whispered, pulling back, “oh, Frankie, I can’t believe you did that,” and then Frankie had said, quietly, “I can’t believe it either.” They’d meant the same thing, or Grace had assumed they did.

The teakettle bangs onto the range top, and Frankie turns on the flame as high as it’ll go.

“Do you remember me telling you about my friend Manny?” she asks, without prelude, and withdraws from the range, backing up against the counter opposite Grace. She’s got her hands behind her back, too, Grace notices. “Manny, the guy from the—”

“—from the airport parking lot.” How many times have they had this exact exchange? “I know who Manny is. Your friend with a kid who’s anxious about his loose tooth. You told me all about it.” She remembers this information very clearly, in fact. Normally, it’s the kind of irrelevant detail she forgets about as soon as Frankie’s told her, but the kid and his loose tooth have stuck in her memory. They’d been the last part of Frankie’s ramble just before she’d blown apart Grace’s life for good with the revelation that Frankie couldn’t live without her, and Grace is fairly certain she’ll remember every word around that moment for the rest of her life. “I assume this is somehow relevant, and not a new topic you’re trying to distract me with? Remember, Frankie, I’m not you. Shiny doesn’t work on me.”

“But that’s it. That’s what I wanted you to know. Mateo is afraid,” Frankie reminds her, and she seems, suddenly, like she might be close to tears. “Of losing his tooth. He’s just so frightened, Grace. He’s frightened because he loves the shit out of that damn tooth, and, I mean, sure, maybe it happens to be a little too sharp and irritating around the edges, and it’s very particular about how it likes cleaning, and it absorbs mouthwash way too often for its own good—but it’s his tooth. It’s a part of him. And for a long time, it was always there, and he was happy with things the way they were, but now it’s, the tooth, I guess, wiggling a lot—” She opens her mouth, pinching the air in front of it, twisting her hand. “—and it’s starting to expose its roots, the part it usually keeps hidden under the gumline, so he’s— Mateo’s very worried that some morning he’s going to wake up and this tooth is just gonna fall right out of his mouth. Then there’ll be a whole new tooth that comes in, and what if things with the new tooth don’t work out—”

“Okay,” Grace says, gently, because if she doesn’t stop Frankie now this will probably continue until it gets dark. “Okay, Frankie. I get it. We’re not talking about Manny’s kid, are we.”

“Damn it all, how did you guess? It’s a metaphor, Grace. It’s really about you and me. I’m Mateo. You’re the tooth.”

If there wasn’t a palpable feeling of fragility in the room, the petrifying uncertainty that’s starting to reshape this tender thing between them, Grace might be able to find at least a little humor in Frankie’s comparison. But Frankie looks so lost and bewildered, standing there with her lower lip caught between her own teeth, hair frizzed out and clip-free, un-brushed. She’s slumped a little against the counter, wearing her overalls and a thin floral cotton button-up. Which, Grace notices, is buttoned unevenly with one side too long, like Frankie hadn’t taken the time to make sure she’d lined up the sides correctly. It isn’t the right thing to do, not now, but Grace would like nothing better than to cross the few feet separating them, re-button Frankie’s blouse for her, smooth down her hair a little, kiss her mouth—

“Right, I figured as much,” she says, instead. “Why don’t you try saying it directly to me without the metaphor? I’m a big girl. I can take whatever you’ve got.”

“Can you?” Frankie asks, and looks directly into Grace’s eyes, shoving her hands into the side pockets of her overalls. Grace hasn’t eaten anything yet today, but there’s a taste flooding her
mouth nonetheless, something metallic. “Even if I tell you that what we did together last night, what we did physically, went way too far and too fast for me to be truly comfortable with it in the cold light of day? Or warm light of day, I guess, since it’s like seventy-five degrees right now.”

Grace is glad she’s got the island behind her, keeping her steady, the cold lip of the counter reassuring underneath her palms. For Christ’s sake, she’d brought this up in the car, told Frankie they should take things slowly, even if she’d been silently wondering how that could be possible. But had Frankie listened to her concern? Taken it seriously? Oh, she’d made a show of it, all right, asking for a sex talk that really hadn’t amounted to much more than foreplay. And now Frankie’s been up all night, working herself into a panic, probably visualizing increasingly improbable ways this situation might end up in unmitigated heartbreak. Goddamn it.

“Even then,” she manages. “Frankie, are you telling me you regret what happened? I thought you wanted it—you said—I remember you saying it, clear as anything. Didn’t you say it?”

The expression on Frankie’s face shifts, pinching with obvious distress. “Lady, don’t you think for a split blue second that I didn’t want it. That isn’t what this is about. Believe me, I wanted it. Badly. It wouldn’t have happened otherwise.” One of her hands emerges from behind her, lifts like she’s going to reach out towards Grace, and then pulls back. “I still want it. I want you.”

“I want you too,” Grace confesses, shy with the admission, and although neither of them say the word now, it’s within reach, obvious enough to let it go swallowed. There’s that tug again, yanking hard between their bodies, making Grace realize that at some point in the night, something significant has shifted inside. It’s now much harder to make herself stay away from Frankie than it is to go towards her.

As if she doesn’t realize she’s doing it, Frankie touches the side of her neck with the tips of her fingers, feeling the place Grace had worked at with her mouth the night before. When Frankie’s fingers move away, Grace can see the small but obvious bruise that’s starting to purple the skin. Oh, I made that, she thinks, and arousal claws gently at her, reminding Grace that whatever her plans this afternoon, it won’t let her get far away.

“It’s not about regret, either,” Frankie tells her, interrupting Grace’s trailing thoughts. “The simple fact of the matter is that I let what I wanted take precedence over what I was ready to experience. Grace, you gave me an orgasm not ten hours after we first realized we were attracted to one another. I didn’t let Jacob watch me sneeze until we’d been dating for at least a month. You know how closely I guard my S face, and listen, I’m emphatically more private about who gets to witness my O one.”

“Well, when you put it like that.” Surely at some point she’ll get used to Frankie talking like this about the two of them, and stop blushing whenever it happens. If it keeps happening. “You’re right. We did move pretty fast. But don’t you—” If she can just find the right words, be appropriately reassuring, maybe they’ll tunnel their way out of this together. Slowly, this time. “Don’t you think that taking a little risk might not be the worst thing in the world? Look at all the risks you and I have taken and how well they’ve worked out. Moving into this house together, for starters. Creating a very successful business on our own terms—in our seventies, no less. Riding in a hot air balloon. Remember? We were both pretty afraid, that time.” For very different reasons, she doesn’t add. “And we still did it.”

“Sure, and then there are the risks that ended up mutating into total clusterfucks. Need I remind you that our decision to hunt down Phil led to your domino-like series of unhealthy choices, culminating in the emotionally abusive alcoholic binge to end all emotionally abusive alcoholic binges?”
Grace winces, hating the implicit reminder of what she’d said on that day. It’s worse when it comes from Frankie. “That isn’t the same thing. Not by a long shot.”

“Or that time I slept with Sol on a whim because I wasn’t ready to let go of what we’d had together?”

“Now that wasn’t a risk. There’s a big difference between a well thought-out risk and a rash impulse. You slept with Sol without thinking. And you thought about this in advance, about being intimate. I know. I was there.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“You called this ‘a little risk,’” Frankie repeats, and fumbles behind her on the counter for the half-eaten snack pack, grabbing it. “With all due respect, Grace, that’s a load of horseshit, and we both know it. This isn’t a little risk, me and you. This is a big risk. The biggest. Ginormous. Sequoia-sized.” She dips two fingers into the plastic cup, shoveling out a small heap of pudding. “And don’t you start with me about my diet, all right? I happen to be practicing self-care at the moment.”

“Truthfully, Frankie, I don’t give a fuck about your diet right now,” Grace informs her, trying to maintain a calm tone and doing a decidedly mediocre job. It’s not entirely true—she’d certainly prefer it if Frankie picked something to stress-eat that wasn’t processed—but what she’s said has the desired effect. Frankie’s eyebrows lift with surprise. “Physical intimacy is a big deal for you. Fine. I can understand that. But guess what? You’re not the only one who’s scared. I am, too.”

Frankie’s still got the pudding on her fingers. She’s staring at Grace. “So what’s scaring you? Is it people? People knowing about us? About you? What they might think?” A pause. “Coming out?” Coming out. As if it’s a foregone conclusion with no consideration needed, as if there’s a door she’s supposed to walk through and Frankie’s just holding it open.

Something she’d once heard Robert say returns to her, unsolicited and sharp. You think it’s going to be a one-time thing, that you’ll come out and be done with it. But as it turns out, it isn’t a one-time thing. It happens over and over again. Every day. At the time, she remembers, she’d felt a twinge of unexpected dread, convinced herself she’d been concerned for him.

“To some extent,” she admits, not willing to clarify which of Frankie’s possibilities she means. “But I’ll tell you what scares me more. That you might not be totally in this with me. That you didn’t sit in your studio this morning—” Her eyes are suddenly damp, stinging. “—and think about a future, our future, where we could sit on that couch together and watch just terrible reality television, like we always do, only now you’d put your head on my lap and fall asleep, while I comb my fingers through your—” She stops. Unless she wants to give herself permission to cry in earnest, continuing this ridiculously indulgent train of thought out loud is not a good idea. “Frankie, are you and I in agreement about where we’re going? Because, oh, my God, if we aren’t—”

“Hey,” Frankie says, softly, and spreads her arms wide, “hey, pretty lady, come over here. Oh, hang on a tic.” She shoves her pudding-coated fingers into her mouth, sucking them out with an audible popping sound, and swallows. “Okay. Now I’m good.”

Ever since early childhood, when she’d been forced to submit to the crush of older relatives’ arms, Grace has never especially cared for hugs. As a blanket rule, she tends to avoid them as often as she can, the perfunctory embrace of polite greetings aside. But Frankie’s her exception, has always been her exception since the first time she remembers reaching for her, after Frankie had grabbed
her back from a sure fall, and here, in the kitchen, Grace doesn’t hesitate. Not for a second. Couldn’t keep herself away, even if she wanted to try.

Two small fast steps, then she’s home again. One of her arms crooks close around Frankie’s neck, the other around Frankie’s shoulder, and at the same time Frankie pulls her in tight, hands pressing against Grace’s back, wholly erasing the space between them, until the full length of Grace is flush against Frankie, backing her into the counter and cabinets. Frankie hasn’t answered her question about their relationship yet, Grace realizes, but before she can think about what that means, or let dread take up even more room inside her lungs, she feels Frankie’s head dip into the crook between her neck and shoulder, resting there. Her heart cramps.

“All right,” she says, and closes her eyes, briefly. “But if you’re not ready to be—”

“Can’t a gal comfort-hug her best friend?” Frankie asks, against her neck. “This is something that friends do, after all. Hug. We can do this as friends. I have faith in us.”

Grace isn’t so sure. The last time she’d held Frankie, they’d embraced within a very different context, and it’s impossible not to think about those circumstances right now, given the way their bodies are lined up. She can feel Frankie’s breasts pressed up against hers, stomach against stomach, thighs against thighs, a soft mirror for each point of contact.

“As friends,” she repeats, and Frankie’s hand lifts off her spine, threads briefly into her hair, sliding down to her neck. She cups Grace there, warm and tight. Her other hand shifts lower and to the side, just below the waistband of Grace’s jeans, stroking at her hip. “Is this how you want to comfort me, Frankie? Is this how you hug your friends? Do you touch other women this way?”

In response, Frankie exhales, her breath warm on Grace’s skin. “I can do this,” she says, sounding like she’s trying very hard to convince herself, and her voice is unsteady again. “I can hold you, like a friend would, and not go one single step further than I mean to, even though—”

Grace can’t help herself. “Even though?”

“Even though—oh, Jesus on the mainline—even though I keep, I can’t stop thinking about much I want you to suck—” She stops abruptly.

“You—” Grace can’t believe she’s actually going to say this out loud. “You mean your neck? Like last night?” Her face warms, prickling with the scald of exposure.

“Well, there too,” Frankie murmurs, and when Grace figures out what she means, an involuntary noise escapes her. God. Frankie’s thinking about that? Right now? And telling Grace about it? Right when she’s trying her hardest to persuade both of them they can keep this, somehow, from escalating rapidly?

Of course, now it’s all Grace can think about, too.

“I shouldn’t have told you what I was thinking,” Frankie says, low. “I won’t say it out loud again.” The hand she’s got on Grace’s hip slips up along the side of her waist, palming over her ribs, moving higher. “But you’d do it, wouldn’t you, if I asked, you’d do everything I wanted, right now —”

Summoning up every last ounce of willpower she’s got left—which isn’t much—Grace abruptly wriggles herself out of their embrace and manages, somehow, to pull away, retreating back to the island. She’s lightheaded, a little out of breath, and when she catches Frankie’s eyes, there it is again. Her mirror. Frankie’s expression looks just like Grace knows her own must. Stricken, stupid
with uninvited need.

Quietly, she says, “I would. Everything.”

Frankie doesn’t respond right away. Arms crossed over her breasts, she grabs at her own shoulders, still leaning back into the counter, and she’s trembling a little. Exactly why isn’t fully clear to Grace: if it’s from desire, or a new realization, or the two things meeting.

“What the hell do I do?” she asks, finally.

Just like that, trepidation steals back through Grace’s limbs and chest, diluting her arousal. I, Frankie’s saying. Not we.

You tell me you think taking a risk with me is worth it. That’s what you do.

Unless that isn’t what you believe.

“It’s up to you,” she says, instead. Haven’t they been down this road before? A choice, Frankie’s choice, between San Diego and Santa Fe, between Grace and Jacob. And she’d won. Maybe it’ll happen again. Maybe there’s no real reason for Grace to be edging closer and closer to panic. “You know what I want physically. I think I’ve made that perfectly clear. What happens now is your decision.”

“Of course it’s my decision. No one’s suggesting it isn’t. Just because it’s my decision doesn’t mean you can’t give me a little input. You’re not being very helpful.”

Next to Grace, the teakettle starts to whistle, joining Frankie’s complaint. “That makes two of us.”

“In a perfect world, I’ll tell you exactly what I’d do. I’d pack up every last one of my anxieties about intimacy into a biodegradable box, haul said box over to Torrey Pines, and just punt the shit out of that fucker over the cliffside. Probably I’d yell, ‘Begone, anxieties! Trouble me no more!’ Oh, sister, if only it were that easy. But it’s not. It just isn’t.”

The teakettle is louder, now, growing more insistent and shrill by the second.

“I know it isn’t! What do you want me to say? That I’ve got some perfect solution modeled up so you don’t have to do the hard work here? That I’ve figured out your problem?” Your problem, not our problem. That’s payback for Frankie’s I. Somehow she’s managing to say all this to Frankie like it’s an academic matter, and not the most important crossroads Grace has ever stood at in her entire life, blind and two minutes away from begging. “Well, I haven’t figured it out. You’re just going to have to do that yourself, because if this is what you’re like after last night, I don’t even want to think about what might happen if we have sex for the first time before you’re completely sure you’re ready. Look, aren’t you going to get the kettle?”

Frankie’s staring at Grace in obvious astonishment, mouth slightly open. Her crossed arms fall slack to hang at her sides. The kettle starts to shriek in earnest.

“What now?” She can’t hear herself think over that sound. “Come on, Frankie, if you’re not going to turn off the stove, then—”

“Say that to me again. I want to make sure I heard you correctly.”

“Say what again? Oh, for heaven’s sake—” Grace fumbles at the gas range, rotating the burner knob, and the teakettle immediately quiets, pacified into a soft warble. She turns back to Frankie. “I said, you’re just going to have to figure this out yourself.”
“That isn’t what I meant.” There’s a new tone in Frankie’s voice that hadn’t been there a minute ago. It’s measured, almost patient, decidedly unlike her normal register. “I’m asking, what did you say about sex? About our first time?”

She can’t quite meet the intensity of Frankie’s gaze, currently focused on Grace with a concentration that makes her want to squirm. What new hellish abyss are they now dangling over? “I said that we shouldn’t have sex for the first time before you’re ready. Is that a controversial statement? I thought our entire conversation was about you not being sure you’re emotionally prepared to start a physical relationship.”

Frankie laughs, a short *hah!* that’s more like the inverse of a gasp. “Silly me,” she says, way too brightly, “silly little ol’ me, because, Grace, I just assumed—look at me, over here assuming things!— You see, I thought we’d already had sex for the first time. Last night. Remember last night? I can give you a play-by-play, if you need a reminder.”

Oh. It’s a miscommunication. One that’s understandable, given Frankie’s neuroses about sex and physical intimacy. Of course she’d have a broader interpretation of the act than Grace would.

Grace considers taking back what she’s said. It would be easier, far easier, to say she’d misspoken, and she’s this close to correcting herself before she thinks better of it. No. No more lying. Not with Frankie, and not at the start of things. She isn’t going to pacify Frankie with what she thinks Frankie wants to hear, when it isn’t what Grace actually believes. They’d both spent decades in dishonest marriages where the other person had done precisely that. And after all, it isn’t as though Grace can’t try and explain herself. If she’s clear and careful enough, maybe Frankie will actually listen to her, and they can get back to figuring out how to move forward together.

“Last night,” she begins, with the dim sense that she’s walking through an emotional minefield, “was remarkable. Transformative, even. And it *was* sexual. It was absolutely a sexual encounter, no two ways about it. Hands down the most important sexual encounter of my life, as a matter of fact. But what we did—I just don’t see that as actual sex, even if you adjust the normal definition for, uh, for two women. Please don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying it didn’t mean something—it meant the world to me, I can’t even tell you how much it—”

“Normal definition,” Frankie repeats, sounding aghast, and Grace realizes, too late, that she’s managed to step on an explosive device without realizing it. “Normal— Lady, you’re a real piece of work sometimes, you know that? You don’t get to tell me what counts as sex and what doesn’t. What we did in that car together, you and me, what we did on that porch, that was the most intimate I’ve ever been with another human being in my entire life. And that’s saying something, since Sol and I once spent four whole days at a Kama Sutra-themed retreat in Big Sur with several complementary jars of all-natural nut butter and a large bag of ice. Well, briefly a large bag of ice. A large bag of water.”

“Please, stop. I don’t want to know about any of that.” Grace absolutely does not need to deal with a surge of pointless jealousy right now, not on top of everything else she’s feeling. “Frankie, you clearly aren’t getting what I’m trying to say. Of *course* we were intimate. Incredibly intimate. I’ve never let anyone else see me—do what I did in front of you. Or said the kind of things I said. There just wasn’t any—” She stops. “We didn’t—you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” Frankie tells her, and she’s got one hand to her side, gripping the handle of a drawer, hard enough that Grace can see the knuckles of her hands are bleached white. “Go right ahead, please. Take me on a leisurely stroll through your heteronormative bullshit. I really want to hear you justify this to yourself. Out loud.”

“Why are you refusing to listen to me?” She can’t believe what she’s hearing. “So we interpret sex
differently. That isn’t important. What’s really important is that what we did together—”

“No, what’s *important* is that if I’m sharing my body with you, and you’re sharing your body with me, then I need to trust that we’re in complete and total agreement as to what that means. End of story. Close book. Write Goodreads review.” She slams the edges of her hands together, palms facing up, and claps them shut, followed by furious air typing and a pointing stab Grace knows must be an imitation of clicking submit. “So ‘fess up. What’s your definition of sex?”

“My def—oh, I can’t deal with you when you get like this. All your stubborn—”

“Digital penetration?” Frankie holds up her left hand, waggling her fingers. They’re not pointing in Grace’s direction, but the gesture is accusatory just the same. “How about a couple of these inside you? Oh, but hey, maybe my delicate lady fingers aren’t enough like a man’s penis to meet your shitty unexamined standards. Am I right about that? I’m gonna bet I am.”

Her cheeks are suddenly hot again. “Frankie, stop it. You’re making an enormous deal out of something that doesn’t have to be a—”

“What if I fucked you with your vibrator? Is *that* sex? Come on, baby. I want to hear you say it to me.”

“Grow up.” The words are impulsive, something she can propel away from herself to distract from the single strong pulse that beats, without warning, between her legs. Grace isn’t going to let herself imagine it, either. Frankie directing her to—no. Not now. “You can be such a child.”

“Don’t,” Frankie says, roughly, “no way, don’t you *dare* tell me I’m acting like a child, when you’re the one who refuses to take half a second to look at her own fucked-up and hurtful assumptions. I’m not a child. I’ve already got two kids and an ex-husband who find all sorts of ways to let me know I’m incapable, I don’t need a wife who—” She breaks off, looking away, and Grace’s chest twists with something that isn’t quite pain, isn’t quite hope. Oh, God. So Frankie’s been thinking about that word, too. *Wife*. Maybe spending the morning repeating it silently to herself, just like Grace, questioning all the while how something so familiar and worn in after forty years could feel this new. “I’m not going to let myself be dismissed like that in my own home. I’m not going to let you dismiss me.”

“Fine! Have it your way. Penetration. That’s my definition. By whatever means. Penises or, or fingers, or—other devices. And objectively, neither of us did any penetrating whatsoever, hence my belief, my *personal* belief, a belief I am not asking you to subscribe to, that what happened between us was not sex. Happy now?”

“No, not especially. The thing is, penetration *did* occur, Grace, and I think you’d realize that if you’d only take a good look-see at all those cultural falsehoods you’ve internalized. You let me penetrate your boundaries. I let you penetrate mine. And I guess you’re telling me that doesn’t measure up. Move. I need to get into that drawer behind you.”

“It measures up! In a completely separate category!”

“Are you going to make me ask you again, or do we have different definitions of the word ‘move,’ too?”

Grace moves, withdrawing to the side of the island next to the sink, and Frankie pulls open the drawer in question, the one they use for miscellaneous shit that doesn’t have a home elsewhere. She reaches all the way into the back, pulling out another snack pack of pudding, and tears open the lid, avoiding Grace’s amazement. So Frankie’s been hiding food, despite that big show she’d
made of throwing out everything processed. Probably sneaking all sorts of unhealthy garbage when Grace isn’t around to notice. Isn’t that just fucking wonderful.

“I take it this isn’t a one-time indulgence,” Grace remarks, although she knows that going down this road is an extremely bad idea. She isn’t feeling especially in control of her tongue at the moment. “Exactly how many of these buy-one-get-one artery plugs have you got stockpiled around the house?”

“About ten cups, at the moment,” Frankie says, and scoops out pudding with her fingers, shoving it in her mouth. Grace doesn’t think she’s ever seen anyone eat pudding aggressively before. “Oh, believe me, I would’ve stashed more, but all the good hiding spots on this property are already taken. By a certain twiggy blonde whose collection would make Betty Ford circa 1978 green with envy. I could keep going.”

The distinct sensation of someone lifting her shirt without permission. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“Yeah. Thought so.”

Yet another thing they’ve never directly talked about before. Grace knows Frankie’s aware of the various bottles she keeps stored in out-of-the-way places, where no one’s likely to come across them, but it’s never been something Frankie’s brought up in conversation. Way easier for them not to discuss it. Easier for Grace to avoid thinking about why she needs to hoard alcohol like someone’s going to take it away from her, easier for Frankie not to—what? Admit that yet another person she loves might have a problem?

I’m not like Coyote. I’m not an addict. Addicts are people who can’t control themselves.

There’s a wine glass left to dry in the otherwise empty rack next to the sink, and if Frankie’s noticed, she hasn’t said anything.

(Before stumbling into bed, the house dark and quiet around her in Frankie’s absence, she’d given herself a generous pour from one of the chardonnay bottles in the fridge, trying her best not to let the shaking glass spill. From experience, she’d known how much worse the tremors would’ve been in the morning if she hadn’t had at least one to tide her over, bridge the gap between that afternoon’s drinks and whatever she’d have the next day. Medicinal, necessary. The right decision.)

“Grace? Grace?”

Quickly, she refocuses. Frankie’s set aside the empty pudding cup on the counter, next to the other discarded one. She’s peering at Grace too closely for comfort.

“What?”

“You’ve gone off somewhere. Don’t leave me.”

This is steadier territory. At least Grace knows the answer to this one. “I’m right here,” she tells her. “I haven’t gone anywhere. It’s still me. Okay?”

“I had no idea we totally differ when it comes to our definitions of sex. What else don’t I know about you, Grace? What else am I going to find out that’ll send me spiraling into a maelstrom of misgivings?” Her face twists, briefly, into a mask of anguish. “If I open myself up to you, in every way a person can open herself, emotionally, spiritually, physically, only to discover that what I’d wholeheartedly believed in was built on a false façade, it will break me. I mean that. It will break me in places I didn’t even know existed three years ago.”
“There is no false façade, Frankie! Why can’t you trust that we can do this together and be okay? We—we’ve got something here, the two of us. You know it. I know it. You told me, out there in the desert, that you loved me. And I—” She swallows. “Well, you know how I feel about you.”

“I do know,” Frankie agrees, and then, slowly, “or at least I’ve always thought I did. You’ve never actually said the words to me. Not directly. Hey, look, I get it. It’s cool. Saying ‘I love you’ has never been your thing.”

But it is Frankie’s thing. Grace pauses. She could give Frankie those words now, or should. It’s clearly what she needs to hear; the reassurance she wants from Grace. An admission that would make things between them better immediately.

Just three words, but goddamn it, if Frankie wasn’t so focused on listening for one kind of language, she’d have translated a thousand other declarations. The whole wheat waffles Grace now makes every Sunday, with carob chips and raspberries baked in and extra crispy, just the way Frankie prefers. The care box she’d put together for Frankie to get her through the week Grace spent visiting her sister in Seattle, filled with all sorts of things Frankie might need or enjoy: charging cables for various devices; an organic eucalyptus-infused shower bomb; a biography of Shirley Chisholm she’d picked up at the La Jolla Public Library; a letter opener; hand moisturizer. Brief notes scribbled on her stationary and left out for Frankie to find. Ray Donovan is a rerun tonight. Don’t forget to pick up your Skeflaxin refill. I got our tickets for Casablanca at Cinema Under the Stars. Good luck today at the doctor’s office; I’ll be thinking about you.

“We have the rest of our lives to tell one another all sorts of things,” she says, finally, forcing herself not to consider what kind of expectations might flare inside someone hopeful during a silence that long. The disappointment on Frankie’s face is unmistakable. “We have the rest of our lives to learn about each other. That’s what marriage is, after all. Or so I’ve been told.”

Quietly, Frankie says, “You’re forgetting something, Grace. I haven’t said yes.”

The sudden blow of it buckles Grace’s knees from under her.

She stumbles, nearly falling. Reaches out for the the island to steady herself, and even when her feet are solidly planted again, the world still feels like it’s pitching violently.

“Grace—” Frankie’s at her side, suddenly, her voice filled with sharp concern. She’s gripping Grace’s arm, keeping her upright.

Oh, dear God. Not enough. She’d let herself dream for the first time— What they’d had, the road trip, the desert, the car, the front porch, the past few years, all of it. Here’s her conformation, her worst fear made real. It hadn’t been enough for Frankie. It isn’t enough.

Grace isn’t enough.

“Sweetheart, are you—?”

Sweetheart, Grace thinks, this close to laughing, or something like it. Sweetheart. Her fingers, clenching at the hard lip of the island, are pinched rigid with pain. Sweetheart. Sweetheart, sweetheart, the word banging around her head. She has to fixate on it. The only other choice is to think about the apocalypse lurching into probability.

And maybe Frankie senses, somehow, what she’s set off, because she starts again, this time without the endearment. “You’ve got to sit down immediately. I’ll sit down with you, okay? We’ll do it together. I’m right here. Have you eaten anything today? You need to eat something. I’ll
make you something. Eggs? Eggs.”

Gray threatens the rims of her sight. She fumbles her way towards the nearest chair on the other side of the island, climbing in, trying to regain control of her breathing, and all the way Frankie’s there with her, her hand rubbing Grace’s back, soothing her. Trying. It’s not soothing. Not one bit.

“I’m not fucking hungry,” she manages, blinking fast. “I don’t want to eat. I’ve never wanted to do anything less in my entire life. Frankie, what—are you saying? Are you turning me down?”

“Of course not! I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. I’m not saying no, it’s just that I can’t give you an answer yet. Everything’s moving so fast. Twenty-four hours ago you were Grace Hanson, BFF, roommate, business partner, adorable pain-in-the-ass, and now—”

“I’m still your best friend! It’s still you and me underneath all this—this stuff.” She gestures rapidly between their bodies. “That hasn’t changed!”

Frankie pulls out the chair next to Grace, taking a seat. “I get that you’re ready to jump into a serious commitment, but as much as I wish things were different—I’m not. I’ve got to take things slow, Grace. That’s who I am. You know that about me. Sweet Saint Francis, you’re talking to a woman who still isn’t emotionally ready for the last episode of Seinfeld. I need more time. I need to better understand what we’re becoming to one another. To make sure we’re going to survive this if we move forward.”

“How much time, Frankie? Are we talking days? Weeks? Months?” Not years. Frankie can’t be thinking in years. That would be certifiably insane. They’re seventy-three. Frankie has a stroke history. Years aren’t exactly being distributed to them in bulk, for fuck’s sake.

“I don’t know. I can’t tell you right now. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Grace, I’m so, so—” Frankie’s staring into her lap. “I’m probably the sorriest motherfucking person on the entire planet right now, you have no idea—”

“I take it we’d still live together? Pretend like none of this happened? Go back to the way things were for some unspecified amount of time, until that theoretical moment when you decide you know what you want? Have you thought this through for even one second?”

“Not pretend, no,” Frankie stammers, twisting in her chair to face Grace. “I could never ask either of us to pretend this didn’t happen. It’s too damn big for that. It’d be like—like visiting the Sistine Chapel and telling ourselves not to look up.”

“So it’s a life where I’ll see you every day and not be able to hold you, only you’re giving us permission to keep talking this whole thing over. I can say, ‘Hey, Frankie, your drought buckets collected a half-inch of rain last night, there’s some mail for you over on the dining room table, and oh, by the way, no one, including myself, has ever made me come as hard as you did.’ That’s fine, just as long as I keep my hands in check. Have I got it right?”

“Jesus, Grace—”

“I’d do it!” The words burst out of her, and she hates herself, hates this weak, desperate, grasping woman who can’t stop herself from pleading. “If that’s all I can get, if limbo’s my only choice, I’ll do it. Somehow. Even though you’ll laugh, or you’ll smile at me, like you always do, and I’ll—I’ll—”

She presses her fist to her chest, hard, and her voice cracks. “I’ll feel it right here, like I always do. Except now I’ll know. I’ll know what I’m feeling. I’ll know what I am.”

Before she can say more, Frankie grabs her face with both hands and leans across the small gap
between their chairs, pressing her mouth to Grace’s. A soft thing, Frankie’s mouth, made hard and hot with urgency. The sudden motion rocks Frankie’s chair slightly off its legs, and there’s nothing left in Grace to stop this. She grasps mindlessly at Frankie, kissing her back. Thinks, as she does it, about drought buckets, decades of them, and waiting for a half-inch of water, and the wildfires that burn through dead brush from a dropped match. It has to be Frankie who pulls away, because Grace can’t bring herself to do it, not when she has no way of knowing when she’ll have this again.

A small sound of distress against Grace’s upper lip, the brief push of fingers into the side of her scalp, and then, abruptly, Frankie’s mouth isn’t there anymore. She’s still touching Grace, though, and there’s one hand palming her cheek, cupping it gently. Grace keeps her eyes closed, knowing that Frankie’s watching her. If she doesn’t move, maybe she can live here, right here, not facing what’s ahead.

After what feels like an infinite amount of time and not nearly long enough, Frankie says, her voice barely audible, “I was wrong. I can’t do that to you, Grace. I see that now. I can’t make you live in limbo. You need more. That’s the path you need to follow. And the thing is, honey—oh, God. If we’re living in the same house, I don’t think I can stop myself from giving you what you want.”

Grace opens her eyes, then, and that’s when the wave of understanding hits her. It’s clear as day in Frankie’s face. The terrible thing, right here all this time, just waiting for Grace to stop fantasizing like a teenager and see what’s been inevitable since the beginning.

“Take your hands off me,” she gasps. “Don’t you dare keep touching me if you’re going to say what I think you’re going to say.”

Frankie obeys, withdrawing, and at the same time Grace staggers up from her chair, holding onto the island to keep her balance. She isn’t sure she can get through what she’s about to hear, let alone stay next to Frankie while it’s happening.

A goodbye kiss, she realizes. That was a goodbye kiss. She’s been kissed goodbye.

“It wouldn’t be forever, just for a little while, just until I’ve had some time to think—”

The dining room table. Grace can make it that far. If she doesn’t throw up first.

“I can’t go to Bud and Allison’s, I could never kick a pregnant woman out of her bed, and that guest room of theirs is haunted—Coyote, though, I guess I could stay in his tiny house—”

“Where, in the shower?” Like it’s the question that needs to be asked right now. Like anything having to do with Coyote’s prefabricated tin shoebox on wheels fucking matters. She’s reached the dining room table, and she hears the scraping of Frankie’s chair against the floor, knows Frankie’s following her into the next room. Can’t face her, not yet, not when Grace is about to say what she can’t keep back. “Frankie, you don’t have to do this. Do you want me to ask you not to leave? Is that what you want to hear? Because I’ll do it. Listen to me. Don’t leave. I can give you the space you need, I can find the strength to do that, just don’t go. Please.”

