There I Will Be
by Telanu

Summary

Frankie’s back from Santa Fe, and Grace needs to start looking ahead. All the way ahead.

Notes

Thanks to Luthien and ellydash for very helpful feedback at various stages as I wrote this bear of a fic. In related news, literally everything about the story is ellydash’s fault.

“You understand, don’t you?” Robert asks.

Grace does. She understands perfectly, as a matter of fact, and nods.

“Grace.” Robert hesitates. “I know this is...I mean, my God, what a thing to ask of someone. I’m more than happy to help you make alternate plans.”

“No, Robert.” Grace purses her lips and looks at the lonely olive rolling around in her martini glass. “I can take care of it myself.”

“But these things are never as easy as they should be.” What’s really uneasy is Robert’s laugh. This is the worst conversation they’ve ever had, and that’s saying something. “You remember how long it took us to find…"
“I’ll handle it, Robert.”

Laughter comes from Robert and Sol’s kitchen, where Macklin and Coyote are making ant logs for the family lunch. It’s too bad Robert hadn’t waited until after they’d eaten to have this little chat. Grace’s appetite was already on its usual thin ice.

Nevertheless, they’re alone, so now is as good a time as any to say, “It makes sense, considering the circumstances. Of course Sol can have my grave.”

They’d bought the plots nearly fifteen years ago. Grace’s skin had crawled, but Robert had said it was necessary—after all, plots got snapped up quickly. Cemeteries filled. The dead population kept expanding, somehow, and real estate prices were going up every day.

Seven years into adultery, and he’d sat down with her and talked about getting buried together. Grace is mostly past the bitterness, but moments like this remind her why she’s still stuck at “mostly” instead of “all.”

And now she’s in a bind, isn’t she? After all, she’s going to keel over sooner than she’d like. Christ. She’s got to sit down in front of her laptop, Google cemeteries and memorial parks in southern California, see what’s available, and pony up considerable money in order to store her earthly remains.

Thinking of this, Grace is quiet during the drive home from lunch, even though Frankie tries to engage her on important topics like cat memes and where you can find the best power-ups in Super Mario 3. She is especially fond of the Tanooki Suit. God only knows what a “fursona” is, but Frankie gurgles with laughter every time she says it.

Grace is supposed to snipe back, or at least fall down the rabbit hole and start discussing video games, but she’s not good at this anymore, not since Santa Fe. She’s stuck on “Mm” and “Huh” and “Yeah.” It’s not right, but that’s just too bad. Her mouth is too numb for conversation. It has been for two weeks, ever since Frankie came back.

And it’s especially obvious now. The longer Grace’s silence in the car goes on, the more nervous Frankie seems to get, as if she senses something’s off. Her laughter gets higher pitched and sounds more forced. Her comments about Mario grow increasingly suggestive. And when Grace still doesn’t rise to the bait, Frankie says, “Christ on a crutch, Grace, what’s the matter with you?”

Grace pulls the car into the driveway and parks. She might as well start following the script before she gets sucked into a conversation she refuses to have. “Nothing’s wrong. Why?”

“You haven’t said a word during the drive home. You hardly talked all afternoon. Are you okay?”

“Sure.” Grace picks up her purse and opens the car door. “I’m just feeling a little quiet today, that’s all.”

“Today?” Frankie gives her a flat, challenging stare. They get out of the car and head for the house. “Okay, so that’s how you wanna play it. If you could be a furry, what would you pick?”

“Be a--you mean an animal? We’ve talked about this.” Over a year ago, Frankie finally pestered Grace into admitting that yes, if she had to be an animal, she’d like to be a falcon. “You know mine
doesn’t have fur.”

“I knew you weren’t listening.” The words come out in a huff, but the look on Frankie’s face is concern, not annoyance. “One: as a furry, you’d be a pink cat with a puffy white tail, and B: what is up with you, lady?”

Grace’s heart feels as heavy as if it’s already been packed in earth. “I’ll tell you later,” she says as they descend the stairs.

“Promise?”

Grace’s back is to Frankie, but she puts on a tight smile anyway. “Yes,” she lies, and hustles down the steps before Frankie can demand a forehead kiss, which she probably wouldn’t, but just in case. Those promises are off the menu.

Two weeks earlier, Frankie returned from Santa Fe. That wasn’t the same thing as coming home, as Grace had swiftly learned.

She’d been so happy, almost sick with joy, which is a strange thing to say. But anticipation and hope and wonder had twisted her guts into knots. Frankie hadn’t been awfully forthcoming over the phone, just said that the Santa Fe trial period was officially at an end. “It’s not what the Universe has designed for me, Grace. Can you meet me at the train station on Wednesday?”

Grace could. Out of respect for the circumstances—specifically, Frankie’s breakup with Jacob—nobody else showed up to greet her with open arms and exclamations of delight for her return. She’d asked them not to.

“Just you,” she’d told Grace, who'd still brought flowers.

It was an impulse that had seized her on the way to the station. She’d left early, over an hour earlier than she’d needed to, knowing that Frankie would manage to be at least thirty minutes late even when being carted by train. There was plenty of time to swing by the Ocean Beach Farmer’s Market. Frankie loved it there, and no doubt it was one of the many things she’d missed in Santa Fe. She had dragged Grace through it dozens of times, loading up on organic produce for Grace to cook and insisting that they get matching glitter tiaras. Out of self defense, Grace had learned to enjoy the trip, if only because Jacob didn’t sell his yams there.

She scolded herself as she made her way through the crowds. Frankie loved Jacob. Whatever had gone wrong, Frankie was bound to be hurting a little, even if she’d decided Jacob didn’t measure up to...

Don’t you see this is an impossible choice? I don’t want to lose Jacob. I don’t want to lose you.

Grace’s heart pounded as she brushed by an old man playing the saxophone and made her way through the white-tented booths. She passed Frankie’s favorite place for kettle corn, a rack of silly hats, and all kinds of hippie offerings until she found the flowers.

Alfredo sold the bouquets out of buckets. Grace chose quickly, and he took her money in exchange for a burst of safflowers and yellow peonies wrapped in plastic and tied at the base with a rubber band. On top of Frankie’s dresser sat an old paint pot where she usually stashed the flowers she stole.
from Grace’s bedroom. Grace hadn’t had time to buy flowers lately, far too busy with Vybrant, so these would do instead.

“Enjoy them,” Alfredo told her. “We haven’t seen you in a while. Is…” He glanced around.

“She’s been gone.” Grace carefully looked over the flowers. No bugs. “But she’s coming home today.”

“Oh, these are for her?” Alfredo took the bouquet, unwrapped it, popped in a rose, and tied it all back up again. “From us to Frankie. Tell her we hope to see her soon!”

The rose was the color of butter, tipped with sunrise’s palest pink. Its sweet fragrance wrapped around Grace like a scarf. “You will,” she said, and smiled at him. “We’ll be back.”

As she sat on a bench at the Santa Fe Depot--now there was a name dripping with irony--Grace wondered how she must look, flowers in her hands and a hunger in her eyes that had been there for months. Even Nick had noticed it, though he’d assumed it was corporate ambition, which was all he knew. Nick understood nothing about the hunger that kept Grace glued to a bench for a train that was forty-five minutes late. This hunger was...

Jesus, said a voice in her head. It sounded a lot like Brianna. Find some chill.

But Grace found no chill until Frankie arrived, nearly falling onto the platform thanks to her two bulging carry-on bags. For the next twenty minutes, Grace had her hands full of the familiar--fetching the clog Frankie lost on the steps, finding her checked luggage, and waiting as patiently as she could while Frankie shared an emotional goodbye with the hapless soul who’d sat next to her during the trip.

“And I wish you the best in your chihuahuapoo breeding enterprise!” she called as the woman fled.

Grace smiled to herself and clipped the arrival tag off the second suitcase.

Then they were alone on the platform, a fact Grace realized only when she glanced over to see Frankie holding the flowers and thoughtfully stroking a petal. The train had pulled away. The sun was setting behind Grace, so its rays fell on Frankie, lighting the edges of her hair and catching the silver of her turquoise earrings. And she was...she was so goddamn beautiful, and…

Grace should have known before, when Babe died. She’d looked at her own moral code with clear eyes, weighed it against unconditional love, and smashed it to pieces before going to Frankie’s side. Waited for her to emerge from Babe’s room, walked her home with an arm around her shoulders, and made tea, her whole heart in their silence. She’d teetered, then, on the edge of knowing.

Then, after another party, she and Frankie sat on the beach. Frankie laughed about launching a line of adult diapers. Said Grace would be first choice if she ever contemplated assisted suicide. Held her hat against the breeze, smiling, untouchable and dazzling. Tears filled Grace’s eyes and light filled her chest when she realized--when she understood, for the first time, how lovely and beloved--

But Jacob.

And now Jacob was gone. Grace had been been content to watch without daring to wait. But now...

“Welcome home,” Grace said, her heart in her mouth as Frankie touched the rose.

“Yeah,” Frankie said, too quietly. Quietly enough that Grace’s heart fell right back down into her stomach, but then Frankie smiled at her. It was a little sad, a little tired, and Grace immediately kicked herself. Of course this moment would be bittersweet.
She gulped. “Uh, how was the trip back? Was it--”

Frankie wrapped her arms around Grace in a silent hug. Grace clung back, probably harder than she’d ever hugged anybody in her life, and wondered if the sunburst in her heart would kill her. Frankie smelled like lavender.

*Find some fucking chill,* mental Brianna reminded her, but it couldn’t compete with the part of Grace that whispered *she’s home, she’s home, she’s home. Home with me.*

This would turn out to be premature.

Frankie’s expression, along with her spirits, seemed to lift during the drive back. She said nothing about her trip, but began chattering about anything that crossed her mind, from the evils of GMOs to radioactive squirrels. Grace played along, said her usual lines: “Frankie, if a squirrel bites you, you’re more likely to get rabies than superpowers.”

And she ordered herself not to flaunt her joy, not to beam or laugh or say *Hey, Frankie, remember that time you said you were so happy you wanted to puke? I get it!*

They arrived at the house. Grace helped Frankie lug her suitcases to her studio, which remained just as she’d left it. Frankie still looked around as if she’d never seen it before, and for a moment, the lost expression returned to her face.

Then it vanished, and she tossed one suitcase onto her creaky bed. She unzipped it and said, “I normally like to let everything marinate for forty-eight hours, but there’s some stuff in here I’ll actually need tonight.”

Grace unwrapped the flowers from the plastic. “Your toothbrush, for starters.”

“Are you nuts? That’s in my carry-on. I meant my sage.”

“So mote it be,” Grace muttered as she filled the paint jar with water from Frankie’s sink. The smears of paint on the inside of the white fireclay had dried weeks ago. She resisted the temptation to scrape up a patch of midnight blue with her thumbnail.

She knew she should wait to ask. She knew. In hindsight, she shouldn’t have asked at all. She couldn’t help herself, though, and as she was putting the flowers in the jar, she blurted, “So what made you decide to come back?”

Frankie’s back was to her as she bent over her open suitcase. For a moment, Grace thought she meant not to answer, and opened her mouth to apologize. Too intrusive, too soon. Sorry.

“Hello! You know Bud and Allison are pregnant.” Frankie rifled through her suitcase. The scent of sage filled the air. “I’m not missing a single second of that baby. And honestly, Jacob’s family wasn’t thrilled about me. That was one thing when he and I were over here, but when he’s with his kids, it’s something else. I mean, that’s natural, it’s not his fault. And if not for my forthcoming beautiful, perfect grandchild—or grandchildren, apparently triplets run in her family like eczema—I might have stuck it out. But...” She sighed heavily and rested her hands on the side of the bed. “You know me. I’m trying to focus on the positive. Anyway, that’s it.”

*That’s it,* Frankie had said, and still Grace had waited. And waited. For something that never came.
She has since stopped waiting.

Oh, it was rough going at first. That night, while Frankie was rearranging her studio, Grace had huddled on her bed and fought her way through the worst panic attack she’d had in years. Xanax, as always, was her friend, though she needed a frighteningly high dose. She’d chased it with vodka. And within twenty minutes, the shaking had stopped, and she was able to uncurl her body from the fetal position. Her heart rate slowed back to normal, and her skin felt less clammy.

*Stop sulking,* she’d told herself. Frankie had come back for her family, come back because things weren’t working out with her boyfriend, and it was natural to prioritize both of those things over a friend. There’s a hierarchy to these matters, after all, a chain. Frankie had learned that lesson from Jacob, and now she was passing it along to Grace. Family first. Romance second. Friends a distant third.

Safely sedated, Grace had forced herself to confront the thought that had sent her into a tailspin in the first place. *She could leave again.*

It was unlikely, but not impossible. Bud and Allison seemed pretty tethered to the area; their families were both here, and Bud had taken over the law firm. Still, they were young, with their whole lives ahead of them and opportunities nobody could foresee. Who was to say Frankie wouldn’t follow her grandchild, or grandchildren, across a continent?

Or find another boyfriend, one who worked out better, whose family would adore her in Vermont?

Or anything, anywhere, really.

Grace had erred the way she always did: pinning her heart on something beyond her control. Her happiness depended on other people’s circumstances or decisions. On the day Frankie had called and said she was coming home (back), Grace had told Nick to fuck off once and for all. She’d congratulated herself on learning from her past mistakes, avoiding another emotional five-car pileup. She had then put on a blindfold and continued blithely driving down the highway.

Flowers at the train station. Fucking brilliant.

*Don’t dream about her,* she ordered herself as she put on her pajamas, her limbs sluggish from the drug. Fat chance of that. The order wouldn’t do any more good than it ever had--she wasn’t responsible for her subconsciousness’s recent obsession with Frankie’s body and everything Grace wanted to do with it--but she gave it anyway. She couldn’t dream about that. Not with Frankie one floor above, missing her ex-boyfriend and maybe a little bit psychic.

Another drink might help.

The next morning, unsurprisingly, Grace rose from bed with a headache. Didn’t remember her dreams. Frankie wasn’t up yet, so there was nobody to side-eye her when she poured Bailey’s into her morning coffee. Her usual routine would have been to start work on Vybrant, but she had to complete a mission first.

She sat down on the sofa in the living room and forced herself to look at everything around her with clear eyes. Blindfold off.

When Frankie had left, this house had been all wrong, so wrong that Grace had hardly been able to bear it. She’d caught herself thinking more than once that if Frankie stayed in Santa Fe, it might be time to find a chic condo with a city view and no stairs. Somewhere Grace could walk to the shops,
keep the kitchen neat, and not expect to see Frankie around every corner. Somewhere she could wait it out in monochrome.

But if Frankie returned...well, then Grace would be able to laugh at the drama of her little doomsday scenario. They’d settle back down together and resume the rhythm that Frankie obviously preferred to Santa Fe. Color would come back into their house.

And Grace would be patient. She would wait for the woman in the floppy hat who’d cheerfully agreed to kill her if called upon. The wait would be worth it. It had taken Grace so long to realize what she wanted, and she’d done a great job of wrecking everything she touched in the meantime. She couldn’t expect miracles of Frankie, who wouldn’t be in the mood to rock the boat for a while.

*If* Frankie came back, she’d reminded herself over and over. If Frankie chose Grace and returned because she wanted to be in the beach house more than she wanted to be anywhere else.

Then Frankie came back for every reason but that, and the house still wasn’t right, and patience wouldn’t achieve a goddamn thing.

Grace squared her shoulders on the sofa. Time to face facts. For two years, without even noticing it much, she’d thought of this place as home. The beach house was *their* house, where Grace and Frankie lived.

Alter the grammar a little bit, and you arrive at the truth. The beach house is a house. Grace lives in it. Frankie also lives in it.

For now.

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Frankie’s behavior since her return has proven Grace right every day. She rhapsodizes about Allison’s morning sickness and throws herself into knitting a baby blanket that will supposedly have a pattern of a San Diego sunset. She works on Vybrant when prompted and at no other time. She grumbles about low sodium food and takes her blood pressure. She fights with David at the co-op.

If you look at the surface, it seems like Frankie never left. If you look a little deeper, you’d see that Grace could really be anyone, a warm body with a willing ear, an audience for Frankie Bergstein’s life. A garage to park in, more or less, until Frankie decides to hit the road again. She’s never even told Grace she missed her.