“If you can find that strength, then you’re far stronger than I am.” Frankie’s directly behind her. “I can’t do it. I can’t stay here right now. Even though you’re asking me. I hear you, Grace, I need you to know that I know how hard that is for you, and I’m so sorry, I’m so—”

“Stop saying that!” She whirls around, and Frankie, who’s clutching and re-clutching fistfuls of her blouse, actually takes a step back. “I don’t want your apology! You’re going to turn your back on me after I’ve openly begged you to stay? You’re going to turn your back on the best thing either of
us have ever had in seventy-three years? You know, maybe you’re right. Maybe I am stronger than you are. And you’re a coward."

It’s like a slap. Frankie falls back again, takes another step away from Grace, stumbling into it. Her shoulders are bowed and she’s hunched over oddly, her posture like an old woman’s. Like the old woman she seems, for the first time, to be. “Go to hell,” she says, quietly. “You’re being mean.”

Grace is shaking with anger, her voice high and quivering. “Oh, so you think I’m being mean? All right, let’s talk mean. You’re so scared of being heartbroken that you’re perfectly willing to break mine to try and avoid it. That’s mean. You’re leaving me, Frankie. At least be honest about it. Have the decency to own up to what you’re doing.”

“I can’t listen to this,” Frankie snaps, and turns away, hurrying towards the foyer. She grabs her keys out of the bowl on the half-wall, her purse, too, all the accessories for an exit, and Grace watches, breathing hard. “I’m not leaving you, I just need—"

“Now who’s minimizing her actions? Look at yourself. One foot out the door and you can’t wait to get away.” She throws up her hands. “Okay, Frankie. Fine! Go ahead! Run from this. Run away, just like you always do from everything that’s even remotely difficult. Managing a business? Well, that’s no fun, better go toke up on the back patio and let Grace handle all the important details. A gun goes off and it upsets you? Time to leave. Suffer a stroke? Ignore it, don’t go to the hospital, everything’ll work out hunky-dory somehow. Things getting a little too serious with Jacob? Better sprint like hell in the other direction.”

“You’re not being fair.” Frankie’s next to the door, but even from this distance it isn’t hard to see the tears streaking down her cheeks. “I chose you, Grace. You asshole. I didn’t run away from Jacob, I ran towards you.”

“Oh, sure, and look how long you’ve stayed. A whole two weeks. What an extraordinary accomplishment! You know, you keep telling me you’re so traumatized by your first marriage, you’re so worried about what might happen with us, but at the end of the day, between you and me, who’s got the track record of disappearing? Face it, Frankie. Sol isn’t the only Bergstein with a bad habit of skipping out.”

“Fuck you,” Frankie tells her, and opens the front door. “No, you know what? I take it back. Go fuck yourself. At least then it might count.”

She walks out, slamming the door behind her. The slam reverberates through the walls until it doesn’t.

The second she’s alone Grace’s fury leaves her, too, just like that.

As a child, she’d broken her arm, had it reset by a doctor. Grace remembers clearly the moment right after he’d wrenched it back into place, the swollen second of shock that ballooned improbably between the act itself and the jolt of sweeping pain that followed. She’s back in that second again. It’s so much longer now.

What she does into the dining room chair isn’t collapsing, not exactly, but it isn’t particularly controlled, either. She sits, heavily, and wobbles as she does it, or the room does. Touches her lower lip, briefly, with the tips of her fingers, and the light pressure feels nothing at all like the last visitor there, and maybe that’s a good thing.

Stay, she’d pleaded, as naked as Grace has ever let herself be in front of another person, in front of her own self, last night included. Now Frankie’s gone.
She’s gone, even if it only ends up being temporary. It would be so nice to hate her for walking out. Simple. Grace can’t do it. Can’t bring herself to hate Frankie, despite being face-to-face with this cold understanding that Frankie had a choice, chose her fear. The woman Grace had been in her bedroom an hour ago, that shameless idiot with stars in her eyes and impossible dreams, those stupid fantasies—that woman can shoulder the bulk of the blame instead. It’s her own fault, after all. She’d gotten her hopes up. She’d made a wish.

And look at what’s come of that wish. An entirely predictable mess. Or it would’ve been entirely predictable, if she’d just gotten her brain out from where it’s been for the last day, between her legs, and actually listened to what Frankie’s been telling her all along. Christ, that song she’d sung along to yesterday in the car, out of tune, wholeheartedly. Carole King. *But will my heart be broken when the night meets the morning sun? Will you still love me tomorrow?*

Somehow, she isn’t crying, and that’s odd, because Grace cries at everything. Even Frankie always says—

There it is. Fresh pain rips up her chest without warning. Sharp, saw-toothed. She inhales, trying to ride through it, and curves forward, arms folded over her belly, a soft keening sound escaping her mouth. Oh, no. Too much. Oh, God. Too much.

*No. I can’t do this.*

Rocking, back and forth, so carefully, cradling herself—

*I need to get drunk.*

The thought brings on the first small bit of relief she’s felt in an hour, just the reminder of alcohol’s existence carrying good adrenaline that floods out some of the pain. Not too drunk, not blackout drunk, just drunk enough to take the edge of this away, maybe sleep it off some, and then she’ll deal with what she can later. If she’s drunk, she won’t be able to think too much about Frankie, by now heading south towards Coyote’s place. Almost certainly putting her own and other people’s lives at risk whenever she merges, panicking as she does it. Frankie never pays attention when Grace tells her, time after time, that all the mantras in the world won’t prevent an accident if she doesn’t look at the next goddamned lane first. So Grace will get drunk instead, and stop remembering all the times she’s asked Frankie to keep them both safe, all the times Frankie hasn’t listened.

On her way back to the kitchen and the full bottle of vodka she knows is waiting in the freezer—what’s that old rhyme? *wine is fine, but liquor is quicker*—she’s mostly steady on her feet, made calmer by having a clear goal. The craving’s home in her mouth, now, and strong. No need to take the bottle upstairs, either, since there’s no one here to notice what she’s doing. She can drink and drink and drink, right out of the bottle if she wants, and Frankie won’t hover, wondering out loud if maybe Grace should slow down, at least have a little nosh to settle her empty stomach. *Nosh.* A word she’d never would’ve thought about using in her entire life before she’d moved in with Frankie.

The cap of the bottle twists off easily, a lucky break. She doesn’t bother to shut the freezer door, partly because the waves of cold feel good on her face, and partly because Frankie would definitely tell her to close it. *Don’t you care about all that energy you’re wasting? Don’t you know what it does to the environment? Where’s your heart, Grace? I know you’ve got one.*

No glass. Directly out of the bottle, which is a far more efficient delivery method. A generous swig, too, and as she swallows it down Grace remembers a time when the vodka would blister in her throat, back when it was less of an intimate. It hasn’t in years. She’d used to love that burn
beyond reason, loved what it meant, how it signaled the beginning of something she could give herself. It’s always been something she’s given herself.

The bottle pauses on its way back to her mouth.

There’s a clear itinerary laid out here. Look away from her pain and down into the bottle. Get good and drunk, crawl back into bed, wake up bleary-eyed sometime around sunset, stumble into the bathroom, let her sick stomach handle the clearing-out without the help of a hand. Throw herself back into Vybrant tomorrow and the dozens of tasks on her list that need completing. Reassure her daughters, smile quickly in the driveway at the neighbors, and try to walk around the safe perimeter of her life like she hadn’t realized last night, with total and astonishing clarity, what the shape of herself has been this entire time. Press it all down, at least until Frankie decides what she wants. Say no, I don’t, I’m not, I can’t, like she always has.

She could do that, and then something inside her would break, maybe for good.

Because—and the realization is enough to make her close the freezer door, set down the open bottle on the island, next to Frankie’s jojoba oil—Frankie had been right about at least one thing. Limbo isn’t a bearable option anymore. Not for Grace, not after realizing, all at once, that for seventy-three years she’s been breathing through a straw.

Seventy-three years of surviving herself, and the signposts keep rising up in the backwards vista of Grace’s memory, even while she’s standing here staring at the island. She’d brought an apple for pretty Miss Fields without fail each Monday during fifth grade, warming under the bloom of her teacher’s appreciative smile. Three decades later, she’d sat by herself in the back of the art house theater for a showing of *Desert Hearts*, in the afternoon so Robert wouldn’t need an explanation. She’d left in the middle of the love scene, nauseous and trembling, convinced her revulsion was for something other than herself. That time at the pool with Mimi during their Denver conference, when they’d been walking towards the lounge chairs and Mimi had caressed the bare part of Grace’s back, the exposed skin surrounded by her swimsuit. Not long enough to be unambiguous, just long enough for Grace to drop the bottle of Sour Pucker and blame it on one too many shots.

And Judy Campbell, always back to Judy with her scarlet toenails, and those full lips she’d pressed against Grace’s cheek one evening in 1961, both of them a little drunk on her mother’s brandy. She’d left a bold lipstick print Grace couldn’t stop staring at, heart pounding, in the bathroom mirror. Oh, she’d forgotten about that until just now, how long she’d looked at her cheek, wishing foolishly she didn’t have to wipe the mark away. A shade she’d loved so much on Judy, something close to coral, and—another flash of sudden understanding—that had been the same exact shade she’d spent weeks trying to reproduce years later when they’d started Say Grace’s lipstick line, rejecting prototype after prototype. None of them had been right, and at the time, she couldn’t figure out why. Now she knows. The color wasn’t the thing she’d been aching for.

Frankie’s gone, but Grace—Grace is right here, and even if it’s on her own, fumbling and uncertain, she has to do something. Drinking herself into full forgetful retreat might be familiar, but it isn’t enough. Not anymore. That romantic she’d been this morning, that starry-eyed and improbable dreamer: yes, she’d been senseless, and somehow right, too. I can’t go back.

But without Frankie, what does forward look like?

Grace rubs her hands on the front of her jeans, looking around the kitchen. She takes a breath, a deep one. There’s an energy bar in the bowl on the counter, something made with granola and honey. Nothing she’d ever eat, normally, considering how many grams of sugar it has, but today, maybe, she can manage to make an exception. A little nosh. It might settle her stomach. And then
She doesn’t know where to go from here, or how. There’s someone else who might.

____________________

“Grace?”

“Hello, Robert,” she says, carefully, and she’d been rehearsing a casual tone the entire drive over, but from the worry already starting to darken his face, her attempt’s failed completely. “I’m so sorry to drop in on you unannounced like this. I know it’s not the way we usually do things, but I’ve got—I need to talk to someone. To you.”

He swings open the front door. Sol’s nowhere to be seen, thankfully. Grace doesn’t think she could handle his particular brand of intense caretaking at the moment. “What happened? What’s wrong? Did someone—the girls, Grace, please tell me they’re all—”

“Our children are fine. The grandkids, everyone, they’re all fine, as far as I know. Everyone else is just fine.” Her voice wavers on the last word, and she stops. Clears her throat. She’s going to keep herself together if it’s the last thing she does. At least she can preserve her dignity in all this, if nothing else. “Robert—”

“Did someone do something to you?” His eyes are wide with disbelief, and she can see his pallor actually start to change, redden, as he thinks about the number of possibilities that could result in his distressed ex-wife showing up unannounced at his doorstep with her face barely made up at all, probably looking like an overcooked piece of chicken breast. “Are you hurt? Are you—”

“No, I’m not hurt, not physically— Oh, just shut up and give me a second to get this out, please, I, I can’t do it if you keep asking me—”

“No, I’m not hurt, not physically— Oh, just shut up and give me a second to get this out, please, I, I can’t do it if you keep asking me—”

“Okay,” he says, softly, his hand lifting, “floor’s all yours,” and for a stunned second, Grace thinks he’s about to reach out and actually touch her arm, try and physically comfort her, but he doesn’t. Instead, his hand moves to cup the side of his own neck, the gesture she knows so well completely at odds with the rest of this stranger’s demeanor.

Who the hell is this man standing there looking at Grace with so much concern? Not her husband of forty years, that’s for goddamn certain. In all the dark recesses of her recollection, she can’t pull out one single time Robert’s ever looked at her like this, like someone able to see beyond his own discomfort. Not even when the girls were born. The second time, with Mallory, he’d asked Grace if she’d prefer a little privacy during her labor. The question had stunned her so much she’d agreed. For the past three years, she’s attributed the changes in Robert to Sol’s influence. You can’t live with a man who’s too sensitive to sit through the bickering on Love It or List It without pacing back and forth, and not pick up some form of emotional thawing. But standing in front of Robert now, seeing the expression on his face, Grace is beginning to think she’s missed a key component of her ex-husband’s transformation. It’s not just that Sol’s softened him, it’s that Robert isn’t living to survive anymore. He’s learned how to give himself what he needs. There’s space and time for compassion, growing in the quiet green of his honesty.

What can she tell him? What could she possibly say that could explain to Robert why she’s showed up to his house unannounced on a Sunday afternoon? Which one of her many revelations would be shorthand enough? Would any of them? I’ve spent my entire life trying not to want other women. The thought of Frankie leaving frightened me so badly I proposed to her. I’m attracted to Frankie in ways I never could’ve let myself imagine before yesterday. I’m in love with her, Robert. I’m in love with her. I’m in love with her. I’m so in love with Frankie Bergstein that I can’t breathe when
I try and think about it, I can’t even get it out of my mouth to tell her, and she left. She walked out. She left me.

Her phone vibrates briefly inside her purse. A text message notification.

Two weeks ago, another lifetime, she’d sat with Robert on the patio of this very house and somehow she’d found it in herself to ask him how did you know, and what she’d meant was tell me I’m not starting to wake up inside the same thing.

It’s the same thing.

Another vibration. Another text.

“Dear God, Grace, please—say something. Say anything. What is it?”

“I think—I’m a lesbian,” Grace says, softly, “Robert, I’m gay,” and hearing herself speak it out loud for the first time, hearing the truth of it, she puts her hand up to cover her open mouth, like she isn’t sure the thing that said those words is something she can actually touch.

Now it’s Robert’s turn to be silent.

He stares at her, clearly stunned by what’s just happened. The door sways a little in his unsteady hand. Grace wonders wildly what he’s thinking. If he’s convinced himself he couldn't have heard her correctly, if he’s offended because he thinks she’s playing some sort of prank on him, if he’s too shocked by her declaration to make himself respond.

“Robert?” she asks, and it’s so small.

Her phone vibrates a third time.

Slowly, Robert says, “Well, I'm more than a little taken aback right now, I have to confess, but — Would you be very angry with me if I told you—? Grace—oh, kid. This explains so much.”

She starts to cry.

It’s loud, sudden, gasping, the weight of today and yesterday abruptly collapsing in on her, the weight of every other day, too, and her phone is vibrating, again, again, more texts, and then Robert’s holding her in his arms for the first time in she can’t remember how long. She sobs into the cotton of his polo shirt, soaking his shoulder, unable to stop herself. Somewhere above her head, she can hear his voice, this new Robert: it’s all right, you’re all right, you’ll be all right. What he’s repeating is a nice refrain, comforting, but the solace of it pales in comparison to the thing that’s making her cry uncontrollably. For half her life, she'd worked alongside this man to create a performance they'd agreed to call living, and this impossible revelation, this seismicity, this nerved thing that's plucked her out of the dark—it makes sense to him.

For a while, they stand like this, together in a way forty years hadn't accomplished, and eventually, reluctantly, she pulls back, sniffing, wiping at her cheeks with both hands.

"Thank you, Robert," she manages.

From the way he's smiling at her, he might even understand why she's grateful.

“Now that you’ve come out,” he says, gently, and gestures behind him, towards the door, "would you like to come in?"
It’s a terrible joke. One of the worst ones she’s ever heard him make. Grace laughs a little anyway, still sniffling through her tears, and tells him yes. He stands back. Lets her push the door open a little wider, walk through first.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

we’re almost to the end! just one more chapter following this update.

**a brief content warning:** if references to physical abuse are difficult for you, please proceed carefully. no one is abused or hurt in this chapter, nor have I invented an abuse backstory, but some descriptions here, while not explicit or graphic in content, might be distilling to those with significant triggers.

finally, thank you, thank you, thank you again, all of you, for the kudos you’ve left & the comments you’ve written. it’s moved me more than I can accurately communicate to read your feedback over the past (oh, god) five months. writing this story has been the most rewarding experience of my fannish life, & a large part of that is due to how you’ve responded. you’re incredible. <3

& as always, if you’d like to tell me what you think of this chapter, it would make my day (week!) to hear it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So,” Robert begins, closing the front door. He gestures awkwardly around the foyer of his house with arms spread, hands open. “Welcome.”

Still teary and ricocheting wildly between at least six different emotions, Grace is about one second away from asking “What, to homosexuality?” before she realizes just in time that her ex-husband is trying, however strangely, to be a good host in the middle of all this mess. So she closes her mouth on her ridiculous question and fishes a couple of tissues out of her purse instead, taking the opportunity to silence her phone—the screen is awake and showing a series of text notifications she doesn’t read—with a flick of the toggle. Not letting herself think about what’s waiting, she dabs carefully at the tender skin under her eyes. It’s something to do that doesn’t require filling the growing silence with small talk.

Oh, good lord, she can’t imagine how terrible she must look. The tissue she’s using is coming away streaked with runaway mascara. And Robert, she’s soiled him, too. There are black smudges in a large wet patch on his shoulder, standing out ugly against the pale salmon of his polo shirt. Robert *hates* stains. Abhors any visible sign of imperfection that could make him suspect in others’ eyes. Always has.

“I’m so sorry about—” She gestures towards the blemish, and Robert looks down at his shoulder.

“Nothing that can’t be dealt with later,” he says, shrugging, and yet again, Grace is struck by a sense of dim astonishment, the feeling that she’s meeting someone strange. “Sol just so happens to be a complete genius with laundry. What that man can do with a little white vinegar and baking soda would astound you, I swear.”

She’d sprayed Tide on Robert’s clothes for forty years and never once merited a thank-you for it, let alone the label of genius. “The powder room, I can’t remember, it’s—?”
“First door to your right,” he finishes for her, pointing. “Please, go right ahead, and I’ll be in the kitchen when you’re done freshening up. Martini? I know it’s still early, but if ever the occasion called for something strong—”

“God, yes,” she says, automatically, and then, “Wait. No. Thank you, though. Water, please. Sparkling, if you’ve got it.”

“Water.” He repeats it like she’s made her request using a different language, something that needs translating, and for a minute, Grace worries he’s going to ask a question she isn’t yet prepared to answer. “All right. Sparkling water. Of course. Coming right up.”

Robert starts down the steps into the living room, towards the kitchen, and before she realizes she’s done it, she calls after him, “Wait a second. Do you—?”

He turns around expectantly. “Yes?”

Too late to turn back now. “Do you—do you have anything to—? I know I’m a guest in your home, and I certainly don’t want to be impolite, especially after you’ve been so kind to me, but—”

She can feel her face heating up from embarrassment. “Truthfully, I’m a little—”

Clearly puzzled, Robert waits for her to complete her sentence.

“Hungry,” she finishes, and his mouth actually opens in genuine astonishment. The force of his reaction surprises her, at first, until Grace takes a second to reflect. Has she ever admitted so plainly, so explicitly to Robert that she’s in possession of something as humiliating as an appetite? She must have done it before. At least once. Hasn’t she? “I meant to eat before I left the house, but I was in a bit of a rush. It would be nice to have something to snack on. If you’ve got anything handy.”

“You’re—?”

“A hungry lesbian, Robert, yes. Catch up.”

He laughs, then, and she realizes belatedly that she’d wanted to make him do it. It’s quiet, kind. Conspiratorial, as if she’d handed him a good joke, one they both know. Something inside Grace loosens with new relief, a pained coil that’s been corkscrewed tightly since the moment she’d walked downstairs and found Frankie cleaning.

Frankie—

“I think I can manage to put something together for us,” he says, and he isn’t winking at her, not quite, but the tone is close. “Fruit? That might be appropriate, given the occasion.”

“Don’t you dare start with me,” she warns, although the corners of her mouth are twitching a little, and she knows he can see it. “We’re not there yet.”

But they will be, sooner rather than later, and while she’s in the bathroom down the hall, washing her hands, Grace has the odd sense that she can see through the enameled cast iron of the sink to the near future of her relationship with Robert. Conversations where they might break a little, fracture together with gentle humor or with pain or with genuine affection, and learn how to think of it as something other than weakness. For over forty years, she’d valued Robert’s rigidity and named it strength, seen it as a complement to her own, the reason their marriage worked well enough. Now, maybe, they can find different things to value about one another.

Most of the fugitive eye makeup is off her skin, but the rest of the makeup she’d applied that
morning is more or less gone, too. She splashes a little cold water on her cheeks, and pinches them for color. Carefully applies the lipstick she’s got in her purse. The somewhat reassembled face looking back at her, she decides after some inspection, is surprisingly acceptable. Not anything that resembles her usual standards, especially without her beloved trinity of primer, foundation, and powder, but certainly good enough under these extenuating circumstances. A face she can present to the world, or at least to Robert, facilitated by the confidence a good lip color can bring. The face of someone who knows, at long last, exactly what she wants and who she is.

It’s remarkable, really, how just a little lipstick can make a woman feel that much lighter.

She puts away the tube carefully, avoiding her quiet phone.

All right, she thinks, I can do this, and glances at her reflection one last time. It’s still there.

On the way back to the living room, she passes the hall table in the foyer, the same table she’d walked by before. There’s a stack of slim books on it. Earlier, she hadn’t noticed a thing, passed with about as little acknowledgement as a hall table usually deserves. This time, though, she’s approaching from a different angle, and something about the slip of paper sticking out from the book on top instantly grabs her unfocused eye.

Grace stops short, almost tripping over the edge of the area rug. There are letters printed on that piece of paper. Nothing she can read from this distance, but she recognizes the familiar font, nonetheless, and knows exactly what it says.

From the desk of Grace Hanson.

Why the hell would her stationary be inside one of Robert and Sol’s books?

Glancing around her—Robert’s nowhere to be seen, probably bustling around in the kitchen—Grace goes over to the table and picks up the book. It’s thin, nothing she recognizes, and when she opens it, she immediately realizes why. Poetry. Oh, brother. Then the book must belong to Sol—Sol, who quotes Pablo Neruda in casual conversation and pretends not to notice Grace’s eyes rolling—since she can’t possibly imagine Robert ever enjoying verse. Not even this new Robert. He’s never been much of a reader, but what little he does enjoy tends towards nonfiction, memoirs, military biographies. Sol’s book, then. It must be. But why would he have a sheet from her stationary?

Because it’s hers, all right, the piece of paper wrinkled in symmetrical squares as if it’s been folded before, put away carefully, and—Grace inhales sharply—there’s something written on it, too. Her own familiar script.

For a long moment, she stands there frozen with the note in her hand, and she doesn’t have to comb back through her memory for context, or wait until everything consolidates into clarity. She knows exactly when she’d written these words and why.

This isn’t a note for Sol. It has nothing to do with him.

Last October. Frankie’s art show.

That morning, Grace had picked up a bouquet, something she’d ordered the prior week, and arranged it in one of their better vases. She hadn’t left it out in the kitchen, or on the dining room table, but by her own bedside, where she’d known Frankie would show up at the end of the day, on her weekly quest for fresh blooms to take back to her studio. Normally, Grace always buys flowers based on compatibility, harmonizing combinations that make her florist coo with appreciation, but for this particular bouquet she’d left that entirely out of the equation and requested a patchwork
spray of Frankie’s favorites. Morning glories, delphiniums, jasmine, desert bluebells. As she’d set down the vase on her bedside table, she’d imagined the way Frankie’s face would light up when she saw the flowers, her grin bright enough for Grace to read by, lose her place.

And the note accompanying the bouquet. She’d written four, five, six drafts on her stationary in the morning, short things, all of them anticipating the night would be a success, and none of them exactly right for the occasion. Congratulations. You really achieved something today. Babe would’ve loved it. I knew you could do this. I’m so proud to be your friend. One last draft: the word I and the letter l and her pen immobile for almost a full minute just above the paper. Then the final version, the one in Grace’s hand now, pulled out of this little volume of poems where she’d found it stuck like someone had been using it for a bookmark.

For the bravest woman I know.

G

After the show, before bed, she’d tucked the note carefully under the vase, making sure her handwriting was visible, and slipped between the sheets with her novel. Stayed on the same page for twenty-seven minutes while she listened carefully for the sound of Frankie’s feet thumping up the stairs.

Abruptly, Grace notices the poem that the note had been obscuring. It’s short enough that she could probably hold it in her palm, if words were something you could peel off paper. She holds the book a little farther away from her face, squinting, trying to make out the lines as best she can without the help of her glasses, and slowly reads what’s there.

There’s a weed whose name I’ve meant all summer
to find out: in the heat of day, dangling pods hardly
worth the noticing; in the night, blue flowers . . . It’s as if
a side of me that he’d forgotten had forced into the light,
briefly, a side of him that I’d never seen before, and now
I’ve seen it. It is hard to see anyone who has become
like your own body to you. And now I can’t forget.

“Robert?” she calls out, and it’s incredible, how calm her voice sounds in her own ears. “Robert, these books on the hall table. Why are they here? Who was using them?”

“What? Come into the kitchen. I can’t hear you.”

Clutching the book in her right hand, the note in her left, Grace walks back down the hallway, and as she extends today’s remarkable streak of staying upright, her heart is slamming against her ribs. She isn’t sure why, exactly, since she doesn’t fully understand all of what she’s read, but a few phrases have bitten at her. Like your own body to you. And now I’ve seen it. Blue flowers.

“This book,” she says, loudly, entering the kitchen. Robert’s got his head stuck in the refrigerator, and he pulls it out, along with a small bowl of sliced watermelon, to look at her. “It was in the hallway, on top of a stack. Was Sol reading it? Is it his?”

Clearly bewildered, Robert squints at the object in question. It takes a second before his face relaxes with recognition, and he puts down the bowl of watermelon on the counter, next to the tray. He’s already laid out a small feast for them, she notices; in addition to the watermelon and some grapes, Robert’s also plated some soft cheese, crackers, olives, almonds. Her glass of sparkling water’s waiting for her on the island. “Oh, right. Yes, it’s Sol’s. Well, it belongs to both of us, really, sometimes he likes to read to me out loud in the evenings—but that’s not why it’s out. We
loaned it to Frankie a couple of weeks back. That whole stack on the table, as a matter of fact. She said something about wanting to find inspiration for Horton Plaza? Some silly communist poetry reading she’s doing."

Automatically, Grace says, “Democratic Socialist,” like it’s an important distinction, like it matters at all right now. There’s a curious sensation crawling through her. Inner antennae, lifting. “When did she bring them back?”

“Friday, I think. I just haven’t gotten around to re-shelving them yet. Why? Does it matter?”

Two days ago. And Frankie had kept the books in her studio for two weeks, read them in and around the dissolution of her relationship with Jacob, her shockingly casual admission that she couldn’t live without Grace. But had it really been that casual, after all? Had Grace missed something significant that day, too caught in her own crisis to hear that Frankie’s breakup had been prompted by an actual epiphany, one bigger than a disinclination to disrupt their status quo?

*I didn’t run away from Jacob,* she’d said through her tears, just this morning. *I ran towards you.*

Sometime before or after the hour she’d spent waiting outside Grace’s bedroom door, Frankie had read this book, read this poem about blue flowers and seeing and bodies and not forgetting. Frankie had read this, and she’d listened to Grace sob through her panic attack over realizing that this whole time she’d been mistaking herself for someone altogether separate.

And then Frankie had bookmarked the poem with Grace’s note.

Why in the world would this note still be in the book after she’d returned it? Had Frankie left it there accidentally? It’s something she’d do, after all; exactly her brand of forgetfulness. But maybe the note really has nothing to do with the poem, maybe Frankie just reached for the nearest piece of discarded scrap paper at hand to mark her place and it’s all just a big—Oh, Christ, it’s like she’s being dragged through some kind of feelings scavenger hunt set up by an English major. This is why she hates poetry in the first place. Why can’t people just say what they want outright?

Grace stuffs the piece of paper back inside the book, suddenly aware that Robert is staring at her. She’ll have to deal with this later.

“*You look like you’ve seen a ghost.*” Robert’s gaze drops to the book in her hand, then lifts back to Grace. “It’s none of my business, but now that I’ve mentioned Frankie—Does she know yet? Have you told her?”

Grace doesn’t bother to waste time asking him what he means. She looks away, not trusting herself to make direct eye contact, and comes up with a truth she can tell. “You’re the first person I’ve come out to.”

“But she knows something.” He’s finished dishing out the watermelon, and the sharp note in his voice reminds Grace why he’d made the top ten list for divorce attorneys in *San Diego Lawyer* six different times. “She must know something. The two of you are thick as thieves. Where’s Frankie, Grace? Why isn’t she here with you?”

Like it’s part of her skin, Grace’s phone itches at her, and her hand is on the zipper of her purse before she pulls it back.

*Isn’t she?*

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” she says, instead.
“Is she off on some sort of ayahuasca-fueled inner journey to sort through her emotions? Because I certainly know from personal experience how Sol—”

“I can’t talk about it, Robert. Not yet. May I please borrow this for a little while?” She waves the book, and just as Robert tells her, “Well, yes, of course, but—” they both hear the sound of the front door opening.

Grace freezes in place. Robert does too. Her expression must be a mask of alarm, because he immediately shakes his head at her, mouths I won’t say a word, and at the same time Sol exclaims from the foyer, “You’ll never guess what Rosie did today, dear heart! It made her look just like a little person. I’ll give you seven guesses. All right, eight, if you ask nicely.”

“The neighbors’ Labrador,” Robert explains, sotto voce, “Sol takes daily walks to visit her in their yard, they’re very forbearing,” and Grace barely registers what he’s saying. She’d been so focused on the aftermath of coming out to Robert, and then on this absurd poem Frankie’s left her—

—Frankie’s left her—

—that she hadn’t spent a second on considering what she’d tell Sol if he showed up at his own home. Well, he’s here now, and she’s going to have to make a quick and final decision. Lie to Sol about why she’s here in the first place, or obfuscate the situation, or stay silent and let Robert come up with a story, or—

No.

She might not have Frankie right now, but she can have something else.

Better than something. Fuck staying silent, or lying, to herself or to anyone else. Seven decades of that is more than enough for one lifetime. She can come out to Robert, and she can come out to Sol, and, as a matter of fact, she can come out to anyone she damn well pleases. The new realization makes her a little dizzy, faint with all the multiplying possibilities. For heaven’s sake, she could rent out a skywriting plane and have it fly over San Diego, if she felt like it. Get the announcement all over with in one fell swoop and a few mass texts that read go outside and look up.

Well, no, that would be too much. Efficient, of course, but too much. It isn’t the sort of thing one does in this sort of scenario. Not like she’s ever done this before.

But the appeal is undeniable, even though skywriting is a patently ridiculous idea. Everyone in her world would know immediately if Grace did something like that, and while the idea of everyone knowing has always been a fear scratching quietly at the soft places of her denial, having this out in the open seems, suddenly, like the thing she wants most. The thing she wants second-most. If she knows who she is, if she can’t look away from this anymore, well, then, their family needs to know, too. That’s all there is to it.

No halfway mealy-mouthed measures. Not for Grace Hanson.

The answering elation that rushes through her is as strong as it is unexpected, and if Frankie were here with her right now, holding her hand, it might be something she could call pure joy.

“Hello, my love,” Robert tells Sol, as he enters the kitchen, and Sol’s just crossing over to kiss his husband when he notices Grace and pauses in his tracks, obviously startled to find her there. “Grace was just—”

“I can speak for myself, Robert, thank you,” she says, gesturing at him to quiet, and mercifully, he
listens to her, shutting his mouth. Carefully, quickly, so as not to draw attention to it, she places the book of poetry on the kitchen island, her purse on top. “Hello, Sol. It’s good to see you.”

His sincerity always outperforms her politeness. “It’s so good to see you too, Grace. To what do we owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit? It’s rare we get you down all this way, especially on your own. Is Frankie here, too?”

“No, Frankie’s not here. It’s just me. Just—” She clears her throat. “Just little ol’ me, all by myself, showing up out of the blue. It certainly sounds like you’ve been having a lovely afternoon, what with your walk, and—and the cute dog. Dogs, right? They sure are great, or so people keep trying to tell me. Hey, Sol, I’ve got a question for you. How many gay people do you think are in the kitchen right now? I’ll give you one guess. All right, two, if you ask nicely.”

On the other side of the island, Robert groans softly and puts his face in his hands.

“Is this a—a joke?” Sol looks between Grace and Robert, clearly at a loss for how to proceed. “It sure sounds like a joke. Or a trick question. Because I’d say the answer is pretty darned obvious, but— Maybe there’s someone hiding in the pantry? I do love a good pantry surprise. Robert, what in God’s name happened to your shirt?”

“It’s not a joke,” Grace tells him, and she probably shouldn’t be enjoying herself at all right now, given the circumstances, but the quizzical expression on Sol’s face is strangely gratifying. “And there’s no one hiding in the pantry. Robert, would you like to tell him how many gay people there are in this kitchen? You can go ahead. It’s all right.”

“Three,” Robert says, muffled, between his fingers, not looking up. “There are three of us. Three gay people.”

“I don’t understand what you’re tr—”

“Everyone,” Grace says, slowly, “in this room. All of us.” She looks Sol levelly in the face, something she couldn’t bring herself to do with Robert on the front doorstep. Should it feel this much easier to say it out loud, this exciting, when just twenty minutes ago she’d pulled the same confession out of herself like a starved thing? “Myself included. That’s what I came over to tell Robert. And now you’re here, so I’m telling you. I like women, Sol.”

“You like—”

“The same way you and Robert like men. I always have. I just couldn’t let myself acknowledge it until very recently.” Twenty-four hours ago, to be exact. “So—go ahead. Process it, or whatever it is you like to do.”

“But, Grace, that makes no—” This time, Sol interrupts himself. “Look at all the men you’ve pursued since the divorce! That—that convict, and Robert’s cannibal friend who ate all of Frankie’s cheese, and the handsomely mustachioed married contractor I helped you romance, and none of us could forget that corporate putz who sued you to get your attention, of all things—”

“Each of which were extremely sustainable choices on my part.”

“—and—and you were married to Robert! For forty years!”

“Exactly,” she tells him, and points in Robert’s direction. “I was married to this man. And, in turn, he was married to me. We were married to each other. God, Robert—” A thought occurs to her, right enough that it doesn’t feel new, just seen. “We must have sensed something. Is it possible we could have known on some level? That we needed each other, I mean. Not in the way you’re
supposed to need a spouse, but—"

—because you were safe,” Robert finishes. “And I was safe. And all that time, Grace, during those last twenty years when I knew who I was, when I knew I wanted more than what we had, I never once thought to ask myself why I was enough for you. It never occurred to me to wonder, not once. I could have at least given you that.”

“Oh,” Sol says, like he’s having a moment. “Oh. Oh.”

Grace offers Robert a small smile. “I think,” she says, realizing as she’s speaking that it’s true, “you did what you were capable of doing. So did I, I suppose. We can’t erase what’s happened, we can’t erase half a lifetime, but—” She takes a breath. “I guess we can own up to it. Maybe that’s enough. It’ll have to be.”

“What a pair we were, huh, kid?”

He’d called her that for the very first time on their third date, and she remembers, as clear as anything, how good she’d felt hearing it. Safe. Safe enough to get a little thrill from the nickname and misspell it into attraction.

“The perfect couple,” she agrees, “perfectly suited after all, as it turns out,” and then, because she can’t resist the comment, “You know, it’s really too bad your mother isn’t still with us.”

It startles a loud laugh out of Robert, and she knows he’s thinking about it too, imagining how Grace, no longer needing to play nice, could make Barbara Hanson’s lips invert with absolute horror at her former daughter-in-law’s iniquitous audacity. Sol, looking back and forth between them like he’s at a tennis match and their long history is the ball, says in a tiny, wavering voice, “Oh, my goodness. It’s true, isn’t it? It’s really true. You’re a lesbian. Grace Hanson is a lesbian.”

He sounds shocked, not declarative, but it’s the first time she’s heard her own revelation echoed back at her from someone else. It feels good. It feels so much better than good; it feels right. Just like that, the last bit of uncertainty that’s been humming under Grace’s awareness, quiet but persistent—what if she’s wrong about this? What if she’s turning her life upside down for nothing?—disappears completely. “Are you all right, Sol?”

“Shouldn’t I be the one asking you? You’ve just—oh, my God. You just came out. You came out! This is a big deal! Grace, has anyone—Robert, did you congratulate her yet? Of course you didn’t, it’s not like you to think about—” And before she knows it, Sol’s rushed over to her side of the island and wrapped her in his arms, squeezing her tightly. Too surprised to move, Grace stays where she is, wedged inside his full-body hug. “Mazel tov, sweetheart. What an accomplishment! I’m so thrilled for you. May it give you the same happiness beyond measure it’s given Robert and me. You know, my mother always used to say to us ‘Zolst leben un zein gezunt,’ which means ‘You should live and be well.’ She’d tell you the same now, if she were still with us, so I’ll just say it in her place. Zolst leben un zein gezunt, Grace.”

She’s sincerely touched. “Well, that’s very—”

“Of course, my mother also used to say, ‘Sol, drayt nicht arum vie a forts in roosl,’ and that means ‘Sol, don’t wander around like a fart in a pickle-barrel,’ so not all of her expressions were as kind.”

“Sol,” Robert says, from behind them, “why don’t you let Grace breathe?”

“Sorry, I’m sorry. I know. I can be a little much sometimes.”

He releases her, stepping back, and something in Grace makes her tell him, “No, it’s okay. Really. I
think I’m all right with a little much at the moment. Sol, thank you for—"

Unexpectedly, she reaches for him again, pulling him back into a quick embrace. It might be the first time she’s ever hugged Sol without reservations or misgivings, and from the way he tenses with obvious astonishment, Sol clearly realizes it too. Only for a second, though, and then he’s got his arms around her again. “Two hugs,” he’s saying, and she feels him smiling into the top of her head. “Wow. I sure am a lucky guy.”

You had her, she thinks, suddenly, you had her, and it’s strange, how intimately Frankie must know Sol’s back, the unfamiliar map of muscle now under Grace’s hands. You had her in your life, in your bed, you raised your children with her, you woke up every single morning for more than forty years and she was right there, choosing you, over and over and over again.

Eyes pricking, she blinks, and letting go of Sol, says softly, “Yeah. What a lucky guy.”

As luck and talent would have it, during the rest of her visit she’s able to steer the conversation in the direction she wants. For the most part.

Inevitably, once they’re in the living room and eating from Robert’s carefully prepared spread, Sol yanks them into uneasy territory—“So, how’s our Frankie handling the news that she’s the only straight one left in the Bergstein-Hanson family quartet? Probably a whole lot better than she did when Robert and I came out, since you’re not married to her”—and Grace, her throat tight and full, tries to distract him by bringing up the San Diego LGBT Community Center. It’s successful. Successful when it comes to Sol, anyway, since he all but levitates at the chance to talk about the pro bono legal counseling he’s been doing for the Center. And despite how distracted she is, what Sol ends up telling her about the need for accessible senior services among the city’s LGBT population is more than a little interesting.

While they talk and eat, Sol all animated hands and waving arms and flying cracker crumbs, Robert watches Grace from his chair on the other side of the coffee table. His eyes are slightly narrowed, as if he knows the outline of something unsaid is there in the room with them, but he can’t quite figure out how to trace it. Not yet.

Grace answers their gentle questions as honestly as she can, walking them through a story that’s cut carefully around the loud absence of Frankie, and she eats while she does it, and all the while her mind strays back to the kitchen where the book of poetry sits on the island, under her purse with the phone in it. Things, and little limbs, too, extensions of her focus.

Like your own body to you.

Time crawls and crawls through their conversation. Eventually, Grace senses she’s been there long enough to make a getaway without overly concerning either of them, and after one final round of tearful congratulations from Sol and a long squeeze to her shoulder from Robert’s warm, firm hand, she takes her leave, promising as she does it to accompany the two of them to an upcoming fundraiser for the Center. The funny thing is, she’s fairly certain she’s not just being polite. Somehow, Grace can begin to visualize herself moving through that unfamiliar space: confidently holding up her silent auction paddle, networking with media sponsors who might give her a good deal on advertising space for Vybrant. Hearing the references to “our” and “we” in the keynote speech and letting herself nod slightly in agreement.

Before going, she doesn’t run to the kitchen to reclaim her purse and the poetry book. More like a
brisk walk, just expeditious enough to be purposeful. Rushing anywhere is a risk at this age, anyway, and it would look too obvious, too much like she’s unable to stop herself from accelerating.

Her car’s parked at a haphazard angle, crooked in the driveway and almost hitting the bushes. Once she’s back inside, sitting in the driver’s seat, she places her purse and the book on the other side of the center console, and then winces. Grace had been too preoccupied on the way over to notice it, too upset, but the passenger seat’s still reclining in the same position from last night. The obtuse angle created by the juncture of seat and back feels mocking, palpably stuffed with the person who isn’t sitting there.

She looks at her watch. Four hours since she’d left the beach house, and her phone’s been on silent and hidden away for more than three of them. How many missed texts does she have? How many missed calls?

And then the thought occurs to her, accompanied by a jolt of undiluted alarm, that the vibrations she’d felt in her purse while standing on Robert’s front doorstep might not have been Frankie attempting to get in touch after all. Because—how could she have forgotten this?—Frankie never texts or calls first, not when she’s angry. It could’ve been Brianna, even though she almost never messages unless she wants something from Grace. Or Mallory, desperate to find a babysitter for her offspring. Or the automatic payment notification for her phone bill. Or a series of reminders about a salon appointment. Any number of scenarios that don’t involve Frankie at all.

If Frankie hasn’t tried to reach out—

Panic threatens, and she has to work hard not to breathe it in. Grace fumbles with the flap of her purse, digs until her hand closes around the hard rectangle of her phone.

Coyote Bergstein 8 minutes ago
iMessage (42)

Brianna Hanson 1 hour ago
Voicemail

Mallory Hanson 2 hours ago
Voicemail

Coyote Bergstein 3 hours ago
Voicemail

She scans the notifications quickly. Nothing from Frankie’s phone.

Nothing. Not even one text.

Unlocking the screen, she presses the series of buttons that take her to her voicemail, all the while trying to quell the sick fright that’s pressing on her lungs. Frankie hasn’t reached out to her. Which means that Frankie’s still furious. In fact, Frankie’s perfectly fine with letting the seconds they’ve gone without speaking stretch into hours, or even days. That’s the way she prefers it. And maybe Frankie’s realized that she doesn’t need more time to think about things, after all. As a matter of fact, she’s already reached a final decision about their relationship, because she’s figured out conclusively that she doesn’t want or need—

“Grace? It’s Coyote.” He sounds odd, outside his normal emotional range of calm to extremely calm, and it takes her a second to place what she’s hearing from him. Agitation. “So, uh, Mom
showed up at my place like ten minutes ago, and she’s more upset than I’ve ever seen her. Maybe ever? No, definitely ever. It’s way worse than when you—you know, with the gun. Worse than Dad and Robert. I think—I think it’s even worse than the BP oil spill. Right now she’s plowing through a bag of organic baby carrots and lecturing herself for non-ethical consumption, I guess because the baby carrots never got the chance to grow up and become adult carrots? I keep trying to get her to tell me what happened, but all she’ll say is ‘it’s not a one-woman story.’ And when I asked her where you are, her face got all—it was weird. I’m actually super worried right now. Please call me back as soon as you get this, okay? I really need to talk to you. It’s Coyote. Coyote Bergstein.”

Oh, no.

“Mom, what the hell is going— Madison, no. Stop hitting your brother right now. We don’t hit in this house. You know that. Because we don’t. Mom, Coyote just told me he called you an hour ago and you haven’t called back. Where are you? Why is Frankie in Coyote’s house telling him that she’s Usain Bolt, but emotionally? What is she talking about?” In a much softer voice, nearly a whisper. “Does this—okay, I’m just going to say it outright. Does this, by any chance, have anything to do with what you and Brianna and I talked about the other day at—” Louder again. “Macklin? Don’t you dare pick that up. Don’t you— Mom, I can’t do this right now, but you need to call me back. I swear to God, Mack—”

Oh, no.

“Hello, Mommy dearest— Sorry, I know you hate it when I call you that. Cherished Mommy. Is that better? Mom. Momzer. Madre. Mom-o-rama. Care to enlighten me as to why your beloved BFF moved into her son’s road fort for children this afternoon? Is that related to why you’re not answering your phone? Coyote and Mal just called. They want me to drive up to the beach house to see if you’re there, but, okay, here’s the thing. See, I have been hanging out all afternoon with my bud Mary Jane. That was a pun I just made, by the way. Bud, as in pot, which has buds on it, and is also my bud, as in friend. Also the name of my king dork stepbrother. Wait. Wait. Mom. Step-bud-der.” A long pause. “Wow, harsh audience. I’ll just save that gem for Frankie. Oh. Right. I forgot. You’re not actually there. Because this is a voicemail. A voicemail that I am leaving because no one knows where you are. Maybe I’ll just pound a couple of espresso shots and Uber over. Mallory said— Mom, Mal said that this isn’t the typical Frankie B righteous fury spectacle. No improvised song lyrics about how she’s a martyr. No dishwashing glove grief puppets. She’s just lying down in Coyote’s bedroom-slash-coffin, pretending to nap.” Another long pause, followed by a loud clunk and then a rustling sound. “I dropped the phone on the floor. But it’s totally fine. I picked it up again. I got it. So you can call me back. Call me back, Mom.”

Oh, fuck.

She’d been so focused on coming out to Sol and Robert that she’d completely failed to think through the inevitable consequences of an upset Frankie showing up at Coyote’s place. Mallory sounds like she’s about ten minutes, one Valium, and negative four children away from realizing exactly what’s occurred. And once Brianna sobered up a little, there’s no way she won’t start to put two and two together. Anxiety crawls up Grace’s arms, winds around her ribs, speeds up her heart rate. Coming out is one thing, but the thought of their entire family knowing about this unresolved and extremely private situation with Frankie is something else entirely. She isn’t ready for them to find out. Not until she’s had a chance to speak with Frankie again and figure out exactly where they stand, where they’re headed.

If Frankie even wants to talk. If Frankie will actually open her ears, for once in her life, and listen.
The double-digit message notification badge on her phone is new for Grace. She’s never received that many texts at once, not even on the day Frankie, breathless with excitement, had informed Grace that she’d just learned about the existence of something called a gif. Her finger pauses over the screen as it occurs to her that something must’ve happened for Coyote to send her that many texts. Forty-two of them. Has Coyote ever texted her before, even once? Forty-two texts waiting, and Frankie’s apparently upset enough to barricade herself away from their children when normally she’d be clamoring after them to distract her.

Grace suddenly goes cold with pure terror. She’d read a medical journal article a few months ago linking anxiety attacks to the sudden onset of ischemic strokes in already vulnerable populations.

Before she can let herself corkscrew any further down that possibility spiral, she presses the green badge, clicks again to bring up the series of texts from Coyote, starts to read the first message—

The fear that’s sharpened her body leaves her fast enough to make her slump a little where she’s sitting. Just three words in, she knows.

**Today** 1:32 PM

*I’m so damn mad at u*

*I’m so damn mad at myself*

*I am a receptacle of rage Grace*

**Today** 1:48 PM

*R u ok?*

*Pls lmk if u r ok*

*Lmk means Let Me Know in the modern texting lingo*

*In case that’s why u r not answering*

**Today** 2:01 PM

*If u need 2 borrow my emotion wheel it’s in the meditation rm*

*Next 2 the sand mandala toolkit*

*U could use both*

*A self-care double whammy*

*I’m in Coyote’s bedroom and I’ve already hit my head on the ceiling 4 times*

**Today** 2:14 PM

*Trying very hard 2 remember how much vodka is in our house*
Today 2:19 PM

Emotion wheels don’t give u hangovers
That is a big checkmark in favor of emotion wheels

Today 2:41 PM

Grace u had no right to compare me to Sol like that
No right
Or to throw Jacob of all people in my face
Being angry doesn’t mean u get to say hurtful shit to me

Today 2:58 PM

I just received an imaginary text from u in response to my last text (real)
Do u want 2 know what it said
Ok ok I’ll tell u
“Frankie, being scared doesn’t mean it’s okay for you to run away.”
Damn u Imaginary Grace
I hate it when u get to be right

Today 3:16 PM

If u r not talking to me I respect that
I’m not really on talking terms w myself at the mo
Btw emojis don’t count as talking if u felt like sending me 1
It doesn’t even need 2 b a good emoji
One of the lesser emojis would b cool

Today 3:52 PM

Feelings check in:
Still scared
But a new kind of scared
Today 4:21 PM

This tiny house has some bomb perks

U can open the oven door w 1 of those robot grabber hands while lying in bed

Harder 2 convincingly pretend not 2 hear ur son when he asks for his phone

Did I tell u I’m using Coyote’s phone bc I left mine at the house

Fucksticks I should have written that earlier

This is Frankie

Today 4:34 PM

Frankie Bergstein

Today 4:41 PM

Disciple of the universe, mother, best friend, coward

Today 4:54 PM

Oh Grace where are you

Not anywhere. There isn’t a car around her, and she isn’t sitting in a driveway, and Robert and Sol’s house isn’t there, either. It’s just Grace and her phone, this miracle rope.

Forty-two texts.

She scrolls back through the messages, reading them again, more slowly, and then a third time. A fourth. Her index finger lingers on the bubbles as she scrolls through, touching the words, what Frankie’s sent out over and over into the vacuum of Grace’s total silence.

None of the replies she comes up with are right. She types and erases, types and erases.

I’m okay, Frankie.

I’m as okay as I can be under the circumstances.

I’m not drunk.

I hate sand mandalas. And emotion wheels.

I told Robert and Sol.

I told Robert and Sol you know what.

I came out. Can you believe it?

I wish you’d been there when I came out.
I wish I’d come out to you first.

I’m so sorry that I hurt you.

You hurt me.

You knew exactly how to hurt me.

No one’s ever known how to hurt me like you do.

Please come home.

Moving forward and back, repeating the pattern over and over until Grace finally figures out what she wants to tell her. There’s really just one message that Frankie needs to receive, something that matters more than every sentence Grace has deleted, and includes them, too.

I’m here.

She sends the text. After a long second it flowers on her screen, blue.

Almost instantly, the screen scrolls up again on its own as a gray bubble appears, holding the ellipses that mean Frankie’s writing her something back. Then the bubble vanishes, and before Grace can start to worry about what that could imply, it resurfaces. Disappears. Again and again, because—Grace, holding her breath, figures it out—Frankie’s also writing, erasing, writing, erasing, trying to find the right thing to say.

As it turns out, the right thing to say, delivered after four unbelievably excruciating minutes, is an emoji of a monkey with its hands over its eyes.

A monkey.

Grace stares at her screen in disbelief. What the fuck?

An accident, it’s got to be, because Frankie usually sends her one of the little yellow faces, or—Does the eye-covering mean that she doesn’t want to see Grace’s text? Doesn’t want to see Grace? But Frankie had asked her, over and over, to check in. She’d sent all those messages wanting Grace to write back, even—oh, God, it’s just now actually sinking in—imagining what Grace might say back. Needing to hear Grace’s voice. Frankie needs to hear her voice.

So what does a sightless monkey have to do with any of that? Is Frankie trying to say that she’s in denial about something? Is she unwilling to look at what’s facing them? Is it some sort of non-sequitur reference to *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*, Frankie’s favorite monkey-related film? Honestly, this is all just impossible. First she’d had to read poetry that probably means something, except she isn’t sure exactly what, and now there’s an ambiguous emoji to add to that stack of—

Grace draws a sharp and fast breath. Oh.

There’s Frankie, in her memory, vivid.

She’s lying on one of their patio deck chairs, hands clapped over her eyes. *I’m listening, Grace. To the ocean. You can hear so much better when you deprive your other senses.* Frankie sitting at the dining room table, intermittently blindfolded with one of Grace’s scarfs and intently repeating phrases from her Duolingo app. *Je dois un poulet. Tu dois un poulet. Ils nous doivent un poulet.* A couch-prone Frankie, stoned and listening to Gerry Rafferty on their living room record player. *Grace, let me steal those paws of yours. Because there’s still peanut butter on my hands,*
that’s why, and I’m sure as shit not about to miss out on the groovetastic vibes of “Right Down the Line.”

She stares at the tiny monkey, hands on its eyes and smiling.

No, Frankie isn’t ignoring her text. The opposite, in fact.

*I’m listening, Grace.*

Inside her, there’s the first faint stirrings of something twitching back to life. Hope, that shitty little nemesis of common sense.

_____________________

In the twenty minutes it takes her to drive between Mission Hills and Pacific Beach, Grace comes up with a plan. A very good plan, in fact.

She’s going to park in Mallory’s driveway, get out of the car and walk down the concrete sidewalk with precise and cautious steps, head held high just like she always does when she’s trying her hardest to project confidence, and then she’s going to knock smartly on the door of Coyote’s tiny house.

And that’s the plan. That’s as far as she’s gotten.

Okay, maybe it’s not a very good plan, or a detailed one, but it’s the only plan she’s been able to come up with, damn it, and surely she’ll figure out what to do the door opens. Because everything depends on who, exactly, opens the door. If it’s Coyote, that’s easier. Grace will say something carefully nonchalant, like, “I got your message and decided it was just easier to come over,” or “Has Frankie graduated from that bag of baby carrots to Wheat Thins yet?” or “My goodness, Coyote, this house is so small, I wonder if there’s enough room for your mother to change her mind about us.”

No. Not that last one. Jesus, definitely not that last one.

What if Frankie answers the door?

It’s so easy for Grace to picture. Certainly Frankie won’t have put up her hair; she hadn’t brought a headband or clips or pins with her, and she never keeps any spares in her car. So it’ll still be loose the way it was earlier, those soft brown curls outpacing that wellspring of gray at her scalp, and Frankie’s blue eyes will grow large at the sight of Grace. She’ll reach out to grip the doorframe, maybe, not because she needs the support but because it’s what she can touch that’s safe. And if those texts are any indication of where Frankie is right now with all of this, she might give Grace a tiny smile, just enough to make the ends of her mouth into something that keeps going.

If that’s what she’ll see in front of her, Grace isn’t sure she’ll be able to get out a single word. After the door opens, she decides, she’ll keep both hands behind her back as a reminder, in case her body acts all on its own, thinking it knows the best course of action. It certainly doesn’t. Leaning in to kiss that smile, the corner of it, feeling the gentle spot where Frankie’s lips meet the comma of her laugh line, is not what Grace needs to accomplish. Not even if Frankie kisses her back, making that tiny noise that teases at all the places on Grace now defined exclusively by what isn’t there. Not even then.

All right, it takes twenty-two minutes to get to Mallory’s, not twenty, because Grace, distracted and aching, misses the turn onto Mallory’s street and has to circle around again.
But that’s a momentary blip. Once she’s on the right block, the plan executes itself flawlessly, all sixty seconds of careful preparation, until Grace is standing on Coyote’s stamp-sized porch with the book of poetry clutched firmly in one hand, about to announce her arrival. She shifts her shoulders back, standing a little taller, and then, as if everything in her isn’t bruised and inflamed and bent tender out of recognition by the day’s events, Grace finds the muscle, somehow, to knock.

A brisk, business-like knock on the glass window with a curtain on the inside blocking her view. One-two-three, knuckles only, and hard enough that it stings the bone a little. Pulse knocking too, she waits.

No answer. Nothing. So she knocks again, harder this time, and for longer. If anyone’s home, they’re sure as hell not going to have the excuse of not hearing her.

Still nothing.

Except— She presses her ear to the door, trying to hear. Is that—? It is. Someone’s shuffling towards her.

Muffled, she hears a dull thumping noise that sounds distinctly like a body colliding into furniture, followed immediately by a low “Ohhhh, motherf—” that gets snapped off into silence before it’s finished.

Coyote isn’t there. He can’t be. He would’ve opened the door by now. There’s only one person inside that house.

“Frankie?”

At first, there’s no answer. She lifts her head, stepping back just a bit, and the shuffling sounds get a little louder, come a little closer, until they stop abruptly and Grace knows—deduction, intuition, both—that Frankie must be just on the other side of the door, not even a foot away from her.

“Frankie, can you hear me?”

Nothing, again, a long nothing, and then, finally, she hears Frankie answer, “I think so. I think I can. I’m going to try. What about you? Can you hear me?”

It’s clear, what they’re really asking one another. “I’ll try, too. I’ll do my best.” She means it. Her best, and there’s nothing better. “Can you open the door?”

“If you—if you don’t mind, I think I’d like to keep the door closed. At least for right now.”

The question comes out of her before she can stop it. “Do you mean that metaphorically?”

“No,” Frankie says, right away. “Not metaphorically. Literally. We need to have a real conversation, Grace. If I’m here and you’re there and there’s a solid barrier separating us, then it’s a whole lot harder for me to jump off the precipice of my emotions and dash myself on the rocks of you.”

It’s close enough to what Grace had been worrying over in the car that she starts to nod in agreement before realizing that, of course, Frankie can’t actually see her reaction. “Believe it or not,” she says, “I understand completely.”

“Oh, I believe it,” Frankie tells her, and there’s something in her voice that makes Grace blush. “I think a closed door might help both of us concentrate better. There’s a lot to concentrate on.”
“Like you running out on me.” Another thing she hadn’t meant to say, and said despite herself. Well, she can’t take it back now, and the longer it sits between them, the less she wants to reclaim it.

After another pause, Grace hears, “Part of it is physiological. My adrenal medulla overproduces norepinephrine, which happens to result in an autonomic nervous system that triggers a flight response. It’s always been that way for me, ever since I was a little kid. Remember the time we went to see that bangin’ all-lady Black Sabbath tribute band, Black Sabbitch? I spent the opening act drawing a venue map on my hand with a Sharpie so I knew positively where I could find all the exits.”

“Oh, bullshit. I don't want to hear your excuses. Earlier, at the house? That had nothing to do with physiology and everything to do with you making a choice. You chose to walk out on me, Frankie, and what’s far worse, you did it without any indication of, of how long you’d be gone, like some sort of—”

“Coward?”

It’s two syllables, just one word, Frankie’s pain leaking audibly from all of it.

For the bravest woman I know.

“No, not a coward,” Grace says, and presses her fingers gently against the warm door, like she’s feeling something else. Wonders, briefly, if Frankie’s doing the same thing on the other side. “You were scared, and you hurt me because you were scared. I won’t sugarcoat that or tell you it wasn't wrong. But I shouldn’t have called you a coward. It was cruel of me to say. I’m sorry.”

“Cruel of you to say, yes. True of you to say, also yes. Oh, Grace, it just about kills me to admit this to myself, but I think you were right. That’s what you call a person who picks her fear, isn’t it? A coward. I kept staring at my face in the rearview mirror on the way over here, and I gotta tell you, I didn’t much like what I saw there. Neither did the other drivers on the freeway, I guess, because there was a shitload of honking. Honey, I’m just so damn—” She stops. “I guess I shouldn’t call you that, huh? Honey. Or any of the names I keep— It’s not like I’ve earned the right.”

The sensible thing to do would be to agree with this statement, and in a different world, where any endearment out of Frankie’s mouth didn’t press right up against the emptiness of decades, promising to fill it, Grace would. Instead, she says quietly, “You aren’t a coward. And you can call me whatever you want. Anything.”

“Anything?”

“Well, don’t press your—”

“Tootsie-wootsie sure has a nice ring to it.”

“Anything, with the exception of that.”

“Angel pie?” Frankie asks, and Grace rolls her eyes, figuring that there’s really no harm in letting herself smile a little right now if Frankie can’t see it. “Cupcake? Sugar lips?”

“I’d prefer not to be mistaken for food, thank you very much.”

Before the sentence is all the way out of her mouth, she realizes the double entendre she’s set up, and her face heats quickly as she imagines the response Frankie could easily give her. Well, Grace,
that’s just too bad, because you look good enough for me to eat. Which, of course, leads Grace right back into her increasingly vivid daydream of how that scenario would play out, for at least the third time today, and she has to bite down hard on her lip to distract her body. Ridiculous. One single intrusive thought, even in the middle of a conversation, and she’s immediately distracted into a warm pulse strong enough to make her shift her hips.

Thankfully, Frankie doesn’t notice the bait she’s inadvertently placed, or maybe Frankie does notice it and side-steps the joke, for once, because there’s a noticeable hesitation before her reply. When she does eventually speak, the teasing note’s gone. “I know, Grace,” she says, “what you want me to call you, and maybe that’s why I did what I did. Why I ran. Wife. That’s the name you really want to hear.”

It’s a rhetorical bucket of cold water, that one word. She pulls her hand back from the door, not sure she’s ready for whatever Frankie’s about to tell her next, and doesn’t say anything.

“All that time you weren’t answering my texts, I thought—God, I convinced myself that you were so angry with me that you’d changed your mind, that you didn’t want me anymore. It was just like a dream vision. I saw it as clear as anything. You’d drop me faster than a dripping hot glue gun and run right into the toned arms of Josephine.”

“Josephine?” Grace manages.

“Your new girlfriend, exceptionally accomplished in all things sapphic. Oh, she’d be younger, of course, in her early sixties, and tall—I mean, too tall, like, weird tall—with this sleek straight hair that stays perfectly in place, and she’d wear lots of fashionable pantsuits that somehow never get any stains on them, even when she eats spaghetti. Which she almost never does, natch. And by the way, she likes it when you call her Jo. Not everyone-you. Just you-you. Of course, I’d pretend to be okay with her, just so you’d keep me around, but Grace, four words: *Home Alone* booby traps.”

“I—all right, fine, but what in God’s name does that have to do with—”

“With you and me being married? Because around the time I started fantasizing about listening at your bedroom door through the bottom of a water glass while Josephine filled you out like an application, boom, that’s when it hit me. I realized what I should’ve said to you back at the house. I just couldn’t come up with the right words then.”

“You—while she did—what? An applica—”

“Grace,” Frankie says, and Grace succeeds, barely, in shutting up. “I didn’t just imagine you with Josephine while I was up in Coyote’s bedroom, pretending it was one of those Japanese capsule hotels. I thought about us. I thought about the future we could have, if I hadn’t screwed it all up yet. I imagined holding your hand on the seniors’ float during the Pride parade, both of us keeping an eye out for our kids on the sidewalk. I’d be wearing overalls that I’d bedazzled with gigantic rainbow-colored rhinestones, so my body could be a human billboard reading ‘Fuck Corporate Inclusion.’ Obviously.”

“Obviously.” It’s the only thing she can get out. Her stomach’s all fast swish and thick pressure, the first strong kick of a launch.

“And the really crazy thing is, that hand of yours I’m holding on the float? When I close my eyes, I can just about feel the ring that’s on your finger. A ring that I put there.”

“You can feel— *Frankie*—”
“Do you know what imagining that little gold band of yours pressing into my skin does to me, Grace? That it makes my back teeth hurt thinking about it, just because I want it that damn badly? Do you know what that feels like?”

“Yes.” Her voice is just loud enough to be heard, but no less forceful for being quiet. “Yes. Yes. Oh, my God. Yes. I know.”

“Dear heart,” Frankie says, like there’s nothing truer in the world, and Grace has to close her mouth to keep inside some small and pitiful sound. “I know you know. And that’s the real reason I’m scared shitless about us, don’t you see? If we’re going to get from this door to that parade float, and stay like that until the blessed end, I think we’ve got some real labor to take care of first, you and me. The emotional kind. Which takes time. A lot more time than we’ve had so far. Is that something you know, too, or am I on my own with this?”

Grace’s legs and hands are trembling. They’ve been trembling since Frankie said the word ring. She’d like very much to sit down. There’s nowhere to sit. She presses her hands into her abdomen, one on top of the other.

Finally, she asks, “Would you come back home and live with me again? While we did this—what did you call it, emotional labor?”

“I think so. Yes.”

“If—when you came home, would it be as my roommate, or as my partner? And I'm not talking the business sense of the word.”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Would I be able to touch you?”

“Grace—”

“How much time would you need before you’d be ready for sex?” She doesn’t stumble over the word, a minor miracle. “In a bed. Like we talked about.”

A long unsteady exhale on the other side of the door. “Oh. I—I haven’t figured that out either.”

“Would we still sleep separately? For how long? In the meantime, what do we tell the kids about us, about our relationship? And Robert, and Sol?”

“I don’t have any of those answers for you right now. I’m sorry, I—”

“I’m in,” Grace says, simply and without pause. “I’ll do it. I have to admit, I don’t know exactly what emotional labor means, although I think I can hazard a decent guess.” She thinks, for a moment, about the vodka bottle on their kitchen island, waiting patiently for Grace to come home and rescue it from rejection. Like she’s invited her mouth to the thought, it waters, and she swallows down what isn’t her preference. “I don’t know how good I’m going to be at that, to be honest with you. I’ve never been very good at that sort of thing. I’ll try, though. I’ll try whatever you want. But in return, Frankie, I need you to do something for me.”

“Okay, then.” Frankie sounds a little startled. “Shoot.”

“Give me a timetable. The least you can do is deliver me a by-when. So you can’t answer my questions yet. Fine. I have to know when you can answer them. I need a date.”
“A date,” Frankie repeats. “If—”

“Mom?”

Grace whips her head to the left so quickly her neck stings with pain. There’s Mallory, standing just outside her front door, with Madison clinging to her waist, and Coyote’s next to them, all three staring down the front lawn towards the tiny house.

“Oh, fuck me,” she groans, under her breath. Now is not the time. Now is so unbelievably not the time. “Frankie, you—”

“Mom!” Mallory’s beckoning frantically at her, shouting in a yell-whisper clearly pitched to avoid alerting the neighbors to their business. It’s fairly impressive, Grace has to admit. “Mom! You need to come over here, right now!”

“One second, Mallory,” she calls up towards the house, “give me just one— I’ll be right—” and, turning back to the door in front of her, realizes she can’t rush this, can’t demand what she wants this second or she’ll risk, again, not getting it at all. How can she make Frankie understand? What can she tell her?

In the space of an instant, she makes a decision, fast enough that she doesn’t have time to worry about it. “Frankie, I’ve got to go, the kids are— Look. I’m going to leave something for you, okay? Right here on the welcome mat—” She looks down for the first time. “—that says ‘SUP? in large capital letters. Of course it does.”

“That reminds me,” Frankie interrupts, “we got a card from Coyote last week thanking us for our super belated housewarming present. On the fridge, if you want to take a look.”

“We got him this mat, didn’t we?”

“Conceivably.”

“That’s a hard yes,” Grace says, trying not to be too elated by how easily they’ve recovered their familiar rhythm, even for a quick and inconsequential volley. “And Frankie—”

“Yes?”