Nevertheless, she’s back. The only wish Grace has ever dared to make and really *mean* has come true. Even if Frankie doesn’t feel the same way about their life together, she still came back, and music once again comes thumping from her studio. *Hold up, wait a minute, let me put some kush up in it.* That should be enough. It should even be plenty.

But it’s not. Grace’s life feels too much like a broken bone that wasn’t reset correctly. The longer it stays like this, the less easily it can be put right.

And now she’s got to figure out where she wants to be buried.
At least Frankie’s given her some breathing room. After they got back from lunch at Robert and Sol’s, she’d retreated to her studio and hasn’t made a peep in the hours since.

For her part, Grace sits at the kitchen table, staring at her computer. Her Google search has led her to a site titled “buyandselcemetryplots.com,” and while she appreciates the straightforwardness, a big part of her doesn’t know how to deal with any of this.

El Camino Memorial Park. That seems pretty.

Greenwood Memorial Park, practically in Mexico.

Holy Cross Cemetery, not too far away from El Camino, for Catholics in good standing. That seems iffy--there’s the whole “divorced” issue, to say nothing of how Grace yearns to spend the rest of her life in another woman’s arms--but hell, that’s not going to happen. And the divorce wasn’t her fault. So it might be worth a shot.

Grace stares at photos of flower wreaths and well-groomed patches of earth until she can’t take it anymore. She can barely breathe. Death is a horrible thing--she avoids thinking about it as much as possible. Now here she is, unable to avoid staring it in the face all by herself.

She rises from her chair so quickly it almost falls over, and hightails it out to the deck, where she collapses on a chaise longue and watches the ocean beneath the stars and a waning moon. It’s a beautiful night. The kind of night where you don’t think about death, about being chucked beneath the dirt where you’ll never see the stars again.

“I don’t want to buy a fucking grave,” she says, the first words she’s spoken in hours.

Isn’t that the essence of claustrophobia, after all? The eternal image of the coffin? Grace was supposed to be buried beside Robert, not because it suited her, but because that’s just what couples did. They bought paired plots, and whichever one was left behind would stand at the dead one’s grave, mourning and trying not to look at what lay in wait next door.

Now there’s not even going to be a next door. There’s just going to be Grace, trapped in a casket beneath a headstone that’s not adjacent to another headstone. She can see the obituary now. She died doing what she loved: avoiding physical contact with other people.

Grace shudders as she pulls her beige cardigan more tightly around herself. She wants another drink. But just as she’s on the verge of going for one, a new thought makes her pause.

“I don’t,” she says, and blinks. She frowns at the moon. “I don’t have to buy a fucking grave.”

But just as she’s on the verge of going for one, a new thought makes her pause.

“TF don’t,” she says, and blinks. She frowns at the moon. “TF don’t have to buy a fucking grave.”

She’s not with Robert. She’s not with anybody. She’s a free agent, as far as funeral plans go, and if she doesn’t want to spend eternity rotting in a box, she doesn’t have to. Nobody can gainsay her. She can do whatever the hell she wants, stipulate anything in her will.

For a moment, she gives in to the pure silliness that Frankie’s brought out in her. _To those left behind, I wish to be used as a coffee table. Or, I’d like to be brought out every Halloween as a decoration. Or...or..._

Grace looks at her wrinkled hands, the only evidence that she’s had work done. She looks at her legs stretched out over the chaise longue, impossibly thin by anyone else’s standards--but there are days when she looks in the mirror and sees only flab. She’s got wrinkles, paunches, arm flaps, sagging
boobs. She hates her body. She’s hated it for decades.

Picture.

She closes her eyes, tilts her head back, and exhales into the night. Yes. Cremation. That’s what she wants. It worked for Babe, didn’t it? Babe, who’s still on the mantle in Grace’s samovar. She cannot be dislodged.

Catholic tradition frowns on human remains being kept in an urn at home. You’re supposed to stow your ashes somewhere sacred, consecrated, like Holy Cross Cemetery. Grace will have to decide--

A howl splits the air behind her.

Grace has never heard a sound like it before. For a second, she wonders if some kind of animal has gotten into the house, but by the time she’s scrambled to her feet, she’s realized it has to be Frankie. Frankie made that sound, a shriek of pure agony, and oh dear God something’s happened, something horrible, not one of Frankie’s non-crisis. Something real.

Before Grace can get inside the house, Frankie bursts out of it. At first, Grace can’t make out her face because she’s illuminated by the house lights behind her, turning her into a frenzied, frizzy-haired silhouette.

But then Grace’s eyes adjust to see the tears streaming down Frankie’s face and the contortion of her mouth. She looks like she’s trying to talk, but only choking noises come out. “Guh,” she gasps, “guh-guh-guh--”

“Frankie?” Don’t panic, she orders herself, oh Jesus. Is this another stroke? No, the last one had rendered Frankie immobile and speechless. “Oh my God, what’s wro--”

“Guh-Grace!” Frankie wails. She holds out both hands, and they’re shaking so hard she almost drops Grace’s laptop. The one Grace left on the kitchen table with pictures of graves all over the screen.

Oh, hell.

“No.” Grace reaches for the laptop and takes it from Frankie’s hands before it can fall to the ground and void the warranty. “No, it’s okay. It’s not--”

“You’re dying!” Frankie’s hands, now free, cover her face. “Oh my God, oh my God!”

Grace, who should be reassuring and sensible, can only stare at her best friend. The one who’s weeping like she’s going to crack in two, like she’s the one who just got a diagnosis. Like the world is ending.

“I knew something was wrong,” Frankie sobs, keeping her face in her hands. “You haven’t been talking, and you went out yesterday and didn’t tell me where, you never tell me anything anymore, and--” Frankie raises her face. It seems to have melted since lunchtime. “Were you at the doctor?”

It’s a few moments before Grace can say, “No.” She closes the laptop and sets it down on another chair before she can drop it herself. “Frankie, calm down. It’s not…”

“I knew something was wrong, and it was this!” Frankie grabs fistfuls of her own hair. “And I had to hear it from your fucking computer!”

There doesn’t seem to be enough oxygen. Grace takes Frankie’s shoulders. So much of Frankie is
hidden beneath layers of clothing that it’s always a shock to feel how slight she is, how small. “Frankie, forget the computer. I didn’t mean for you to see any of that. I’m not--”

Frankie wrenches free of Grace’s grip. “Why not? How long were you going to keep it from me? When were you gonna say--”

“No, I’m not--”

“Hey, Frankie, I’m outta here, enjoy the rest of your bullshit life’--”

“I’m not dying!” Grace yells, probably loud enough to alert the neighbors. It takes a second or two, but it does the trick. Frankie falls silent, panting.

Grace dares to take her shoulders again. Frankie seems so fragile, like one of her dried herbs that has to be handled carefully in case it crumbles between fingers and thumb. She’s shaking. Grace is too. She hasn’t felt this charged with adrenaline since a big balloon began rising into the sky.

“I’m not,” she says, fighting to keep her voice steady. Something is happening. After weeks of nothing, here’s something. “I’m not. Be calm. Sit down. Okay?”

She guides Frankie to the chaise longue. Frankie crashes onto the edge, but before Grace can begin her explanation, Frankie grabs her wrist and hauls her down too.

Grace falls on her ass, the impact softened by thick cushions. Their thighs bump. Frankie’s hand is hot on her wrist, and they’re both still trembling.

She hasn’t touched Frankie since the train station. Now, in the past few seconds, there’s been shoulder grabbing and thigh bumping and wrist holding. How could she have forgotten how warm Frankie always seems to be, and how frozen Grace must seem to her in comparison? Cold hands, warm heart, they say, but nobody’s ever said it of her.

They look into each other’s eyes. There’s just enough light for Grace to see that Frankie’s are red-rimmed and glassy. She’s sniffling and gulping as she tries to get herself under control.


Grace takes a deep breath. This moment doesn’t feel real, somehow. It’s too jarringly at odds with the past two weeks, when she’s just been hanging around Frankie like some kind of benign growth.

“I’m okay,” she says. “Really. I was talking to Robert today. He’s--”

“Robert’s dying?” Frankie pivots on her hip. Her bottom lip wobbles. Before Grace can correct her, she blurts, “I’m such a shitty person,” and throws her arms around Grace, pulling her in for a hug that could cause serious injury if not for Boniva. “Oh God, just so long as it’s not you. You can’t tell anybody I said that. I’ll be sad in a minute, I swear.” She hugs Grace even tighter.

Grace’s vision is hazy. It might not entirely be due to the lack of oxygen. She can’t let Frankie keep believing this. She needs to clear matters up right now.

Instead, her arms go around Frankie too. She squeezes back. Frankie’s hair tickles her cheek and two hearts slam against her chest, from within and without.

“Shh,” she says, because nothing else is coming to her right now. She pats Frankie’s back. The pat turns into a rub. Not a caress. That would be wrong, it would be...nearly as wrong as letting Frankie labor under this misunderstanding for one more second.
“Frankie, listen to me,” she manages. God, Frankie’s got a grip on her. “Just listen, okay?”

Then everything happens too fast for her to make sense of it. She’s saying “Robert” when Frankie pulls out of the hug, saying “isn’t” when Frankie cups her face, and is about to say dying either when Frankie kisses her.

It’s close-mouthed, hard, and it tastes like salt. Grace holds still as her mind goes blank. Does not compute. Frankie’s kissing her. It hurts a little. Grace’s teeth are pushing against the inside of her own lips.

Then it’s over when it’s barely begun. Frankie pulls away, panting and flushed. She lets go of Grace’s face. Grace’s mouth takes the opportunity to fall open and pull in a huge lungful of air that makes her cough.

I liked giving her flowers, she thinks, apropos of absolutely nothing.

“Robert isn’t what?” Frankie asks.

“Uh...” Grace looks at Frankie’s throat, where her pulse beats quickly beneath her perfect skin. Her lips are tingling. Frankie asked her a question. Frankie kissed her. “Um. Robert’s not dying either. Nobody’s dying.”

“Then why the fuck,” Frankie says, “are you looking at graves and nearly giving me another stroke?”

“That’s not funny!” It’ll never be funny. For just a moment, the kiss doesn’t take up Grace’s entire consciousness.

“No shit. ‘Funny’ is a baby monkey on a small saddle riding a dachshund. What’s up with--” Frankie points a shaky finger at the computer.

Grace blinks at her. She barely manages not to touch her own lips. They’re really not going to talk about what just happened? Frankie doesn’t want to process how she kissed her best friend when Grace hadn’t even been sure they were best friends anymore?

Apparently not. Maybe it had just been another Frankie Bergstein signature impulse, one that means nothing, and Grace is supposed to overlook it like she’d overlooked the time Frankie tried to make kale flambee.

Grace presses her lips together. They are a little sore. Deal with it later. Don’t think about the floppy hat, don’t think about the beach.

“Years ago, Robert and I bought a couple’s plot,” she says. “This afternoon, he asked me if I’d sell my half to Sol so they can be buried together.”

Frankie’s eyes go wide.

“Obviously I’m not going to sell it,” Grace continues. “I’m going to give it.” Sol will write her a check anyway. She’s still on the fence about whether to accept it. “But now I have to make new arrangements.”

“That bastard. Kicking you out of your own grave? Who even does that?”

This note in Frankie’s voice is familiar, at least. It’s the same one as when she’d learned Mallory had told Robert about the twins first, the scrappy note that comes out whenever Grace needs a protector.
It’s a note Grace hasn’t heard in a long time.

Grace’s mouth tingles. Her face is hot. Something’s happening.

“I don’t want to be buried with him,” she croaks. She clears her throat. “Why would I? It makes sense for me to bow out.” It does, she realizes. As she says it out loud, the last of the bitterness fades away. No, Robert doesn’t want her at his side eternally. That works out, because she doesn’t want to be there either.

“Anyway,” she says, “that’s why I was looking at burial plots. They’re surprisingly hard to get, you know. Did you and Sol make plans?” The look on Frankie’s face is answer enough, and Grace sighs. “Never mind.”

“Well, I--I--” Frankie twists her hands together and looks at the computer again. “Did you find anything?”

“Um. There are a couple of possibilities.” They’re going to talk about this? Really? Not the, not the--

“Like where? Oh!” Frankie turns around to look at Grace again. The distress on her face has vanished. Now, of all fucking times, her eyes light up as if they’re going to Build-A-Bear. She even clasps her hands to her chest. “Grace, find somewhere with a view! How about the beach?”

Grace stares at her and says, “A view. From a cemetery.”

“Duh! Or would you prefer the desert? The stars at night are--” Frankie gestures up at the sky. “Well, there’s less light pollution. It’s so cool, in both the metaphorical and literal sense.”

Instead of arguing that you can see neither sea nor stars from the inside of a casket, Grace says, “Frankie, I don’t want to be buried.”

“We can flip a coin,” Frankie says, and adds, “what did you say?”

“I said, I don’t want to be buried. I’ll be cremated. I was thinking about it, and it just made me--” Grace looks down at her lap. She’s clasped her hands too. “Well. Coffins and all. You know I’m claustrophobic.”

After a pause, Frankie says, “Oh. Yeah.” It comes out quietly, as if she’s been rebuked.

“I know it shouldn’t make a difference.” Perhaps it’s not so bad they’re talking about this. The subject no longer seems awkward or even strange. It feels, for the first time in a month, like they’re talking about something that matters. Something Grace could never talk to anyone else about, because there’s only one Frankie. (Frankie, who kissed her. Frankie, who left.) “It’s just my body, not my soul. I won’t actually be in there. But it makes a difference.”

“I--I can see that, yeah,” Frankie stammers. When Grace frowns at the tremble in her voice, she holds up a finger. “But hold on! You don’t want to be stuck in a coffin, but you’re okay with an urn?” She moves her hands up and down as if she’s tracing a woman’s curves, but is apparently imagining pottery, because she says, “C’mon, think it through. Urns are even smaller. Don’t you want to be able to at least--” Frankie arches her whole body, from her fingertips to her toes, until she’s in danger of sliding off the chaise. “Stretch out a little?”

Grace opens her mouth, closes it, and looks up at the night sky. Well, Frankie’s not wrong. Babe was always okay with tight spaces--said she’d had the best sex of her life in a broom closet--but not Grace. She doesn’t want her samovar back, and she doesn’t want to go somewhere with the Vatican’s sacred seal of approval.
“I want to be scattered,” she hears herself say. “Taken somewhere, and…” She gestures as if throwing away her own ashes. “You know.”

“You do? Where?”

Only one image leaps into Grace’s mind. She leans back on her hands and says softly, “My oak tree.”

Silence. After a moment, Frankie whispers, “The tippy top.”

“Yeah. Well, the bottom.” Even Grace can see the poetry in that—her ashes nourishing the soil of one of her happiest memories. Then she shakes her head. “I know it’s not practical. It’s all the way back in Connecticut, and I don’t even know if it’s still standing. But California’s got trees.” She’s not sentimental about any of them in particular, but it’s the symbolism of the thing. She can look around, even go for a walk in something close by.

That’s sacred enough.

Her chest warms. All of a sudden, this feels like one of the most healing, nurturing things she’s ever contemplated. It’s not the horror of the grave. It’s seeking out her forest, a place where she will rest. She’s never thought about it that way before. Does it really make such a difference?

It sure seems to. Frankie will understand that better than anyone. Grace turns to look at her, feeling her recently kissed lips stretching out into a smile.

But Frankie’s not smiling back. Her lower lip trembles and she looks like she might start crying again.

Dammit. Grace puts a swift, remorseful hand on her arm. “I-I guess this is kind of morbid. I’m sorry. Let’s talk about something else.” How about the kiss? Or how about anything? Anything that will keep them on a chaise longue under the stars, and not separated in a car while Grace’s soul continues its hum of everyday misery.

“You want to be scattered?” Frankie asks, instead of changing the subject. She appears truly bereft, for no reason at all. It’s not like Grace is dead now, for crying out loud.

“What’s wrong with that?” she asks. “I’m surprised you’re not all for it. Asking to be thrown into Mount Kilimanjaro or something.” She tries another smile. “You’ve always wanted to go there.”

“Jews don’t get cremated.” Frankie drops her gaze from Grace’s and looks toward the dark ocean. “It’s law. From dust we came, to dust we return. You know the drill.”

“Jewish law? But you—” There are a dozen ways the sentence could end. You never go to temple. You pray to Frig. You said my God was “fire and bullshit,” like He’s not your God too.

“Don’t say whatever you’re gonna say,” Frankie tells her, rendering the point moot. “I didn’t think it would matter that much either, until…”

“Until?” Grace prompts, when it seems like Frankie’s done.