“When you see it, what I’ve left—” Her fingers are already inside the poetry book, searching for the slip of paper tucked there. “We can do this, Frankie. You can do this. You just need a little reminder of the person you really are, that’s all.”

Before she can stop herself, she’s dropped the note on the welcome mat, and she’s about to start wondering if the closed door means she can bring herself to say something else, words that’ve been brimming at the back of her mouth all day, when Mallory calls again, “Mom! I will absolutely drag this clinging child all the way across the front yard and onto the sidewalk if you don’t come inside and talk to me right now. Please.”

It can’t be more than a hundred feet between the curb and the porch where Mallory, Coyote, and Madison are waiting, but the crossing takes her far longer than it should. It’s a stretch of time broken only by the faint sound of Coyote’s front door opening behind Grace once she’s a safe distance up the concrete steps. Unable to let herself turn around, Grace keeps going, and as she walks her back burns from what she knows is Frankie’s gaze, the thin fabric of her blouse a bad barrier between skin and staring.

“Well, hello,” she says, once she’s reached the landing, offering the trio on the porch a practiced
and extremely convincing smile. Her eldest granddaughter is the only one who bothers to return it. “Hi, everyone. How are—"

“Okay, Mom?” Mallory reaches down to muffle Madison’s ears. One of her hands is clutching a portable baby monitor, rendering the attempt functionally pointless. “What the s-h-i-t is going on with Frankie? What the s-h-i-t is going on with you? Why is Frankie refusing to talk about—whatever it is? Coyote and I have been totally in the dark for hours, waiting for you to call us back, and if I hadn’t happened to look outside just—”

“I can hear you,” Madison interrupts, looking up at her mother and rolling her eyes. Mallory straightens up and rolls her eyes too, in a gesture that underscores their strong resemblance. “You spelled s-h-i-t. That means it’s a curse.” She sounds it out. “Shhhhhiiii—"

“I didn’t—you know what, fine. You got me. Mommy’s a terrible influence who really needs to remember you know how to read now.”

Letting go of Mallory’s waist, Madison attaches herself immediately to Grace’s, squeezing as she wraps her arms around her stomach, and Grace, not exactly sure how to react to this unusual display of affection from a child who isn’t much of a hugger, briskly rubs the top of Madison’s head with her free hand.

“Maddy,” she says, and pries a finger loose to establish exactly how sticky it is, “what do we always make sure we do before we put our hands on Grandma Grace’s very expensive clothes?”

Not hesitating, Madison answers, “We wash them with the soap for twenty seconds. I did! Did you know, um, did you know that Daddy doesn’t live here now? Because of him and Mommy getting a divorce. I know everything about divorce.”

“Me too,” Grace tells her. “Maybe we’ll start a club. Honey, why don’t you and Coyote go play together while your mommy and I talk about some grown-up things?”

“I wanna stay,” Madison says, instantly.

“No, you don’t. It’s going to be really boring. So boring! You wouldn’t like it. We have to talk about—” She searches for something a six-year-old would hate. “Taxes. And mortgages, and mutual funds, and books that don’t have pictures. Total yuck, am I right?”

Madison releases her and stares up at Grace, clearly not taking the bait.

“Uh, Grace?” Coyote asks, speaking up for the first time. “I’d really like to be here for this grown-up conversation, if that’s okay. She’s my mother.”

“Grandma Grace, why is Grandma Frankie here? Why are you here?”

Grandma Frankie? Well, that’s certainly something brand new. Gracious. Surprise must be written all over her face, because Mallory says, too quickly, “The kids didn’t understand why Sol got to be Grandpa Sol and Frankie couldn’t be Grandma Frankie, so we just stopped trying to explain—Mom? What is it?”

“Nothing,” Grace says, her voice bright. She clutches the poetry book a little more tightly. “Absolutely nothing at all. Everything’s fine. Madison, Frankie—your Grandma Frankie’s here because she wanted to spend some real good quality time with Coyote in his Lilliputian house, that’s all. Hey, has your mommy read Gulliver’s Travels to you yet? Or are you still too young for that?”
“I’m almost seven,” Madison informs her, scrunching her face in recrimination. “Duh. I’m not a baby.”

To Grace’s deep relief, Mallory steps in. “Go terrorize your big brother for a little while. Stay inside the house, and don’t you let me catch you bothering the twins, all right?” She shakes the monitor to stress her point. “They need their sleep so they can get ready to deprive Mommy’s at three in the morning.”

“Can I have a peanut butter cup?”

“Fine,” Mallory allows, just as Grace says, “No sugar before dinner,” and at the same time annoyance flashes over Mallory’s face, she adds, unable to help it, “You really shouldn’t let them ruin their appetites, honey. It’s not good to—”

“Go eat a peanut butter cup, Maddy. Give Mack one too. Mom, my kids, my bad choices, okay? When I want your advice, I’ll ask for it. Promise.”

Meaning, of course, that she won’t ask for any advice at all. Grace shuts her mouth on another suggestion she knows won’t be welcome as Madison runs back into the house, all gangling limbs and loud feet. Good heavens, that child is tall. Exactly when did she get that tall? It hasn’t been that long since Grace has been over to the house. Has it?

“Grace,” Coyote says. She’s startled out of her calculations and into looking at him. “What happened with you and my mom? Was there a fight?”

“It’s—well. It’s a little complicated.”

“Which means there was a fight,” Mallory confirms. “But this feels different. Frankie’s seriously isolating herself right now. Normally, she’d be in this house eating fistfuls of cereal out of the box and telling my kids her Queen Grace stories, but I haven’t even seen her since she got here. Mom, the thing you said at lunch yesterday about—”

“Wait, wait, wait.” She’s glad to have an excuse to break in before Mallory keeps going. “Excuse me just one second. Back up. Hold on. You said—Queen Grace? Stories?”

“Oh, you know. Whenever she gets annoyed with you and ends up over here, it’s always ‘the beautiful, infuriating, beautifully infuriating ruler of Seahaven’ with her ‘shining golden tresses’ and ‘let me tell you the tale of how the intrepid Lady Frances finally convinces Queen Grace that the blinds only need to be dusted once every few months.’ That sort of thing. You knew she did that, right? I could’ve sworn I’ve told you about it before.”

No. Grace hadn’t known. So Frankie makes up stories about Grace for her grandchildren when Grace isn’t around. For their grandchildren. Because she’s Grandma Frankie now, apparently. Grandma Frankie, who thinks Grandma Grace, with her shining golden tresses, is beautiful.

Oh, God.

And the blinds should be dusted once a week, for fuck’s sake.

“You’re right. Both of you are right. We fought,” she says, finally. She can’t let herself think about Frankie’s stories right now, or how Frankie’s apparently unable to leave Grace out of her mouth for a single afternoon, even when she’s fuming. It’s just too much to take in. “I guess you could say it was a pretty big argument.”

The only thing she can come up with is completely idiotic. “Big big.”

“Grace, why does Mom have—?”

It bursts out of Coyote without warning, like he’s been holding it in. Coyote, who’s been quiet nearly this whole time. She’d assumed nothing strange about it. He’s always quiet. Grace turns to him, surprised, and that’s when he stops talking. He meets her eyes for a second, then looks away, unable to hold her gaze. Shuffles his feet in place. The question dangles unfinished, a safety hazard.

Immediately, she’s on her guard. Something’s not right. “What?”

“Never mind. Forget it.”

Like hell she will. “What, Coyote? Never mind what?”

“Not outside,” he says, with a quick glance down towards the tiny house. “She might hear, okay? I don’t want her to hear.”

Without elaborating further, he walks through the open front door. Grace has been facing towards Mallory’s house this whole time, away from the street, but she lets herself look for just a second, and sure enough, there’s Frankie standing on Coyote’s front porch, watching them. Watching Grace. She looks so small, this far away, even with a pine shoebox surrounding her.

But Grace doesn’t have time to linger. There’s a new question mark to untwist now, some fresh grief she’s increasingly convinced is waiting for her at the end of Coyote’s sentence, and so she resists the temptation to keep squinting down the front lawn, make out the familiar features of Frankie’s face. She follows Coyote into the house, Mallory right on her heels.

The second they’re all inside the living room, she tosses the poetry book onto the coffee table and demands, hands finding her hips, “So? What about your mother? What does she have?”

Now Coyote’s looking at the floor. Anywhere is better, apparently, than directly at Grace.

“I’m wrong,” he says, sounding wholly uncertain, and drags a hand across the top of the armchair in front of him, like he wants any occupation that isn’t this. “I know I’m wrong. I really think I’m wrong. I want you to tell me I’m wrong. You have no idea how bad.”

“Wrong about— If you don’t spit it out right now, Coyote, I swear—”

“There’s something on Mom’s neck. This dark spot. It looks like a bruise.”

For a long moment, she can’t speak. At first, it’s because she’s that stunned by what Coyote’s noticed, even though she shouldn’t be. A hickey that size and color would be impossible to miss, and of course Frankie wouldn’t have had the presence of mind after their fight to keep it covered when leaving the house. *He’s figured it out*, she thinks, blindly, *he’s onto us*, and then she sees it in his face, both his fear and how wrong she is.

All at once, Grace comprehends the thing so awful Coyote can’t bring himself to articulate it. Horror floods her so quickly that she takes a few fast steps away from him almost before she’s realized it, nothing premeditated about her reaction.

“It looks,” Coyote says, slowly, “like maybe someone could’ve hurt her.”

“No way, Coyote.” It’s low and hard, Mallory’s voice. “Are you insane? Take it back right now.
“I’m not saying she did! I’m not accusing— Look, Mom won’t talk to me, and Mom always talks to me about everything, even when we’re up in Ojai on one of our silent retreats and we have to do her blinking code thing. Clearly they’ve had a major fight, Grace was MIA for hours, Mom keeps touching that spot on her neck whenever she thinks I’m not watching her, and I can’t talk to Bud about any of it because when they told us Allison was pregnant I promised him I wouldn’t come running for help every time Mom or Dad had a thing. Mal, I’m kind of seriously freaking out over here, so if your mother wants to give me a really great explanation for all of this, I would be so extremely cool with that.”

“How could you even come up with something so sick? What the hell is the matter with you? Mom, Jesus! Tell him, okay? Tell him how wrong he is.”

“Oh, my dear God.” She’s finally able to get it out of her throat, this stammer. It’s weak, thready with her total astonishment. “You think, Coyote, you think I could, that I could be capable of something like—no. You’re wrong. No. No. That I could ever hurt—?

The monitor in Mallory’s hand squawks without warning, and all three of them jump at the noise. Loud cries filter through the small speaker.

Like she’s extremely unconvinced, Mallory offers, “They should be fine for a while.” She’s looking towards the direction of the landing near the staircase. “That doesn’t really sound like the cry Milo has when he’s completely shit-covered. Not exactly. More like a partial coating. Two-thirds at the most. I can wait for a little bit. Mom—” Turning back to Grace, her face is soft. Pained. “I know you would never do anything like that, okay? To anyone, but to Frankie, of all people— Coyote, you should’ve heard what my mom told us about what—”

“Go, Mal,” Grace orders, before Mallory can elaborate any further. She waves a hand towards her in a brusque gesture of dismissal, and maybe it’s distracting enough that they don’t hear the shock still straining her voice. “Handle the twins. And text your sister, too, while you’re at it. I haven’t called her back yet. Tell her not to come to the beach house, all right?” On the off-chance Brianna’s actually made it off her couch in the last two hours, which Grace doubts. “We’ll be right here when you’re done. I’ll explain what’s going on.”

What’s going on. A phrase that covers a lot of ground. Too much to be comfortable. Well, she can’t worry about that now. Not when Frankie Bergstein’s son sees violence on his mother’s soft neck and thinks Grace could be responsible.

For some reason, Mallory doesn’t protest, or tell Grace to stop micromanaging. Instead, to Grace’s amazement, she obeys almost instantly, her only reply a worried glance in Grace’s direction before she turns towards the staircase. It’s a show of compliance that reminds Grace, suddenly, of Mallory as a little girl. All those years when she’d been Grace’s good child, constantly trying to make her mother happy in the gap opened up by Brianna’s constant provocations.

Once she’s out of earshot, her footsteps disappearing up the stairs, Grace says, gently, “Coyote. We have to talk. Sit down.”

“I don’t need to—”

“Oh, yes, you’ll need to. And I’ll need to, too. Sit. Please.” She holds her arm wide, palm open and indicating the couch.

Like Mallory, he listens to her without further objection, taking a seat; unlike Mallory, this isn’t a
bit surprising. Coyote’s always been remarkably pliable. All those terrible two-person plays Brianna had made him perform with her until the onset of disaffected adolescence, as some sort of doltish sidekick to Brianna’s take-charge protagonist, or on more than one occasion, part of the set for her one-woman comedy show. Frankie, she remembers, had always cheered loudly for them both, shaking out her dark hair in full-bodied joy, and it’s strange, but Grace doesn’t have a mental picture of Sol or Robert’s reactions, even though they would’ve been there, too, and watching.

She joins him on the couch, reflexively smoothing the denim over her thighs after she’s seated.

After what can’t be more than twenty seconds of awkward silence, Grace begins. “You’re a good kid, Coyote. You always have been, even when you were, well. You know. Troubled.”

“You mean when I was stealing Mom’s rainy day money out of Grandpa Abe’s shofar to pay for my coke and rotating what liquor stores I went to so the people who worked there wouldn’t judge me for showing up so often?”

“Liquor stores? Well, there’s your mistake. Vons is a whole lot bigger and no one there gives a damn about—” She stops. “Yes. That’s what I meant.”

“I wasn’t troubled,” he says, slowly. “I was an addict. I am an addict. I always will be. I’m cool with admitting that, because it’s true. It’s part of me. And people notice you at Vons, too. People see things, even when you don’t think they do. They see you.”

Is that a generic you or a specific one? Grace isn’t sure, and doesn’t want the question answered.

Instead, she says, “Forget Vons for right now. You love your mother. That’s what I was getting at. You love her very much. I know how important she is to you.”

“She’s not just important,” Coyote insists. “She’s Mom. She’s the lady who dove into a lake to rescue me even though she’s totally positive the Loch Ness Monster has American cousins. Important doesn’t even begin to cover it, you know?”

“Yeah. Oh, I get it. I really, really do. Coyote—” A question shows up uninvited, sparking out of the live wires where her deliberation and good judgment used to live. “How do you think I feel about your mom? Be honest with me.”

“You’re her best friend, I know that. She loves you. A whole lot. It’s still a little weird for all of us, after all these years, but—”

“I’m not asking how she feels.” There’s something swollen in her throat, and she realizes, suddenly, that she cares very much about what Coyote Bergstein understands when he sees her with Frankie. This child—man—whom she’s known his entire life, first met when he was small and red-faced and squalling in his lovestruck mother’s arms. “Please. Tell me. How do you think I feel about her?”

His obvious reluctance to elaborate is surprisingly painful. “I’m not exactly sure,” he says, eventually, and that hurts, too. “I mean, I know she’s really important to you, Grace, I know that much. You take good care of one other. When she had her stroke, you were great. Seriously. She wouldn’t listen to any of us, but she listened to you. God, we were all terrified, but I kept thinking, at least Mom’s listening to Grace, Grace will take care of her, and I was so glad you were there in the house so she wasn’t all alone. Especially after she and Jacob broke up. I felt like, living with you, she had someone. That’s why I got so freaked out when I saw the—” He clearly can’t bring himself to say it again. “The thing. On her neck.”
“Even if you aren’t completely sure about how or what I feel, what in God’s name could possibly make you entertain the idea that I could ever, for one single second, be physically aggressive towards your mother?”

“Because I’ve seen you do it before,” he tells her, and she feels the air collapse out of her lungs like it’s been forced out by what he’s saying. “That time you got bombed and crashed our lunch with Jacob. You pushed her.”

“No. I couldn’t have.” There’s no conviction in the denial at all. She doesn’t remember.

“You pushed her into her chair. I saw it. I was right there. You called her a liar and you put your hand on her chest and pushed her down and then you told her she was a failure.”

She doesn’t remember. Surely Grace would remember a thing like that if she’d actually done it. Of course she’d remember. Before the break-in, she’d never laid a hand on Frankie’s sternum, despite sixteen months of Frankie’s infrequent calming requests during her various moments of panic. Hadn’t ever let herself think about what it could feel like to put her palm flat on that exposed surface, the open slit of Frankie’s dresses the only place below her neck that ever hints at what’s hidden beneath. Of course she’d remember putting her hands on Frankie’s skin, even to—

To hurt her. To make Frankie feel the way Grace had felt in the aftermath of Phil: exposed, wounded, a raw joke of a person. So Grace, adrift and abandoned like any other wrecked thing, could find some scant company in pain and pull the two of them together.

“I hurt her?” she hears herself ask, weak and small. It sounds like a person she doesn’t ever want to know. “I hurt Frankie?”

“It wasn’t a hard push, it’s just— You hear things, Grace. In AA. A couple of the guys, they’d use and then they’d get mean. Physically. Sometimes it escalates. I tried to forget what happened. Honest, I did. But it’s really difficult when you see something like that. Watching someone push your mom.”

There’s a hand over Grace’s mouth. It’s her own. How it got there in the first place, that she doesn’t remember.

“So when I noticed the bruise on her neck today, and Mom wouldn’t tell me what happened, I got scared. Grace, you promise you didn’t, right? You didn’t hurt her?”

The last question wavers a little. He doesn’t want to believe it, she can tell, and the cross Grace has to bear is that Coyote’s desire not to believe it clearly has nothing to do with his opinion of her.

She drops her hand into her lap, and takes a deep breath to prepare herself for the conversation ahead. “Oh, Coyote,” she says, as steadily as she can. This isn't how she’d wanted him to find out, but she can’t see any other way around it. “Kiddo, that bruise on your mom’s neck, that wasn’t from our fight, okay? I didn’t harm her, not in the way you’re thinking. I promise. But it was from me.”

His eyes are big, taking up too much space as he watches her. “So how’d it happen?”

Finally, she comes up with the beginning of an answer. “The two of us got a little carried away.”

“Carried away. Okay.” He’s clearly lost, unable to process what she’s telling him. “What does that mean?”

How in the world do you put something like this? Something this delicate? “It was consensually
bestowed, I guess you could say. With her full permission. As a matter of fact, ‘permission’ isn’t really the right word. It was requested. Repeatedly. By your mother.”

“None of that makes any—”

“Sweetheart, what Grace is trying to tell you is that she gave me a hickey with her mouth,” Frankie says, from behind them. “Sexually.”

They both turn around to see her standing right there in the foyer, the door still open behind her. Frankie’s hands are shoved in her overall pockets. Her hair’s wild, spitting everywhere. She looks exhausted, drawn, shoulders slumping with the weight of everything they’ve gone through today, and the lines in her face are sharper than usual against her pallid skin. She’s beautiful.

Grace’s chest is kicking with adrenaline. How long has Frankie been there listening? What has she heard?

“Sexually?” Coyote gets out, the pitch scaling to heights he probably hasn’t reached for two decades. He twists back to stare at Grace, and then again to look at his mother. “So it definitely wasn’t—you didn’t—and it was— That wasn’t a hallucination I just had, right? You said ‘sexually.’”

“Bingo.”

“Whoa. Cripes. That’s, uh.” His face is frozen in shock. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah,” Frankie agrees, and even though she’s talking to Coyote, she’s watching Grace as she speaks. “Yeah, holy shit is right. The holiest of shits. We’re at fully beatified dung-heap levels here, baby. So. Wanna tell me what’s going through that precious keppy of yours? You doing all right?”

“Mal and Brianna’s mom gave you a hickey. Grace gave you a hickey.” He faces forward on the couch, fingers twisting together like he needs to hold his own hand. “Okay. You, a person who is my mother, did sex things with your best friend. That’s what you’re telling me.”

“Repeat it as many different ways as you want, it’s still gonna be true. What else you got?”

“What do I even say? What do you want me to say? God, tell me what I should say. Please. I mean it.”

“I don’t know. There’s no script. I want you to let out whatever’s in your heart.” Apprehension laces Frankie’s voice. Light, but Grace can hear it just the same.

“It’s—Jesus, Mom. It’s cool? I guess?”


“Cool’s good, Grace. Don’t push it. We’re cool with cool.”

There’s that we again. “He’s clearly not cool, Frankie! He’s not cool at all. Look at your son. That’s the expression of someone whose therapist is going to need to start seeing a therapist.”

“Look, sister, don’t you think I know—”

“Fine, my brain is exploding into a million pieces right now. Is that better? I was trying to be nice! Mom, are you absolutely positive this wasn’t, like, some sort of accident? Grace didn’t just trip and
“Fall face first into your mother’s neck and turn my mouth into a suction cup in order to avoid hitting the floor? No, Coyote. I didn’t.”

“Oh,” he says, deflated. “Yeah, I guess that was a pretty dumb question.”

“But a seriously stupendous visual,” Frankie offers. Grins a little, too, and for a brief second it’s something Grace could lose herself in, an expanse where the sun, gently warming and everywhere, touches. Then it’s over.

“Exactly how long has this been going on, Mom? And please don’t say ‘for the past twenty years.’ Please don’t say that. I don’t think I could take it a second time.”

“This is a very recent development, honey,” Frankie tells him, and enters the living room, making her way to the armchair nearest the couch. She flops into it. “We’re talking hours. Grace? You want I should tell him what went down? Or would you prefer to do it? Or maybe we could do it together. Like a word relay. You say one word, I say the next, then you, yada yada yada, wham. Story.”

“No word relays. I’ll do it.” But tell him what, exactly? How do you even begin to translate something like what’s happened into a narrative that’s appropriate for other people’s ears? Coyote, about a week ago your mother told me she couldn’t live without me, and then I had a full-fledged panic attack because I realized I couldn’t live without her, so I accidentally proposed to Frankie, then sexually propositioned her, and finally we went on an impromptu road trip, the highlights of which included an erotic experience at Del Taco and the best orgasm of my entire life in the backseat of an Audi.

“We happened to figure out some important things yesterday,” Grace says to Coyote, instead of any of that. “Namely, that we have feelings for one another. Romantic feelings.” She clears her throat. “Sexual feelings, if you really want to put a fine point on it. And we’re still in the process of figuring out what’s next. Which is why we fought earlier. That’s what made your mom so upset.”

“Feelings.” Coyote’s face is still drained of color, but he’s clearly trying his best to keep it together. It’s admirable. She tries to imagine Brianna or Mallory staying this calm. Not a chance. “Okay. So are you two not straight anymore either? Is that what you’re telling me? I’ve got two gay moms now to go with my two gay dads?”

In a rush, Frankie begins, “It’s really not about picking—” just as Grace blurts out, “Well, I’m a lesbian.”

There’s a beat of awful silence, and then Frankie closes her mouth. Opens it again, and says, strangled, “Grace, oh, my God—”

She assumes Coyote’s staring at her, too, since she can just about see him gaping in the corner of her peripheral vision, but he’s not the one who’s got her full attention. Frankie’s sitting up straight in the armchair, face struggling with something Grace would like very much to understand and can’t, except to call it naked. It’s unclear to Grace how being stared at and staring back can feel this much like being held, kept in one place.

“I came out to Robert earlier. On his doorstep, if you can believe it. After you left, I drove over there and he opened the door, and I just, I just said it. Just like that. Sol knows, too. I wanted—oh, Frankie, I thought about you, the whole time I thought about you. I wanted you there when I did it, but you were, you were gone. And I couldn’t hold back anymore. I couldn’t stop myself. I have to
have this, Frankie. My God—I could’ve died first.”

She could have died before realizing. Where Grace is, right now, waking up, that's the immense improbability, that she's stumbled into it at all. The revelation stuns her, and there's anger there, too, feeding her amazement. Anger at herself, at God, at anyone willing to stand still long enough to be a target. It would've been so easy to die, never knowing. Somewhere between one and two more decades of refusal, blinding herself right into her grave. No longings she couldn't control. No chance to discover a lifetime she could regret. Never this Sunday confession, this full transformation out of her surface calm and into what she's become, a human exit wound. But now —

"Now," she says, "I know. And I’m not going to waste one more goddamned second."


There are tears in her eyes again, those little fuckers. “Yeah, I sure did. And I’m gonna keep coming out. As many times as I need to. Mal and Brianna are next, then Bud and Allison to round out the family, and then—” She takes a breath. “I guess I’ll have to sit down with a glass of—sit down and go through my address book. Make some phone calls.”

“Wow,” Coyote says, and there’s so much kindness in it, nourishing the word. He sounds just like his mother. And his father, too, dammit. “Hey, um, Grace? I’d be lying if I said I had a handle on just about anything that’s happening right now, but it seems like you’ve been figuring out some big stuff for yourself, and that’s really good. I mean it. Good for you. Way to go.”

“Yeah. It is good, right?” She looks at him, then, finally breaking away from Frankie, and smiles. A real smile. “Thank you, Coyote. Very much.”

Frankie sniffs. Once, and then again. A hand wipes quickly at her cheek.

Coyote stands up, brushing off the legs of his pants in what appears to be a nervous gesture, and then signals towards the back of the house with his thumb. “Okay, so on that note, I think I’m just gonna go play with the kids for a while. You two probably need to talk about some stuff, anyway. I’m guessing.”

“Do you need me to go get your nine-step emotional processing workbook, honey?” Frankie asks, gazing up at him, and that worry’s back in her shaky voice. “I mean the one with the color charts, not the one we made into origami together. Although if you wanted the origami one, we could always do some speedy unfolding.”

“I’m okay, I promise. I just kinda need to be—somewhere that’s not right here for a little bit. To start figuring out how to deal with all of this. If that upsets you, Mom, I’m really sorry, I feel like a total asshole saying it, but—”

“It’s authentic,” Frankie finishes. “It’s what’s within you. I get it.” Her hands, squeezed into loose fists, lightly hammer her knees, a burst of energy that doesn’t seem to have anywhere else to go. “Hey, don’t say anything about this yet to anyone else, okay? About me and Grace? Not even your brother. I know that’s a lot to ask of you, but we still need to—” The loose fists disintegrate into a vaguely descriptive flurry of fingers. “Figure out our shit first. Before we’re ready to discuss it with anyone else. It’s not like we planned on you finding out yet, either, but I suppose the Fates had other designs. Grace? That plan sound right to you? I don’t want to ventriloquize.”

“Yes,” she says, carefully, “that sounds right.”
“But look, if you need to bring up any triggers with your AA group, then I’m sure we can make an —”

“No, it’s fine. I can keep my mouth shut. I’m a big kid.” Moving over to where Frankie’s sitting, Coyote leans down into the chair and kisses the top of her head, a loud smacking sound. “Love you, Mama,” he says, quietly. “I really do. A whole lot. Nothing could ever, ever, ever change that. You know that’s true, right?”

Frankie grabs at his head, keeps him pressed a little longer against her scalp before letting go. There’s obvious pain flashing across her features. “Tell me again, okay? Just one more time? I kinda really need to hear you say it right now.”

Like it’s the easiest thing in the world for him, Coyote does, and while he talks to her Frankie touches his cheek briefly with the flat of her palm, listening to him with her hand. For once, the ache that briefly takes over the whole of Grace’s body has nothing to do with sex, still everything to do with wanting.

“I love you too, my peanut,” Frankie tells him, and pats his cheek. “More than you could ever comprehend. And for the record, what you were so worried about earlier? Before you knew I was in the house? Don’t be.”

Grace’s cheeks scald.

“You’re saying, when I thought—?”

“Yes. I’m saying.” Although she isn’t, Grace notices. Not really. Frankie can’t seem to find the words to address it head-on. “I know Grace, and she wouldn’t. Ever. Full stop. You got me?”


But it’s not true, what Frankie’s telling her son. That Grace wouldn’t, ever, full stop. Because on one afternoon, when her pain shrieked straight past inebriation, birthed ugliness into her words and her raised hand, Grace had. Or if she hadn’t, it was something too close for peace.

And she’ll have to live with knowing that for the rest of her life.

Which is why, without any forethought or reflection on what’s about to come out of her mouth, she says it. “Coyote? When you have some time, I’d like to talk with you.”

He looks at her, then, clearly taken aback.

“About what it’s like in AA,” she clarifies. “What they tell you there. What they make you do. Only if you’re all right with it, though. Because I’d completely understand if you’d rather not—”

“Hey, hey, Grace,” he interjects, not letting her finish. A huge smile’s spreading across his face, transforming it out of the fear and confusion that’s been wrinkling there since she’d walked up to Mallory’s doorway. Grace has the odd sensation that she’s shown up late somewhere, thinking herself a stranger, and been welcomed home instead. “Yeah, of course I will. Are you kidding me? Of course. Let’s talk. Day or night. I mean it. Whenever. Name the place. I’m there. Promise.”

“Okay. Okay, then. Because I think—” She hadn’t remembered what she’d done. She'd pushed Frankie and forgotten it. Her hands, cramping with sudden tension, grip the arch of her lower thighs, just above the knee. “I think I have to do something.”

“You want to quit drinking?” Frankie asks, quietly incredulous. “Do you really mean it? Are you
No, Grace isn’t sure. She isn’t sure at all. If she goes down that path, it’s going to leave her, it’s going to get taken away, her forever friend, her pleasure, the only thing she ever gets to ingest without some kind of penalty. And suddenly she wants a drink just as much as she’s wanted anything in her entire life. She can taste it right now, a sharp thing filling up her mouth, promising to make the world fall back, warm her until she’s loose, satisfied, numb. Closing her eyes, she presses her lips together, her teeth biting into the soft skin inside, and rides what’s uncontrollable, breathing through it until the craving quiets down again into background noise she can manage.

After a while, she whispers, “I don’t want to be that person anymore.”

Her eyes open. Now it’s just the two of them, just Frankie sitting up straight in the armchair and watching her closely. Coyote’s gone, apparently taking his cue to leave while she was distracted by her craving, and somewhere from the back of the house she hears his indistinct voice announcing the start of some new game. Maddy’s squeal of delight, Mack’s yelling. The echoes of any normal Sunday in Mallory’s house.

“What person do you want to be?”

No one’s ever asked Grace that before. Until right this second, she hasn’t even realized it’s a question people ask themselves. Why would they? Why would Grace even need to ask it? She’s always been the same person, finding her favorite reflection in others’ admiration of her accomplishments. The perfect student, the uncomplaining girlfriend, the consummate wife, the successful mother, the accomplished executive. The woman who’s hung onto her looks, despite time and gravity. The woman who’s made it her life goal to prove her excellence to anyone watching. That’s who she is. It’s who she’s always been, this terrible effort dressed up as perfect ease.

“I want to be enough,” she says, finally.

Frankie exhales, all in one fast breath, and then from upstairs, they both hear Mallory call, “You guys, I’m almost done, just throwing some bedding in the washer. It was kind of a horror show in there. Hey, you’re still in the living room, right? I’m not talking to myself?”

Before Grace can start to answer, Frankie gets up, crossing the few feet between them to stand right in front of where Grace is sitting on the couch. Somehow, she still has the presence of mind to call back, “Still here, honey, take your time,” even though Frankie’s close to her, getting closer.

Bending down towards Grace, right there just above her, and Grace forgets, temporarily, how to breathe. The entire afternoon blanks out of her mind, everything she’s felt and realized and done over the last six hours forced elsewhere to make room for this new proximity.

She closes her eyes again, involuntarily this time. Tilts her face up, waiting. Ready for whatever Frankie will give her.

Frankie presses the palms of both hands against Grace’s temples, fingers tracking loosely, slowly, through her hair. It’s the first time she’s touched Grace since they’d kissed at the kitchen island. The contact is like a shock snapping between them, and Grace is immediately hollow for it, changed, her conduit body crafted to deliver need and nothing else. Frankie’s hands can shape anything, even Grace, into art.

She looks at Frankie, inches away. Frankie feels it too. It’s all over her face, in her round eyes. Grace is breathing again. They both are. A little fast. Grace can hear it. Anyone could.
Frankie says, low, “Listen. I came over here to make you a promise. I need to—”

“T need to,” Grace says, at the same time, and her voice cracks, “T need it, please, before you leave, just one—”

They kiss, then. It’s slack, careless, urgent. Grace’s arms are still at her sides, momentarily paralyzed. Frankie sighs a little into her mouth and presses harder, almost stumbling into Grace as she does it, and Grace absolutely can’t pull Frankie onto her lap right now, can’t have Frankie straddle her cupping hand on someone else’s couch in a room with no doors, can’t make her whimper with collision. She’s getting nearer to the things she can’t do, her fingers starting to reach towards Frankie’s hips, when they both hear the sound of footsteps above them. Mallory.

Somehow, they jerk apart. Grace is so preoccupied with trying to remember how to be a person who isn’t kissing Frankie, a person with a functioning brain, that at first she doesn’t register Frankie’s actually talking.

“What?” she asks, tongue thick and heavy. “What are you saying?”

“My promise. One week.”

“One week what?” Grace isn’t tracking. Frankie’s breasts are right there. Of course, she can’t see the shape of them, not underneath the loose hang of her overalls, but she knows where they are, and remembers their exact geometry, the round curve under her touch. “I’m sorry, I’m having trouble—”

“I know,” Frankie says, quietly. “You’re not the only one. But we’ve got just a couple of minutes before Mallory comes down, and I have to talk to you first. Try and focus, honey. You can do it. Breathe. Look up here.”

With great effort, she does. The tide recedes just enough.

“You asked me for a timetable earlier, Grace. You wanted to know when I could answer your questions vis-à-vis you and me. That’s why I came up to the house in the first place, so I could tell you my answer. One week. I’m thinking I’ll stay here until then. Do some serious noodling over what I’m ready for. Then I’ll come home to you and we’ll talk. A real talk.” Silence. “Is that cool? One week?”

Quite honestly, the timetable Grace would prefer is something more along the lines of however long it takes to speed-walk between this living room and Coyote’s empty house, where they could lock the front door and maybe find eighteen inches of empty wall space to slam against. But even through her slow and struggling brain, she hears it, what Frankie’s trying to do. Compromise. Meet her halfway.

Be brave.

She reaches out and touches Frankie’s cheek, stroking lightly with the tips of her fingers. The inside of Frankie’s thighs, they’re smooth like this. Smoother.

Frankie’s eyes flutter.

Okay, grace murmurs, and pulls back her hand. “One week. I guess I can handle that. Then you’ll come home to me.”

“Affirmative.” The smile Frankie gives her is small, so relieved. “It’s a deal. Okay. Last final thing, before I—” Her hand’s shoving into her right pocket, and she pulls out a folded piece of
Grace sits back, not sure what’s happening now as Frankie turns away, looking around the living room for something, then seeing what she wants, apparently, on the coffee table. For a second, Grace thinks she’s spotted the poetry book lying there, that Frankie’s about to translate all the gaps in Grace’s understanding, explain what the poem has to do with how they got here, and her heart leaps up into her throat—but no, that’s not what Frankie’s diving for. It’s a pen.

She kneels down on the hardwood floor in front of the table, wincing as she does it, places the note flat on the surface, and scrawls something towards the bottom, quickly. Grace’s eyes aren’t good enough to make out what she’s writing, even three feet away.

Again, Mallory’s footsteps above them.

“Frankie, if you don’t want Mal to—”

“I don’t,” Frankie says, and stands back up, folding the note back into its creased square. “I’m gonna vamoose. Not too far. There’s a knot in the ceiling over Coyote’s bed that looks like a tiny Truman Capote. I’ll probably go stare at it for a little while, pretend ol’ Truman and I are doing some snappy schmoozing on Dick Cavett.” She holds out the stationary. “This is for you.”

“You’re not returning my note, are you?” A flutter of worry in her stomach, not all that easy to distinguish from the remnants of her arousal. “I wanted you to have it. It’s yours.”

“I’m re-gifting. With a twist. Think of it as a repurposed objet d’art. Come on, take it. We don’t have time.” She shakes the note in Grace’s direction, and after a brief moment of hesitation, Grace complies. “Hey, lady?”

“What?”

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” Frankie says. For a second, she looks as though she might actually burst into tears. Then it’s gone, and then Frankie’s gone, too, rushing quickly out of the house, behind the couch and through the front door, leaving Grace by herself.

She doesn’t have time to sit here and think about everything that’s just happened. Not if she wants to read the note before Mallory comes downstairs and starts firing off another round of questions. So Grace unfolds the note with awkward and heavy fingers, wishing, for the second time today, that she’d remembered to bring her damn glasses with her when she’d left the house earlier. She squints at her stationary.

It’s the same note. Not the same note at all. The author’s different.

For the bravest woman I know.

**Frankie BerGstein**

The bold signature’s almost as familiar as her own, all swerves and loops surrounding the G for Grace’s name. Frankie hasn’t erased what Grace had written there originally, but swaddled it instead, making her thin letter part of something new. Grace can’t stop staring at it, at the G, still there and not alone.

The world around her is temporarily quiet, a small and still interlude just for Grace before the inevitable sound of Mallory’s feet down the stairs, the start of Grace’s next conversation, the fourth time she’ll speak herself out loud. She sits on the couch in her daughter’s home, looking at a wrinkled piece of paper, and heals there, a little.
the poem Grace reads is Carl Phillips’s “Just the Wind for a Sound, Softly,” from his 2013 collection *Silverchest*. 
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

hey, all! you know that thing I keep doing where I say there’s one more chapter & then it turns out I was extremely wrong? well, guess what happened again?

having said that, we are, I promise, rapidly approaching the end of this story. my goal is to have it finished before the fourth season starts.

finally, please note that the rating has been raised to E, in part due to this chapter.

your (wonderful, life-giving, gratifying) feedback continues to be something I value tremendously. if you’re so inclined to let me know what you think of the chapter, either in a comment or with a kudos, I would greatly appreciate it!

Grace isn’t alone in their house, not after she flicks on the light switch in the foyer by the front door. She’s met with Frankie’s absence, announcing itself in all the spaces where Grace can’t see her, in all the awful quiet that doesn’t have her noise.

Somehow Grace has to get herself through an entire week of this. Seven days in their house with no Frankie, just drained walls and pale furniture and dead doors, bone that’s dropped flesh. But it’s not forever, or even open-ended. That’s what she needs to remember. Frankie’s given her a real timeline, something Grace knows she can survive. First thing in the morning her priority will be to figure out exactly how.

One week. Seven days. Less than seven, if you count the hours.

Then I’ll come home to you.

Years ago, when the kids were still small, she'd completed a half marathon just to prove to herself that she could. Spent three months training for it and ran with strangers there to cheer her on. Grace remembers her wobbling legs shaking as she’d tried to stop her forward momentum after the finish line, finding that for a few seconds, she didn’t know how.

It’s not quite nine o’clock yet, but she’s never felt so ready for bed in all her life. Everything Grace has she’s used up today, drained out of herself, leaving her with weak limbs, hot eyes, a blurred brain. Loopy enough from exhaustion that she wonders, ludicrously, how many calories you burn coming out four different times to five different people in one day. Maybe one hell of a lot, if her wilting body’s any proof, and Grace manages to shamble over to the oversized armchair in their living room before letting herself collapse into it with a soft groan of relief. Just a few minutes. She’ll rest here for a few minutes, maybe relax her eyes, then take herself upstairs for some proper sleep.

The only reason she realizes that she’s dozed off is the jolt that takes her back into semi-consciousness. Her purse is rudely pressing into her leg, jammed between thigh and seat cushion, and while she’s trying to decide if discomfort is enough to make moving worthwhile, it has the audacity to vibrate. The long staccato vibration that means someone’s calling her phone.
Fuck.

The absolute last thing she wants to do after the day she’s had is to start yet another conversation.

But—and there’s a tiny flutter as she thinks about the possibility—it could be Frankie. It’s actually very likely to be Frankie. And even though Grace doesn’t want to move right now, even though speaking seems like an unreasonable effort, she also can’t think of anything else she’d rather do than listen to Frankie’s voice. So she yanks her purse out from under her leg, pulling out the phone.

As soon as she sees the lock screen, disappointment fumbles in her stomach. Not Frankie, after all. Mallory’s calling. And God knows she doesn’t want to talk to Mallory again. Not after their conversation earlier, and definitely not right now. She needs more time. At least a couple of days to cool off.

Still, despite her exhaustion, some surging impulse that inertia can’t overcome makes her slide the button to answer the call.

“Did I let my phone ring long enough for you before answering?” she asks, instead of saying hello. “Or do you think I rushed into that, too?”

“Mom,” Mallory says, after a second. She sounds tired, although Grace isn’t especially inclined towards sympathy for her at the moment. “I know you’re mad at me, all right? I get it. Just hear me out.”

“Oh, I think you made yourself perfectly clear earlier.”

“Can’t you take a second to see what this looks like from my end? Please. Just yesterday you sat right in front of Brianna and me and you swore up and down that there was no way you were a lesbian. I think the exact word you used was ‘preposterous,’ actually. Now, all of a sudden, you’re telling me you’re a hundred percent positive you’re gay? It’s that simple?”

Simple. A rush of sudden and immense anger frosts her into sharpness. “Well, I had no idea you’d suddenly become such an expert on my personal life! Congratulations. Maybe I can rustle up some kind of achievement certificate for you.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong about this, Mom. Those things you said about Frankie at lunch, they weren’t exactly the straightest— Okay, look. What I’m trying to tell you is that obviously I’ll support you, no matter what.”

“But,” Grace says.

“No ‘but’s,’ I swear! It’s just—”

“There we go,” she mutters.

“—that this is happening so fast. Don’t you want to take some more time to think about it? Don’t you want to be completely sure you’re right before you overturn your entire life? When Mitch and I were having problems, I didn’t just decide immediately to break up my family, I really thought about it, I thought for months—”

“I do not want to take ‘some more time,’ Mallory. And I’ve thought about this. My God. You, you have no idea what I’ve been—how dare—” Horribly, Grace’s voice breaks on the last word, and she attempts to cover it by the loud clearing of her throat. “I don’t owe you an explanation. I am still your mother and you are still my daughter. You are not entitled to know anything about me other than what I think is necessary to disclose, which means that I don’t have to spend one second
justifying any of this to you.”

“I’m not asking you to justify it! I’m just trying to wrap my head around how you could be so convinced about this when you didn’t seem like you had a clue yesterday. You don’t have to tell me every single detail, just—You’re my mom and you’re telling me you’re gay, and I’m trying to understand it. I just want to make sure you’re okay. Okay? I want you to be okay.”

There’s a plaintive note in Mallory’s voice, genuine distress that manages to slice through Grace’s resentment and frustration without dismantling it one iota. “Fine,” she snaps. “After our lunch, I went for a walk down by the cove and did some thinking. And that thinking led to an epiphany, I guess you could call it. That’s all you’re getting for now.”

“That’s all?”

“I need you to trust me that I’m right about this, Mallory. That I know who I am. Because I’m not going to defend myself, to you or to anyone else. I’m a lesbian. I have always been a lesbian, whether or not you knew about it. If you can’t deal with this information like a grown-up, then that’s your problem to figure out, not mine, and you can go do it someplace else that isn’t this conversation.”

A long pause, and then, softly, Mallory asks, “Is this why you were always so sad?”

She has to fight not to inhale at the intimacy of Mallory’s question. It’s not wholly unprecedented. They’ve talked about this before, or something like it. That night she’d smoked Frankie’s pot for the first time and watched the night sky and badly wanted a thing she couldn’t name, except to know it spilled beyond acceptability. She’d told her daughters how alone she’d been in her marriage. But what Mallory’s saying is different, telling Grace she’s been seen for decades, perceived without her permission or awareness, and she’d always assumed—She’d been good at pretending, hadn’t she? A consummate actress. Good enough that she could go weeks or months without letting herself touch the soft panic of her desolation. Even Robert never knew back then how she’d really felt, hadn’t been able to care enough to ask or notice. But the girls—

Oh, God. What had her girls seen?

Not trusting herself to speak yet, Grace leans back into the armchair. Her head, pressed against the cushion, sags slightly to the right, as though her neck’s decided it doesn’t want to do the work of lifting it up anymore.

“When I was a kid,” Mallory continues, “I always thought it was me. Brianna and me. I thought we weren’t right. We weren’t what you wanted, or we kept doing something wrong. I tried to stop whatever it was I was doing, but—I don’t know. And then I got older, and I figured that maybe it had something to do with Dad, because you’d fight when you thought we couldn’t hear. Or you wouldn’t talk to each other at all. But after he came out, when the shock wore off—Mom, this is so gross of me, because I know you went through a really hard time—when Dad came out, I was kind of relieved. Because I felt like it explained so much about our lives. I thought, oh, that’s why everything was so awful. It was Dad. He was in pain for so long. Hiding who he was.”

“Everything was so awful?” Grace repeats, astonished by it. “Everything, Mallory? Your entire childhood?”

“No all of it. There were some good times. That trip to New York, when you took me on the carousel in Central Park, just the two of us. Bree and Dad were off somewhere. You told me that I should pick the prettiest horse, because I deserved it for being such a pretty girl. Remember?”
There’s a vague recollection of the trip struggling to the foreground of her memory, pieced in blurry snapshots. A small hand in her own, tugging hard. Lifting up Mallory—or had it been Brianna?—so she could peer into a tower viewer at the top of the Empire State Building. Stopping to buy the girls overpriced pizza at some neon tourist trap. Walking through an unfamiliar city she’d adored with immense and irrational feeling, desperately loved its millions of unconcerned strangers who weren’t expecting anything from Grace, or asking.

“Yes,” she says. “Of course I remember. I’m thankful you’re able to come up with at least one instance when living with your father and me wasn’t a complete nightmare.”

“That’s not what I was trying—” Mallory’s stung by her retort, Grace can hear it, and even though that wasn’t her intention, she can’t muster up too much regret. Likely she’d feel worse about it in a different sort of conversation, one where Mallory wasn’t trying to impose a schedule on Grace’s personal choices. “I said there were good times. It wasn’t all bad.”

“That’s a relief.”

“What I’m trying to say is that I think—maybe I was wrong. Dad wasn’t why you were so unhappy. I mean, he was part of it, but he wasn’t the main reason, was he? You were hiding, too. You were in pain, too. Oh, my God.” She gasps. “Mom. You were. You were in pain, and you were hiding who you were. This is why. This is the reason. You’re just like Dad. You’ve been gay my whole life. God, Mom.”

“Sweetheart,” Grace says, quietly, and closes her eyes. “Please don’t cry.”

“You really didn’t know? You weren’t keeping this big secret from us for twenty years like he was? You had no idea?”

The answer’s yes, and the answer’s no, too, but right now explaining the nuances of how both can be true at the same time doesn’t seem possible, given how little energy Grace has left. So she says, going with what’s easier and mostly right, “I really didn’t know. Oh, maybe if I’d fallen in love like your father did, I might’ve be able to realize it sooner. Or if your grandmother hadn’t spent my entire childhood talking about my future husband, like marriage was the only thing I was supposed to work towards. Or if I hadn’t been so good at denying how I—”

No. That isn’t for her daughter’s ears. Too private.

“The world was a very different place when I was younger,” she continues, retreating to the relative safety of big picture statements. “I made the choices I made because I never thought there was an alternative. And besides, there’s just no point in imagining how my life would’ve looked if I’d realized this before now.”

“You mean if you’d known, you might not have married Dad.”

“Mallory, I said there’s no point—”

“No had us.”

She’s thought about it.

Grace would never admit this out loud to anyone, not even to Frankie—Frankie, for whom motherhood is her life’s calling, a blessing that shapes the world into meaning—but the thought of a life without her children has crossed her mind. More than once. During both pregnancies, hating the way her growing belly slowly became the domain of total strangers’ hands. When she’d been angry over how Brianna’s incessant cries could make Grace’s milk leak without permission,
staining the front of her nightgown. Having to choose between Mallory’s ballet recital and the largest cosmetics conference in Southern California, and the guilt she’d finally felt was over not feeling guilty. The first I hate you from a teenage Brianna, and the second, and the third, until finally she’d snapped back, “I can’t help but notice that you haven’t asked me how I feel about you.” Brianna’s face had blanched.

Grace loves her girls. Loves them wholeheartedly, with a strength and ferocity she couldn’t have anticipated in those final childless months when she and Robert had fought over now-or-never. She’s immensely proud of them, even if she doesn’t always understand or approve of their choices. Adores their many strengths, tries hard to accept their inevitable weaknesses. Knows for a fact that the world is a better and stronger place for their existence.

And. And.

She could have moved to New York by herself, after college.

Somewhere in the Village, maybe, where there were people like her, people who understood even back then that this wasn’t a sickness you had but something that helped you breathe. Grace, never Hanson. Instead, she would’ve made a life around a secretarial job while she kept looking for better openings at Cover Girl or Elizabeth Arden. Bared her mouth in something men took for a smile, not seeing the corporate ladder rung between her teeth. At work, a package of carefully constructed lies she’d tell about her personal life, designed to fend off set-ups and pinches. At home, maybe a wife in everything but recognition. Or the occasional lover, women to keep her nights warm. Years of long looks inside unmarked bars on no one’s map. She’d have known herself sooner, faster, burned for longer.

But no Frankie. She wouldn’t know Frankie. Not in this alternate timeline without Robert.

Grace is thinking about that, about the sheer impossibility of a life without Frankie in it, and not about anything else when she says, finally, “If I could do it over again, I’d marry your father. In a heartbeat. I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“You would?” There’s no denying the relief in her daughter’s voice. “I don’t want to say I’m glad, because that sounds really shitty, but—”

“You can be glad. It’s all right.” Her hand rests briefly against her stomach, a place Mallory knew a long time ago and left. “I am. I’m glad—” That even if I spent more than seventy years without loving her, I’ll get the rest of my life to try and make up for it. “—that you’re my daughter. My smart, brave, kind daughter.”

It’s true. Moreover, it’s what Mallory needs to hear right now. What Grace needs to hear herself say, too, a statement that wards against the pointless indulgence of a what if that still wouldn’t make life just. Nothing would.

“Mom.” It’s soft, a little teary again. “That means a lot to me. Thanks. And I’m—I’m really glad you’re my mother.”

That could be true, too. Or something close.

“My gay mom,” Mallory continues, and takes a deep breath. “I’m starting to get used to it. It’s happening. Yeah, we’re pretty good. I’m like twenty, thirty percent there already. My mother, Grace Hanson, who is a lesbian. My kids’ gay grandma. My mother, who— Wait. Mom. Mother’s Day. Next Sunday.”
Sunday. Why does that word ring inside Grace? Sunday—

“We’ve still got a week left,” Mallory says, and Grace sits up in her chair, pulled temporarily out of fatigue by instant comprehension. That’s it. A week. Frankie’s coming home on Sunday, so they can have a conversation about the future of their relationship. On the same day their children are planning on throwing the two of them a party. God in heaven. “So if you think we shouldn’t have brunch, given the situation, I can always cancel it.”

She manages to refocus her attention. “Last I heard, Mallory, brunch wasn’t exclusively for heterosexuals. In fact, I understand from your father that it’s very popular among the—what did he call it?—the ‘lavender persuasion.’”

“We’re really gonna have to work on updating some of your slang. No, I’m not talking about the whole gay thing. I mean the situation with Frankie. The part where she isn’t living with—” She breaks off. “Oh, Mom. Oh, no. That’s it. You came out to Frankie, didn’t you? That’s why she ran over to Coyote’s and wouldn’t talk to any of us. Because she freaked out and didn’t know how to handle it. Jesus. Mom, I’m so sorry.”

Grace pulls the cardigan she’s wearing tighter around her chest. Mallory’s close enough to the truth that she feels uncomfortably exposed by the way her daughter’s stitched information together, making Grace human in ways she doesn’t especially appreciate.

And then, Mallory asks, quietly, “Did you tell Frankie that you have feelings for her? Like we talked about?”

“I,” Grace says, and stops. How do you tell someone you’ve carried for nine months that you’re just now realizing your body and heart are capable of achieving miracles? “I, uh. I don’t want to go into that. Not right now. And brunch will be fine. Just don’t go to too much trouble. Frankie and I—” As if the simple conjunction bridging the two of them still means exactly what’s it’s always meant. “No fuss. Neither of us wants that. Something small. It’s your day, too, after all. You shouldn’t be working yourself to death on our behalf.”

Maybe there’s something convincing in her voice, because Mallory doesn’t press the Frankie issue any further. “No fuss. Promise. It’ll all be very tasteful and understated. I’m thinking lavender honey lemonade spritzers, a red pepper and asparagus frittata, Greek yogurt parfaits, avocado deviled eggs, blueberry scones, mini pancake stacks the size of quarters with a raspberry garnish—Mom, those are going to be so cute. And because we’re honoring Frankie, too, we have to have a waffle bar. Heart-shaped waffles and plenty of yummy sugar-free toppings. But that’s it. I swear.”

“Mal,” Grace says, not without affection, “all of that sounds suspiciously like a lot of fuss.”

“I’ve only got two Pinterest boards and three to-do lists. And anyway, I’m going to tell Brianna that for every ten tiny pancakes she makes, she can use Macklin’s slingshot to fire one tiny pancake at Bud’s head, so that part of prep will go ridiculously fast. Don’t worry about it, okay? You’ve got plenty of other stuff to deal with right now.”

“Like figuring out how I’m going to talk to your sister tomorrow,” Grace says. There’s got to be an easier way of doing this, one that doesn’t involve constantly spreading her ribs for others’ inspection, showing off these tender strips of self that should stay in the dark of her body.

Mallory gasps. “Wait a minute. You told me first? Brianna doesn’t know yet?”

“Well, no, not—”
“Can I be there when you tell her? Please? Oh, please? I’ll be so quiet. You won’t even know I’m there, except for all the waves of total moral support I’ll be vibing silently in your direction.”

“Nice try. Forget it. You can vibe all the moral support you want from the comfort of your own home.” She yawns unexpectedly. It’s wide enough that her cheeks sting from stretching, and this time, the moisture that rises in her eyes has nothing to do with tears; everything, instead, to do with how exhausted she is. “Mallory, I don’t want to be rude, but I really need to get off the phone and go to bed.”

“Of course. Absolutely. You should go do that. Sleep well.”

“Thank you,” she says. “I really think I will.” She means it, if only because she knows she’ll be helpless the second she hits her bed, ready to give herself up for as long as oblivion will let her stay.

“Um, Mom? Before you go?”

“Yes?”

“Maybe being out will make you happy,” Mallory tells her, and there’s so much hope in her voice that Grace aches, briefly, with some undefined pain she can’t place. “I mean, happier. You’ve seemed, I don’t know. Like things have been a lot better these past few years, ever since you and—since the divorce. And, Mom—” She hesitates. “There are other women out there besides Frankie. You’re a total catch. I bet all the older lesbians in San Diego will be fighting over who gets to date you, and you know what? I’m gonna stop this train of thought right now before it makes us both really uncomfortable.”

“Oh. Uh. Thank you.” It’s the second time she’s said it to Mallory in as many minutes, and this time, it’s less assured. Of course, Mal knows next to nothing about what Frankie actually wants, and Grace isn’t ready to correct her just yet, not before she’s had her conversation with Frankie. Regardless, hearing the easy assumptions guiding her daughter’s words—you clearly have feelings for Frankie; Frankie obviously doesn’t feel the same way about you—makes self-doubt prick inside Grace’s chest. “I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“You’re welcome.”

There’s a silence, the kind that always seems to edge between the two of them despite Grace’s best efforts, and likely Mallory’s too. It distends for a few seconds and then a few seconds more.

She hears the tiny hint of breath that means Mallory’s opened her mouth to tell her something, almost certainly good night, and then, Grace says, quietly, “I had an unhappy mother, too.”

A handful of memories she’s stuffed inside herself, most of them acidic and not worth bringing back up, but one struggles into her awareness, despite knowing better where it should stay. I married down, her mother had told Grace, once, when Grace couldn’t have been more than ten years old. Old enough to see how the statement made her into living proof of her mother’s bad choice. I could’ve been an Astor, one of them danced with me, but I married your father. Learn from my mistakes, Grace. You’re far too pretty to waste yourself on a naval captain. Find someone better than I did. Aim for the stars.

Aim for the stars, Mother had ordered, and more than sixty years later she’d gone to the desert at night and stood in some desolate wash a hundred miles from anywhere, bundled in Frankie Bergstein’s warm embrace. They’d looked up together.
She says, now, “Your Grandma Helen. She was unhappy. And it wasn’t easy for me when I was a kid. In fact, it was pretty—well, awful. Awful is right. I’m sorry you went through the same thing I did, Mallory. I know how it feels. But you, you’re giving your children something different than what you or I had. Something better. And I’m so proud of you for that. Really, I am.”

A shaky inhale. “Wow. I, um. I honestly don’t know what to say, Mom. Except that my therapist is going to lose her shit when I see her tomorrow.”

“What you can say,” Grace tells her, gently, “is good night. That's enough for right now. We can talk more another time. After you've disclosed all this very personal and private information to your therapist.”

“Good night,” Mallory repeats, still sounding stunned.

“And Mal? If you breathe a single word about this to your sister before I get the chance to talk to her, I swear to God I’ll buy Maddy a drum set for Christmas this year. The loudest one I can find.”

“Mom! I would never—”

“I love you,” Grace says, “I love you very much,” and as she hangs up, curling up her legs in the armchair like a person who’s earned its softness, she’s still smiling.

There’s a text waiting for her on the screen. Her smile spreads further. Coyote’s number, not Coyote.

She’s sent Grace a yellow face, this one with its eyes closed and several ZZZs on its forehead to indicate sleeping. I’m going to sleep, she means, probably, or you should be going to sleep, Grace, or are you asleep yet, or just hey, isn’t sleeping the bomb dot com, since a general celebration of being dead to the world would be fairly on brand for Frankie.

But does it matter, exactly what she’s trying to say to Grace? Maybe not. Maybe the only thing that matters is that they’ve reached the end of an excruciatingly long day, one where they’ve torn at themselves, at each other, done it enough for other people to see, and Frankie still can’t let herself go to bed before reaching out to Grace one last time.

Me too, Grace writes back.

There are dreams. Two. The only seam that splits them is the moment when, half-awake and aching for what can’t be found, she comes on the hand jammed between her thighs. Teeth in her neck.

But by the time light’s filling her bedroom, the ache’s re-homed.

Even before she’s fully awake, she knows something’s not quite right. Grace isn’t off the pillow yet, and already her head and her stomach are fighting to see which one can make her feel worse. Well, they’re both winners. Pain bolts through her temples and the front of her skull, too sharp to stop her from squeezing her eyes tight in response, and oh, Christ, she feels sick. The kind of rollicking nausea she typically only earns from losing count and throwing back one too many, too fast. Which is ironic, because she hasn’t actually had a drink in—

More than twenty-four hours. Not a real drink, anyway.
Oh. That’s why.

This isn’t the first time she’s gone through it. About a decade earlier, she’d attempted to stop drinking. Just for the short term. To prove to herself that she could, a decision provoked by a snide comment Janet had made over lunch—my goodness, Grace, it’s a wonder you’re ever able to powder that perfect nose of yours! Well, you know. It’s always inside a glass—followed by silence from the other girls. It had been the silence, more than anything else, that disturbed Grace into taking action. No uncomfortable giggles. Just quiet. She’d caught Mary and Arlene’s quick glances at the floor and realized, horribly, that the truth Janet had excised with her comment was something everyone already knew about Grace Hanson.

She’d resolved to give it up, just like that. Temporarily, of course. A healthful detox, a systematic purge, a fresh start. Two weeks of sober living would certainly be good for her skin, she’d reasoned. Maybe she’d lose a couple of years off her face and get a few additional compliments on how glowing she looked. Robert might even notice.

Three days. That’s how long she’d lasted.

Three days before the headaches and tremors and escalating bouts of unplanned vomiting had left her weak and desperate enough to crawl right back to her supply and fix herself a fast rescue. Not a martini. She’d grabbed a coffee mug and there were no olives or vermouth to pretty up her choice and the only thing shaking was Grace and her drink was just vodka, vodka she’d knocked back in seconds like it was water for a cracked and burning mouth. Janet could go ahead and make her shitty comments.

So Grace knows what withdrawal feels like. Understands perfectly, as she sits up in bed, why her hands are trembling, why her heart’s squeezing so fast, why she can feel sweat starting to bead at the edges of her hairline, between her breasts. And she knows, too, how quickly she could make her symptoms stop. There’s a nearly full bottle on the kitchen counter, still uncapped and silently waiting for someone to claim it.

“Frankie?” she says, too loudly. Her head pounds hard with each syllable. “Frankie, can you come up here?”

No answer.

She’s about to call out again when she realizes, not all at once but slowly, like a wound trying to close, that something isn’t right. What Grace just did, that’s what isn’t right. Asking for Frankie. Because Frankie isn’t here. Frankie’s somewhere else. Somewhere not their house. Different. Small. Coyote’s.

Grace hasn’t forgotten Frankie’s gone. It’s certainly not the kind of thing one forgets. Six more days, she’d thought immediately upon waking up, six more days, and she’d even dreamt about it during the night. Frankie, missing, and Grace frantically hunting throughout their house, knowing she’d failed to keep Frankie small and safe and close at hand. Wondering, in the dream, why she hadn’t thought to do the obvious by folding up Frankie’s body and stashing her in one of Grace’s hiding places. Aching for her with each imagined step.

She knows for a fact that Frankie isn’t here, and still she’d called out. Alarm joins her pain and nausea, prickles quickly up her arms.

Twenty minutes later, she’s dressed, downstairs, and seated at the dining room table in front of her laptop, trying her damndest to stay calm. Alcohol withdrawal, she types into her browser’s search bar, and swallows down the nothing that’s in her mouth as the results load. Her stomach’s trying
hard to convince Grace she isn’t actually sitting upright, that the room is tilting meanly. Mental confusion, one link preview reads, and another, disorientation. Hallucinations. Tremors. Seizure. Delirium tremens. Agitation.

Well, if she wasn’t agitated before.

The medical article she eventually locates, after a more refined and careful search, has a recent publication date and five authors with M.D. after their names, although the journal isn’t one she recognizes. All of these people seem to be in general agreement that safe withdrawal from years of consistently heavy alcohol use is possible without medical intervention, yet inadvisable, especially with comorbid conditions. Heavy. A term she’s never once associated with anything connected to herself. But if heavy alcohol use is defined for women as eight drinks or more per week— No. That can’t be right. Only eight? That’s all? Barely more than one drink a day? And yet, there it is, peer-reviewed and in black-and-white.

Hesitantly, Grace lets herself start to number through her previous week’s total, as near as she can remember it, and ends the count once she’s halfway through. There’s really no point in continuing that far past the marker, like running after the finish line. Her hands, suspended just above the laptop keyboard, are shaking harder.

She clearly can’t stop drinking, not if she doesn’t want to risk a fall in an empty house, or a trip to the hospital, or worse. Maybe twenty years ago she’d tough it out and take her chances, fifteen or ten, even, but now? At seventy-three? All the willpower in the world, all the self-resolve, apparently doesn’t mean a damn thing if she can’t guarantee her body’s safe response.

A whimper of pure frustration escapes her mouth.

Just then, the cell phone next to her lights up with a text. She grabs it, moving fast enough to make her head and stomach object aggressively. Too early for—but it is. Frankie’s sent her another emoji. This time it’s a coffee cup.

A drink for Grace, just when she’s terrified over how much she needs a different one. Grace won’t let herself find signs in every minuscule and unimportant occurrence, not even after nearly three years of living with a woman who’s got a large sign hanging in her studio that says IT’S A SIGN!, for God’s sake, but maybe—

She texts back before she has time to stop herself. May I call? And then: It’s fine if you’d rather I didn’t. I know you need your space.

While she’s staring at the screen, waiting for the ellipsis bubble to tell her Frankie’s writing back, the phone buzzes loudly, startling her almost out of the chair. Christ, her heart’s going a mile a minute.

“Did you sleep okay?” It’s too fast, what Frankie’s saying. She sounds nervous as hell. “I got about five solid hours, maybe, but I gotta tell you, this loft really isn’t built for sleepwalkers, so it’s a good thing I only—”

“Hey,” she says, wincing, and it’s only mostly from the band of pain that’s gripping her head. She closes her eyes. Sensory deprivation is easier right now. “Um, Frankie? Can you, uh—”

“Grace?” And just like that, the tension rushing Frankie’s words vanishes, replaced with sharp concern. “You sound horrible. What’s wrong?”

Her tongue’s big, too large for her mouth and getting in the way. She can feel the stagnant air of
the room where it’s meeting her exposed skin, pressing at her moist neck, her sternum, working more sweat out of her pores.

“Grace, if you don’t spill the beans at some point in the next five seconds, I’m gonna be out of this house and in my Leaf so fast I won’t even have time to appreciate the extra space. You’re scaring me.”

“Please don’t be scared,” she says, finally, and sits back in her chair. Despite the admonishment, that’s what she’d wanted, on some level. Another person who could be scared for her. Not just any person. “I’m all right. Mostly. I just, uh. I think I could use some. Help, I guess. In figuring out what to do.”


“I don’t think I can stop,” she says, which could apply to several things having to do with her current state, all of them true, and so she clarifies, “Drinking. On my own. I mean that I don’t think I actually can, Frankie. Physically. Not without taking the risk of hurting myself. I think my body’s too used to it.”

Shame, tremendous and all-consuming, heats her chest and radiates out. It’s strong enough to overtake her whole attention, make her physical symptoms temporarily recede. The word Grace isn’t using is dependent.

Frankie draws a long and audible breath. Finally, she says, “So you really have decided to stop for good. Wow.”

Has she? Grace isn’t sure.

“I can’t stop,” she says, rather than agree with Frankie. “That’s what matters. Don’t you get it? I don’t have a choice. Oh, God, talk about scared. I am, I’m—I don’t think you know how—Frankie, I feel completely cornered. Like someone’s backed me up against a wall and said ‘this isn’t yours to decide.’ And please don’t make a joke right now. Not about this, okay?”

She expects Frankie to protest that she wouldn’t, she would never, but that’s not what happens. “Do you really need to quit cold turkey this exact second?” she asks, instead.

“Yes! Of course I do! I can’t just go back to the way things were before all this, I can’t pretend like I haven’t realized—” She won’t say I can’t let myself be the person who hurt you.

“Honey, I don’t mean you have to go back to the way things were. Maybe there’s another option. Look, if you were a Disneyland attraction back in the day, you’d be an E-ticket ride. High speed. Thrilling. Moderation’s never been a Grace Hanson forte. We both know that. But what if—and, by the way, what I’m about to suggest would probably get me chucked out of Al-Anon toot sweet, if Bobbie were listening in on this convo, but, okay, hear me out, what if— What if you could find — Not a happy medium, per se. An okay-for-now-until-you-figure-out-your-next-step medium. You wanted to talk to Coyote at some point, right? Think about your options? So stake out some middle ground until then.”