“Until right now.” Frankie picks at her Hammer pants.

“Why right now?”

“Because I never thought about it until right now.” Frankie doesn’t look up from her pants. “I don’t
know why. I didn’t have a problem when Babe got cremated, and I used to think I’d go out with a Viking funeral, but now I just...I can’t let it happen to me.” She grabs her patterned shirt, clutching the fabric over her heart. “It’s not right for me.”

“Well--” Grace is floundering again. It’s familiar, better than feeling like a stranger in her own home, but not great. “That’s okay, isn’t it? You can do whatever you want.” She’d offer to help, since of course Frankie hasn’t made arrangements, but the idea of shopping for Frankie’s final resting place is even worse than doing it for herself. It chases the peace of the forest away. Grace shudders.

“Yep.” Frankie slaps her thighs and looks at the ground. “And so can you, obviously. I would have pictured you in ye olde WASP mausoleum. I gotta hand it to you, I didn’t see this one coming.”

Grace can’t help it. The words burst out of her, and they could be even worse than her question about why Frankie left Jacob: “There’s a lot about tonight I didn’t see coming.”

Frankie stands up without a word.

Grace’s breath catches. Shit. She needs to reach out for Frankie, to detain her, but she wraps her arms tightly around herself instead. “Wait. Where are you going?”

“Bedtime for Bonzo.” Frankie rubs her hands together. She doesn’t look at Grace. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Grace has to do something, but she stays frozen on the chaise longue. “Frankie--are we really not going to talk about--”

“I’m all talked out. I’ll see you tomorrow. We’re working on the budget, right?” Frankie heads to the open doors, her palms still together like she’s praying. “G’nite, Grace.”

Grace can’t move. This isn’t particularly unusual. She’s always remained still while Frankie orbits wildly around her. But she could have moved if she’d chosen to, joined Frankie in the whirl. Destabilizing them both in the process, which was why she’d never--

She rubs her forehead. I’m all talked out. Just so long as it’s not you. I’m all talked out. Don’t say whatever you’re gonna say. All talked out, all out.

Grace might be stuck where she is, but she’s spinning in place.

Klonopin’s better for getting a full night’s sleep than Xanax is. It takes longer to work, but it also has a greater half-life. Grace is less likely to wake up in the middle of the night, and she needs her rest. She’s got work tomorrow, though maybe not much else.

No more meaningful conversations, possibly. No more kisses, definitely. The ache in her lips is gone, her only proof that the kiss really happened, as if it meant anything and wasn’t just Frankie losing her head for a second.

But she’d been upset about Grace dying. So terribly upset, more worked up than Grace has ever seen her, including when Ben and Jerry’s discontinued Schweddy Balls. And that means something, surely? Even if Frankie didn’t come home because of Grace--even if Grace wasn’t on her mind while she was with Jacob, surrounded by hot air balloons--she’d still wept over the possibility of
Grace’s death.

Even as Grace thinks it, she rolls her eyes at herself. Yeah, that’s setting the bar high, all right: Frankie would cry if a friend died. Frankie cries when goldfish die, for pete’s sake. And she kissed Grace, but she also kisses goats at petting zoos and doesn’t get mad when they eat her hats.

*Find your fucking chill,* she thinks, and sighs with relief when the drug kicks in and her eyelids finally start to sag. This will do nicely. She’ll get at least six hours of not having to be here.

She doesn’t. Even Klonopin isn’t enough to let her sleep through the bounce of her bed in the middle of the night, which is when Frankie throws herself on the mattress.

Grace wakes up even before Frankie shakes her shoulder and says, “Grace! Wake up!”

“Whuh--what--” Grace fights through the fog. She can only think of one reason for Frankie to be here. In spite of the sedative, her skin prickles with sudden fear. “Is somebody in the house?”

“Yes,” Frankie snaps. “Two people are in this house, Grace. Specifically, one brilliant artist, Frankie Bergstein, MFA, and one late edition Twiggy with peroxide for brains.” She leans in until she and Grace are nearly nose-to-nose. They do not kiss this time. “That’s Grace Hanson, CEO. You’ve got your letters, I’ve got mine.”

“Frankie, what the…” Grace tries to sit up on her elbows and then flops back down with a groan. “What are you doing? What time is it?”

“It’s exactly three in the morning, which my horoscope tells me is the most propitious hour for a major discussion. Come on, snap out of it.” Frankie looks at the pills on Grace’s bedside table. The slatted light coming through Grace’s blinds makes stripes of apprehension on her face. “How many did you take?”

“Clearly not enough. What’s going on?” Grace rubs a hand over her face.

“What do you think’s going on? We have to talk about getting married.”

Grace pulls her hand away. Lets it fall to her side. Stares up at Frankie.

“What,” she says.

“I said we have to talk about getting buried.” Frankie sounds impatient as she arranges herself until she’s sitting cross-legged next to Grace, who’s still supine with shock. “What else? Get with it.” When Grace continues staring at her, she says, “Do you want a drink?”

Yes. Grace wants a drink. Several. She opens her mouth.

“Too bad.” Frankie shakes her head. “You need to be able to give informed consent. I’m not gonna let you walk this back in the morning.”

“Walk what back? Buried?” Married? “Frankie, either tell me what the hell this is about or get out of my bed!”

“You can’t be cremated.” Frankie is obviously trying to sound firm. It doesn’t mesh with the pleading look on her face. “Grace, you just can’t be.”

“But I’m not--” Grace props herself up on her elbows and struggles into a sitting position. She turns on the lamp, as if a gentle glow will make sense of any of this. “I’m not Jewish. Or has that escaped
your notice somehow over the last thirty years?"

"Thirty-two. Stop living in the past. We’ve been in this house for two years now. And--"

"Two years minus three weeks in Santa Fe," Grace blurts, because benzos lower your inhibitions and impair your good judgment.

Frankie falls silent. Only for a moment. Then she says, “That was a mistake.”

“Yeah, mine.” Suddenly, Grace’s eyes sting as if she’s watching Frankie wave at her from the train window. She could leave again. Holy shit. Grace pulls her knees to her chest and wraps her arms around them. As much as the image of the forest gives her some peace, it’s not enough to make her think about death with any degree of pleasure.

Her voice shakes when she says, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not being ridiculous. You’re the one who’s being ridiculous. Even more ridiculous than the time you said we were too old to do the Krazy Kars at Belmont Park, which I think you’ll agree was a revelatory experience for both of us. You can’t be cremated.”

“Why not? Why is this bothering you so--”

“Because we have to be buried together!”

Grace closes her mouth. She’s dreaming, obviously. Klonopin has plunged her into some kind of bizarro world from which she will eventually awaken.

Frankie pinches her.

“Hey!” Grace rubs her arm.

“I know what you were thinking. This is as dead serious as it gets. Pun fully intended.” Without uncross-legging herself, Frankie scoots closer. Her left knee bumps Grace’s right ankle. “C’mon, can’t there be a compromise?”

“Compromise?” Grace pushes her hair out of her face. “On burial? How--”

“I mean, I have to be buried, so you compromise and do that too,” Frankie says reasonably.

“Frankie, there’s a dictionary downstairs,” Grace growls. “Want me to get it so you can look up what ‘compromise’ means?”

“That might have been on one of the pages I tore out for my mixed media project.” Frankie reaches into the pocket of her bathrobe and withdraws two envelopes. “Look, I brought our wills. We can alter them right now. You need to do it anyway after your talk with Robert.”

They keep their wills in a fireproof safe in Grace’s walk-in closet. “When did you get those?”

“After I left you sitting on the deck with your mouth open while you contemplated abandoning me
for all eternity. You can’t blame me for taking drastic measures, Grace. Like when David made a
motion to ship organic veggies down all the way from San Francisco and leave a carbon footprint the
size of the Jolly Green Giant’s.”

“Abandoning you?” It comes out in a wheeze because Grace has no air in her lungs for a second.
“You’re talking about abandonment? You went traipsing off with your boyfriend while I was alive
and well, and now you’re sitting on my bed telling me I’m the one who’s leaving you?”

This time, a teardrop breaks loose, rappelling down like an escapee from prison. Grace hisses and
dashes her hand over her cheek, but the second one’s already following. Oh, no.

The envelopes crinkle in Frankie’s hands while her knuckles go white. “I came back.”

“Yeah, for Bud and Allison and—” She can’t do this. “B—because it wasn’t working out with Jacob
and—” She can’t do this. Grace needs a drink, and Frankie can’t stop her from getting one. She’s got
two mini-bottles of Smirnoff in her medicine cabinet, lined up behind the calcium supplements and
baby aspirin.

She scoots toward the edge of the bed. Sounds like she’s strangling when she says, “I’m going to the
bathroom, and when I get back out, you better not be here.”

She has her legs over the side of the mattress when Frankie’s arms wrap around her from behind and
haul her backward onto the middle of the bed. She falls down on her back and yelps when Frankie
climbs on top of her. Frankie, who apparently has the strength of a Clydesdale horse. Or maybe it’s
that Grace is weak, a feeble old woman who never learns.

A weak, feeble old woman whose nipples tighten almost painfully the minute Frankie’s warm body
presses against hers. She forgets about bottles and graves. Frankie’s eyes are so blue.

_my wife_, Grace thinks, not for the first time, and wonders if it’s possible to boil her own brain.

Frankie lifts herself before suffocation becomes a potential problem, pulls up on all fours, and then
sits back with a groan, putting her weight on her knees instead of Grace’s hips. But they’re still so
close. Frankie’s ass is on top of Grace’s—on top of—and Grace’s silk pajama top is so thin that her
nipples must be visible from space.

Her face burns. Her whole body burns.

Aside from a memorable few moments when Grace’s back was trying to kill her, she and Frankie
have never been this close before. This is too bad, because Grace really could have done with some
preparation. Not so long ago, she would have scrambled away, either because she was disgusted or
was trying to be. But here, now, it’s horribly unfortunate that she and Frankie are this close in this
way for the first time while Grace feels...what she feels.

She’s trembling. Not Byron, not Phil, not—anyone—has turned her into this, someone who can
tremble with want. For a few seconds, she doesn’t hate her body. For once, it’s only asking her for a
simple thing instead of reminding her of her inadequacies at every turn. And it’s asking, begging, for
Frankie.

She can’t sit up. If she tries, they’ll be nose-to-nose again, pressed together, Frankie in her lap. She’ll
put her arms around Frankie exactly like she’s dreamed of doing, she’ll...

“You’re not going anywhere until we settle this, so I hope you’re wearing your Depends,” Frankie
says.
It’s better than a cold shower. Grace’s arousal collapses. “I don’t wear Depends!”

“All the more reason to get the party started. The serious discussion party, I mean. And don’t get all huffy about this.” Frankie gestures at the position of their bodies. “It’s the least you deserve for scaring the absolute shit out of me tonight.”

“Frankie, I didn’t do that on purpose. I didn’t even know you were downstairs. And what--” This should have occurred to Grace before. “What were you doing on my computer?”

“My laptop’s battery died and the power cord is also part of my mixed media project.”

“Bullshit.”

Frankie shrugs. “You’ve been clammed up tighter than--” She purses her lips. “Than a tight clam, I guess. Brianna and Mallory don’t know what’s going on, either.”

Grace’s heart stops. “You asked them?” She doesn’t know what’s worse: that Frankie went to her daughters in the first place, or that her daughters have noticed something’s off.

“You bet I did. Right after I texted you the entire plot of *Hamlet* in emoji form and you sent a smiley face back. That’s a big honking red flag, Grace.” Frankie takes a deep breath. “So I innocently decided to check out your personal email account, and what did I see? Fucking gravestones.”

“I told you why! You’re just being--”

“Do you know how much worse I felt when I thought you were dying than when I realized Sol was divorcing me?”

“What? I--”

Frankie leans in. Her lips curl back over her teeth. “A lot worse!”

The shout echoes off Grace’s tastefully papered walls. The hair stands up on her arms, and even the rage on Frankie’s face doesn’t distract from how close their mouths are.

“Uh,” she says. Her breath touches Frankie’s mouth and comes back to her.

“Don’t you dare.” Frankie’s breath meets her this time. “Don’t you dare leave m--”

They’re kissing again.

Grace started it. She cupped the back of Frankie’s neck, raised her own head, and now she is kissing Frankie Bergstein. It isn’t like last time, with closed mouths and mistaken assumptions. It’s a proper kiss. The kind that should silence forever the cry of pain Frankie made.

And oh God, Frankie kisses back. She opens her mouth enough for Grace to feel the wetness of her bottom lip. So warm, so soft and lush, generous and...and not enough. Grace needs more, more--they should have been doing this for years, it’s so natural--

Her other hand grabs Frankie’s back. She can’t help herself, but it breaks the spell. Frankie pulls away, panting, her eyes wide. She doesn’t look like someone who thought that was natural.

“Oh!” Dammit, dammit, God damn it all. Grace yanks her hands away and holds them rigidly at her sides. Her fingers dig into the sheets, and she wills the throb between her legs to go away. It would be easier if Frankie’s ass wasn’t so close to her clit. “I’m sorry. I won’t. I mean, I, I didn’t mean that.” She could leave again. Now she will. Who could blame her? “That was just--you understand
about impulses, for God’s sake—"

“Yeah.” Frankie touches her mouth. It’s reddened from Grace’s kiss. “Fair enough. For earlier, I mean.”

“Yes, exactly!” Grace grabs the sheets tighter in a gesture of good faith. She’ll keep her hands to herself. She’s good at that. “Just got carried away. It’s an emotional subject.”

“Right. Same here. Super emotional.” Frankie swallows with a clicking sound. “I can’t remember ever being this emotional, actually, so do you mind if I ground myself?”

Ordinary Grace would have rolled her eyes and said, Fine, go get the clogs with rubber soles. Kissing Grace manages, “Um. How?”

“Oh, it’s simple.” Frankie pushes Grace’s pajama top just past her navel and puts her hands on the rise of Grace’s ribs. “Skin-to-skin. Human contact. Most basic form of comfort there is after sour cream and onion potato chips. Jesus, your skin is—” Frankie clears her throat. “Anyhoo, is this cool?”

This is hot. So fucking hot Grace might lose consciousness from it. Her nipples have gone from being tight to starting to ache. Frankie’s got to notice the goosebumps rising beneath her hands. Her hands, which are touching Grace in a place that, while not explicitly sexual, is also not casual touching territory.

Please, Grace’s body begs again. Oh, please.

She fights not to pant. What is this, the elephant in the room lumbering to its feet? Is Frankie actually trying to seduce her into a coffin? Grace glances over at the other side of the bed, where Frankie dropped their wills.

Frankie follows her gaze. “Oh, right. I got kind of off-track. It was your fault, but it’s pointless to assign blame. So what are we gonna do about this?”

Grace knows exactly what she would like to do about this. If Frankie moves her hands any higher, she can get Grace to agree to anything. But Frankie will not do that, and besides, this is important. This matters.

“Frankie,” she says unsteadily, “you left me. You came back for reasons that had nothing to do with me. And now you say you want to get buried next to me.” Should she bring up the “married” Freudian slip? Better not. It might have been a hallucination. “Forgive me for having no idea what’s going on in your pot-addled brain.”

“I’m not high right now. I haven’t gotten high for days in spite of great temptation, thank you very much. And what do you mean about my reasons for coming back? Are you serious?”

Frankie looks so outraged that it proves contagious. Anger coils up in Grace’s belly where arousal sat only moments ago. “Yes, I’m serious! I asked you why you came back. You said Bud and Allison. You said Jacob’s family. And then you said ‘that’s it.’” She makes to push Frankie’s hands away. Instead, her own hands just stay there, resting on top of Frankie’s. “It was pretty fucking unambiguous.”

“Well…” No more outrage. Now Frankie’s eyes slide away to look at the envelopes again. “I--jeez, I thought it went without saying.”

“That what did?” Grace clutches Frankie’s hands. Their knuckles and veins press against her palms. “You never even said you missed me!”
“Of course I missed you!” Frankie tugs her hands free, leaving Grace’s own hands empty again, and her skin cold and prickling. “I always miss you. I miss you when we’re not even in the same room. Which presents a problem at night, obviously, but I know you need your…” She rolls her eyes and makes air quotes. “‘Personal space.’”

Grace’s heart hammers. She says hoarsely, “Santa Fe’s a pretty big upgrade from not being in the same room, Frankie.”