“What, two glasses a day keep the DTs away?”
“Well,” Frankie says, slowly, “yes, as a matter of fact. Something along those lines.”

She leans forward, elbows on the table in exactly the way she’d been taught never to sit, trying to ignore the fresh lurch of sharp nausea that’s doing more than threatening to escalate. Well, she’d done it over the weekend, hadn’t she? Poured herself a glass of two a.m. chardonnay to get between the night’s dry spell and the day of rupture she didn’t know was coming. And still, this feels different. Like she’s making a foundational concession to something bigger than herself, a force that’s been moving her in one direction for so long she’d mistaken its hands for her own.

And then, Frankie continues, “I believe in you, Grace. You know that, right? If this is something you think you need to face right now, I have the utmost faith in your ability to do it. Head-on, no backsies. You’re good at that sort of big decision thing.” A pause. “Yours truly, maybe not so much.”

The skin on Grace’s arms is still prickling. Louder, now, and wet, too, like it’s being closed inside a purring mouth big enough to take the bones. Why can she hear a feeling? Nothing about that seems right.

She squeezes her eyes a little tighter against the throb of pain at her temples. “This is the first time we’ve had an actual conversation about this, Frankie. Ever. In nearly three years of living together. Have you realized that? You’re Coyote’s mother, for Christ’s sake. You go to Al-Anon often enough that you knit those people tiny doll blankets for Hanukkah. And not once have you ever brought up my drinking. Not seriously, anyway.”

“It’s not like you’ve ever tried to talk about it either!” Frankie exclaims. “I would’ve been there for you in a hummingbird’s heartbeat, Grace, if you’d ever said ‘I think I have a problem and I want to do something about it.’ Don’t you know that?”

Grace won’t open her eyes yet. Too bright, too much. Far away, in the kitchen, the refrigerator motor starts to hum.

“Well,” she mutters, and shoves a trembling hand into her lap, between her thighs, so that it’s pinned and safe. “I’m saying it now.”

“I know,” Frankie tells her. Grace’s shaking hand isn’t holding Frankie. A hand can’t hold someone who isn’t here, that doesn’t make a bit of sense, and so it can’t be Grace’s hand making Frankie’s words shake like that. “And now I’m here. I’m here for you. Lady, you’re not alone in this. I’m only a phone call away. Just because I’m spending some time processing in another house, that doesn’t mean I’m out of your life, okay?”

In a voice she hardly recognizes as her own, one that’s shot through with undisguised need, Grace says, “But you’re not really here,” and she doesn’t add I miss you, I need you, come home, but all of it’s there.

“I can be. Just ask, Grace, and I’ll do it. You know that, right? If you need to not be by yourself right now, say the word. I’ll be at the beach in fifteen minutes. Thirty, if there’s traffic on the 5. Forty-five, if the zoo lost one of their ostriches again.”

She considers it. Frankie, back in their home, the pale rooms animate again with her sound and light and movement, and the thought fills her with so much longing she’s got to press her lips together to stop a small moan. With Frankie back, she’d be able to reach out and—

Her eyes open. No, she couldn’t. Touching’s off limits for the moment. Not until Frankie’s had her week of processing and Grace her week of limbo.
It would be an intermission where they’re not best friends, or roommates, or lovers, but something else, something defined by lack and lull. Sleeping in separate rooms, separate in waking rooms. Alone together in the same house, and awkward with the temporary suspension of their two-person language. Each ordinary interaction swollen with possible meaning. Frankie’s fingers crooked around a brush, or her mouth on the lip of a selfish cup, or the frail oval of her unkissed wrist. The heat between them, a thing so alive and palpable it could almost be stroked out of the abstract, made filthy, touched. Grace, not touched. Needing it. Frankie too. These things, together.

“I’ll be all right, Frankie,” she says, instead. “Please focus on your—what did you call it yesterday? Your noodling. Do that. Be the best noodler this week that anyone’s ever been in the history of the world, and I’ll be here—” What? Trying to keep vertical and lucid? “Mulling over those okay mediums, I guess. Until you’re ready.”

“Roger that.” Deep disappointment, she can hear it in Frankie’s voice, and a strain of yearning that makes Grace shudder with something that isn’t sickness. “I’ll noodle so damn good the first thing you’ll do when you see me on Sunday is ask what I’m doing out of a pho bowl. Meanwhile, keep me posted, okay? I need to know you’re doing all right. And Grace?”

“Yes?” Sweat drips unhurried between her breasts and finds the upper reaches of her stomach, hidden from view. Chasing darker places.

“There’s no shame, sweetheart,” Frankie tells her, gently, “in being kind to yourself. There’s no shame in needing it.”

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Two ample glasses of Riesling from a bottle she’d been planning to re-gift. That’s all.

The timer on her cell phone ticks down from thirty minutes while she sips, puts the shaking glass back down on the kitchen island, lets it go, and waits, counting silently. Picks it up again and sips, the wine’s mawkish sweetness a curb that reminds Grace she doesn’t get to love this rest, just have it.

Slowly, mercifully, her headache fades. The nausea pulls away. Her hands still. The house around her sharpens back into accuracy. She trades the bottle’s fullness for her own.

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By early afternoon, Grace is fine again. Better than fine, actually. Relieved and loose, her body slack with the incredible pleasure of gone pain. Driving herself downtown to Say Grace becomes a viable option, one that temporarily distracts her from any unease over feeling this good.

Brianna’s office is transformed, too, a fact she notices before she’s even walked inside. A large walnut desk is the centerpiece for a room that’s been entirely repainted and redecorated, now colored in deep honey and gray accents. The sleek furniture is gone, replaced with soft cloth chairs in cream, a plush couch just begging for a nap, and a sturdy conference table that, remarkably, looks as though it isn’t trying to be anything other than what it is.

“Very nice,” she says, and takes a couple of steps into the office as Brianna looks up from her desk. “Very, very nice.”

“Do my ears deceive me?” Brianna asks, and laces her fingers, resting her chin on top of the bridge
she’s built with her hands. “Was that an unconditional compliment? From my mother? My esteemed mother, who’s never met an interior decorating choice she couldn’t fillet into splinters with the sharpest of appraisals?”

“No, I mean it. You’ve really done something with the place. It’s lovely. Much warmer. Of course, you might end up regretting that full couch, given how busy the wall is, but—”

“Oh, goody, it’s still you in there. I was beginning to get worried. And speaking of—” She gestures at Grace to take one of the seats on the other side of the desk. Not for the first time, Grace is struck by the strangeness of this reversal: her daughter inviting Grace to sit down in Grace’s old office. “I take it you’re here to fill me in on the whole Frankie B sitch? Because it’s about time someone in this family fessed up.”

“Something like that.” Grace’s mouth is suddenly dry.

“You know, for once, Mallory is completely refusing to tell me what’s going on? Coyote won’t narc either, even after I threatened to give him a wedgie, and he’s very familiar with how uncompromising my wedgies are. And somehow, somehow, Budyard has found a new way to be impressively useless, since apparently he knows even less about the current state of affairs than I do. That is not the way this family functions, Mom. Kids on one side, adults on the other, with the occasional exception for when your roommate calls me to pick her up from the middle of the fountain in Balboa Park because she’s baked out of her fucking mind and doesn’t want you to know she forgot how to leave. Again.”

“I’ve told her a million times,” Grace says, “circles have exits,” and she sits down, brushing invisible lint off her slacks in the process. Not one trace of a tremor. She’s grateful for small miracles. “Brianna, before we get to yesterday—I came here because I need to talk to you about something. Something important. About myself.”


“It is serious. I mean, it’s not all that serious, I’m all right, there’s nothing wrong with me, it’s just that—” Oh, God, why is she so nervous? She’d been able to blurt it out the other four times, and now what Grace needs to say to her eldest daughter is sticking in her throat like something that isn’t sure it’s made for daylight.

Which is clearly preposterous, because Grace is almost certain the news won’t be a complete shock, given Brianna’s pointed questions about Frankie at Saturday’s lunch; her answers, too. But what if Brianna laughs or rolls her eyes at how blind Grace has been to herself all along, when even Brianna knew the right thing to ask? What if Brianna thinks she’s rushing into this announcement, just like Mallory did? Worse, what if Grace’s revelation is too intimate, too private? What if this information somehow disintegrates the relationship they’ve managed to create, a respectable understanding that’s built on shared competence, brutal incisiveness, professional acumen, and nothing more truly personal than a mutual hatred for the shorter Property Brother?

Two people who’d shared a body once and agreed not to do it again. The last time they’d talked about anything delicate, just the two of them, she’d been shocked to learn Brianna hadn’t felt loved unconditionally as a child. Ashamed, mostly, to discover her failure to convince her girls that they’d had what all children were supposed to have. You’re not very unconditional with yourself, Brianna had informed her, like it was obvious information anyone could grasp. Except that Grace hadn’t made the connection, not in decades of motherhood, and now she can’t help but wonder what else her daughter can lay bare for her that Grace couldn’t see until now.

“I’m so sorry, Brianna,” she whispers, and she isn’t going to start crying before she gets this out of
her mouth. She just can’t. “Give—give me a minute, all right?”

She fishes for a tissue in the purse on her lap and finds one, touching it to the thin skin below the corner of her left eye, and then the right, pressing hard rather than wiping. If she wipes, the gesture will be far more obvious.

While Grace struggles to collect herself, Brianna keeps quiet. She places her hands on the top of her walnut desk, palms down, and spreads her fingers wide, in the gesture of a person who’d prefer to touch everything at once but can’t.

_I spent more than seventy years trying to convince myself that survival and happiness were the same_, Grace could say, and then she might have to listen as Brianna tells her _yeah, no shit, Mom, you’re talking to one of the things you survived._

The tears are coming in earnest now. She can’t move the tissue quickly enough to blot all of them.

“Mommy?” Brianna asks, abruptly. “Maybe I could say something first. While you’re—” Her hand gestures in Grace’s direction, acknowledging the escalating situation. “You know. In a temporarily moistened condition.”

Grace nods, not trusting herself to speak.

“Do you remember a woman named Nancy? I don’t know her last name. She worked at Dad and Sol’s firm in the early 90s. Short hair, no makeup, suits and ties. Dead ringer for a young k.d. lang.”

Oh, yes, Grace remembers. She nods again, sniffing, and the prickle of memory that runs up her spine tells her where Brianna’s going next.

“I met her the first time you let me come with you to the office Christmas party. I was ten, and extremely hot shit in my super stylish green velvet dress with basketball-sized puffed sleeves and a red polka-dot headband. And you looked like a cross between Heather Locklear’s character on Melrose Place and the wife of a hypocritical Republican senator. No offense. Actually, it was a pretty decent look. My point is, per usual, all the people in that room couldn’t take their eyes off you. Including Nancy.”

Grace remembers that, too.

“Nancy was the only person at that party who didn’t treat me like some stupid kid. She was cool, you know? She said ‘fuck’ twice, which is amazing when you’re ten, and she let me drink a teensy bit of her Scotch when no one else was looking. But then, at some point, you pulled me into a corner so you could do that thing you always did where you made me feel like shit about my hair? And you jabbed your finger in Nancy’s direction, and you said, ‘Let that woman be a lesson to you, Brianna. Everyone in this room feels sorry for her. You can always control whether or not other people feel sorry for you.’”

“I said that?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you did. And then you said—Jesus, I remember it like it was yesterday—you said, ‘Why would a woman ever choose to look like that?’ But the way you said it, it was like there couldn’t possibly be a good answer.”

Across a crowded room, and there was Nancy, pulling the wrong kind of attention, or attention that Grace didn’t like because it felt wrong to her, unnerving. She hadn’t meant to stare or be rude, but she’d never seen a woman dressed—well, dressed in a suit exactly like a man. Not a feminine suit,
either, but a navy double-breasted coat and tailored slacks that might’ve been just as much at home on Robert. Except Robert didn’t have obvious breasts that swelled out the front of his jacket, or generous hips and an ass that couldn’t be fully hidden from view, even with all that tailored cloth. Or eyes like Nancy’s, sharp and knowing as they’d caught Grace’s stare and held her, trembling, on a strange hot hook without a name or shape.

Slowly, Brianna says, “I was thinking about Nancy after lunch on Saturday. I was thinking about Nancy a lot, actually. And you. And what you said about her. To be specific, I was thinking about why you, my mother, a woman who’s just told me she can’t live without her best friend, a woman who wanted to know if her best friend loves her, would say something like that. And then I thought—well, maybe it wasn’t your typically enchanting Grace Hanson charm after all. Maybe you saw something that scared you. Or—” She pauses. “Or maybe you saw something you liked. I don’t know, maybe it was two things.”

When Grace speaks, it’s nowhere near steady. “Brianna, I—I should never have said that. I shouldn’t have said that about Nancy, and I shouldn’t have said it to you. The person I used to be back then, she was, she was awful, she was—angry, and, and brittle, and mean, and hurting, and—”

“Gay?” Brianna asks, quietly.

Air rushes from her lungs in a single stunned gasp, and then—an unplanned sob jerks out of Grace’s throat, and then another, until she’s crying in earnest, crying enough that she can’t bring herself to look directly at Brianna’s face. Brianna can’t stand earnest emotion when a cutting comment and a raised eyebrow aren’t enough to box it away or make it vanish. Brianna hates it when people cry. She’s never had any true tolerance for human frailty, and Grace, oh, Grace knows exactly why.

“I need—” She’s flailing her hand over the desk, nearly blind with tears. There’s a Kleenex box somewhere, and by some miracle she manages to find it, grabbing the tissue hard enough to tip the box over onto its side. “I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m really, I’m fine, I’ll be—”

Brianna’s chair scrapes on the wood floor as Grace hears her push it back. For a good ten seconds she’s convinced her daughter’s going to walk right out of the room and leave Grace alone until she calms back down into something approximating normalcy. And maybe, in the end, that’s the best thing for both of them. Maybe it’s the least mortifying option out of a series of wholly embarrassing outcomes.

Just as she’s taking a deep breath, she feels Brianna’s hand cupping her shoulder.

“Mom,” Brianna says, from above her. The name’s gentled down into softness, nearly unrecognizable in her daughter’s mouth. “Mom, hey. Mom. It’s okay. I got you.”

And then she bends down and puts her arms around Grace.

For a second, Grace is too shocked to move. Admittedly, the hug is more than a little awkward, their bodies forming a wide angle that meets only where Brianna’s holding Grace’s shoulders, pinning her upper arms as she leans in. But it’s her daughter who’s doing this, the one who’d spent her childhood struggling away from good-night kisses, wiping off her cheek any that managed to land with furious fingers, until Grace, angry and embarrassed, stopped trying at all. They never hug, except on those rare occasions when dire circumstances or Christmas morning make Brianna impulsively forget how much she needs distance.

This doesn’t feel anything like an impulse. Brianna’s embracing Grace so carefully, as if she understands that the best thing for what’s too much is something that can stand to hold it, and then
Grace suddenly twists towards her. She wraps her arms around Brianna’s waist and squeezes, hard, the side of her head pressing into Brianna’s abdomen as she pulls her daughter in, as close as possible. The abrupt realignment of their bodies means that Brianna isn’t bent and hugging her anymore, but after a second, Grace feels the light pressure of two hands, one over each of her shoulder blades. Incredibly, Brianna’s not trying to get away.

Fresh tears spring to Grace’s eyes. Those hands have come a long way to reach her.

For a while, they stay like this, and eventually, Brianna says, patting Grace briefly as she does it, “You know I said ‘gay’ and not ‘gray,’ right? We’re not operating under some hilariously awkward misunderstanding where you burst into tears because you think I’ve finally realized you’ve been dyeing your hair for the last quarter century?”

“I don’t dye my hair.” Her indignant breath ruffles the red silk of Brianna’s blouse. “I maintain the color that God gave me. And yes.” She lifts her head, looking up at Brianna. The movement breaks the cord of direct contact between them. For one ridiculous second, Grace feels unfairly deprived, and then, just as quickly, the sense of deprivation is gone. Brianna’s still here, looking down at her. “I heard what you said.”

“So—? Would you care to comment further?”

She pulls away and finds the tissue again, wiping quickly at her wet cheeks. At least this time she’d had the foresight to keep the eye makeup at a light coating of mascara. “It’s true.”

“Oh?” Brianna says. And then, still looking right at Grace, “All right. That is—God, that is definitely a thing you just said.” She takes a deep breath and blinks a couple of times. Seems to steady herself. “Well, then. Okay.”

“Okay?” Grace repeats it, startled. “Really, Brianna? You mean that?”

Brianna’s tiny smile seems bigger, somehow, than it actually is. “Yeah. Yeah, I do. Dad’s super gay, apparently you’re a huge lesbian, and, in totally unrelated news, this year I would personally like to volunteer to write the letter that goes with the Bergstein-Hanson family pan-holiday card.”

“You don’t—? Your sister, she thought this was too fast.” It hurts, still, even though they’d talked it out. “Too sudden. She thought I should take more time. You don’t agree with her?”

“Mom.” Instead of reclaiming the seat behind her desk, Brianna takes the other client chair, crossing one immaculately trousered leg over the other as she sits down. Now they’re side-by-side. “We’re talking about a woman who thinks going from light blonde highlights to medium-light blonde highlights is a drastic change that requires consultation with at least four different people. Why do you care about her opinion?”

“For the same reason,” Grace informs her, quietly, “that I care about your opinion. Because she’s my daughter. Because you’re my daughter. And at the end of the day, while I refuse to let anyone else dictate how I live my life, I would prefer not to go through this—this process without the full support of the people around me who matter most.”

“I see,” Brianna says, and tucks a strand of hair behind an ear. “You really want to know what I think?”

“I’m not asking for my health.”

“Okay. Speaking as a person who took literally months to figure out she’d thrown away the best thing that’s ever happened to her—correction, the best thing that wasn’t discovering we exceeded
last quarter’s projected growth by eight fucking percent—”

Wait a minute. *Eight* percent? The news briefly distracts Grace from her focus. She’d managed three percent, just five quarters before she’d retired, and even that had been an impossible feat before she’d made it happen. “Brianna, that’s astonishing. Eight? Are you sure? *Really?*”

“Yeah.” Brianna grins, her face blooming with quick joy. “Eight. Insane, right? We just got the numbers this morning. I was going to tell you, but—” She waves a hand vaguely in Grace’s direction. “Events. Anyway. Back to this whole emotion thing we’re doing right now. The point I’m trying to make is that I threw away the other best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I almost didn’t get it back. Get him back. I’m talking about Barry, in case that isn’t clear. And because I didn’t figure out how I felt before he left for Baltimore, now we’re stuck doing long distance for the time being, which means at least a couple more months where we’re not together in person, so—” She stops. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, because normally, clichés make me break out in hives, but Mom, look. Life’s too short to spend it not going after what’s right for you. If this is who you are—and it sounds like you’re pretty positive it is—then I really think you deserve to have what makes you happy. Don’t wait.”

“Brianna,” Grace says. She clears her throat. How could she possibly communicate what she’s feeling right now, hearing this? Like her life is slowly expanding to accommodate the shape of what’s inside it. “Thank you. Very much.”

As Grace watches, Brianna looks away into the corner of the room and brushes a fast finger under her right eye. “So,” she says, after a moment, and shakes her head quickly, her hair rustling. “Um. You’re a lesbian. Which you apparently realized at some point between lunch on Saturday and right now. May I ask what happened? Did you binge-watch a bunch of classic *Ellen* episodes? Spend a lot of quality time at the Subaru dealership? Participate in some hand-to-gland combat with Frankie?”

Jesus Christ. “I,” Grace stammers, completely unprepared for that last question, “I, um,” and her face must be turning bright red, it has to be, the truth of what’s happened written all over it, because now Brianna’s staring at her in absolute horror, her mouth starting to open. Oh, no. Oh, no.

“I was kidding. I was totally—Mom? You’re not seriously telling me—? Oh, my God. You went for it? You actually put the moves on Frankie? Grace Hanson, seductress of ladies? Oh, shit, is *that* why Frankie’s currently playing the lead in an extremely low-budget and hastily assembled production of *Escape from La Jolla*? Of course it is. Of course that’s why. Of course Frankie ran out.”

A blanket denial seems entirely pointless in the face of Brianna’s astonishment. “I’d pick a different phrase than the very colorful one you used,” Grace manages, “but let’s just say the general characterization isn’t entirely off the mark.” She sits up, pushing her shoulders back. If she has to have this conversation here and now, at least she can face the situation with excellent posture and retain a little dignity.

Brianna says, “And once again, it appears my natural gift for hilarity has, by total chance, brought to light some uncomfortably real shit I would prefer not to acknowledge.”

“Only today we’re talking about my love life, not yours.”

“First of all, Mom, fine, I always acknowledge a decent burn when I hear it, so good one, and secondly, what in the actual *fuck*? You’re telling me that you had—” She stage-whispers it. “—*sex* with Frankie at some point in the last forty-eight hours, after straight up denying to Mallory and
me that you were stupidly and completely in love with her? By the way, please know that if I could outsource the asking of this question to one of my interns without risking a lawsuit, I would do it so quickly it would make Adam’s weird little bowtie spin.”

“Can a lesbian really ‘straight up’ deny something?” Grace asks, before she can stop herself.

“Okay, cool, you’re a comedian now, in addition to being gay and super evasive. Mom. Focus. Or should I start calling you Mom 1 now?”

“We didn’t have sex.” It seems extremely important to clarify this, even though absolutely none of it is Brianna’s business, and this is \textit{not} a conversation she wants to be having with her daughter. Her face is boiling. “I guess it really depends on whose definition you—”

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Stop right there. I am one hundred and fifty percent okay with not establishing in any detail whatsoever the exact parameters of the sex you did or did not have with Mom 2. What I \textit{would} like to hear about—and in the vaguest possible terms—is if, you know. Things. If they’re okay.”

“Things?”

“Well, obviously not \textit{everything}, everything clearly isn’t okay, the world is a giant apocalyptic trash heap, but I guess I’m referring to a fairly specific part of that everything that I happen to be concerned about in this particular moment. More than most of the other parts. Of things.”

“Brianna, are you trying to ask me how I’m feeling?”

“Yes,” Brianna says, with relief. “Yes. Good. Say that.”

It’s a question that’s almost as remarkable as the hug that’s proceeded it. From Brianna’s inability to meet Grace’s eyes, she knows her daughter cares about the answer, far more deeply than she’s willing or able to admit. Brianna’s looking down again, and away. For once, her jaw is relaxed, not stiff with defensiveness. In the soft curve of it Grace suddenly sees the familiar shape of her little girl, the flicker of a disappeared face.

There could be a gift here, in risk. So. She’ll be honest.

“When you were about four years old,” Grace begins, the image rising behind her eyes as she speaks, “you vanished. One minute you were playing in your room, and the next, you weren’t. I couldn’t find you. I looked all over for almost an hour—your father was ready to call the police. We were terrified. Then I thought to check outside, in the backyard, and all of a sudden, I could hear this tiny sound coming from under the house. This soft cry. You’d been stuck in some crawlspace antechamber nearly all that time I’d been looking for you. No one else was there to hear you but me. I couldn’t go in and get you because where you were was too small for me to fit—do you remember?”

“No. What happened?”

“You had to wiggle yourself out. I was right there the whole time, talking you through it, encouraging you, but you did it all by yourself. All the hard work. And once you were free—I’ll never forget it—you stood up and looked right at me, all covered in dirt and spider webs and God knows what else, little sticks in your hair, and you said, ‘Watch me, I can do this now,’ and you spun yourself around in a circle. You know, with your arms stretched wide? You spun, and you spun, and you spun, even though you almost fell down, and you didn’t want to stop. Maybe you couldn’t stop. Because you were so damn grateful to be out of your trap.” There’s a catch in her
voice. This time, she doesn’t try to hide it. “You wanted to know how I’m feeling, Brianna? That. That’s how I’m feeling.”

There’s a long silence, and then Brianna says, softly, “Jesus, Mom.”

“Well, it’s the truth.”

“No, I know, I get that, it’s just—that sounds pretty fucking intense. You felt trapped? All these years?”

There’s no good way to explain what she’s realized over the past few days: how a crawlspace can look exactly like a life, how you can spend decades inside it going deeper, convincing yourself that the walls are what you want. So she says, instead, another thing that’s right. “Until the divorce. Until Frankie.”

Maybe there’s something in Grace’s voice that gives away her longing, because Brianna asks, “You know she’ll come back, right, Mom? You do know that? She always comes back. Frankie loves you. We’ve established this. Remember? Saturday? Around the same time you informed Mal and me that you were heterosexually interested in having a heterosexual Boston marriage with your heterosexual roommate, heterosexually, and terrified our waiter into giving us a free dessert? Well, me. It was me, I had the dessert.”

“She’s coming home on Sunday,” Grace says. Now it’s her turn to look away. There’s an empty vase on Brianna’s desk, something that should be filled and isn’t. “A week. Less than a week. Six days.”

“See? Then you and Mom 2 can live in sweet sapphic bliss alongside Dad and Sol’s adorable gay joy, while PFLAG bestows upon your loving and supportive children platinum-level lifetime memberships and a free goody bag each. Everyone wins.”

“And then you’ll have the mother you’ve always wanted.”

It falls out of her mouth so easily, like something loose. As though Grace hasn’t voiced for the very first time a deep pain that’s scratched at her for thirty-five years, since the exact moment she’d watched a newborn Brianna cradled in Frankie’s soft arms, envying Frankie her certainty, envying Brianna her comfort. Motherhood’s always been so much easier for Frankie, a natural extension of who she is and not the sutured appendage Grace still can’t quite mistake for her own self. But maybe—maybe with Frankie by her side, as her partner, things could be different. Grace, with more, might finally have more to give.

The revelation sits in the room with them, fading under the limelight of confession, dwindling towards a pain she can start to manage, and after a while, Brianna says, so carefully, “Yes, Mom. You’re right. Because I’ll have you. But happier.”

--------------------------------------------------

Today 2:51 PM

Brianna and Mallory know. I talked to them.

Today 2:53 PM
R u ok?
R they ok
With it I mean
How did it go
R they happy for u?
Oh Grace I’m so stinking happy for u

We’re all fine.
Actually, I think everything’s going to be fine.
By the way, Brianna guessed about you and me. I couldn’t lie to her.
I’m sorry. I know we weren’t going to tell the rest of the kids until after we talked.

U don’t have 2 apologize
I understand
Wouldn’t want u 2 lie
Did u think about that ok medium?

Today 3:01 PM
Yes.
Two glasses.
From that bottle of Riesling Amanda gave us.
I stopped at Vons and bought a few more bottles to last me through the week.
Just until I figure out what I’m going to do.

Good
Good for u
Well I think it’s good
It’s good right?
Is it good?
It’s something.

I don’t feel sick anymore, at least.

Good

No that’s good

Grace

What?

I keep thinking I can smell ur perfume

But that can’t b right

Can it?

I shouldn’t b able 2 smell u

Should I?

I don’t know.

It’s possible.

Maybe.

I keep thinking I can feel your hands on me.

Today 3:19 PM

Frankie?

Are you still there?

Yes

Here

I had 2 put down the phone
Today 3:26 PM
Is it cool if Coyote comes over in a bit
To pick up some things for the week
Clothes and my phone and some art supplies and a box of Tibetan Abhishek incense
Will u b at the house

Of course. I’m not going anywhere.

Today 3:29 PM
I’m right here.

She doesn’t write this in a text, but Grace, standing in their kitchen and staring down at her phone, thinks she might be able to smell Frankie, too. Of course, Frankie doesn’t wear perfume. Just generous amounts of tea tree oil, rubbed regularly into her pressure points for relaxation. Against her temples, on the back of her neck, in the soft pad of flesh between her thumb and index finger. There’s the faint trace of pot smoke that always hugs Frankie’s hair between showers, drifting up whenever Grace gets close enough to touch. And there’s another smell, too, one that Grace associates with her and can’t use language to define with any real accuracy. It’s sharp, that smell. Familiar. Like sweat or salt, close to the brined scent that’s baked into the beach house from years of wind and sun and spray. Sometimes it’s hard for Grace to tell apart what’s Frankie and what’s all around them.

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In retrospect, she should’ve been tipped off by Allison’s matter-of-fact statement over the phone that while she and Bud don’t have time today to meet Grace for coffee, of course Grace is welcome to accompany them to their Wednesday afternoon Lamaze class, because the instructor just loves it when grandparents show up. But it’s Allison, after all. Somehow, it seems just like her to spontaneously extend a familial role towards Grace, despite the fact that Grace has exchanged maybe eight or nine words with Allison, cumulatively, since she first entered their lives.

Allison is—well, more than a little odd, to put it mildly. But kind, in her own strange way.

And direct, too, which is why Grace is only moderately astounded when Allison, arranging herself carefully in a cross-legged position on the thin yoga mat in the middle of the studio, says, “So. I haven’t seen your wife since she dropped off a gallon of fermented cod liver oil for me last week. Why is she living at Coyote’s place now? Is it a skin condition? Are you worried about contagion? Because I definitely get that.”

Bud, who’s been propping up a series of pillows to support Allison’s back, freezes in place. “Um,”
he says. “Uh. Allison?”

“Can you hold on a sec, sweetie? We can talk about our pillow material rankings later, I promise. I’m in the middle of being polite to Grace.” She leans a little towards Grace, who’s sitting just off the mat to Allison’s left, and grins at her, like they’re part of a two-person conspiracy. “So far, so good, right? I’ve been working on my conversation skills. I think they’re improving a lot. Can you tell yet?”

“Yes?” Grace tries. Her feet are flat on the floor, and she pulls her legs up against her body, chin touching her knees. That she’s approaching a fetal position before the start of a Lamaze class is not lost on her.

“Let’s all just stop. Pause. Rewind. Reflect. Allison, you do know Mom and Grace aren’t married, right? You were making a joke?” Bud laughs, two forced ejections of air. “Oh, right, I get it! Because they live in the same house, and they’re always together, and my mother likes to spend Sunday afternoons in the Mission Valley Home Depot so she can hang out with the store cat, it’s, yes, really great job with the humorous—”

Confusion flickers on Allison’s face as she swivels to face Bud. “I haven’t gotten to the part of my interpersonal communications practice yet where I feel comfortable making jokes with other people. You know that.” She turns back to Grace. One hand moves to rest on her belly, swelling noticeably under her loose blouse. “I mean, for a while I figured you had a polyamorous relationship, because of the way Frankie split her time between you and Jacob, but of course that doesn’t mean your marital bond is any less legitimate.”

“Wait a minute. You thought my mom was dating a man and married to another woman at the same time, and you never once thought to bring it up with me? ‘Hey, Bud, wow, it’s pretty nifty that your mom’s cross-platform compatible.’ No? You didn’t, oh, I don’t know, think any of that was maybe something worth discussing?”

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“Why would I?” Allison’s still watching Grace. “Aren’t you two married?”

“No,” Grace replies, after a moment, and even though it’s true, the answer costs something to give. Her stomach pulls. “No polyamory. No marital bond. We’re not married. Frankie’s my best friend. My roommate. And my partner. In Vybrant.”

“But you love her,” Allison says, sounding taken aback.

“Of course they love each other!” Bud exclaims, and he sits down on the floor in front of them, hard. His statement’s loud enough that a couple on a nearby mat look over in their direction, and when he speaks again, it’s quieter, no less intense. “Allison, we’ve talked about this, remember? After they had that fight over the gun, when I told you they kissed and made up, because they realized that when you really love someone, you’ve committed to working through—oh. Ohhh. I get it now. Yeah, okay, in retrospect I probably should’ve been a little clearer about some things. That’s on me.”

Allison’s still looking at Grace, her expression unchanged and perplexed, like what Bud’s said hasn’t even registered with her, and she says, again, “But you do love her, right? Really love her? I don’t mean the way I love how great it feels to peel dry skin off my lips. I mean, like, the way I love Bud?”

A wave of intense longing, slow and tremendous, starts to roll through Grace, beginning at her toes and seeping up through her limbs, flooding into her torso, her chest, her fingers. She presses on her shinbones, pushing her legs further into her body. It isn’t sexual, exactly, what’s happening to her
right now, but it’s not entirely different from sex, either. The strange feeling of being gradually shaped towards something, every nerve and muscle gathered together in unanimous agreement on a target that’s just out of reach.

Like it’s being tugged out of her throat and into the room, she says, “Yes.”

“Grace,” Bud says, slowly, after a long silence. “Uh, maybe I’m wrong about this, but I’m starting to get an inkling that you might need to process something extremely important here. Shall we go have a quick feelings huddle out in the hall before class starts? Or a long feelings huddle? You should know that I’m completely receptive to a long feelings huddle. As a matter of fact, some of my most rewarding life experiences have taken place in long feelings huddles.”

“Ooh, a feelings huddle,” Allison coos. “I’ve got, let’s see, one, two, three—six feelings I can share right now, and only one of them is a potentially serious disease symptom, which is just so cool and different for me. But Grace, you can go first! I, for one, would be happy to listen while you tell us about how you’re just completely over-the-moon besotted with Bud’s mom.”

“Is that—?” Bud’s staring at Grace. “Is that why you called us and wanted to go out for coffee, even though in thirty-three years I don’t think I’ve ever once been in a room with you where Mom wasn’t also there? Oh—wait, hold on, hold the phone, does this have something to do with why—”

“Your mother’s staying with Coyote right now, yes,” Grace finishes for him, because she’s been here before, and sighs. Honestly, there’s just no point in trying to maintain any amount of privacy or circumspection about information you’d like to keep quiet, not with any of their children. “We are not doing a feelings huddle in the hallway. Not if I have anything to say about it. And I didn’t call you because I—I didn’t call you to talk about my—about Frankie, I called because I realized I’m a lesbian and I want everyone in my family to know it. And, well. There you are. Now you know.”

The same exact sensation, every time. Repetition doesn’t mute it. The world immediately gets sharper when she says it out loud, and closer. Coming into contact with her skin, charging her up with new urgency, making her brim over into something reckless or free.

Bud’s jaw drops, and at the same time, Allison says, brightly, “Well, yeah. Of course you are. That’s obvious. Right, Bud?”

“No! No, it’s not obvious, and we did not know that, we—”

“But it’s very nice of you to make sure there was no miscommunication,” Allison continues, and smiles at Grace again. “Very considerate. Guthrie or Fable—” She gestures to her belly. “—is really lucky to have such a thoughtful grandma.”

“Or,” Bud says, in what sounds like a rehash of an earlier conversation, “Daniel or Sarah is very lucky. But, okay, maybe, let’s go back to the part where Grace just said she’s a lesbian? Which, I want to state again, for the record, I did not know? Can we please do that?”

Amazed, and not by the names Allison’s picked out—she’s known the Bergsteins too long for that—Grace lets her legs drop flat to the ground. She presses her hand on the mat, and shifts a little to the right to let the flesher part of her hip take the weight of sitting. The floor’s not especially comfortable. “You knew, Allison,” she repeats. “How did you know?”

“Well, first of all, because you’re married to Frankie,” Allison says, “or I assumed you were,” and, all right, that seems like a fairly logical extrapolation to make from a misreading of their
relationship. Then she adds, “And the way you look at her.”

She’d expected something like—well, Grace doesn’t know what she’d expected, but it hadn’t been that. “The way I look at her?”

“Your face. It gets all—it’s like a very, very tiny cluster of stars. Bud looks at me like that a lot.” She beams at him, and Bud’s face softens briefly out of his bewilderment as he smiles back at her. It’s sweet, or Grace doesn’t know what she’d expected, but it hadn’t been that. “Oh, right, and that one time I saw you two kiss.”

“What?” Grace exclaims, while at the same time, Bud says, disbelievingly, “I think I’m having an existential crisis. I think this is what an existential crisis feels like. There’s a flavor. It’s very metallic.”

“I didn’t—how could you have seen that? We’ve never, not—” Not before this weekend, she almost clarifies, and bites it off just in time. “It’s impossible.”

“Oh, God. New Year’s Eve. New Year’s Eve. New Year’s—

Oh. Oh, God. New Year’s Eve.

But that wasn’t— No. That wasn’t. I didn’t,” she says, managing to stutter herself out of denial and into remembering yet another puzzle piece she’d tried very hard to forget, had mostly forgotten. Until right now.

Because it was. It had been. She did.

“I was kissing Bud, and I had my eyes open because sometimes I like to make sure his pores are still healthy, and I saw you two. Also kissing.”

Four drinks in, some godawful pink concoction Sol had put together, it was just after midnight, and she’d been standing next to Frankie behind Sol and Robert’s couch, behind the rest of the small gathering in the living room. Times Square was celebrating on the television screen, but her eyes had been on Frankie.

And Frankie was watching her, too.

Jacob isn’t here, she’d told Grace, an obvious fact that only implied more than its bare truth because she’d said it. No midnight kiss. Unless you want to pucker up those tea coolers and lay a quick one on me.

Four pink drinks. Maybe that was the excuse she’d needed.

Smooth against her lips, Frankie’s cheek, and then Frankie, seeming startled, had turned a little towards her, as if on instinct, and still their mouths hadn’t met. Not quite and not then. Just the bare edge of Frankie’s lips, the dimpled corner a promise of something Grace couldn’t bring herself to ask for or deserve.

“I kissed her,” she says to Bud and Allison, because it’s true, and now she’s a person who says true things. “You’re right. I kissed her because I wanted to do it, and I told her ‘Happy New Year, Frankie,’ and I told myself all of it meant absolutely nothing.”

There’s a hand holding hers. Grace looks into her lap. It’s Bud’s hand. Looks up, again, to see his
face peering closely at hers from across the mat, and the anxiety she’d seen there before is mostly
gone, replaced by a focused compassion. The expression is so bone-familiar, so intensely yearned
for that seeing it in someone else’s face makes her feel like weeping.

“Grace,” he says, this man she’s known all his life, and hardly knows. Frankie’s son. Her baby
boy. “Hey. We’re here. Okay? Allison and I, we’re right here for you. What can we do? How can
we help you with this? Do you want me to—I can talk to Mom, I can find out—”

She shakes her head, hard and fast enough that the ends of her hair smack at her jaw. “Thank you,”
she says, quickly, to cover up how much she doesn’t want Bud to bring up any of this conversation
to Frankie, “thank you very much, but no. Thank you. Really. Just—let’s change the subject, all
right? Talk about something else? Anything at—”

As if on cue, a voice from the front of the room calls, “All right, everyone! We’re gonna get going,
so moms, please assume the starting labor position on your mats. Support partners, make
yourselves comfortable.”

Make yourselves comfortable. That seems impossible, given the current situation, and so Grace
says, as the couples around them start to move into position, “You know, I’m thinking maybe I
should just leave? I’m not a part of this, after all, I’m not part of your—your birth plan, or whatever
you call it, and I don’t want to be in the way. I told you what I needed to tell you, so—you know
what, I’m just going to—”

She starts to get up, yanking her hand away from Bud’s, pushing herself into a standing position,
and then, just as she’s on her feet again, Allison reaches out to grab her wrist.

“You’re not in the way,” she says. Her eyes are large and focused on Grace. “You’re our family.
You said it yourself.”

“We’d like it,” Bud adds, gazing up at her, “if you’d stay. With us, here. We’d like it very much.”
Grace stares down at them. At her family.

“You mean it?” she hears herself ask.

Allison lets go of Grace’s wrist, rubbing her belly with both hands. A soft look settles over her
face, an expression Grace recognizes, with a twinge of old discomfort, as the kind of response
pregnant women are supposed to have. “This is the first time I’ve had something growing inside
me that I didn’t attempt to remove surgically or with intensive balneotherapeutic meditation. I
could use someone who understands what that feels like.”

“I don’t know, I—”

“Please, Grace,” Bud says. “Stay.”

Just like his mother, Bud is a terrible liar, afflicted with the inability to be credibly dishonest, and
so Grace realizes the request must be genuine. More than genuine. Without an ulterior motive.
They’re not asking her to stay because she’s good at managing the situation at hand, or at making
sure a task goes smoothly. In fact, they don’t really need her at all. Apparently, Bud and Allison
are asking her to stick around because—for some reason that isn’t fully clear to Grace—they seem,
sincerely, to want her with to be with them.

Something very old and cramped inside her loosens a little as she says, “All right. Okay. I’ll stay.”

“Well, fuck, yes!” Allison exclaims, and absurdly, Grace blushing, while Bud, grinning with
pleasure, silently extends towards her one of the pillows he’s collected for Allison. A nice plush one, comfortable enough for sitting.

She takes it and carefully sinks back down to the floor, just to the side of Allison’s mat. Positioning the pillow beneath herself, Grace watches as Allison, now lying on her back, bends her knees with her feet flat on the floor, letting her arms rest on either side of her body. The hill of her belly is still relatively small, just a preview of what she’ll have in a few months, as Allison learns how to become someone else’s home.

“Moms, let’s begin by taking a deep breath,” the instructor calls out. “Count to five.”

Without thinking, Grace slowly fills her lungs with air, lets herself expand.

Today 9:42 AM

Nnetqrta

Oh rats well look at that I must’ve accidentally pocket texted u whoops!!

But while I’m here it would b the polite thing for me 2 say hello

I am nothing if not unfailingly polite

And charming and utterly delightful

Hello Grace

How r u?

Today 9:48 AM

I’ve developed a very strong interest in staring at the clocks in our house.

What r the clocks doing????????

They’re not doing anything, Frankie. My point is that I’m trying to get time to move more quickly.

Believe it or not, I haven’t been very successful.

It’s only Thursday. Somehow.

How are you?

Is Coyote’s place comfortable? Are the bedsheets soft? Is it quiet there at night? Have you been getting enough sleep?
Have you been able to think?

Are the clothes I gave to Coyote all right?

**Today** 9:58 AM

I will answer these questions in the order u asked them

Reasonably

U know other people’s bedsheets r never soft enough for me

There’s a very large owl nesting in a nearby tree that likes 2 share her opinions vociferously and I wholeheartedly support her right 2 free expression

Not exactly

Yes

And SUPER yes!!

Grace how did u know I desperately needed 2 wear my green dress w the Greek meander pattern???

*I didn’t know. It was clean.*

*But I’m glad I picked something you like.*

*And the other items I packed*

*I take it those were okay, too?*

**Today** 10:11 AM

My geodes let me know they were very happy about our reunion

It was pretty subtle feedback but I got the message loud and clear

By the way were u aware that it is possible 2 hotbox 160 square feet with just 1 extremely large stick of Tibetan Abhishek incense

Except of course there’s no high

Just a crapload of coughing

No, I meant the other clothing items.
Today 10:20 AM

Oh right

Those

Yes

Those were good 2

Right because u picked those out for me of course u did I thought about that before right now

I know it’s a little intimate.

It’s just underwear Grace

We all have it

Under our wear

As the famous expression goes

Right.

As the famous expression goes.

There’s nothing inherently sexual about it whatsoever

I didn’t say there was.

Right bc there isn’t so of course u wouldn’t say there was

Anything sexual

Because there isn’t Grace

People touch other people’s underwear all the time

It’s practically tradition on community outreach night down at the co-op


I thought you’d like to have the gray cotton pair.
They felt soft when I picked them up.

I know how much you like soft things, and being comfortable.

**Today** 10:33 AM

I do

I mean I do like the gray cotton especially

And they r soft

And I do like 2 b comfortable

Everything is very comfortable

I am at the veritable apex of personal comfort

Which u have provided me

In regard 2 this underwear

That u touched

So thank u

I'm glad.

*I want you to have what makes you feel good.*

**Today** 10:45 AM

I really want u 2 have that 2 Grace

**Today** 10:49 AM

U have no idea how much I want u 2 have that

Or maybe u do

Have an idea I mean

**Today** 10:55 AM

Grace
“Yes, Arlene,” she says, into the phone, and tosses her reading glasses onto the dining room table. “Yes, that’s correct. Exactly like Robert, but with women. Yes. Both of us. You’re right, the odds are probably very small. I certainly understand why you’d be surprised. Of course. No, I’m not going to stop wearing my high heels now. No, Arlene, I have not, nor will I ever think about you in that way. Well, I’m glad to know you’d find it flattering, but it just isn’t something I’ve ever—Look, Arlene, I’m sure there are plenty of other lesbians out there who’d find you very appealing, I just don’t personally— No, I don’t know any. How would I— It’s not like there’s a gay Rolodex, for heaven’s sake, I was just making a—”

Frankie would laugh, if she were here, and squeeze Grace’s free hand tightly in hers. Arlene, she’d holler, loudly enough to be heard through the speaker, hey, Arlene, get your own lesbian. This one’s mine.

She avoids looking at the empty chair next to her own when she says, “Well, thank you, Arlene. For your support. Well, yes. I agree completely. Your friendship is important to me, too. Yes.” And then, “Oh, Arlene. Of course you’re allowed to say ‘congratulations.’ That’s—gosh. It’s a very nice thing to say. I appreciate it. I really do. Yes. Yes. Talk soon. Okay. Sounds good. Arlene, I really do have a lot of calls to—okay. Arlene—yes. All right. Same here. Bye-bye.”

Arlene’s name is first on a numbered list of eight people. Grace is about to cross it out when she hesitates, pen suspended over the legal pad, and makes a different choice instead. A checkmark, right next to the careful scrawl of “Arlene.” The dark lopsided V stands out stark against the yellow of the pad.

Three more calls. Just three more calls, three more checkmarks next to her sister, her brother, and Cousin Alice. Then she can let herself have her Thursday Riesling allowance, the two glasses that never get more distant than the periphery of her attention. And after that, lunch. Maybe she’ll treat herself to someone else’s effort. There’s that place on Girard right by the bookstore that has excellent hamburgers, cooked medium rare and bursting, just the way she likes them best. Grace hasn’t been there in years.

But she’ll make a quick stop at Warwick’s first, where she can pick up the new Ann Patchett she’s been meaning to buy, fall into, let the book take her just far enough away so that the hamburger she’ll eat while reading tastes good to Grace, nothing more.

Coyote and I had a long conversation this morning

About AA

He told me u called
But don’t worry Coyote is very serious about the anonymous thing
He didn’t tell me anything else
But if u felt like telling me anything else
Then I would like very much 2 listen

**Today** 1:32 PM
Grace??

**Today** 1:34 PM
I’m trying to figure out how to put this without sounding like
Oh, I don’t know
Like I’m making excuses for myself.
I’m not, Frankie. At least I don’t think I am.

**Today** 1:38 PM
I’m staring very intently at my phone with the utmost attention
I know u can’t see me so I wanted u 2 know what I’m doing
I’m listening with my eyes Grace

**Today** 1:44 PM
Coyote sounds really happy with the program.
He told me it gave him the structure that he needed to get sober.
Which makes sense, given that he never had all that much structure to begin with.

**Today** 1:48 PM
I didn’t mean that the way it sounds
Or looks, I guess
Frankie?
Today 1:52 PM

You understand I’m not blaming you for Coyote. You get that, don’t you?

Today 1:55 PM

I guess I do

Sore spot sorry

I’ll b good again in a sec

Today 1:59 PM

It’s not your fault, Frankie. Coyote’s addiction.

It’s not

What I’m trying to say is that Coyote needed more structure to get better

And the thing is, I don’t know if that’s what I need to figure things out

My whole life, I’ve had structure

You know?

Piles and piles of structure

I’ve made all these rules for myself

Today 2:06 PM

So maybe

I think

If I’m going to make different choices

I should make those choices differently

Today 2:14 PM

Does that make any sense at all?

You don’t think it’s an excuse

Do you?

What do you think?
Frankie, please tell me what you think.

Today 2:18 PM

❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤

Today 2:23 PM

Okay, just so we’re clear

Hearts are a good thing in this context. Right?

Yes

Yes they r Grace

Hearts mean you think I’m on the right track? You support me?

Oh lady lady lady

I’ll b every single motherfucking pillar 2 ur Coronado Bridge if u let me

Have u thought about what u want 2 do instead?

Today 2:31 PM

I want to get it out of my system first. All of it.

With medical supervision.

So that means detox, I guess

Today 2:34 PM

There’s a place in Del Mar that does outpatient treatment.

It doesn't look too depressing.

I want to call and schedule a consultation. To see if it's right for me.

I haven’t called yet.

But I’m going to call.
Want me 2 b there when u do?

Frankie
Yes

I’ll hold ur hand the whole time
I won’t let go
I promise
Not even if ur hand gets all sweaty and clammy and slippery
Not even then

I’d like that.

I really would.

The woman sitting at the front desk in the otherwise empty reception area is bent over a stack of scattered papers when Grace walks in, head held high. Both hands clutch her purse strap tightly.

“Hello?” she begins, trying not to let her nerves jangle the greeting into a question. What if she’s in the wrong building? There weren’t any signs when she entered, nothing that reassures anxious first-time visitors they’ve found the San Diego LGBT Community Center. “I’m looking for Julia. Julia Ramirez? The volunteer coordinator?”

At the sound of Grace’s voice, the woman looks up, face knotted with focus. “That’s me.” And then, taking in Grace, her focus dissolves rapidly. It’s replaced by a startled expression. “Oh. Yes. Hello there. I’m Julie.”

“We spoke on the phone earlier. About volunteer opportunities for the Center? You told me to
come down when I had some free time. And I have some free time today." She doesn’t let herself think about Vybrant and all the work she hasn’t had the concentration to complete this week. After all, today’s Saturday. The day of—all right, not her day of rest. Frankie’s day of rest. “So here I am.”

“And you are?”

“I’m a lesbian,” Grace says, before she has time to think about it.

Julie’s eyes widen. She lets out a loud and generous laugh, a whoop that fills the room, makes it warm. Or maybe that’s just Grace’s cheeks, scalding with fresh embarrassment as she realizes what she’s done. She grips the purse strap even harder, pressing her lips together.

“Me too,” Julie informs her, and—oh. That’s—Grace feels it. Something inside her chest squeezes hard, a grip of perfect recognition. “But that’s not what I meant. What’s your name, honey?”

“Grace Hanson.”

“Grace Hanson.” There’s a lilt to it, that note of delight still threading through Julie’s voice, and yet despite that, Grace doesn’t feel like she’s being mocked. The laugh lines around Julie’s dark eyes and full mouth are deep grooves, clear evidence that she’s a woman who’s spent years letting herself be pleased. “Welcome to the Center. How’d you hear about us?”

“A friend told me. He does some pro-bono work for you. Sol Bergstein? He’s—well, ‘friend’ isn’t exactly accurate, although I guess we’re sort of—He’s my ex-husband’s husband. They were law partners, they had a twenty-year affair before they—” She presses her lips together. “God. I’m so sorry. I have no idea why I’m just telling you all this. A total stranger.”

“Hey, you’re family,” Julie says, waving a hand in vague and cheerful dismissal of Grace’s discomfort. “Family can’t be strangers. Take a seat, why don’t you? The chair on the right’s better. The other one, you’ve got about a twenty, maybe thirty percent chance one of the legs is gonna give right out. I wouldn’t risk it.”

Grace complies, taking the recommended chair. “I don’t— I take it that means something. Family. Something other than the standard definition. Do we—” She’s said it. We. “Do we use that term differently?”

Julie peers at her over the desk. After a moment, she asks, “How long you been out, Grace? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“About a week,” Grace admits. “A week tomorrow.”

A low whistle. “Wow. And you’re already jumping right into volunteering. Well, you’re a gal who doesn’t like to waste any time, aren’t you?”

“At my age, there isn’t much of it to waste.”

Julie doesn’t take the opportunity to speak. As she looks at Grace, she blinks a bit too fast, thick lashes beating. They’re long enough to graze the skin just below Julie’s eyes. Natural, too. Nothing false about them.

Eventually, Grace says, “Are you going to tell me what ‘family’ means, or will I have to go on a long and probably fruitless internet search later?”

“Right, right,” Julie says, still staring, “no, yeah, sorry, of course,” and Grace—well, she knows
that look. Countless men, innumerable times. Only now it’s on the face of a woman who must be, what, fifteen years younger than Grace? Maybe twenty. There’s hardly any gray in Julie’s hair yet, just a few obvious streaks splitting the dark curls. “Family means you’re one of us. Part of the community. Means you belong.”

Just like that? No questions asked? All Grace has to do is walk into a nondescript room that hasn’t been decorated beyond the presence of a few rainbows and some poorly-framed pieces of mall art, and suddenly she’s part of a family? “I don’t even know you,” she blurts out. “And you don’t know me. I don’t belong here. I’m an outsider. I’m, I’m seventy-three years old, I’ve lived my entire life acting like a straight person, I don’t even know how to be a lesbian. I’ve never been a part of a community. Any community. Look, Julie, you seem like a very nice woman who shouldn’t have to listen to me telling you all of this, and I really did come in here just to get some more information on volunteering, so maybe we could—”

“Lemme ask you something, Grace,” Julie interrupts. “When you were in high school, or maybe college, did you have a close friend? Another girl. Someone different from your other friends, someone you wanted to be around all the time, someone who made your stomach do flip-flops whenever she looked at you?”

It’s been more than half a century, but Grace can still feel it on her left cheek when she tries. The warm press of Judy Campbell’s mouth, the puff of breath, the soft slide of her lipstick. “Yes,” she says, startled, “I did, but—”

“Was there an older woman you admired? A teacher? Maybe you thought about her a lot, couldn’t wait to see her every day, wanted her to think you were more special than all the other girls?”

“I’ve never told anyone about—”

“When the other girls talked about boys they liked. You had to think about it really hard, right? I bet you had a name all ready to go in case anyone asked you. Some boy who made sense.”

Five minutes. It’s been five minutes, maybe a few more, and this unfamiliar woman’s pulling out bits of Grace’s past with the confidence of someone who’s been watching her closely since childhood. “How in the world could you know all of that?”

“Because,” Julie says, and smiles at her, “you aren’t alone.”

Grace opens her mouth. Closes it again. All those years. All those years of awful determination, feelings that stayed below until they couldn’t and became spills she’d cleaned up fast before they could stain her with what’s true. She’d always felt so goddamn—

Opens her mouth, again, and says, “Family. Right. I see.”

“So.” Julie clears her throat. “You wanted to talk volunteering. There’s an orientation in a couple of weeks, and we’ve got to fingerprint you first before you can start, but what’s your cup of tea? We’re gonna start prepping the AIDS Walk next month, the Hillcrest Youth Center’s short on group facilitators, the art class needs a new instructor. Any of that sound good?”

Still reeling a little from Julie’s insights, Grace hears herself ask, “An art instructor?”

“Yeah. You know how to paint?”

“Oh, God, no.” She shakes her head quickly, as though vehemence is the only thing keeping her from a fate marginally better than making macramé. “But—I know someone who does. My roommate.”
“Your roommate?” Julie repeats, arching one eyebrow.

As it always does, the word feels thin, wholly inadequate to the task of capturing Frankie Bergstein in all her loud glory. Roommate. A name for someone who’s adjacent to you, not woven in. “She’s an artist. You should see Frankie’s work, it’s— She understands people. She sees them for who they really are. And somehow, somehow that understanding ends up in every line of her paintings. Every single brush stroke. She captures them. And then you understand what they feel. Their pain. Their joy. Their longing. They become real.”

Julie says, gently, “Sounds pretty amazing. This Frankie.”

What Grace can manage, her throat tight with feeling, is “Yes.”

“Are you—?”

The unfinished question hangs between them. How many different ways could Julie finish it? With her. Together. In love with her.

“I am,” Grace says, after a long pause.

Julie nods. Just once, a firm downward tilt of her head, punctuating a sentence that never started.

They don’t talk about Frankie again, not until after they’ve discussed the Center’s Senior Services Program, which—as it turns out—happens to have an advisory committee that’s always looking for new members. Grace tells Julie all about her work on Vybrant, about her commitment to senior women and their sexual needs, and Julie listens intently, asks the right questions, wants to know if Grace might be interested, at some point, in offering a seminar for the Program focused on educating older women about the benefits of masturbation.

Yes, as a matter of fact, Grace is interested. Very much so.

She shakes Julie’s hand before taking her leave, and maybe it’s Grace’s imagination, but Julie seems to hold on a little longer than absolutely necessary.

“Your roommate,” she says, and pulls back her hand. “Frankie. She’s a very lucky woman. Assuming she’s wise enough to know what she’s got. And if she isn’t—” Julie’s cheeks are pink. “The maple bacon donuts, over at Great Maple, around the corner? They come in twos. Perfect for commiserating.”

Grace feels herself flush. Maple bacon donuts for two aren’t in her future. Certainly not with Julie. She knows that, with the bone instinct of someone who can’t stop planning for a life that starts tomorrow, the second Frankie walks back through their front door. And yet—those donuts could be in her future, with Julie, if she wanted it to happen. She knows that, too.

Just the possibility. That’s more than enough. She’ll take that with her, going home.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” she says, “thank you,” and allows herself the indulgence of a tiny little thrill as Julie smiles at her one last time.

______________________

Talking about Vybrant brings the business back to the forefront of her attention, for the first time in a week. By the time Grace is back at the beach house, the guilt over ignoring her professional responsibilities overrides other preoccupations. At the very least, she really does need to check her
work email. There’s a parts order that has to be placed no later than next week, distributors to
contact, quarterly taxes to file. An entire life to live that isn’t thinking about how much she misses
the sting of a dry martini, or about Frankie’s hands, or that she doesn't really mind the taste of
Riesling anymore, or Frankie’s thighs, or when she gets to have her next drink, or what Frankie
will be wearing the first time Grace undresses her.

Logging in at the dining room table, she sees forty-seven new messages since, what, last Saturday?
Okay. That’s not as bad as she’d—

Wait a minute.

The second email from the top. The one sent earlier this morning. The one with the subject line “A
Professional Business Letter Regarding Our Business.”

Grace clicks on the subject line, adjusting her glasses on her nose, and doesn’t let herself think
about what she’s hoping, desperately, to read.

Ms. Frances M. Bergstein
The Tiny Home of Mr. Coyote Bergstein
(In front of) 6425 Tourmaline Street
San Diego, CA 98571

May 13, 2017

Ms. Grace Hanson
40224 Seahaven Way
La Jolla, CA 92037

Dear Ms. Hanson:

As I am contacting you per our shared venture, in my capacity as a serious and
professional entrepreneur, I am sending you a business letter. Which I carefully
formatted with the assistance of one Mr. Sol Bergstein, Esquire, and, moreover, the
internet, before it distracted me with a delightful video of a very small rooster who can
play the piano. But that is not the germane point. The germane point I would like to
make is that this missive is about our business, and from me, a businesswoman, to
you, also a businesswoman. This is not at all, for instance, a letter from a woman who
can’t stop thinking about you, to you, a woman who maybe is thinking about me too.

Because I have recently been educated, also by the internet, to appreciate that learning
from customer feedback is one of “50 Steps Every Entrepreneur Must Take to Build a
Business,” I have taken the initiative to solicit said feedback. This has been
accomplished by going into our database (with the helpful technical support of one
Mr. Coyote Bergstein, Son) and contacting, via cellular telephone, twenty-five
randomly selected individuals who have purchased our product and who had the first
names of people I was friends with in high school.

Here are some important things I have learned from this survey that I wish to convey
to you:

1. After conversing with them one-on-one, I have discovered that Vybrant’s
customers are extremely pleasant people. Except for Ida Mangold. I didn’t like
her. She had a very snotty tone.
2. Seven of the twenty-five randomly selected individuals, which is 28 percent,
which is very mathematically close to two-thirds, wish that the packaging was more “discreet.” Elizabeth Rojas told me, quote, “I don’t want the mailman to know I’m visiting the safety deposit box, if you know what I mean.” I did, in fact, know what she meant.

3. Four of the twenty-five randomly selected individuals, which is 16 percent, which is sort of mathematically close to two-fifths, expressed interest in purchasing a smaller vibrator, if Vybrant were to offer one. Barbara Nowak said that while she enjoys the Ménage à Moi, on occasion its size can be, quote, “a little much.” Personally, I don’t get it, but there seems to be something of a “market demand.” Perhaps at some future juncture we could discuss expanding our product line to include what I suggest we call the Mini Moi.

I hope you have found this information to be elucidating, and that it will prove fruitful as we look towards the future of our great enterprise. I thank you for your time, and trust that you are well in mind and spirit and body.

Very professionally yours,

Ms. Frankie Bergstein, BA, MFA, CMO

P.S. If you need to contact me to discuss the contents of this letter, or for any other reason, I am available for a cellular telephone conversation prior to our scheduled reunion tomorrow.

P.P.S. You know the number.

P.P.P.S. It’s (858) 351-8524.

All Grace can bring herself to do, after reading this astonishing letter again, and then a third time, is sit back in her chair with a soft thump. She takes off her reading glasses, folding them carefully, and places them on the table next to her laptop. Frankie, taking an interest in their business? Actually going into the database and attempting to do something that might, if you squint really hard, resemble market research? Coming up with new ideas to expand their business? Where the hell did all of this come from? Frankie’s never, not one time—

The sudden understanding that surges through Grace feels like warmth. Run away, she’d yelled at Frankie, almost a week ago. Run away, just like you do from anything that’s remotely difficult.

Well, this isn’t running away. The opposite, in fact.

And Frankie wants Grace to call her.

Of course, Grace does. It would be impossible not to do it. She doesn’t let herself call right away, though. Not until she’s answered a few time-sensitive emails she really should’ve responded to during the week, finished folding the clean laundry, wiped down the kitchen counters using all the energy Frankie’s created in her. She isn’t hungry, nothing working inside her stomach but the low and tremulous shiver of excitement, but she eats a silent and mostly respectable dinner, anyway. A piece of leftover chicken that’s been marinated in balsamic vinegar, basil, olive oil. Roasted green beans. Several bites of angel-hair pasta. And all the while, she feels it teasing at her chest, her shoulders. This inevitability, this reward she’ll give herself held, just barely, at bay.

By the time Grace is seated on the couch in the living room, holding her phone in both hands, she's prickling with new heat. It’s time.
Frankie answers on the second ring.

“Grace?” she asks, and that’s it, that’s the only thing she says, but it’s all Grace needs. Frankie’s voice is in her ear for the first time since Monday. Euphoria, pure and pointed, shocks right through her body with a strength that seems impossible. She almost gasps.

Instead, she tells Frankie, “I got your email,” trying very hard to sound like a person who isn’t clinging to normalcy with one slipping hand. “You said you were available? For, uh, a cellular telephone conversation?”

“Yes,” Frankie says, clearly delighted, “I’m very available, I have the house all to myself right now, Coyote’s putting the kids to bed,” and then, “Did you like my email, Grace? Did you?”

It must’ve taken Frankie hours to write. Two or three days to call all those women and ask them for their feedback. She’d asked Sol to help her format what she’d sent, solicited Coyote’s help to get into the database. Taken notes, maybe, as she’d interviewed each customer, chewing her pencil’s eraser in between sentences. Her business “missive” sounds like she’s run it through an online thesaurus, the language objectively ridiculous and still, somehow, beautiful. Every action, each word, carefully crafted to give Grace what Frankie thinks she needs.

It’s a love letter.

“I liked it,” she says, “very, very much.”

“Oh, hooray!” Frankie exclaims. “Tell me, what did you like about it? Do you think twenty-five was a good number of people for me to call, because I wasn’t sure that it was— Wait a sec. Grace. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—I should ask you how you are. How are you? I’ve been thinking about you.” A soft thunk. "Owww."

"What happened?"

"No, it's cool. I just sat up in bed too fast. You'd think I'd remember where the ceiling was by now."

Frankie’s in bed. All right. Grace won't let herself picture what that must look like. Not right now. "I'm fine," she says, instead, and means it. Better and better with every second, in fact. Every tick of the clock brings them both towards tomorrow and Frankie closer to home. “I’ve been thinking about you too.”

“You have? I mean, I hoped you were, but I didn’t know for sure. You’ve really been thinking about me?”

“Frankie. Are you kidding? Of course I have.”

There’s a silence, characterized mainly by the total absence of elaboration from either of them.

“I really liked your suggestions,” Grace continues, before the pause becomes too long to be anything other than obvious. She means it, too. What a wonderful thing, to tell the truth and make Frankie happy, all at the same time. “The packaging. It makes total sense to label it more discreetly. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me before.”

“You can’t have all the ideas,” Frankie says, reasonably. “How about the smaller vibe?”

“The Mini Moi.” For a brief instant, she’s transported out of the single-minded focus of the past three weeks, back into an easier version of herself. “I think you’ve got something there, Frankie. It
could really work.”

“You know, I thought the same thing. What’s the Ménage à Moi’s diameter, 1.5 inches?”

She’s more than a little surprised Frankie remembers. “Yes, that’s right.”

“So say we go with one inch or thereabouts. Maybe lose the pearls, too, if we want to create a totally different experience for our customers.”

“Gosh, I’d miss the texture,” Grace says, without thinking, and then realizes what’s accidentally left her mouth. Her face is instantly and horribly hot. That isn’t the sort of thing she should be saying out loud at all. This is about their business, not about herself, and it especially isn’t about what she likes.

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

Then Frankie says, “So would I.”

Oh.

They’ve never used the first person singular when discussing their business. Not once. Even during the designing stage, when their own preferences inevitably influenced the choices they’d made, Grace had been extraordinarily careful with her language, distancing herself from the process as much as possible. If we go external only, then we’re not being attentive to customers who might also be looking for an internal experience. We need to include a variety of vibration modes in addition to intensity levels. Our product should take advantage of the entire vaginal wall, not just the G-spot.

Which is why she can’t believe what she says next. “What would you miss about it?”

Another pause, long enough that Grace, burning with the scald of exposure, is about to change the subject to something that takes them back to safer ground, and then Frankie, sounding a little hoarse, says, “Sometimes smooth is fine. Sometimes smooth is what I really want.”

There’s a qualifier coming. She waits for it and can’t move.

“But usually I want something less streamlined. It connects me to the experience more fully. Forces me to be present in the moment. You know. All those little sensations happening inside me. What about you?”

It takes a second for Grace to register that Frankie’s asked her a question. She’s still thinking about the words inside me, how they’d had that slight grit. Her mouth is dry. “What about me?”

“You said you’d miss the texture, too. What would you miss?”

“I like that it’s a little rough,” she says, quietly. There’s a small noise in her ear, a little hitch as Frankie’s breath catches on the other end of the line. Hearing it, Grace shifts slightly in her chair. “I’d miss the way it rubs up against me when I—”

“When you—?”

“When I—move it.” She hesitates. “In and out.”

“Oh,” Frankie whispers, “oh,” and Grace has to close her eyes. She’s hot everywhere, now, not just her face. They’re not really going to do this, are they? “So insertion’s an important part of the
experience.”

The experience, not your experience. Right. Right. Okay.