“I figured that out when I got there, Sherlockina Holmes. Is that why you haven’t been talking to me? Don’t get me wrong, I prefer it to you dyi—” Frankie’s voice catches. “Is it why?”

Grace is slipping over the edge of a cliff. There seems no end the fall. “I’ve… I’ve been talking to you. Since when have I not talked to you? Just this morning I told you not to wrap your medication in tofu pepperoni.”

“Yeah, that was quite a conversation. ‘Frankie, don’t wrap your medication in tofu pepperoni.’ Magnifique. And you know what’s pathetic?” Frankie glares. “I was glad you were nagging me. It’s as much as I can get out of you these days. So here we are, Grace. Why’ve you been acting like you’ve got a bug up your ass?”

Because I love you. I’ve loved you since we killed Babe and I realized I’d do anything for you, anything at all. I love you and I lost you and you were never mine.

She can’t say any part of that.

“Why do you want to get buried together?” Grace asks instead, turning the interrogation backward like they do on all the awful cop shows Frankie loves.

“Because we have to.”

“Why?”

Frankie’s eyes go glassy. The tears lining her lower lashes make Grace’s heart twinge. Frankie blinks, the tears fall, and she wipes her cheeks. “Damn it. You’re the weepy one, not me. Hold on.” She sniffs resolutely—Grace has never known that’s possible—and places her left hand directly over Grace’s belly button.

“Your third chakra,” she murmurs. “Fire and transformation.”

That seems like something else you won’t find in the Talmud, but Frankie’s touch is so warm and so good that Grace really could be burning, transforming, changing into… into what?

With her right hand, Frankie delicately traces the line of Grace’s jaw and tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. There’s a hundred times more tenderness in the gesture than anything Robert ever did. Or Guy, or even Phil.

Grace’s eyes fall shut. Frankie pinched her earlier, but she’s back to thinking this is a dream. A gentle fingertip, Frankie’s fingertip, is stroking Grace like she’s something precious, something Frankie could never have left behind.

But she did.

“There’s some stuff I can’t explain. It’s just—the thought of us not being like that when we—” Frankie dips her fingertip into the space behind Grace’s ear, the one that makes Grace shiver during intimate moments, and works perfectly now. She shivers, gasps a little, and hears Frankie’s breath catch. “Oh,
Grace. You gotta stop making those noises. We need to focus.”

If Frankie wants Grace to stop making noises, then she needs to stop touching her. However, this is an unacceptable outcome, so Grace bites her bottom lip to stay quiet.

“Honey,” Frankie says, and for just a second, her ass presses down a little bit. A hot shock of pleasure nearly makes Grace sob with need. What the fuck’s happening? Two weeks of stilted silence, and now caresses, aborted kisses, and getting buried together?

But Frankie doesn’t want to elaborate on any of that, for some damn reason. She wants to pet Grace, turn her on (when they’ve never talked about this, not ever), and get what she’s asking for. What’s she up to, what’s her angle?

Frankie’s never been somebody with an angle--geometry is almost as confusing to her as the DVR instructions--but it seems like there’s a first time for everything. And though Frankie might not want to give it, Grace deserves an explanation.

There’s got to be a way to get it before she loses what’s left of her mind. Instead of spreading her legs and begging, or asking why did you come back, Grace husks, “Why did you go?”

“I don’t know.” Even the raw pain in Frankie’s voice can’t make Grace open her eyes, not when two more fingertips join in and stroke down her exposed throat. “I did love him, but I was also--I was--” She takes a shaky breath. “I was scared.”

Grace finally opens her eyes. Frankie is still touching her. Another tear has made its way down Frankie’s cheek, and she steels herself against it. They’ve got to talk. “Of what?”

There could be so many answers. Frankie could have been afraid of missing out on a new adventure. She could have been afraid of having another stroke, and seen Santa Fe as some kind of escape from her worries.

Frankie bites her bottom lip. “You.”

“Me?” That can’t be right. Frankie’s never been intimidated by Grace, and in the beginning, Grace had really tried.

“You. And this.” Frankie gestures at their bodies again. “I didn’t have to worry about this with him.”

Presumably she does not mean sitting on top of Jacob. Presumably she means something else. “You’re scared of this, whatever this is? Frankie--”

“And a few hours ago I had the worst moment of my life, which I don’t think you’re fully appreciating.” Frankie stops touching Grace’s neck so she can poke her shoulder. “Just imagine yourself in my shoes for a second. How would you feel if--”

“I don’t have to imagine it!” She’d lived it, sitting in Frankie’s stupid electric go-kart while Frankie had a stroke right in front of her. A stranger had taken over her vocal cords, saying reassuring things like It’s going to be okay, the ambulance is coming, just hold on, I’m right here. Grace is grateful to whoever that was, since her real self had been deep inside her somewhere, letting out one unending scream.


“I’m surprised it took this long,” Grace mutters as Frankie clambers off her with a grunt. She winces
at the loss of Frankie’s warm weight above her.

But it finally allows the world to settle around her again. A world she recognizes, in which it is ridiculous to have the kind of conversation they’re having in the way they’re having it. If they’ve got to unpack every goddamn thing about their lives, then it should be in a neutral place like the kitchen, over a cup of tea or something stronger. Certainly not rubbing up against each other in Grace’s bed, where she’s had fevered dreams and shameful longings and can’t look at any of this with a sensible eye.

She says, “We should,” just as Frankie lies down next to her, props herself up on one elbow, and tweaks Grace’s nose. Somehow that’s more outrageous than a kiss. “Frankie!”

“Right, so,” Frankie says briskly, as if trying to get back on track. “The whole grave thing. It’s not religious for you, and like you said, it’s not really you, just your body. The neurotic part of you is going to be--” Frankie raises one hand to the air, looks up at the ceiling, and makes a whoosh sound.

“Yeah, and same for you,” Grace snaps. Her lips and nipples were bad enough; now she has to deal with a tingling nose, too. What’s worse is the way she’s getting warm and weak to the whole idea. Whatever’s going on with the kissing and the grounding and the nose tweaking, Frankie wants them to be together for the ultimate long haul. This, coming on the heels of five horrible weeks, is hitting Grace where she lives. The spot where she’s always alone.

I’d do anything for you, she’d realized months ago, and it’s so damned unfair.

Frankie offers, “What if we found a double coffin? I bet they’re out there, or we could go custom on Etsy. Sol’s bound to feel guilty enough that we could get him to pay for the whole thing. That way you wouldn’t have to be in there by yourself. And it’d be roomier.”

“Frankie,” Grace says, after a pause in which Frankie doesn’t come to her senses, “are you suggesting that one of us dies, gets buried, and then when the other one goes, the coffin gets dug up again?”

“Is this what I get for being considerate?” Frankie flops down on her back next to Grace. They lie shoulder to shoulder. Grace’s neck is getting a crick in it, so she stares up at the ceiling instead of at Frankie’s face.

Frankie elbows her. “See? Just like this. It could work.”

“You could start by killing me now,” Grace says. “Please.”

“Nah. Not before I get to kiss your third chakra. Now that’s good grounding.”

Grace clutches her hands together over her abdomen. She says through her teeth, “Frankie. We can talk about death or kissing. I can’t handle both.” She might not be able to handle either. “Pick one.”

“Well, one sort of jump-started the other. I thought, what if you died and I’d never kissed you? Or vice versa? Death and love, Grace, it’s all tied up together.” Frankie waves both hands at the ceiling and nearly elbows Grace in the eye. “Part of the great cosmic unity.”

Grace mustn’t get stuck on the word love. Frankie’s said it before, and not just about Grace, but about dogs and string cheese.

She says, “So you kissed me.” And you’ve been thinking about it? Because I’ve been thinking about it.
“As we’ve established, it was an impulse,” Frankie says, dashing her hopes. “On both our parts. I gotta say, your impulse was a lot better than mine. You’re good at impulse kissing.”

Frankie wouldn’t say that if she knew about the sour taste in Grace’s mouth. Only an impulse. Of course. At least Frankie doesn’t seem to regret it.

So much for kissing; time to go back to death. “If it’s cosmic unity you’re thinking of, then what’s the big deal? Like you said, it’s just our bodies. We could be buried on the other side of the world from each other and we’d still—still—”

Silence.

“Still what?” Frankie asks. “What do you think happens then? Do I get into Catholic heaven with you?”

Grace sets her jaw. What Frankie wants to talk about now is like poking a bruise. According to everything Grace was taught, non-Catholic Christians get some wiggle room. Lumen Gentium. But there’s less room for everybody else.

“Because it sounds boring,” Frankie adds. “Why don’t we go hang out in Valhalla?”

“See?” It’s Grace’s turn to prop herself up on her elbow. She glares down at Frankie. “How am I supposed to take you seriously about your religion when you talk about Valhalla and Frig and reincarnation and the Force and everything else you’ve talked about for as long as I’ve known you? Why am I the one who’s got to give in on this? I don’t want to go in a box!”

The words burst out of her louder than she meant them to, edged with true fear. No, it isn’t rational, but that doesn’t make it less real.

“And how is it supposed to make a difference, anyway?” Her voice cracks. “Suppose you’re the one who’s right. How am I supposed to get into your afterlife? It’s not going to matter where my remains are.”

“That’s something else Jews don’t do. Stress about what comes after.” Frankie fiddles with Grace’s pajama collar. “We don’t have your nine rings of punishment or whatever. Or playing harps on clouds. And nothing says Jews and goyim can’t go there together, wherever ‘there’ is.”

That’s more reassuring than it should be for a Gentile. Grace reminds herself that you don’t get to pick and choose between faiths as it suits you. At least, she doesn’t. “We’re alive now, Frankie. We’ve got time now. Why can’t we just enjoy it?” Perhaps that’s not the right way to phrase this. Not when Frankie’s fingers are so close to Grace’s pajama buttons. “I-I thought you’d be all about that. Carpe diem.”

“I am. It’s just…” Frankie seems fascinated by the piping on Grace’s collar. Grace is in the burgundy silk tonight. Normally it feels delightful on her skin; now, with Frankie so close, playing with Grace’s body like it’s her new favorite toy, the friction of silk is torture.

This is wrong, she tells herself, you need to stop this, you don’t know what’s happening, does she even know what she wants?

She swallows, takes Frankie’s hand away from her pajamas, and holds it. It’s as warm as when she led Frankie to the balloon a lifetime ago. “It’s just what?”

“Um.” Frankie’s eyes go to Grace’s hand holding her own. “I don’t know how much time there is. We wasted a lot of it not liking each other.” She gulps. “All that time, and now I can’t stand the
thought that sooner rather than later we’re gonna have to say sayonara for good.”

Grace closes her eyes against the crush in her heart. Frankie is right; the idea is too painful, too unbearable to hold onto. Losing each other on the heels of finding each other? If heaven doesn’t include Frankie putting sriracha into Grace’s scrambled eggs, or Grace keeping lookout in Barnes and Noble while Frankie slips copies of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* next to the *Fifty Shades* books, then there’s no point to it.

Can the Universe, and whoever is in charge of it, really be that unjust? How cruel is Grace’s God?

She squeezes Frankie’s hand. When she opens her eyes again, Frankie is still looking at their entwined fingers.

“We could have twenty years left.” Grace’s voice is harsh in her throat. “Let’s not focus on this.”

“Twenty years or twenty minutes, what’s the difference? I need to believe there’s something else. I can deal—maybe—maybe—with being separated from you for a little while, but not forever. I figured that out tonight. Is it okay if I do this for a second?”

For elaboration, she kisses the pulse point on Grace’s wrist, letting her lips rest there.

*Fuck.* Frankie’s mouth chases the cold away and leaves Grace nearly panting. “Why,” she chokes, “why do you want to—”

Frankie mumbles against her wrist, “Because I can feel your heartbeat here. Duh.”

Grace can see Frankie’s heartbeat, too. She can see it perfectly well, hammering away at the base of Frankie’s throat. She needs to pull her hand free. She can’t. Not when Frankie’s soft lips on her skin are the center of the world.

“It’s going fast.” Frankie parts her lips and kisses Grace’s wrist again, harder this time, as if to leave a mark.

“So is yours,” Grace whispers. Frankie’s lips pull back, as if she’s going to bare her teeth and bite down. “Oh--!”

The sound seems to snap Frankie back into reality. She inhales sharply through her nose. And when she lets go of Grace’s hand and looks up again, her eyes are clear, her expression more serious than it’s been since their divorces.

There’s no trace of the clown Frankie plays at being, no childishness. Frankie has never been a clown or a child, although it suits her purposes to pretend. Grace has always known it’s a front, and Jacob probably did too, but that’s not the same as seeing the Potemkin village fall away here and now.

Grace shakes inside at the trust she’s being given. It’s almost as much of a turn-on as if Frankie started stripping right here.

Almost.

“I know,” Frankie says, “that I’m off-kilter and not thinking rationally right now. I know it would be better to talk about this in the morning. And I said what I came here to say. So we can talk about this in the morning.”

But she never breaks eye contact, and she makes no move to get off the bed so they can talk about
this in the morning. Her expression remains the same, sharp and focused, the eyes of someone who’s never missed a trick when it comes to Grace. What is she seeing?

“And we need to get under the blankets,” she adds. “You keep your room at subzero. It’s terrible for the ozone layer.”

“Uh--” Grace looks at the rumpled duvet. The inside of her wrist is hot, still wet from Frankie’s mouth, still tingling. “What?”

“I can’t go back to my bedroom tonight. I guess I can sleep on top of the blanket if I have to. Or in the chair if you want to be a real asshole about it. Just make sure to give me the duvet.”

If Frankie’s in the chair, she probably won’t sleep, which means she won’t snore or talk like a serial killer. Plus, it would certainly be safer for them not to be huddled up nice and cozy together, where anything could happen, anything they’d regret in a calmer moment.

Grace sits up and reaches for the edge of the duvet. “Just...get in.”

Frankie scrambles under the covers as if she’s afraid Grace will change her mind. For a moment, Grace considers doing just that, but she turns off the lamp instead. The room falls into darkness. She sits on the edge of the bed.

“Grace?” Frankie asks, shadowed now.

Grace shivers. In spite of what Frankie says, she doesn’t keep her room particularly cold, but now her body craves warmth anyway. Without a word, she slips beneath the bedcovers into the space beneath. She and Frankie aren’t close enough to touch unless they reach for each other.

“Is this okay?” Frankie asks.

Grace tugs the blankets up to her chin and looks at the darkened ceiling. “Yes.”

“You’re shaking.”

“I am not.”

“Are too. I can feel it through the mattress. Which is nice, though you should really consider memory foam.”

Grace licks her lips. Her tongue feels thick and dry. The water glass by her bed is half full, but if she drains it she really will have to pee. “You’re shaking too,” she points out.

“Yeah.”

They lie in silence. Then, beneath the blankets, Frankie touches Grace’s hand again and takes it in her own. The shock of heat makes Grace whimper softly. Frankie doesn’t react, so she might not have heard it, half deaf as she is.

The contact seems to help, though, because they both stop shaking. Frankie lets out a soft sigh. Grace’s muscles unlock, relax, in spite of herself.

She glances to her left. Frankie’s flat on her back, looking at the ceiling again.

“You didn’t say you missed me, either,” Frankie points out.

Grace’s grip reflexively tightens. Anger flashes in her chest, hot and unwelcome. “Oh, I’m sorry. I
didn’t know I needed to.” At the station, as Frankie waved and the train pulled away, mascara had streaked down Grace’s face while her mouth stayed locked in a smile. “Were the flowers not a clue? Or the stockpile of low sodium every snack?”

“All right, all right!” Frankie rubs her free hand over her face as if she’s exhausted. “So I didn’t know what to say. As soon as I left, I knew I’d made a mistake. Jacob did too. And the stuff with his kids…” She sighs. “Just icing on the shit cake. I know it was a bummer for him, but he didn’t try to get me to stay. Well, not very hard.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” That’s something else Grace hasn’t said since Frankie came back. She should have asked before. It was tantamount to cruelty not to, since Frankie needs to process like she needs to breathe. But Grace needs Frankie like she needs to breathe, and she couldn’t have endured another explanation of why she’d come home. For every reason but Grace.

“I never wanted to talk about it,” Frankie says, absolving her. “Except, when I finally decided I had to come back, he said, ‘I guess Grace will be happy,’ and he gave me the look. It’s the one he always gives...gave me when we were talking about you. Like he knew something I didn’t.”

Grace has always known that Jacob and Frankie talked about her. It’s still mortifying to hear Frankie say it out loud. It’s like she’s been caught doing something wrong. “He hated me.”

“Yeah, and you know why.” Frankie squeezes her hand, but it’s not enough to take the sting out of how Grace had behaved on that awful day, cramming her mouth full of cake and hurting Frankie as badly as she could.

“I’d hate me too,” she says bitterly. “If I saw someone treating you that way, I’d--I’d--” She doesn’t know what. She’d have thought of something worse than carrying the offending party out of the room, that’s for sure. Sometimes she’s not a very nice person.

“It wasn’t just that. He knew I was split between you and him. It wasn’t even fifty-fifty. More like seventy-thirty. No, more like…” Frankie gives a shaky sigh. “Ah, screw it. Ninety-nine-one. He deserves the one,” she adds fiercely. “Shit, he deserves a lot more, but I can’t give it to him.”

There’s enough self-loathing in Frankie’s voice that Grace squeezes her hand right back. “You don’t have to. Just because he’s a good guy doesn’t mean--” She fumbles for words. “You don’t owe yourself to anybody.” Grace has spent decades parceling herself out to her various obligations, and what has it gotten her? Tossed out of her own grave.

“Well, that bulletin’s coming a little late. I gave Sol everything I had for forty years. It kinda came back to bite me in the ass. I didn’t mean to do it again, but here I am while we hold hands in bed.”

Grace’s heart stutters. Holding is an understatement. She’s probably hurting Frankie’s hand by now.

“Grace, did you hear that?” Frankie asks tightly. “I said, ‘everything I had,’ followed closely by ‘here I am.’ Do you know what I mean?”

“Everything.” Grace’s voice is faint.

“The whole enchilada. Whatever you’re thinking and probably more. And I want--I want--”

Grace edges closer to Frankie’s body. She can’t help it. I want, I want. “What?”

“I want you to need the same thing. Which sucks, it really sucks, because I can’t make you need anything, or do anything, or, or love me, or--”
Frankie knows about impulses. Grace hopes she’ll understand this one as she throws herself over her best friend.

She seeks the base of Frankie’s throat and kisses her pulse point. Frankie’s heart is a wild beat of life against her mouth, saying *I’m here, I’m here, I’m not going anywhere.*

Frankie clutches her shoulders. “Grace!”

This time, Grace does not pull away and keep her hands to herself. “You don’t need to make me do anything,” she whispers.

“Really?” Frankie clings tighter. “You promise?”

Grace raises her head and looks down into Frankie’s eyes. They are glassy again. “I promise.”

“The way I--”

Grace kisses Frankie’s forehead before she can finish. She lingers there. She waits. *Please, please...*

Frankie exhales. “Thank you.”

Grace kisses her forehead again. How many kisses has she been storing up? Can they be counted? “Yes.”

“Oh God.” Frankie strokes her hands up and down Grace’s back, over the slippery silk. “I’m so fucking scared. Are you? Because you said--I mean, you probably don’t remember, but you said once that as long as you were with me, I didn’t need to be afraid of anything.”

“I remember.” Grace kisses Frankie’s cheek. It’s so soft, as soft as she remembers from holding Frankie in the balloon, their skin brushing before Frankie’s hair tickled Grace’s cheek instead. For a moment, she’d been home.

She is home again. This can’t be real, she can’t have permission to do this. But so far, she does. “I said I’d always be here for you, too.”

“Yeah, and then you kicked me out of bed.”

A laugh huffs out of Grace. “Not this time.” She can put up with snoring and sleep-talking. She’ll learn. It will be worth it, anything would be worth this, any currency she has to deal in.

Frankie tugs Grace’s earlobe, not ungently, but firmly. “I’m gonna need more than ‘this time.’”

Grace props herself up, her elbows on either side of Frankie, and looks down. Frankie’s serious expression is back. She’s not fucking around, and she won’t be satisfied with breezy reassurances. This might be a no-brainer for Grace, but Frankie’s coming from somewhere else, and has been propelled into this moment only by a cataclysm.

She needs to know how long Grace has been here, waiting.

“Frankie,” she says softly, trying to figure out how to phrase this, “I’ll be here. I always have been.” Be careful, be careful. “I won’t pretend it’s been for this exact reason, but when the time came to choose, I’ve always chosen this.” Breaking up with Guy, ending it with Phil, kicking Nick to the curb, turning down opportunity after opportunity. “This is where I want to be, and I want to be here with you. D-don’t you...um...you want the same thing, right? That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

*Buried. Married.*
“Here, as in San Diego, or here, as in your bed? Don’t answer that, because both are ‘yes,’ Grace, obviously.”

Grace takes a deep breath. She needs to know something. “You’re not just here because you were afraid tonight? You’re not--” Grace’s voice creaks at the possibility she voices now. “Going to walk this back in the morning?’”

Frankie looks outraged. “Grace, I thought about this for hours! And I operate on FCT, which, as I hope you remember, is--”

How could Grace forget? “Frankie Cosmic Time.”

“Yeah, and on Frankie Cosmic Time, that’s an eon. Or an epoch. Or an era. Or is it a period? Like with the dinosaurs? It’s a long time, anyway. And I, um, might have been, um.”

“Might have been…?”

“Thinking about it before.” Frankie drops eye contact and looks at Grace’s throat. She fiddles with the hem of Grace’s top. “When I shouldn’t have been. When I was with him. It was really, really wrong.”

The remorse in Frankie’s voice forbids Grace from expressing a sudden, delirious surge of joy. That would be inappropriate. She contains it to, “I was--I was also thinking about it.” Elaborate. “About this, us, here.”

Frankie stares at her. “Say what?”

“But you had him,” Grace says quickly. “I wasn’t planning to say anything, or do anything, I thought--just so long as we were here. Just so long as we were doing Vybrant together, and living together, and everything, I was happy.” Happy, she’d told Sol, meaning it. “I really was. And you seemed happy too, so there didn’t seem to be any point in wanting more, because whenever--” Oh no, oh God, she doesn’t want to say this. She can’t help it. “Whenever I go after more, I fuck it up, and--”

“Oh, honey.” Frankie pats the small of Grace’s back and leaves her hand there. “Roll over.”

Grace rolls over, Frankie keeps an arm over her, and they lie on their sides, facing each other. Grace’s throat feels clogged up. Why had she said that, when all she wants is to reassure Frankie that they’ll be right together?

“We’re probably gonna fuck up,” Frankie tells her. “Hmm. Amend that to ‘definitely.’ But that doesn’t mean we have to fuck it up.” She strokes Grace’s arm. “You know us. When the chips are down, we come through. And we’re kind of--”

Grace clears her throat. Frankie’s words loosen the knot in her chest. Never, in her wildest dreams, would she have imagined that Frankie would try to talk her into this too. “Kind of what?”

“Kind of already there,” Frankie admits. “What are we supposed to do, half-ass it now? Pretend I didn’t just say I want to spend forever with you? It’s not like I can go back in time and take it back. My Tardis is still under construction.”

Grace hates that show. Who would want to keep coming back again and again, losing everyone along the way? Nevertheless--

She glances around the bedroom. “Well, seems like this is bigger on the inside, too.”
Frankie’s eyes widen in delight. “A Whovian pun? Grace Hanson, you are irresistible. We’re definitely sneaking into Comic Con next year.”

“We’re definitely not,” Grace says, knowing that they definitely are.

Frankie smirks and strokes her face. The gleam in her eyes makes Grace blush. She’s always liked being admired, appreciated—who doesn’t?—but Frankie’s expression is something else. Something as wicked and wanton as Grace.

“Jeez,” Frankie breathes. “You really are a striking woman. I wish we could impulse kiss for a while, though thanks to Guru Kevin, I recognize that’s a sign of avoidance. We’ve got more to hash out.”

Kiss for a while? That implies multiple kisses. Grace’s face gets even hotter. Her heart speeds up and her mouth goes slack.

Frankie looks at it. Hunger blooms in her eyes, something Grace recognizes, the same thing that’s been swallowing her whole for months. “Although...I guess it might be relevant. Establishing physical compatibility, I mean. That’s important if...since we’re going to do this. You know I go slow in that arena, but we gotta start somewhere, right?”

Death or kissing. Grace’s libido is glad they’ve circled back to the second, even though her common sense is pleading with her not to drown. Yes, she wants multiple kisses. Yes, she’s had erotic dreams in this bed. And yes, the object of those dreams is right here with her offering multiple kisses, but that’s not a good enough reason to be sucked into a hormonal vortex at this critical juncture. They’ve got more to hash out.

“Grace,” Frankie asks, “do I turn you on?”

Grace gasps. She cups Frankie’s face, and Frankie slides one leg over her thigh, pulling her close so they can impulse kiss.

Breasts against her own. Frankie’s are muffled beneath multiple layers of cloth. Grace’s nipples tighten again, hurt, and even that’s secondary to the way their stomachs and pelvises are pressing together. Frankie’s arm slides over her waist, and they kiss by mutual consent, making room for each other.

Grace melts in the face of this heat. Frankie’s hand spans the small of her back, sliding the silk over her skin, and it’s not good enough--she needs to be grounded, needs skin-on-skin. And she needs it all now, right now, after months of hunger she needs it right now.

Frankie tugs her closer and Grace’s hands slide into her hair, thick and soft. She can do this now, touch Frankie this way. She doesn’t hold back a moan. She doesn’t hold anything back, because Frankie doesn’t want her to and she doesn’t have to anymore. She’s great at holding back, until she isn’t, and after that point restraint is like being wrapped in barbed wire.

They kiss again and again, going deeper, lingering. By the time Frankie’s nibbling on her bottom lip, Grace is clawing for sanity and losing it anyway. She rocks her hips helplessly forward, needing pressure and heat and contact, and far more than that.

She needs to make love.

But Frankie needs to go slowly, and Grace has zero experience with women, both of which are excellent reasons not to slide her hands down Frankie’s pajama pants right away. All she can do is plead between kisses, “Grounding? Skin?”
Frankie gasps. She grabs Grace’s hand and tugs it down to her waist. Without further prompting, Grace shoves her hand beneath Frankie’s T-shirt.

Frankie’s wearing a camisole beneath. Goddamn it. But she’s hot beneath the cotton, and she needs to go slowly, and Grace can wait, Grace can do anything for her.

“Can we just make out?” Frankie pants, maybe a little bit psychic after all.

Right. Yeah. Hit the brakes. Find some goddamn chill. Grace’s hand tightens on Frankie’s waist. “However far you want to...anything you need...”

“Need?” Frankie kisses Grace’s neck, and when Grace shudders against her, she says, “Don’t tell me that.”

“No, I mean it--” Grace arches her head farther back. More kisses, more, right there, please. “I swear, whatever...whatever you need...”

“Don’t say that until you know what I need.”

Grace goes still at the gravel and glass in Frankie’s voice. Before she can respond, a hot hand covers her breast. Her breath leaves her with a thin, high cry.

“Oh, Grace. Honey.” Frankie’s gaze drops down to where she’s cupping Grace through the silk. “Look at you.” She brushes her thumb over the hard tip of Grace’s nipple, then begins to circle it.

“Frankie!” Grace chokes. She clutches at Frankie’s camisole, unable to do anything else.

“Do you like this?” Frankie pushes her thumb down, rubs more firmly, and Grace can’t breathe. Her breasts were already so sensitive from silk and want, and now that’s Frankie’s touch, making it even worse. Making it even better. The warm throb between her legs begins to turn into an ache.

“Yes,” she sobs. “Please.”

“Jesus. Damn it, Grace.” Frankie looks into Grace’s eyes. “I mean honestly, I’m a pretty giving lover, all about the body worship and the soul connection, but right now I--I--”

Grace could scream with frustration. She’s got two breasts, Frankie’s got two hands, what’s the fucking holdup? “You what?”

Frankie stares at her mouth. Her own lips thin. “I need to mess you up.”

The air deserts Grace’s lungs. If she thought she knew hunger, then the look in Frankie’s eyes is telling her she doesn’t know jack shit about it after all. Starvation is looking back at her.

“I-I wanted--when we do it--” Frankie stammers, “I wanted it to be, you know, we’d take care of each other, and it’d be like a romance novel or some crap like that.” She shudders against Grace, groans when she looks at Grace’s throat. “But right now what I need is to pull your hair and give you hickeyes and leave scratch marks on your back.”

Grace could drown like this after all, pulled to the very bottom of herself by her own desire. “Oh.”

“That’s not me, is it? I’ve never been like that. And I had to take it slow with Jacob, so I don’t know what the fuck this is, Grace, I guess the life force, but...we should just make out, I know we should...” Her hips push forward and her eyes fall shut when they rub against each other.

Grace shudders again. Oh fuck. Oh God, it would be so easy just to let it happen. Instead, she
manages, “You need to know I’m with you.”

“Grace…”

She cups the back of Frankie’s neck. “You need to make sure I’m here.”

And more than that, probably. Grace frightened Frankie badly tonight, after weeks of pushing her away. This could be about punishment, or claiming, or both. All Grace knows for sure is that nobody’s ever treated her in bed the way Frankie proposes to do, even when--once, during the early days of their marriage, awkwardly--she had asked Robert to. The night had ended then and there, and since then all she’s known is men who wanted to handle her like porcelain. She’s never thought to ask for anything else.

After decades of forgetting, she remembers how badly she wants something else.

But Frankie would regret it, might even hate Grace for letting it happen. If they’re going to do this--buried, married, whatever they’re doing--there will be time and time for else.

“I can stop you,” Grace makes herself say. “If it’s too much. We can just...make out. Jesus, Frankie, we can get out of bed and play goddamn Cranium if that’s what you need.”

“Grace.” Frankie’s voice trembles. “I need to fuck you raw.” She rests her head against Grace’s shoulder as if seeking comfort, or as if waiting for rescue. For a plan.

She’ll have to wait a little bit longer while Grace gets her mind out from between her legs. “Um.” She licks her lips. “Uh.” Frankie cups her breast again. “Ah!”

“I need to, but I don’t want to,” Frankie continues shakily. “Grace, please, you gotta stop me. This isn’t me.”

“Yes, it is,” Grace wheezes. Frankie’s hand feels so fucking good through the silk, all warmth and promise. “It’s just a side of you that you…” Frankie nuzzles beneath her ear, kissing her neck again. “Oh God, that you don’t know, we all have those, we…”

Frankie bites her.

Not hard, but not tenderly either. Frankie nips once, and then again, lower on Grace’s throat. Then she kisses the same spot, flicks it with her tongue, and next thing Grace knows she’s on her back again, only now Frankie’s lying between her thighs. Grace has both arms around her, and she’s tilting her pelvis up, whimpering while Frankie bites her once more. Harder this time. It’s a bright sting that reverberates throughout Grace, pulling a gasp from her.

Frankie’s hair brushes Grace’s chin and tumbles down across her throat. Grace has never made love with anybody who’s got long hair. Then again, she’s not making love now, she’s about to get fucked, and the realization makes her moan aloud.

“You like this?” Frankie sounds both disbelieving and desperate. “Oh Grace, you’re so soft. I-I don’t wanna leave a bruise. Do I?” She seals her mouth to Grace’s skin and suckles, worrying the flesh there, hurting it a little.

Grace clings to her, rubbing her hands up and down the cotton camisole. Frankie’s still wearing that goddamned bathrobe, three whole layers of protection between her and the world, and Grace is…

Grace is about to lose the one layer she’s got, because now Frankie’s fingers are fighting with the buttons of her pajama top. She sits up, and the blankets fall down, coming to rest at her hips. She
isn’t making eye contact, just keeps staring at her own fingers as she straddles Grace again and strips her. Then, when all the buttons are open but one, she looks at Grace’s chest instead.

It’s nothing she hasn’t seen before. Well, half of it, at Jamba Juice. But seeing the whole appears to overwhelm her as much as it does Grace.

This is new. There’s no time to be self-conscious or ashamed of what Frankie sees. Grace is sweating, panting, touching the sore spot on her neck, and wondering why she feels so powerful when she’s never been more at her own body’s mercy.

Frankie doesn’t exactly seem in control of herself either. Her mouth opens, closes, opens again.

And just as Grace cobbles enough brain cells together to say, “Frankie,” it descends.