“That’s something we should probably maintain. Assuming we decide we want to branch out into this new venture.” She’s proud of herself. The words are fine. They’re almost calm, and she doesn’t think there’s anything in them that gives away the very specific and personal venture she can’t help but imagine. “Of course, the research tells us how crucial clitoral stimulation is for most women, and I think we’d both agree that should remain a major feature if we mock up a smaller vibrator, but we can preserve both elements. It’s important our clients feel reassured that this new product isn’t disregarding their other needs.”

Very quietly, Frankie asks her, “What do they need, Grace? Tell me.”

The throb between her legs is terrible, approaching painful. It’s drawing the entire focus of her concentration, pulling her like tide. So she says, desperately trying to redirect herself into any other feeling, “If you’d read any of the literature I gave you when we first started designing the original prototype, you’d know already.”

“I did read it. Or I put it under my pillow and let the words seep into my brain while I slept. Which in some cultures is considered an extremely enlightened method of acquiring knowledge. But that’s not what I want you to tell me about, honey. I think we both know that.”

It makes her dizzy, this honesty that rips at the veneer they’ve been preserving. The room actually spins, just for a moment, and she grabs the couch arm, fingers tightening over the lip of it. Under the new pressure, her knuckles start to protest. That’s all right. It’s a distraction.

“Frankie,” she chokes out. “You wanted your space. I gave it to you. Now you’re—?” She can’t finish the sentence.

“I’ve had space,” Frankie blurts out, in a rush, “six fucking days of space, six nights of lying in this bed and not being able to sleep because all I can do is think about needing you. So much my toes are permanently curled. Every day it just gets worse and worse and worse. I didn’t even know it could be like this, that I could want it so much—and now you’re in my ear telling me you like it rough, what am I supposed to—” She gasps. “Grace, I’m aching so bad.”

“Oh, my God, Frankie—”

“Please tell me I’m not alone. Is it like this for you, too?”

“You’re not alone. I didn’t know it could be this much either. I can’t stop—” It’s her own ragged voice admitting this, somehow. “I’ve had to—take care of myself. A lot. Way more than usual. Just to be able to function normally.”

“How often?”

Grace lets go of the couch arm and lifts her hips a little, pressing her back into the cushion. Should it be this arousing when you’re confessing to the humiliation of not being able to control yourself? “Two times a day since Sunday. And that’s not counting the dreams I’ve had.”

“Grace,” Frankie says, faintly. “Jesus ice-skating Christ. Do you ever think about me during?”

“The whole time,” she whispers, and maybe her voice contains some of what she’s remembering, because Frankie’s exhale shivers out slowly. “Are you doing it too? Have you been—?” She swallows. It’s a perfectly normal word. She’s used it at least five hundred times over the past year.
“Masturbating?”

“I can’t.” There’s real anguish in it. “Not here. No privacy. My kid’s always in and out during the day because apparently no one in the entire city of San Diego needs a substitute teacher right now, and I happen to be sleeping exactly one robot claw grabber’s distance away from the rest of the entire house. It doesn’t matter, anyway. Oh, sure, maybe I’d get some relief. A little quiet down there. It still wouldn’t give me what I really want.”

Someone else is holding her breath, keeping it from Grace. “What do you really want?”

“You,” Frankie says, and there’s no trace of levity or farce in the word, just a note of unrestrained sincerity that pulls the cord of Grace’s need impossibly tighter. “First I want us to sit down and have a conversation in person. A real one. The conversation I promised you. Total transparency. We need to get on the same page about what’s ahead before we do anything else.”

For some reason, she thinks about the night she’d placed Frankie’s flowers by her own bedside and waited with a book in front of her unseeing eyes. “And then?”

“Once we’re on the same page, then we can turn it together. By which I mean—”

“We make love.”

She hadn’t meant to interrupt, but the words are out of her mouth almost before she knows she’s said them. Grace bites down briefly on her lip, an instinctive punishment.

Frankie isn’t talking. The stillness between them feels delicate, a carefully spun thing that could snag so easily on a half-sharp word or too-eager phrase and fray right into distortion. Maybe she’s already done it.

“I’m sorry,” Grace says, finally. “If that isn’t what you were going to—”

“No. I mean, yes. It is what I was thinking, I just didn’t expect you to— Yes. That’s what I want to do with you, Grace. Make love. That’s exactly it.”

Oh, gosh, she thinks, a little giddy just from hearing Frankie say those words out loud. But as much as the prospect of the two of them being in alignment delights her, that hard kernel of fear she’d had pressing inside her all Sunday is back, too. A little softer, a little less insistent, but still ready to remind Grace of what she could lose, should this all go badly again. She’d have to figure out some way to survive it, despite not knowing how that’s possible.

It’s either courage or fear that makes her speak again. “Frankie, are you absolutely certain you’re ready for a physical relationship? Because if we do this, really do this, if we make love and you decide it’s too much for you again, I don’t think—I’m not sure how I would get through all that a second time. If there’s even one single small part of you that wants to hold back, then I need to know about it right now.”

“Oh, sister. Look, can you put on your listening ears for a minute?”

“My—my listening ears? As opposed to my seeing ears or my talking ears?”

“Don’t be cute. Okay, fine, twist my arm, be cute. You’re so damn good at it. Here’s the thing. I need to tell you about the first time I slept with Jacob.”

Well, there it is. The only sentence in the world that could possibly dampen the hum of her arousal. “Do you have to?”
“Yeah,” Frankie says, “I really kinda do, sweetheart. I understand that you don’t want to hear it, but it’s the only way I can think of to explain why I know I’m ready to have sex with you. Don’t worry, I’ll keep it PG.”

*I know I’m ready to have sex with you.* For a few seconds, Grace doesn’t speak, too overwhelmed by exhilaration. If Frankie’s certain about moving forward with her, then Grace will listen to just about anything that gets them there. God, she’d even sit through a long and rambling anecdote about that one time Frankie and Sol hybridized Twister and Battleship into some unholy two-person plastic wading pool intercourse tournament. Again.

“All right,” she says, eventually. “Shoot, I guess.”

“So as you’re aware, we waited a long time to do it, Jacob and me. Months and months after we started dating. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to, honestly, because I did—he’s a good kisser, Jacob, so I had a feeling that—”

“Frankie.”

“Sorry. Sorry. And, hey, I said ‘good.’ I did not say ‘makes me forget at least two, maybe three of my four names.’ That’s an entirely separate category, Grace. Belonging to a certain fiesta de uno. In case it’s unclear, I’m talking about an outrageously good-looking blonde with a mouth that should be heavily regulated by the Consumer Product Safety Commission.” She pauses, clearly for dramatic effect. “The consumer is me.”

“Yes, Frankie, I got that.” It’s probably not very nice to feel so satisfied. After all, Jacob’s really not much more than an innocent bystander in all this. Nevertheless, she preens a little, her lips pressing together in a satisfied smile. “And if you don’t mind, I’d like to get to the end of this story before Al Roker puts our names on a screen to congratulate us for reaching a century.”

“As a matter of fact, Little Miss Impudence, I do mind,” Frankie tells her. “So keep that talented mouth of yours closed for just a minute and listen to me.”

It’s friendly, her command, a little teasing, mostly sweet, but there’s an undeniable edge to it, too. Despite the unappealing topic of their conversation, something about that edge suddenly makes Grace throb so hard she exhales with the force of it.

At least Frankie doesn’t seem to hear her. “All right, then. Back to Jacob. So we waited, and he was so patient with me, just a total mensch, until it was sorta like someone flicked a switch in my head, or in my body, and I needed to do it with him. Honestly, I can’t explain what happened, why I wasn’t ready one day and then the next I was, except for—” She stops abruptly. “You and me, I guess. That was around the time we were finalizing the prototype design. I knew it was unbefitting my professional role, but some of those conversations we had—I swear, I couldn’t help it. They got me pretty worked up. Maybe that has something to do with why I went for it with him.”

*Christ.* And Grace had been so certain she was the only one having trouble reinforcing an opaque wall between their business endeavors and what she’d done at night. She’d convinced herself that needing it a little more often, or a lot, was only natural, given where her mind had been focused. Nothing to do with Frankie, though. Of course it wasn’t. Not even the first time she’d used both hands down there at once, something she’d never thought to try before. (Earlier that day, Frankie had mentioned simultaneous clitoral and vaginal stimulation in passing conversation. Let it slip so casually, too, like it was masturbatory routine for her, a regular occurrence.)

“Anyways. We had sex. It was good. Kind. Healing’s really the right word. And we cuddled afterwards—oh, by the way, Grace, you should probably know I have a big thing for fully present
post-orgasmic nuzzling, I like to schedule in at least twenty solid minutes, if not more—"

“Duly noted,” she manages.

“—and here’s the thing. I felt totally at peace with what had happened. I closed my eyes and said a mantra of gratitude to my brilliant body for letting me know I was ready to take the next step with him. That’s really what I’m trying to tell you, Grace. When we got home from the desert last weekend, I was so freaked out about what could happen with us that I completely forgot something I’ve known for quite a while. Something I was reminded of the first time Jacob and I did it. Bodies are much wiser than we give them credit for. They understand things our brains can’t accept yet.”

“You mean like how you think you can predict that someone’s about to start a wildfire because you get warning signals from the tiny hairs inside your nose?”

“Exactly! But it’s even more than that. It’s like—” Frankie’s no doubt wrinkling her face in concentration. Grace can see her exact expression, as clearly as she could if Frankie were right here next to her on the couch. “It’s like how my head realized last year all by itself that it fits perfectly in that place where your neck curves down to your shoulder. I had no idea until the first time it happened. Or how your fingers know exactly the right amount of pressure to use when you rub that intense repair lotion into my hands. I’ve never even told you what I like. Your body just understands instinctively. See what I mean? Smart.”

Grace flushes, stirred by the casual intimacy of Frankie’s examples. Despite her instinctive resistance to align herself with anything that sounds like new age metaphysical mumbo jumbo, she does, in fact, see what Frankie means. After all, her own muffled body’s been straining to speak up for years, seemingly undeterred by decades of Grace’s skilled efforts to numb it, armor it, whittle it down into compliance, keep it quiet and small and safe. She can see that now.

All that time, and her body’s never given up trying to tell her what Grace is just now starting to hear.

“Well, yes,” she says, and blinks rapidly against the new dampness in her eyes. “I suppose there’s something to that. So you’re saying that’s how you know you’re ready? Your body?”

“Honey, my body’s been shouting ‘vamos’ at me since the exact second you detonated that sexplosion in our living room on Saturday afternoon. And I will say it’s a good thing I didn’t listen to it right then, otherwise I would’ve immediately pulled you down onto the couch with me so we could invent all sorts of new ways to give ourselves joint pain.”

The couch on which Grace is currently sitting, in other words. It’s seeming increasingly possible that the flush in her cheeks will never go away again. She’ll simply have to go through the rest of her life red-faced and constantly stirred up.

“But,” Frankie continues, “in retrospect I think my body figured out something important before my brain could see it. Something I didn’t start to realize until I was lying in this bed staring at Coyote’s phone and waiting for you to text me back. That entire time, the whole three hours and forty-one minutes, I felt like I was falling into that abyss under the Bridge of Khazad-dûm. Battling eternally with the Balrog of my decisions. I thought for sure I’d lost you.”

“You could never lose me. Never.” It’s God’s honest truth, simple and uncomplicated. A little frightening, too, considering all the possibilities encompassed by never, but that’s a thought for another time. “Remind me. What’s a Balrog?”

“I actually can’t believe I’m going to say this, Grace, but the Balrog isn’t important right now.
Although, trust, the second I figure out how to remove bubblegum from my sound effects machine tape deck, I’ll act the whole scene out for you to refresh your memory. It’ll probably involve some expressive corporeal art, which utilizes dynamic movement sequences, and howling.”

“I look forward to it.” Somewhere along the path of this conversation she’s lost her ability or desire to be sarcastic.

“But all that is neither here nor there. What is here, and there, and everywhere, really, is that on that afternoon when I walked out of our house, I came face to face with the possibility that I’d brought about my own worst fear. You know how I told you I was terrified of being heartbroken? Well, I’d tried to run away from it, and bingo, there it was, happening to me. My heart shattering into a million microscopic pieces because I thought I might’ve made a future where you weren’t there to keep it whole.”

“Frankie,” she says, just barely audible. “Frankie.”

“So maybe we’ll hurt one another. Odds are, it’s gonna happen. And we still have to handle our shit. We’ve got a shitload of shit to handle. But I’m starting to think that we can handle our shit and handle each other at the same time, if you know what I mean. Sex isn’t going to determine whether or not we get through this. Something else is. Because here’s what my friggin’ genius of a body has known since the first time some primal instinct pulled my head towards your shoulder, while my brain was too busy finding reasons not to realize what was happening. I’m in love with you, Grace. It’s not just that I love you, although that’s also true. It’s that I’m so crazy head-over-heels totally in fucking love with every single inch of your sweet self that I’ll do anything it takes to be by your side for the rest of our lives.”

Her own heart cramps, a sudden spasm of unbearable joy. It’s not breaking, that’s not the word Grace would use, but it’s a kind of fracture just the same. Like the muscle’s shuddering away from coherence into something open.

“And that means even when I get scared or want to run away, and even when you get mean or controlling, we gotta work through that. Process, talk about our feelings, stop avoiding things, all that hard stuff. Because if we do that, and we do it right, then guess what? We get this. This gorgeous thing. You and me, lady. Twenty-five more years of you and me.”

There’s a tear tracking down her cheek. “Twenty-five more years, huh? We’re gonna stick around that long?”

“You bet your bippy we will. And then we’ll die side-by-side in our sleep at the exact same microsecond with the windows open so our souls can take to the sea together. Oh, Grace, we’ve built a beautiful life, haven’t we? A life I never could’ve imagined for a second before Sol and Robert came out, and somehow, when I wasn’t paying attention, it became the thing I need most.”

“Me, too,” Grace whispers, still not sure this moment is actually happening to her. “So we should probably do something about that, huh? Really, really soon?”

“I’m in. How’s tomorrow sound?”

She laughs, sniffling a little, and wipes at her cheek. “My calendar’s clear and you know it. I guess I have to be celebrated at some point. You, too. Mallory’s doing it for both of us. But there’s no reason why we can’t find some time during the brunch to slip away from the kids and Robert and Sol so we can have our conversation privately.”

“And then we can celebrate each other. If you’re ready for that too.”
Oh, goodness. Just like that, her breath’s caught again on a turn of phrase that shouldn’t have nearly as much power to affect her as it does. The heat rushes back into her face. “Also privately, I take it.”

“Yes, very privately,” Frankie agrees, and then, “it’ll have to be, in order for us to—” She makes a sound, a short *hmmmm* that has more than a little air in it. “Maybe you could tell me. If you want.”

“Tell you?”

“Tell me what we’re going to do tomorrow. You know. Physically. You said you’ve been thinking about me while you masturbate. You’ve clearly been imagining it. Us. I’d really like to hear you tell me. So I know what to expect. Think of it as necessary preparation. It’ll get my brain and my body in perfect alignment.” She pauses. “Do you want me to ask nicely? I’ll ask nicely. Pretty pretty please.”

Weakly, Grace says, “I’m not having phone sex with you right now,” and licks her lips. Who the hell is she trying to kid? That’s exactly what she’ll do, if it’s what Frankie wants. She’ll do whatever Frankie wants.

“Who said anything about having phone sex?”

“You did!”

“I most certainly did not. Phone sex, by definition, requires that the participants touch themselves during, and at no time, Grace, did I invite you to do that. We’re fully-grown adults with developed frontal lobes who are extremely capable of restraining ourselves for one more day, until we can do this properly in person. Or are you trying to tell me that’s not the case? Are you saying you can’t tell me what we’re going to do together without putting your pretty hands all over yourself?”

God, Frankie sounds — Just a second ago, she’d been talking about spending the next twenty-five years together, as earnest and beautifully candid as Grace has ever heard her, and now — well, now there’s the full-throated return of that breathless urgency. Like she can’t stop herself from circling right back to what they both need to do. Grace can’t stop herself either.

“I’ve said no such thing,” she declares, channeling her arousal into kittenish outrage. “I can control myself. I can keep my hands off my body. Can you? You’re the one who hasn’t had any relief in the last week. You really think you can lie there in that bed and listen to my voice without doing something about it?”

“Try me, Hanson.”

Fucking hell. The ache she’s been enduring throughout their entire conversation, the hot pulse between her legs intermittently forcing her into a wriggle — she’d thought it was bad before. It’s nothing compared to the way her body begs for pressure in the aftermath of being dared. What’s worse is the image in her mind that comes with the challenge: Frankie, on the phone and lying down in bed, her hips lifting just a little because she can’t keep herself from squirming in anticipation.

Her left hand creeps unbidden to slide up her thigh, and when Grace realizes what it’s doing, she jerks it away. No. She’s going to play fair, or not play at all, and not playing at all is an impossible option. If Frankie really wants to know what’s on the tape that’s been playing in a loop for the last week in
Grace’s fantasies, then she’ll damn well hear about it.

Just above a whisper, she murmurs, “I’ve barely touched your breasts. Have you realized that, Frankie? Because I can’t stop thinking about it. I think about it all the time. When I’m driving. When I’m washing the dishes. When I take myself on a walk down the beach. When I’m masturbating.”

There’s a strangled noise from Frankie. She takes it as an invitation to continue.

“When we were in the car, the angle wasn’t right, and then on the front porch you were shoved up against me—I didn’t get the chance to put my hands on you the way I wanted. I wanted it.” She glances down at her chest. She can see goosebumps percolating through the strip of skin that’s visible. Under her thin blouse and the lace of the bra she’s wearing beneath it, her nipples are obvious, already stiff and begging to be played with. “Should I tell you now? What I want you to let me do?”

“Yes,” Frankie says. It’s nothing like her normal voice at all. “Yes.”

She lets out a tiny moan, soft and teasing. Bait for Frankie, or that’s what it’s supposed to be, but instantly, Grace is caught too. Hearing proof of how much she wants this is impossibly arousing. A second moan, unplanned, slips from her mouth.

Frankie makes a sound of her own.

Grace could touch her own breasts and Frankie would never be the wiser. She could open the first few buttons of her blouse and let her fingers edge inside, slip under her bra, answer the aching skin that’s begging her to get touched.

She keeps her free hand at her side. It squeezes into a tight fist as Frankie breathes, “Keep talking, okay? Please.”

“I’ll stand right behind you. You’ll still be fully clothed. I’ll pull your hair to the side, first. Kiss your neck, in that place just below your ear. I know what that does to you.”

“Yes.” The same unfamiliar voice. “I know you know.”

“And while I’m kissing your neck, I’ll rest my hands on your waist—you have such a nice waist, Frankie, it’s really such a shame, the way you never let anyone see it—” She means the way you never let me see it.

“Remember, Grace, I’m more than just a sex object,” Frankie interrupts, in the longing tone of someone who wants, more than anything, to be a sex object. “I’ve got a brilliant mind, too. Not just this irresistibly seductive body you’re obsessed with touching.”

It’s Grace’s turn, now, to say, softly, “Shhh,” and astoundingly, it works. Frankie shuts up. “I’ll slide up past your waist, over your ribs, slowly, very slowly, until—” She inhales, caught in her own description. “Until I’m cupping your breasts. Do you want me to feel you up?”

“Ah—” Frankie gasps.

“I thought so. I’ll be sure to take my time. Stroke you slowly.” Could she feel Frankie’s nipples through the layers of her clothing? How quickly could she get them tight? Would they be hard before Grace even starts to touch her?

“Be gentle, honey.” It’s strained. “Tease me a little. I like that.”
It’s Grace’s turn, now, to say, “Yes,” and the way she says it isn’t confirmation or agreement or anything other than a desperate need to do exactly what Frankie likes. “So gently. I’ll do it over and over again while you push back into me. And then you’ll pull one of my hands down between your legs.”

Frankie says, voice trembling, “Jesus. Tell me why, Grace.”

It’s not a question. Not a real one, anyway. They both know the answer. They both want to hear Grace say it.

“Because you can’t stop yourself,” Grace whispers. She has to touch something. She has to. It isn’t cheating if it’s just a limb, is it? One hand grabs the outer curve of her leg, clutching it hard enough to make her ache, briefly, in two places. “You can’t stop yourself from grabbing my hand and putting it there. You need it as much as I do. Oh, God. I’ll be able to feel you. Oh, God.”

Frankie’s breathing audibly into her ear. “Sweet fancy sanctified Moses,” she says, after a while. “Keep going. What else have you been imagining?”

“I think about the inside of your thigh.” How many times since Saturday has she reached for the memory of Frankie’s smooth skin against her fingers? It should be worn down by now, a little numbed. Instead, the thought jolts her with the same fresh shock of desire. “It’s—it’s so soft. I think—Frankie, I think it’ll feel even softer when I kiss you there.”

Grace waits for a response and doesn’t get one. More breathing, that’s all, fast little exhalations that tell her exactly what must be happening to Frankie on the other end of the line. It’s the same thing that’s happening on her side. Stumbling closer and closer to the edge they’ve been veering towards this entire conversation.

“That’s what I thought about when I used my vibrator this morning,” she continues, flushing hot with the thrill of admitting something so private. “The second time I’ll ask you to spread your legs for me. But it won’t be like last Saturday. Because this time, you’ll do it. And this time, I’ll go down on you.”

Frankie’s breath hitches. “Fuck,” she says, ragged. The obscenity is a promise, a lick.

“Put your hand on the back of my head?” It’s not supposed to sound like pleading, but— “Please, Frankie? Pull me into you?”

“Where? Be specific. I want to hear you say it.”

“Your—” She stops, tongue suddenly caught with unanticipated shyness. There are at least a few accurate terms that come to mind, but all of them are far too clinical for her purposes. “What word do you want me to use?”

“Grace,” Frankie says, and now she’s panting. Her cheeks must be pink with excitement, her hair spread out on the pillow as she lies in bed. “God. Anything. Speaker’s choice. Use what turns you on.”

Okay. All right. She can do that. Grace shifts again. Swallows. Says, quietly, “Your pussy.”

It’s the first time she’s spoken that word aloud in her entire life. Her clit pulses in response, everything pulses, she’s so fucking warm down there, and—oh, is that—? Is she getting wet? Oh.

Frankie’s exhale is sharp and shaking.
Adrenaline rushing through her, Grace continues, “That’s how I thought of it this morning. Because you called it that once. When we were designing the prototype. Do you remember? You wouldn’t look at me after. It—got me all flustered. Very flustered. I couldn’t think about why. Not then.”

Frankie whispers, “Yes. I remember. Tell me what you’ll do to it.”

What she’s imagined is a blur, less about careful planning and more about the promise of being overwhelmed by a sensation she craves: nose and tongue and chin grinding into heat, soft damp curls, slippery flesh. “I don’t know what to do,” she confesses, aroused enough to let honesty override embarrassment. “I’ve never—Frankie, I want to—I’ll do anything you ask, I’ll go inside you at the same time, if you like that—”

“I think—I think it wouldn’t matter what you did, just seeing you down there, just feeling you, knowing it’s you, it’ll make me so—”

“You’ll get so swollen, won’t you? Just like me. All swollen and tender, the same way I do when I’m almost there. This morning I pretended that I was you. Everything I was doing to myself, I was doing to you.” Her legs are trembling slightly. The phone feels hot, or maybe it’s her hand. She’d watched herself, stared down between her legs as she pressed the vibrator’s head just to the side of her clit and felt herself grow thick against the pressure. Thought, as she’d done it, about what that same growth might feel like inside her own mouth, what it might be like to suck the slick and ready nub into fullness.

“Did you come, baby?” Frankie asks her, softly, and this time, Grace can’t stop herself from gasping loudly. “Did thinking about me make you come?”

“Yes.” She’s starting to pant, too. “Yes. I came so hard.”

“Oh,” Frankie breathes, “oh, oh,” and it’s so similar to the way she’d sounded on their front porch that for the first time in her life Grace, nearly delirious, wonders if it’s actually possible to orgasm without direct contact. “That’s what I need. More than anything. I have to make you do that again. Your gorgeous face, the way you look when you— What else? What else do you need?”

Her mind would be whirling, if she still had one. If she were still a facsimile of a person. Not this constellation of homeless sparks frantically searching for anything that’ll help her burn.

Trembling, Grace opens her mouth, and says, with her own voice, “I need you to fuck me.”

Frankie whimpers. Just once. So quietly that Grace almost doesn’t hear her.

“And Frankie? I don’t want you to be gentle. Don’t worry, I can take it. Whatever you want to give me, I’ll take it. I’ve been practicing.”

Another wordless noise, this one louder, closer to a wail, and then, “Grace.”

“Fill me out. That’s what you imagined, isn’t it? What you told me you thought about while you were waiting for me to text you back on Sunday? Except there was another woman involved. Josephine, right? She was the one filling me out while you listened.”

“Oh, no,” Frankie moans, and the deep shudder of it tells Grace everything she needs to know, “oh—n-no, oh please, it’s too much, please, I can’t stand—”

“That drove you crazy, didn’t it? I can see why. The thought of another woman in your place.” She won’t bother to point out that Josephine isn’t real. If Frankie can bring up Jacob— “Another
woman fucking me. Taking what belongs to you.”

A choked cry. “Grace, Grace, Grace—”

“Do you like hearing that, Frankie? Does it get you off, knowing this is yours?” She leans forward on the couch. Somehow the friction of her jeans makes the ache even worse, edging her into perfect agony. “I’d know you were on the other side of the door. I’d perform for you. I’d do everything I could to get you to touch yourself.” Like I am now. “Would you interrupt us while she had her hand inside me? Would you tell her to get out? After she left, oh—I’d be so empty. I wouldn’t be able to handle being that empty. Not with you looking at me.”

“Oh, my God,” Frankie gasps, “oh, God, yes, y-you—please, oh please, please—”

“I’d have to do penance. You’d have no other choice, Frankie. I let her give me what I needed. Except I wouldn’t really have what I needed. Because I wouldn’t have you. Not yet. Not until I earned it.”

“You want, you want me to make you beg for it—that’s what you’re saying, Grace, you want—”

They’re imagining the same thing. Grace knows this like she knows the topography of her own body under her hands, knows they’re both imagining Grace splayed open on her bed, exposed and half-fucked and frantic for more, while Frankie watches her. Watches, and then—

“Make me beg,” she whispers. What will it be like to ask for something she desperately needs and know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Frankie’s going to give it to her? “Tomorrow. I want to beg.”

“Yes,” Frankie breathes, “oh, yes, I’d, but you said, you said, you just said it belongs to me, but Grace, you’re your own independent person, I can’t, I don’t own you, not even that part of you, you’re not a possession, it would be so wrong of me to want—”

“It’s yours.” She’s dizzy with how good this feels. Not just her body, but the rush of speaking these fantasies out loud, all the gifts Grace has let herself create and crave over the past week. “I’m yours, Frankie. Every single part of me.”

“Oh—”

“Talk to me, honey. Please. Tell me what I’m doing to you.”

“I’m—ah, I’m, I need to, I need to touch,” Frankie moans, and now it’s Grace’s turn to whimper, rocking into the cushion, unable to stop herself from grinding down. A little more pressure. Just a little. “I, I haven’t—I’ve kept my hands to myself, scout’s honor, I’m trying so—You’re not—?” It’s a little thin, a little unsure. “Not, right now—” Almost as if she expects to be contradicted, and maybe that’s what she’s hoping to hear.

“No!”

It’s true. She’s not touching herself. It feels like the biggest lie she’s ever told. Grace can’t stop thinking about touching herself, or being touched, or having both at the same time. Wanting it so badly that need’s almost the same as action, how she’s imagining hands everywhere on her, in her, the limits of what she thought she could take finding new ground.

“God, I’m not,” she says, again, and it’s close to a sob. “I promise.”

A pause, and then Frankie says, low, breathless, “That’s my good girl.”
Grace can’t stop the loud moan that comes out of her throat. It’s mortifying, how uninhibited she sounds even in her own ears, like someone else, someone shameless, someone peeled down into one shrieking nerve, and Frankie’s making a whole string of tiny noises in her ear. These little breathy cries. They might actually drive Grace insane if she doesn’t stop—

“Oh, I can’t keep doing this,” Grace chokes out, “I can’t do this anymore, Frankie, I can’t, I have to get off—right now—”

She’d meant the phone, get off the phone, but that’s not what it sounds like to either of them. Frankie cries out. The sound makes Grace’s arousal feels sentient, alive, what’s beating between her legs a thing with no other purpose or aim than being fucked.

Her crossed thighs squeeze together. *I’m your good girl.* She’d say the words out loud, if Frankie were here now, and open her shaking legs, waiting for what she could get. Unfilled and helpless. But Frankie isn’t here. Frankie’s fifteen minutes away, in another home that isn’t theirs, and there’s one more day to wait before they can fuck each other in person, the way Frankie wants. Properly. The two of them, skin to skin. Her bare skin sliding against Frankie’s bare skin, both sweat-slick. Her hot and eager mouth working these same sounds out of Frankie’s throat. One perfect paint-speckled finger stroking up the length of her slit while Grace writhes and thrusts up for contact and begs—

As if she understands what’s firing from the last remaining cells in Grace’s brain, Frankie pleads, “You have to put down the phone, okay, sweetheart? Right now. I know you need to come—”

Grace gasps. Throbs, hard, and bends forward again, so that she’s almost folded in two, still gasping.

“—and I need you to have that, just, please, I can’t listen—if I hear you it’ll make me—please, Grace, put down the phone, go—”

She has permission. More than permission. Direction.

Grace pulls the phone away from her ear, stammering out something incoherent before her thumb finds the screen’s red button. The phone falls from her shaking hand, dropping onto the couch cushion.

Upstairs. Now.

Breathing hard, she’s hauled herself up from the couch and taken a couple of unsteady paces towards the stairs before what she’s facing becomes painfully obvious. Getting to her bedroom isn’t possible. Grace can’t make it that far, not in the condition she’s in. Can’t keep walking like this, the hot and heavy animal between her thighs pushing harder, hotter with the abrasion of each unbearable step. It’s too much to bear.

Humiliation burns through her body as she realizes what has to happen next. So far gone that she’s got no other choice but to fuck herself standing up, fully clothed—*oh, God, Frankie, you’re right, I can’t wait—* 

The hallway off the dining room.

At least it’s farther from the open shutters than the living room. That’s the best she can manage. Somehow, Grace staggers herself there, managing to slap off a nearby light switch that’ll give her a little extra cover. Bracing her right hand flat against the painted wood slats, she leans towards the wall for balance. The other hand unbuttons her jeans as fast as she can manage, forcing the zipper
open as she yanks them just below her hips, her underwear too, and then, without hesitating, she drives two fingers inside herself.

The cry that bursts out of her throat is almost a scream. Thrusting up again, crooking her fingers frantically into what’s swollen and so greedy, and fuck, she’s wet, she’s wetter than she thought she could ever get without help. All from telling Frankie what she needs. Slick enough that this doesn’t hurt her yet, despite how fast and hard she’s going, unable to slow down or do anything but chase that perfect impact over and over, nearly sobbing from how fucking good it feels to fill herself up. It’s so good, Jesus, she can’t stand how good, and Frankie knows she’s doing this, right now Frankie’s lying in a bed trying desperately not to slip a hand below the waistband of her pajamas while she thinks about Grace fucking herself, doing exactly what she’s been told, her good girl—

That’s all it takes. To no one, she whimpers, “Oh—please—” as she clenches violently around her hand, knees giving a little while the shockwave convulses through her body. The hand she’s got pressed on the wall scrabbles helplessly at the wood, moving in a poor mimicry of the fingers inside her, and maybe she’ll black out or fall but she doesn’t care, she doesn’t care about anything except chasing this and getting it, having it, living inside it forever and ever and ever, this perfect miracle she’s made. And, for a while, she has exactly what she wants. Grace comes and comes and comes, her cries high and strangled as she works herself into completion.

It isn’t until the orgasm starts to recede, finally allowing awareness to seep slowly back in, that she realizes what she’s done. Her mouth’s locked on her right arm, teeth clamped hard into her bicep.

With a gasp, she lifts her head. The light’s off in the hallway, but even so, in the dim glow streaming from the living room she can see the soaked patch on her silk sleeve. Underneath it, there must be bite marks in her skin. Two parentheses.

Dimly, she’s aware of the fingers inside her body, now motionless and cramped. Breathing hard, Grace pulls them out, slowly, feeling her tender skin protest with the friction as she moves. She’s done too much without lube, pushed her body beyond comfort, fucked herself too hard not to feel it in the morning. She’ll have to walk around with this undeniable proof between her legs. She’ll be sore. She’ll have to tell Frankie why.

Her hand’s in front of her face, sticky, and before she has time to think better of it, Grace slips one wet finger into her mouth, tasting herself for the first time. She closes her lips around it and sucks. The finger leaves her mouth with a soft pop. Oh. It’s sharp. Not bad. Maybe good. Something another person could like or even want.

Faint arousal licks at her again, impossibly, as she realizes that this is what she’ll taste like to Frankie.

She’s panting a little, still dizzy from her climax, leaning against the wall with her jeans below her hips, wrecked and raw and alive and home in herself. She remembers the poem Frankie bookmarked with Grace’s note, that odd cluster of broken sentences she didn’t understand and yet recognizes, as though they’re a path she can feel starting to unfold below her blind feet. Like your own body to you. She thinks about coming, and becoming. She thinks about where she belongs.

Grace thinks, Tomorrow.

There’s more than one kind of need and more than one kind of emptiness. Needing a lung to grow around the air you’ve been promised, or the aching cavity of a house waiting on one more person so it can hold a family.
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