Wet and hot, and this time it’s Grace’s skin instead of silk, her bare nipple against Frankie’s lips. Frankie flicks her tongue again and again, harder each time, and Grace is moaning. With every stroke, she gets slick inside, like some kind of sex miracle. She grabs Frankie’s head, pushing her fingers through all that hair. Arches up. It’s perfect, it’s--

Frankie takes Grace’s wrists and presses her hands to the bed. She raises her head just long enough for Grace to see her flashing eyes as she says, “No.”


Still holding her wrists, Frankie bends back down. Playtime seems to be over, because now she sucks harder, with just a hint of teeth. As she does, she rubs her thumbs against the pulse points of Grace’s wrists, and somehow the combination of all that pressure makes Grace cry out. She closes her eyes against the electric thrill that runs from her wrists to her breast to her clit, that forces her to rock her hips against Frankie again.

“God!” Frankie pulls away.

Grace panics—though wait, no, they’re supposed to stop, right? This is supposed to be a good thing, right?--but Frankie’s only shrugging out of her bathrobe, tossing it over the side of the bed. Beneath, she’s wearing a purple T-shirt that reads “Eve Was Framed.”

Just to see what happens, Grace reaches out to Frankie again. Again, Frankie takes her hands and holds her down. She wasn’t kidding about this new side of her, but past the wildness in her eyes Grace sees the old Frankie, pleading for help.

“Are you okay?” Frankie chokes. “Do, do you want me to stop?”

That wasn’t the right question, not anywhere close to it, and Grace has to say, “No.”

“You don’t? Grace…”

Grace’s eyes fall shut again. “Not yet. Just, just a little longer?” The hard hands on her wrists, that rough mouth on her body, all of it belonging to Frankie, who loves her. “Please, just a little more?”

“Grace,” Frankie moans, and bends back down. She lets go of Grace’s hands so she can cup her breasts instead, pressing them close together and switching between them, licking and sucking until Grace can’t tell pain from pleasure anymore, and she doesn’t care either. Then Frankie takes the tip of one nipple between her teeth. And they’re so sensitive now, unbelievably so, it’d hurt if...

“More.” It comes out of Grace in a whimper even as she grabs the sheets in a last desperate bid to
keep her hands off Frankie. “More.”

Frankie works the tip between her teeth, nipping it gently, tugging on it. It does hurt. And yet Grace groans deep in her throat, and sobs when Frankie starts to lick instead, as if trying to soothe the aching flesh. “Yes. Oh, yes, please--”

“Oh God!” Frankie lets go of her breasts, but only to spread her legs. She rests her palms, hot and trembling, against Grace’s silk-clad inner thighs. So close to where Grace needs them most. “You taste so good. I-I didn’t know. I dreamed about you this way. But I didn’t think we’d…”

Instead of finishing, she puts the flat of her palm directly between Grace’s legs, cupping her completely before she begins to rub.

“Oh!” Grace tosses her head back against the bed. The pressure is unbelievable, rough and perfect, exactly what she craves. Frankie’s touching her through two layers of fabric and she’s already quaking, already on the edge, throbbing down below while her wet nipples tingle in sympathy.

“Grace,” Frankie gasps, “I’m touching you. Holy shit, I can feel you…”

She begins to rub faster. Harder. Grace gives a strangled cry.

“And you love it. Oh God. Grace, are you close?” Faster and faster and… “You look like--I’ve never seen you like--am I getting you there?”

Getting there? She’s there. Two seconds in and coming seems as necessary as breathing.

But she’s not ready, not really, and neither is Frankie, who barely seems to be breathing herself as she drives Grace toward climax. She leans forward, moving her hand harder and faster until Grace can feel the orgasm in her fucking teeth, she’s so close. No. Not yet. Not now--

“Stop,” she manages, even though she’d rather cut off a hand. She writhes even as she says, “Oh, Frankie, stop!”

There’s a pause where she’s lost in space, where Frankie’s hand goes still against her and anything could happen. One more push and Grace’s pleasure won’t be her fault, because she tried to do the right thing. She’ll come harder than she ever has, and it won’t be her fault.

Frankie gulps and tugs her hand away. Grace gasps a little, protesting, and then bites her lip as hard as she dares. The pain should bring her back to herself. It worked before, kind of--except before, pain and pleasure weren’t the same.

She’s throbbing. Still so close. So alive.

Frankie asks shakily, “Did you come?”

She sounds apprehensive, not turned on, but even that isn’t enough to cool Grace’s blood. She bites down harder on her lip. Shakes her head back and forth.

“Oh.” Frankie takes a deep gulping breath. “Aren’t you even going to look at me? I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. Oh fuck, Grace, please look at me--”

“If I look at you,” Grace says, her voice a shredding thread, “I might actually come.”

Only their labored breathing follows. Then Grace hears a clicking sound--Frankie trying to swallow.

“What are we gonna do?” she asks Grace, despair in her voice. “I need you. I need this, but I
can’t…”

Then her mouth is on Grace’s stomach, as promised. Except Frankie never promised to bite her there too, pushing down the waistband of Grace’s pajama bottoms just enough to sink her teeth into the skin below her belly button.

“Let me touch you!” Grace gasps.

“Then we’re definitely not gonna stop.” Frankie kisses the same spot. “You’re gonna have your hands in my hair while I…” She plucks at the elastic waistband. “I can smell you from here, Grace. It’s incredible. I bet I could make you come like that. I bet I’d go crazy with it.”

Frankie’s mouth between her legs. Frankie’s tongue on her. If Grace gives the slightest encouragement, she’ll have it, rough and hard. Rough and hard while Frankie hates herself for going out of control, apologizing later and wishing the whole thing undone.

“Oh no.” She mustn’t arch her hips. She mustn’t beg for it. “N-no…”

“Then you’ll never want to leave me. You’ll stay because I make you feel so good, and we’ll do this all the time, I’ll give you like ten orgasms a day and you’ll never want anything else.”

It’s the best possible future Grace can imagine, but the one small, sane remaining part of her snaps its fingers in front of her face and tells her to wake up. “I won’t leave you anyway. I said so. I promised.”

Now she opens her eyes. Frankie’s looking back at her with glazed blue eyes, like she’s half-senseless with desire too.

“We can stop, Frankie.” This would be more convincing if Grace could keep herself from trembling. Want again, so much want. “I’m not going anywhere. We can just, just lie here and--”

Frankie bursts out, “Holy fuck, are you kidding me? If I don’t make you come, I’m gonna explode.”

Grace squeezes her eyes shut again. Well, at least they’re on the same page.

Frankie continues, “It’s just a question of how I’m gonna do it, and you’ve got to think of something unless you don’t want to be able to walk for a while, because I’m about to board the ‘How Many Fingers Can Grace Hanson Take Plus One’ train.” There’s a thumping noise; probably Frankie banging the mattress with a fist. “And then I’m going to look like a complete mess while I’m running errands for you, because I won’t be able to look at myself in the mirror, but I’m starting to think it might be worth it, Grace, if it means you--”

“I have an idea!”

A great idea. It just flashed into Grace’s mind, so sudden and brilliant that she might be seeing stars. She opens her eyes to behold Frankie instead, just as luminous as she leans forward with parted lips.

“You do?” Frankie asks.

“What if we use the vibrator?”

Frankie’s eyes go wide.

“Our vibrator.” Grace props herself up on her elbows again. Her pajama top slides down over her arms, exposing even more of her skin. It draws Frankie’s longing gaze. “We made it together. It
connects us. It practically is us.”

They’d spent weeks designing it, making wish lists and sketches and blueprints. They’d talked about what they liked and what they didn’t, Frankie as forthcoming about her masturbation habits as she’d been secretive about having sex with Jacob. Grace knows that Frankie doesn’t like direct clitoral stimulation, prefers the buzzing to be clit-adjacent for maximum pleasure. Frankie knows that Grace prefers to stick to the lower settings until the very end, and then she jacks it up high and comes with a shriek she can never control.

Grace still can’t believe she’d admitted that out loud, but then again, she’d spent all those weeks trying not to squirm in her seat while Frankie talked about orgasms, so she couldn’t really be blamed.

“You’re a friggin’ genius.” Frankie sounds as awed as if Grace had built the Large Hadron Collider. Maybe more awed, since she told Grace once that innocent atoms don’t deserve to be smashed.

“Where’s yours?”

Grace glances back at the nightstand. “In there with the lube.”

Neither of them uses the Say Grace version of Frankie’s lube. They use the real thing, the version Frankie brews up on the stove, palm oil free and exclusively theirs. Frankie’s taken to making cute labels for the jars with a swoopy “G” in one corner and “F” in another.

“Well, what the hell are you waiting for?” Frankie says, her hands shaking again.

Indeed. Right. Grace wriggles backward, reaching for the nightstand drawer. As she does, Frankie hooks her fingertips into the pajama pants’ waistband, and Grace scoots one step closer to nudity as they slide down her thighs.

Frankie tosses them over the side of the bed to join her bathrobe. She puts her hands on Grace’s bare ankles. “Oh Jesus. Hurry up.”

With straining arms, Grace fumbles the drawer open and gets out the lube, then the vibrator. “Here--”

Frankie doesn’t take them from her. She’s too busy looking between Grace’s legs. “You wear sexy underpants all the time, don’t you? I should have guessed. No, wait. I did guess.”

Grace’s panties are not particularly sexy, at least, not by her standards. True, they’re bikini cut, not the high-waisted things usually peddled to women her age. And they’re black, with a little lace trim, but they’re cotton nevertheless. No silk or satin. If Frankie thinks this is seduction wear, what does she have on? Boxers?

“And you’re all smooth.” Frankie sounds reverent as she strokes Grace’s inner thighs again. Grace drops both the vibe and the lube on the mattress, because how do you concentrate on fine motor control in a moment like this? “Let me guess, you’re bare under there. Or do you have a landing strip?” She looks at Grace with sparkling eyes. “Grace, tell me you get it done in funny shapes. Like a lightning bolt.”

Grace waxes at home, both because she’s got less hair than she used to, and because her skin is more delicate now and she doesn’t like trusting it to enthusiastic twenty-year-olds. Nevertheless, Frankie’s idea makes her laugh breathlessly. “No, I don’t.”

“Damn. Either way, I’m not gonna stack up in that department. I don’t even bother with…”

Frankie’s voice trails off, she goes even redder, and she looks away.
Grace can’t look away, though, not from that fall of hair and those full lips, pressed together now in anxiety. “Oh Jesus, Frankie, I’m not going to care. Do you think men wax? I don’t give a damn, I just want—” She touches Frankie’s hip and is not rebuffed. Frankie doesn’t look at her, though. “I just want you.”

She melts inside as she says it. Who knew honesty could be such an aphrodisiac? Saying what she really wants after years of bottling it up, and not feeling smaller for it?

Smaller. That’s it. What’s happening between her and Frankie right now won’t leave her feeling like she’s carved yet another piece of herself away. She is growing, unfurling. She won’t be less than she was before tonight.

“Right, yeah,” Frankie mumbles. Suddenly, the lust is gone from her voice, along with the sparkle in her eye. “Sure, that’s...that’s fair. You don’t have to be the only one. I can strip too. I’ve bared my soul already. Clothes aren’t that big a deal.”

But Frankie still isn't meeting Grace’s eyes, and when she pulls off her T-shirt, she casts a longing glance at the door. “Oh, hell no-- “Frankie, wait.” Focus. Focus, instead of ogling the outline of Frankie’s nipples beneath her white camisole. If Grace is growing, then Frankie can’t shrink and fade out, she just can’t. They’re in this together. Aren’t they? “There’s, there’s no rush. You don’t have to...Frankie, please look at me.” She reaches up to cup Frankie’s cheek. “Just at me.”

Frankie looks at Grace’s face, finally, shame in her eyes, although she tries to keep her voice light. “What? I’m not a chicken.” Her hands fiddle with the hem of her camisole. “I can do it.”

“I want to do it,” Grace whispers. It’s the truth. She loves to picture it, the moment she’ll undress Frankie with unsteady hands. “When the time’s right. When you want me to.”

Relief and desire seem to flood Frankie’s face in equal measure. She grabs Grace’s hand and places a firm kiss onto her palm. “Okay. Cool. I mean, if that’s how you want it, we can do that. You gonna give me our masterpiece, or what?”

Grace hands over the Menage-a-Moi, but when she offers the lube jar too, Frankie shakes her head. “Not yet.”

“Oh…” Grace is wet, but not wet enough, and she doesn’t want it that rough. “We’re going to need that.”

“In a minute, sure. But I wanna see something else first.” Frankie clicks the button at the base of the vibe.

Oh, shit, what if it doesn’t work? Grace hasn’t charged the batteries in a while--weeks, in fact. There had been no point in touching herself, drained of desire and wondering if she’d ever want it again. Instead, desire has turned into all-consuming flame, and if the vibrator doesn’t work, then what the hell are they supposed to do?

Thank God, it comes to life, buzzing gently on the lowest setting. Grace closes her eyes in relief, which is why it comes as a surprise when Frankie places it between her cotton-covered lips. "Ah. Grace grabs the sheets again and tries to breathe. Frankie rocks the vibe back and forth against her, the pressure muffled by the cloth barrier, the little pearls pulsing against Grace with unfulfilled promise. Helplessly, Grace spreads her legs wider and raises her hips, chasing it.
Frankie puts her hand on Grace’s hip and says, “Nuh-uh. Hold still.” Now that they’ve got an outlet for their need, something they can both deal with, the note of command has returned to her voice.

Grace can’t hold still. If she writhes, moves, she can get that divine pressure right where she needs it. Doesn’t Frankie want her to have what she needs?

A whimpering moan comes from the back of her throat. It chokes out and dies when Frankie presses the tip of the vibrator against Grace’s opening, just one thin layer away from penetration, teasing instead of fucking her.

“I remember you said you like to start slow.” Frankie’s voice is half whisper, half growl. “And keep it that way until the very end. Do I have that right?”

She presses the vibe’s buzzing tip back and forth, much too gently for somebody who wants to fuck Grace raw. It’s not enough, nowhere near enough. “Please…”

Frankie responds by dragging the tip up between Grace’s lips and resting it right next to her clit, driving Grace back to the edge of orgasm in one single heartbeat. If she moves it even a centimeter--“Wait!” Grace pleads. “Wait, wait!”

“Thought you said ‘please.’ Jeez, Grace, make up your mind, will ya?” But Frankie listens, sliding the vibrator back to where it was before, where it feels delicious but not overwhelming. Grace groans in gratitude. If this is finally what it takes for Frankie to listen to instructions...

“Let’s see how this feels,” Frankie says, and next thing Grace knows, Frankie’s mouth is on her breast again. It takes a moment for her to find a rhythm, but when she does, her tongue strokes Grace in time with the vibrator, and oh Christ oh God, Grace really might die before daylight.

This time, her hands go in her own hair. She tugs and it’s not enough to distract her. She can’t open her eyes. Frankie’s mouth is perfect, a soft wet tug that awakens every nerve. “Frankie! Oh Jesus!”

Frankie moans. Then she kisses Grace between her breasts and says, “Fuck. Oh, you feel so good. Grace, I need to ask you something, I…”

Instead of asking, she pulls the vibrator away, turns it off, and drops it on the bed. Before Grace can object, Frankie kisses her. Then she kisses her again, and they kiss until Grace loses count and she just has to. She wraps her arms around Frankie, strokes one hand up and down Frankie’s back, over the camisole. The other hand splays across the top of Frankie’s shoulders, where Grace can finally touch her skin.

“Grounding” isn’t the right word for this. Frankie’s skin is so soft. Grace already knows how beautiful it is, and how it felt to brush Frankie’s arm with just the edge of her hand while helping her with her blood pressure cuff. She’s thought about that so often, wondered if it could happen again. This is better, touching Frankie beneath the fall of her hair while their breasts press together, separated only by the thinnest layer now. The cotton against her bare nipples should be unpleasant, but it only joins the sensations wracking the rest of her body.

Her body, finally inhabited. She can’t imagine leaving it now, burying or burning it. She can’t imagine not living for a thousand years just so they can do this all the time.

Frankie’s hips buck forward, the contact ignites them, and they begin rubbing against each other. Grace has to pull out of the kiss when they find an instant rhythm, because a cry rises from her. And then another. Her underwear is sticky, and beneath all of those layers, Frankie’s clit has to be throbbing as much as her own. Is she close, too? Is Frankie going to shudder in climax on top of her
because they can’t help themselves, they want each other too much?

“Wait!” Frankie lifts her hips off Grace’s. She’s tomato-faced and shaking. “Dammit. Dammit.”

Grace gulps. “Did you--?” Please, no. She can’t be deprived of that moment. When you dream so much of something, doesn’t it become part of you? Frankie’s pleasure belongs to her too, doesn’t it?

To her relief, Frankie says, “Almost. Holy shit. I gotta dial it back a notch before I dial it up a whole bunch of notches.” She looks down at Grace’s mouth. “Kiss me, but no funny stuff.”

No jokes or juggling, then. Grace nods, and when Frankie lowers herself back down to kiss, she keeps her mouth mostly closed. _Dial it back a notch._

She can do that. She can entice, she can thrill, she can prove to Frankie that this is a winning bet. She returns the kiss with the faintest pressure.

Then she unfolds it, giving it her all, inviting Frankie deeper and deeper. She keeps it slow—doesn’t Frankie want that, after all?—slow and maddening, melting her mouth by degrees.

Frankie trembles. Good.

Time to make her imagine that mouth in other places. The places Grace has dreamed of in spite of herself, dreamed of so vividly she’s already got a game plan. She sucks on Frankie’s bottom lip, kisses her top one, opens just enough for the faintest brush of tongue, and retreats demurely. She says without words, _See what I can do for you._

Frankie whimpers through her nose, clutches Grace’s shoulders, and shakes. It’s obvious how badly she wants to move her hips, grind down until they’re lost again.

“Slowly,” Grace breathes against the side of Frankie’s mouth. She draws her fingernails gently over the nape of Frankie’s neck, earning a shiver. _Very_ good.

“Oh my God.” Now Frankie sounds slurred, almost drunk. “Grace, you’re amazing at this.”

Grace chuckles and kisses Frankie behind her ear. It’s not that her urgency has subsided, exactly, but that it’s lying in wait just beneath her skin, ready to catch fire. Is this what she’s been missing all her life? This experience of arousal barely held at bay, nearly as thrilling as orgasm itself? “Thanks.”

But when Frankie looks at her, she’s scowling. “Too amazing. Being with women is different. My experiences in this department are admittedly few, but valid.”

“What--you've--really?” Frankie's alluded to her sexual history, mostly to emphasize how boring Grace’s has been in comparison, but Grace wrote most of it off as bullshit. It’s not? Frankie truly has experimented...that is, had experiences with…

“A couple times. I sure wasn’t as smooth as you seem to be. Have you been hiding a sapphic side from me, Grace Hanson?”

*Being with women is different.* That’s for goddamn sure. Rounder, smoother, softer. And it feels right, so terribly right--is that just because it’s Frankie? All this time, Grace has never let herself wonder. Why bother? It was either Frankie or nobody. And there’s something to be said, there really is, for sticking your fingers in your ears and humming loudly when you’re almost seventy-four.

“I haven’t,” she whispers. “You know that.”
“Do I?” Frankie’s scowl deepens. “What really happened at all those clandestine conferences of capitalist...damn, the next c-word would be misogynistic.”

Grace stares at her in disbelief. “You’re jealous?” That’s insane. Frankie’s the one who’s been kissing other women, not her, and it must have happened long before tonight. So long ago that Grace can’t resent it, especially since she’s obviously better at it than the rest of them.

“What? Me?” Frankie rolls her eyes, tosses her hair back, and adds, “Ha! Ha ha. Don’t be paranoid, Grace. No, no, no. I’m just curious, that’s all, because jealousy is a sign of wonky karma, and I am totally at peace with the Universe now that we’re in alignment and you’re mi--” She makes a strange, choking sound. “Now that this is happening, which we’ve both agreed is the right thing to do. Possessiveness is a concept of the patriarchy, and I completely reject it.” She holds up both hands, palms forward. “See? This is me, rejecting it. Anyway, you haven’t, have you? With other women?”

Personally, possessiveness has always been one of Grace’s favorite aspects of the patriarchy. She loves being wanted by men, wanted so much that they can’t stand to share her, that they’ll fight each other for her because she’s got a prize. It happened all the time when she was young. Then she spent forty years shackled to someone who--it turns out--wouldn’t have given a damn if she’d slept with every man in San Diego.

And now Frankie’s perched on top of her, lying her head off and crazy for Grace, desperate to be the only one. She’s made jokes about jealousy before, jokes that struck Grace as eccentric but not out of the usual line. Just Frankie in one of her moods. But now Frankie’s very, very serious.

How wonderful.

Grace takes Frankie’s hands and pulls them down to cover her bare breasts. She looks into her eyes, holds her gaze, and Frankie can’t seem to look away even as her hands cup and squeeze. Grace arches into her touch--her nipples are still sensitive, the twinge is so good--and gives her a lazy smile. “No, I haven’t. But I’m wondering what you’d do if I had.”

Frankie’s eyes widen.

Grace has one second to realize she’s poked a bear before Frankie yanks her underwear down hard enough that thread pops on the side seams. Grace lifts her ass instinctively, and next thing she knows her panties are tangled around her ankles. She immediately makes to kick them off. Oh thank God, finally, yes, now-

Frankie grabs her shins. “No.”

No? She’s got to be kidding. “But I can’t--”

The words die in her mouth when Frankie looks her in the eyes again, and that look pins Grace to the bed like a butterfly in its last throes.

Frankie asks, “You can’t what?” When Grace says nothing, just tries to breathe, she repeats, “You. Can’t. What?”

“Spread my legs,” Grace whispers, the words sending a thrill up and down her spine, because it’s one thing to talk like this in your dreams, and quite another to do it in the dead of night while the woman you love gets ready to fuck even the possibility of other women right out of you.

“Darn right.” Frankie pats Grace’s thighs and looks between them, assessing. Grace fights not to squirm. Apparently Frankie’s fantasized about this. How much of a disappointment is reality going to be? Grace truly doesn’t give a damn what Frankie looks like beneath all those layers, just so long as
she finally has access to it, but it’s not the same with her. Everyone always expects her to be perfect, and Frankie might too, no matter what she says.

Frankie drags her fingertips through the thin, downy patch of blond hair between Grace’s legs. She doesn’t dip below the mons, but Grace throbs in reaction anyway, and who gives a fuck how she looks? Frankie’s touching her. Frankie’s fingers, with dried paint in the cuticles, are about to stroke her—

Frankie doesn’t stroke anything. She bends down to nuzzle instead.

Her nose brushes Grace’s hair, and she hums and inhales, her breath millimeters from Grace’s aching flesh. “Oh God,” she whispers. “Grace, you’re right here, you smell so good, and you want me...”

Want her? Grace can barely fucking breathe. Her vision has gone blurry. Is she going to pass out? All she can hear is Frankie’s voice saying You’re gonna have your hands in my hair while I...

Grab the sheets instead. Do anything. Beg. “Frankie, please. Please, honey.” Now her fingertips are touching Frankie’s hair. How did that happen? “I can’t, please, please give it to me--”

“Oh!” Frankie’s breath puffs against Grace. She sits up, eyes and face wild. “Gimme the jar.” But before Grace can move, she adds, “No. Wait. I...”

She looks between Grace’s thighs again. Her breath grows rough, and that dark look returns to her eyes. Grace knows it now—the flip side of Frankie’s harmless jealousy, the part of her that needs to bruise and scratch and make Grace come to stake her claim.

“You have to do it,” Frankie chokes, balling her hands into fists. “I’ll do the vibe, but if I get my hands on you...”

“You’ll fuck me raw.” Grace’s shaking hands twist the top off the jar. “With your fingers.” She kicks off her panties, and this time, Frankie doesn’t protest. “Until I can’t walk.” She dips her fingertips into the lube.

Then she spreads her legs wider, looks Frankie in the eye, and says, “Next time,” as she begins to stroke herself.

Frankie’s jaw drops. She watches Grace’s hand as if hypnotized, and if she weren’t trying so hard not to come, Grace would put on a bit of a show. She’s never done this in front of anyone before, but this is Frankie. It’s right with Frankie. This is an extension of the intimacy that’s been building between them for years, that’s let them see through each other all the way to themselves beneath.

She sinks one slick finger inside herself, and then another. How many fingers can she take? She’s never bothered to find out, just done enough to prep for the vibrator before getting down to business. Now she focuses on her hand, on what that warmth is like inside her. It’s strange: there’s no sure promise of pleasure like there is with the vibrator, which can provide sensation right on schedule and never gets tired. Her fingers are smaller, softer as they stroke the lubricant over her surfaces, easing the way.

Her eyes close. She focuses on herself inside herself, like an ouroboros of pleasure, giving herself something wonderful—treating her body with kindness so it’s a worthier gift for somebody else--

“I can’t believe I’m seeing this,” Frankie says brokenly. “Oh Grace, I’m so lucky. Does it feel good?”

Grace lets her head fall back and sighs. Yes, it feels good when she’s gentle and uses plenty of lube.
When she relaxes and teases herself, makes herself hungry for it, as she does now when she withdraws her fingers and plays with her slit. She shivers and writhes and hasn’t even touched her clit.

Can she take three fingers? Time to find out. She swirls her fingers in the lube jar again and paints one long, lush stripe between her lips, slicking every surface before carefully--very carefully--going in.

Oh.

*Oh,* that’s full. A different shape than the Menage-a-Moi. It takes getting used to. She holds her breath until she’s in as far as she can comfortably go, then lets out a deep, shaking sigh.

“*It’s good,*” she whispers. “*It’s warm, and it’s--*” She arches into herself. “*T-tight.*”

Frankie’s breathing gets higher-pitched, the kind of sound you make just before a scream.

Grace’s eyes stay closed. Her voice belongs to a hoarse, provocative stranger. “*Is this...what you wanted?*”

Nobody answers. Instead, a hot mouth lands on the back of Grace’s hand. Frankie kisses and nuzzles her wrist, her knuckles. So close.

Grace’s eyes fly open and she stares up at the ceiling, unable to speak or move or do anything but try to keep conscious while Frankie turns her kisses to Grace’s inner thighs. The kisses grow rougher and turn into bites, just as they did against Grace’s throat. Like Frankie wants to eat her alive.

Grace can’t help it. She’s got to do something, she’s got to touch. She slides her fingers out of herself with a gasp and strokes Frankie’s lips where they’re brushing against her thigh.

Frankie hisses. She opens her mouth and sucks Grace’s fingers in, tasting Grace and yam lube and the skin beneath. The lick of her tongue has Grace imagining Frankie’s mouth on other places, places less than an inch away, and oh for God’s sake, “*Frankie--!*”

“I can’t wait,” Frankie moans, “I can’t wait anymore,” and she grabs the vibrator in one hand and dips her other hand in the lube jar. She prepares the vibe clumsily but thoroughly, both her hands shaking. She keeps licking her lips, chasing the taste Grace left there, and the sight’s so raw and sexual that Grace almost forgets about the vibe until it’s pressing against her.

And then inside her.

Slowly, but relentlessly, Frankie penetrates her. She doesn’t do it like Grace does it, in gentle increments. She pushes in with one long, smooth stroke. It must be how she does it to herself. How she likes it.

Grace’s fingers fly to her clit. She can’t stop. She’s wondered, she’s wondered, now she knows, and the knowledge is more than she can bear. “*Frankie--please--*”

“I can’t wait,” Frankie repeats. She turns the vibe on to the first setting, and the pearls pulse against Grace’s slick inner walls, steady but unsatisfying. She’s too close for this teasing, has to have more, there’s got to be more. Frankie promised to fuck her, didn’t she?

Then Frankie does.

She slides the vibe out almost all the way before pushing it back in, and then again, and again, faster
and harder than before. On the way out each time, she finds Grace’s G-spot and strokes the vibe’s buzzing tip against it before going back in.

“Oh!” Grace gasps, only able to exhale, arching upward.

“Is it good?” Frankie asks. “Do you love m--it--do you love it?” In and out, again. “Do you, Grace?”

“Oh!” Grace gasps, only able to exhale, arching upward.

“Is it good?” Frankie asks. “Do you love m--it--do you love it?” In and out, again. “Do you, Grace?”

“Ah, ah--” Grace begins to move her fingers, taking her clit between them and almost pinching it. Handling it rougher than she ever has before, and it feels so good that she tosses her head back and forth on the mattress. Writhes on the vibe while Frankie thrusts it in and out, stimulating every goddamn inch of her, and still--not enough--

“Higher!” she gasps. “H-harder!”

Frankie makes a whimpering sound that’s kind of like fuck, pushes the button at the base, and the vibrator immediately goes from the lowest to the top speed.

Grace’s hips buck forward. A cry, high and helpless, bursts from her. Frankie, making incoherent noises now, begins to rock the Menage-a-Moi’s curved tip against her G-spot, not letting up, harder than Grace ever does, and that--that--

Even though she’s rubbing her clit frantically, the orgasm comes from deep inside her. Rises from her core, making her clench. At the moment of crisis, she has to stop touching herself, has to dig her sticky hands into her own hair while she screams, first Frankie’s name, and then nothing at all. Just a primal cry that blends pleasure and pain, and announces that she has become more, greater, expansive.

It’s the best, it’s the most, she’s ever had. And somewhere Frankie’s moaning, “Grace, you’re making me crazy, I’m losing my mind, I gotta have you--”

“Yes,” Grace wails, but now it’s too much. Too big. Can you come to death? It wouldn’t be fair...not before Frankie…

“I’ll fuck you all the time. I’ll make you so happy--”

“Yes--yes--” But it’s too much--

“I’ll do anything you want, Grace, anyth--”

Oh Jesus God-- “Enough!”

It’s not true, she’ll never have enough, and yet she can’t take any more. She shudders, moans, “Oh no...I can’t…enough, please!”

Frankie gasps, and slides the vibrator out of Grace while it’s still on, and that’s new, too. When the buzzing tip slips through her entrance, Grace squeaks, arches up, and then collapses like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

Her eyes fall shut too, as she sprawls and melts. “Oh God. Oh God.” She licks her lips. “Frankie, oh God…” She pants for air. Her limbs are shaking reeds. Between her legs she’s hot and swollen, sensitive, throbbing with remembered joy. She can’t open her eyes. Aftermath’s never been like this before, she’s never been destroyed before. Is she drunk? Is that why she’s reeling?

The buzzing stops. Grace opens her eyes just in time for Frankie to clamber on top of her, sobbing for breath. Grace has done this, put Frankie in this state, and for a moment the realization is as
powerful as climax. It jolts through her body, giving her fresh strength.

Damn good thing, too. “Tell me what to do,” she pleads, grabbing Frankie’s hips with sweaty, trembling hands. “Frankie? Tell me how to help?”

She expects to be told to put her hand between Frankie’s legs, or, or _something_ extremely direct, because Frankie’s as wild for it as Grace was only moments ago. Instead, Frankie just groans, “Hold me,” and Grace does, wrapping one arm fiercely around Frankie’s back and sliding her other hand through her hair. Holding her so that nothing, not even death, can snatch her away, while Frankie rubs herself through her pajama pants.

Frankie’s hand works furiously, her breath blows hot and uneven against Grace’s neck, and Grace is dragged back to the beach. To the arch of Frankie’s back as she fumbles around in the sand for Babe’s ashes. Frankie looks up, kneeling before Grace, alight in the setting sun. Mischief curves her mouth.

“You’re beautiful, Frankie,” Grace whispers now, in their bed, while Frankie seeks relief. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Frankie’s free hand grabs Grace’s bare shoulder so hard she’ll leave a bruise, and she goes completely still. Only for a moment.

“I love you!” she gasps. “Oh, fuck!”

And with that, she shudders in release. She hides her face against Grace’s neck, and moans, and it seems to go on and on while Grace wonders if they’ve died after all. That might be all right. This seems like a fine place to spend forever.

Frankie’s hips jerk one more time, and she whispers, “Oh, _Grace_.” Then she sags against Grace, trembling and silent.

_I love you_, she’d said, and Frankie says it all the time, but she’s never said it like this. Grace presses a kiss into the cloud of her hair, keeps her arms around her, and rubs her back. Her shoulder hurts, a little.

It feels like they’re floating together, rising and falling on gentle waves. There can’t be any other peace like this in the universe, in this life or the next. For a moment, Grace gives into it completely and sighs. The whirling orbit has come to a stop. In the center, momentarily sated, they can rest. Has she ever truly rested before?

“I couldn’t wait,” Frankie whispers.

“I know.” Grace keeps rubbing her back. “Did it feel good?”

“Good? It felt...holy shit. I thought I was gonna fall apart, but I didn’t want it to stop.” She brushes a kiss against the side of Grace’s mouth. “Do something for me?”

“Anything.” Seriously. Frankie could ask for the moon.

Frankie takes her hand. “Just touch me for a second. Just hold me. I want to feel your hand.”

She guides Grace down between her legs. Grace, understanding, cups her through the fabric, too blissed-out to treat this like the sacred moment it is. Instead of wonder or even apprehension, there’s only satisfaction, the pleasure and pressure of warmth against her palm. Seems like they’re a perfect fit.
Frankie shudders gently and groans. “I can’t come again,” she says, “not after that, but move a little?”

Grace smiles up at the ceiling while Frankie keeps resting her head on her shoulder. It’s a little awkward, but she rocks her hand and presses gently with her fingertips. That’s Frankie under there, beneath the flannel, waiting to be discovered. What will she be like, feel like…taste like?

“That’s nice.” Frankie pushes her hips forward, a dreamy note in her voice. “Oh, that’s so nice.”

Grace is worn out too, but if she’d been a younger woman (say, by forty years), that would have persuaded her into Round Two. In fact, if she had her panties on, she’d be asking Frankie to return the favor right now. As it is, she’s too sensitive for direct contact, but this is enough. More than.

It’s not enough for Frankie, though, is it? Not really.

Grace closes her eyes, trusts, and prays to God. Let this work. Let this be okay. Just this one thing. He’s let her down before, but she’ll meet Him halfway this time, she’ll do whatever it takes. She can start right now.

She keeps moving her hand. “I love you too, you know.” Tries not to let her other hand tighten too much on Frankie’s shoulder. Tries to seem calm.

Frankie goes still again. Then she whispers, “I didn’t know. I sorta thought, though. I hoped.” She shivers. “Don’t get mad that I didn’t know for sure. Okay?”

Christ, does Frankie think she’s a monster? Maybe she is. There’s a part of her, after all, that is pissed Frankie’s never heard her love language. Gifts and breakfasts and reminders about the doctor, to say nothing of what happened here tonight. Frankie should have known--

Grace takes a deep breath. Exhales. Frankie speaks her own language too, one Grace will need the rest of her life to learn. They’re bound to fuck up once in awhile, but they don’t have to do it tonight.

“Well, now you know,” she says. Her voice is brisk, ordinary. “So don’t forget.”

“No way, honey.” Frankie kisses Grace’s bare shoulder. “Sorry I went all fifteen-year-old boy on you just now. I’ll do better next…”

There’s palpable apprehension in the pause. Grace keeps moving her hand even though her wrist is starting to hurt. “It was perfect, Frankie. But if you want to top it, feel free to try.”


Grace closes her eyes. If she didn’t, tears might spring to them. Love language… “Okay. If you want me to.”

“Yeah. I do. Just that, for right now, but next time--well, anyway.”

Frankie sits up. Grace does too. They look each other in the eye, though Frankie’s obviously fighting not to check out Grace’s breasts again. Grace gently strokes Frankie’s cheek and can’t help returning the tiny smile that crosses her face. Frankie makes her smile more than anyone she’s ever known, and the thought that she’s got this now--that they’ve got this together--

“Wow,” Frankie whispers, as if she’s thinking the same thing.
“Definitely wow.” Grace puts her hands on the camisole’s hem. “Hands up.”

Frankie hesitates. When she raises her arms, Grace sees why. She doesn’t shave her armpits, though at their time of life there’s not much hair left, and it’s pale and thin.

Frankie says defiantly, “The patriarchy also demands that women look like hairless children. I refuse to be objectified by the male gaze. Feminism’s not dead, Grace. I don’t shave my legs, either.”

That answers a question Grace has been asking herself for decades longer than she’d like to admit. “Fine by me,” she says, and without further ado, tugs the white camisole up over Frankie’s head and drops it onto the mattress.

“Really?” Frankie asks, but it’s not enough to distract Grace from what she’s uncovered. Gravity has done its work, and Frankie’s never known a plastic surgeon’s tender touch; her breasts sag, a mole appears between them, and tiny white hairs surround her pink nipples as well. The right breast is a little larger than the left. They are not beautiful except insofar as they’re a part of her whole, part of Frankie, a piece of the trust Grace has been given.

Which means they’re the most gorgeous tits in the world, a fact Grace tries to make clear by dropping two soft kisses, one on each nipple.

“Yeek!” Frankie says, a preposterous noise she follows up with a rich belly laugh. “So you like ‘em?”

“I like ‘em.” Grace hefts them in her palms, watching the goosebumps pop up in the cooler air of the room. Frankie’s nipples have pebbled beneath her touch. What does she like? Gentle, teasing touches, or the rough stuff, like she did to Grace tonight? Is one breast more sensitive than the other?

She’s on the verge of experimenting when Frankie says, “I call the left one Sid. The right one’s Nancy.”

Grace falls back down. She laughs convulsively, joyfully, covering her eyes with one hand while Frankie, Sid, and Nancy all wait above her. “Jesus Christ. Of course you do.”

Unbelievable. This is hers now, this moment, and all the moments that follow. However many they get, they’ll belong to Grace, who will store them up in her heart against whatever comes. She’s back on the beach, where all of this started for her, laughter and love just like this—but with no hope of fulfillment, of the gift that fell into her lap tonight.

Frankie’s giggling as she lies down beside Grace. Grace is as good as naked with the way her pajama top’s open all the way to the last button, while Frankie’s still covered from the waist down, but somehow they seem to be on equal footing.

Frankie snuggles up and traces Grace’s collarbone, earning a shiver. She’s so warm; Grace must feel cool in comparison, just like on the deck a few hours ago. That doesn’t seem possible right now, not with the low flame burning steadily in her core. Frankie’s bare breasts push into her side, soft and unexplored. For now. Soon...

“That was great,” Frankie murmurs.

Grace puts a hand on Frankie’s flannel-clad hip. Her palm slides upward to rest on the curve of Frankie’s naked waist. Her skin feels as beautiful as it looks, smooth and giving, rounded with more flesh than Grace has ever had. There are no bony edges, no ridges of ribs against Grace’s lifeline. Maybe there’s something to be said for this whole “indulgence” thing. Maybe tomorrow Grace will eat two whole-wheat pancakes instead of one.
Yeah. Maybe she will. Aloud, she says, “Agreed.”

“You’re way freaky, Hanson.” Frankie tilts her head just enough that she can look in Grace’s eyes, gratitude clear in her own. “And a real problem-solver. The vibrator? Genius.”

It was, wasn’t it? Grace preens, but modesty demands that she say, “It was a team effort.”

“You really do like the top speed. Man. I’ve got to see that again. I--” Frankie clears her throat. “I will get to do that again, right?”

“It could be arranged.” Hopefully tomorrow. “And…” What ridiculous thing had Frankie said on the morning after they’d piloted the Menage-a-Moi? Oh, right. “And I’m going to see firsthand how ‘engorged with passion’ you get.”

“I only said that to make you spit out your coffee. ‘Engorgement’ might have been…” Frankie pauses to chuckle again. “An overstatement? Or, you know, not.”

Grace touches Frankie’s face. “Do you mean it?” she demands, and it’s nothing to do with overstatements. Languorous and whole as she feels, fresh as if she’s shed an old skin, this needs to be crystal clear. “Really. You and me, together, like this?”

Because if Frankie doesn’t…if this gets weird in the morning and Frankie says it’s a mistake…Grace is going to move out and find that colorless condo after all. She’ll have no choice.

“To infinity and beyond,” Frankie proclaims. “God, I can’t wait to show our newest grandkid that movie.” She pokes Grace in the side. “I hope you noticed what I just did there, Grace. I’m gifted in the subtle arts of both pronouns and love.”

Grace grabs Frankie, and it’s her turn to burrow in, to hide her face against Frankie’s neck. She just needs a minute. Only a minute to push away the last five weeks, the last twenty-two years, the last seven decades. She needs a minute and a tight squeeze, both of which Frankie gives her.

There is a pause, silent and heavy.

“I’m sorry.” Frankie’s breath is soft and warm against the shell of her ear. “I’m sorry I didn’t--know how to do it, or was scared to do it, or…you know what I’m trying to say? I’m sorry I hurt you like that.”

“I’m sorry I scared you.” Kind of sorry. After all, Frankie’s terror led them here. Grace sighs against Frankie’s bare shoulder and kisses it, earning a hum. She raises her face to see Frankie’s eyes shining with unshed tears.

Grace must look spooked, because Frankie sniffles, “It’s happy crying. Seriously.”

Suddenly, Grace thinks of another moment on the beach—not one that framed Frankie with sunlight while her hat flapped in the wind, but one where fire brought out the edges and shadows on her face. The night after their husbands left them. High as a kite, Grace had sat by Frankie in the sand and touched her tears. It was a weird thing to do, peyote or not, but there had been a whole world inside Frankie’s sorrow, perched on the tip of Grace’s finger. They’d looked at it together. Grace had never felt closer to anyone in her life. Later, she’d pushed the mortifying memory away.

Tonight, when a tear rolls down Frankie’s cheek, Grace touches it again. This time she brings it to her mouth. She sucks the world from her fingertip, saline and strange. Then her face warms, because it’s still kind of a weird thing to do. She stammers, “Do you remember that night on the beach--”

They kiss and kiss, and Grace tastes salt again.

Everything’s still true in the morning. Nobody walks anything back. Grace never wants to leave this bed.

Frankie’s head is tucked against Grace’s shoulder. It’s apparently her safe place, and she says Grace needs one too: “How about my fifth vertebra?”

“We’ll call that Plan B.” Grace nuzzles Frankie’s forehead. Sleep’s still tugging at her eyelids. It seems impossible that she dozed off even for a second, but when she opened her eyes a few minutes ago, 3:36 had turned into 9:52. Long past the time they should be up to work on the budget.

The budget can get fucked, at least for the next few days. Let the world wait on the Menage-a-Moi for a little while. Grace and Frankie need to examine its details much more closely and compare its benefits to those of their hands and mouths. That kind of research makes for a better product. Even if it’s just a focus group of two.

"Grace, when I nodded off, I had a dream.” Frankie idly strokes the slope of Grace’s breast. “I dreamed we were climbing a tree together. I think it was your oak, but it was gigantic.”

“It seemed pretty gigantic when I was a kid.” Grace manages not to grab Frankie’s hand and guide it. “Why were we climbing the tree?”

“To get to the tippy top. Duh.” Frankie cuddles in more comfortably. “At least, I guess we were. It seemed more about the journey than the destination. But it got me thinking, if trees are such a big deal to you, and so is staying out of coffins—”

“Oh Jesus, Frankie.” Death is the last thing Grace wants to think about right now. She wants to think about Frankie’s hand on her chest. Or breakfast. “Not now. Really, can’t we just…”

Frankie pinches her nipple. Grace yelps. Then Frankie says, “Gosh, I’m sorry.” She kisses it better.

“You fucking tease,” Grace groans. Frankie moves from kissing to sucking, soft and slow, and Grace whines in the back of her throat. She’s still sore, and her flesh is reddened from the night before. Bruises must be purpling on various parts of her. And yet she wants it.

Frankie hums and bestows a chaste peck to the tip of Grace’s nipple before she pulls away. Then she considerately covers Grace’s breast with the pajama top, making Grace whimper as the silk settles over her wet flesh.

“All right, all right,” she pants, surrendering. “What about trees?”

“We—it’s by we, I mean Sol—buy a plot beneath a tree. I get buried there, and you’re scattered around the roots. See?” Frankie lies back down next to Grace, her face flushed and her eyes bright with desire. “Compromise.”

Grace blinks, first in astonishment, and then to fight off tears. “Um. That’s…” She gulps. “Oh.”

“Brilliant, right?” Frankie pats her thigh. “Thank Frig I thought of it.”
It’s Grace’s turn to pinch, but she goes for the soft skin below Frankie’s ribs. Frankie giggles. Then she makes a V-sign at her own eyes before pointing it upward.

“Got that?” she asks the ceiling. “Don’t pull any crap.”

A chuckle gets stuck in Grace’s throat. It’s hard to swallow down, let alone say lightly, “Let’s hope someone’s listening.” Just this one thing, she begs Him again.

“Oh, someone is.” Frankie waves her hand at the foregone conclusion. “Fuck knows who, though.” Grace scoots in closer. Frankie lays an arm over her third chakra. They’ve both been transformed, all right.

“But I gotta say, shopping for this going to be weird,” Frankie admits. “Kind of creepy. I vote we do it while we’re high.” Fantastic. God knows where they’d end up then. Shot into space, probably, never mind the trees. But Frankie’s right. Talking about this in bed, dizzy with joyful possibilities for the living future, is one thing. Sitting in front of that damn laptop is another.

It’s Grace’s turn to have another brilliant idea. Oh. “I vote we don’t do it at all. I nominate somebody else.”

“Somebody else? Who?” Grace raises one artful eyebrow. “Robert.” Frankie’s mouth goes slack. Then they’re laughing, laughing as hard as they ever have while Grace’s pajama top falls open again and Frankie’s hair spills over her skin. They cling to each other, laughing.

“And Sol pays for it,” Frankie chortles.

“Of course he does.” She and Frankie have paid enough already, although they’ve been paid back, too. Perhaps with interest. Grace’s starved life and body are worth it if they both come to an end at the roots of a tree with Frankie beside her.

“Oh my God. What do we tell them?” Glee sparks in Frankie’s eyes. It might be malevolent. “You know, a picture’s worth a thousand words. We should send them a selfie and tell them they have a mission. Right now. No, wait. You have to button your top first. I don’t care how gay they are, and besides, what if some 4chan troll hacks my phone and steals your nudes? Twitter would go up in smoke. Also, I left my phone in the teakettle. So let’s…”

As usual, there’s nothing to do but wait for Frankie to tire herself out. The time passes pleasantly enough as Grace strokes Frankie’s bare waist again, and then dips a fingertip into her belly button. Then she drags the fingertip to brush against the side of a soft breast while Frankie’s breath catches and her babble comes to an end.

“You siren,” Frankie whispers. “Oh, I knew it. Remember what I said about ten a day?”

Then you’ll never want to leave me, Frankie had said, as if that had been a remote possibility. Stroking beneath Frankie’s breast, Grace says serenely, “Talk is cheap. And I want breakfast. I’ll make pancakes.” She’ll eat them, too. Two pancakes. No, three. And half-and-half in her coffee for extra decadence.
“Cool. After that, though, I wanna eat you,” Frankie says, as casually as if she’s explaining why there are geodes in the microwave again. “I think I can pull it off now that we’re cosmically aligned and I’m chill again. I can treat you right. Honestly, I thought I might need more time to adjust to our new paradigm, but I’m pretty much ready to go whenever you are.”

Grace’s mouth goes dry and her hand stills. “Uh…” She licks her lips. “Uh. Good. When do I get to return the favor?”

“After I shower,” Frankie says at once, like somebody who’s been forming a plan. “I’ve got a thing about being clean, at least at first, because dirty morning sex is dope, but I need to work up to it. You’re fine the way you are, though,” she adds generously.

“Thanks,” Grace manages. “And of course we can...work up to it. We’ve got time.”

They don’t know how much. Nobody does. But this morning seems like a safe bet, and they’re about to enjoy the hell out of it. Carpe diem.

At some point soon, their children will find out, and their grandchildren, and their friends and neighbors, and they’ll either be surprised or they won’t. Grace and Frankie will catch shit for walking down the street holding hands, or they won’t. Those hands will wear wedding rings, or they won’t—and perhaps it doesn’t matter, in the end.

Robert’s going to find their resting place, and Sol’s going to pay for it, and Grace and Frankie will be together forever, till death can’t them part.

Grace raises her chin so Frankie can tuck her head beneath it. She smiles at the ceiling, at its familiar beams and arches, at the fan. Downstairs, the chairs sit by the kitchen island like they’ve been sitting for years, and the stove stands ready for the skillet. All of it in living color.

The beach house is a house. It is their house. But everywhere is home.

FIN.

“Wherever you go I will go,
and wherever you stay I will stay.

Your people will be my people,
and your God my God.

Where you die I will die,
and there I will be buried.

May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely,
if even death separates you and me.”

(Ruth 1:16-17; also, Grace and Frankie, “The Vows,” 01x13)
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